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"Don't Lock Me Out": Life-Story Interviews of Family Business Owners Facing Succession

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This qualitative study used a grounded theory methodology to analyze life-story interviews obtained from 10 family business owners regarding their experiences in their businesses with the goal of understanding the complexities of family business succession. The grounded theory that emerged from this study is best understood as a potential web of constraints that can bear on the succession process. Coding of these interviews revealed four key influences, which seem to have the potential to facilitate or constrain the family business owner's approach to succession. Influence 1, ''The business within,'' captures intrapsychic dynamics of differentiation and control. Influence 2, ''The marriage,'' addresses how traditional gender roles shape succession. Influence 3, ''The adult children,'' examines the role of having a natural (accidental, organic, passively groomed) successor. Influence 4, ''The vision of retirement,'' captures the impact of owners' notions of life post-succession. Family therapists frequently encounter family systems in which the family business is facing succession. Even if succession is not the presenting problem, and even if the business owner is in the indirect (rather than direct) system, this research reminds clinicians of the importance of

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the family's story about the family business. Therefore, clinical implications and recommendations are included.

Keywords: Family Business; Retirement; Succession; Life-Story; Grounded Theory; Constraint Theory

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INTRODUCTION

In the complex dance of levels that constitutes the core of systemic practice, issues surrounding work are always present. By focusing too much on the relational and individual levels, family therapists sometimes ignore the level of work at their own peril. Certainly, the current economic crisis bears powerfully on families, couples, and individuals. A study by the *New York Times* and CBS News found that 56% of unemployed people with children believed that ''their children's lives had changed some or a lot as a result of their unemployment,'' and 48% reported having ''more conflicts or arguments than usual with family and friends'' (Montopoli, 2009). A study done at SUNY Albany in 2009 showed that a person who lost a job has an 83% greater chance of developing a stress-related illness, such as diabetes, arthritis, or psychiatric issues (Luo, 2010).

The systemic picture becomes even more complex when work and family are linked through the existence of a family business. A family business is defined[1] as a business run by the founder or a descendent and with the intent of keeping the business in the family. Both ownership and management are ways that multiple family members participate in a family business. Family businesses are pervasive in American culture. There are an estimated 10.8 million family businesses, and they are estimated to account for 59% of the GDP, or US$5.5 trillion, and 58% of the workforce, or 77 million workers (Poutziouris, Smyrnios, & Klein, 2006).

Much has been written about the challenges of managing the boundary and the relationships that exist because of the juxtaposition of work and family in the family business (Davis & Harveston, 1999; Dunn, 1999; Malkin, 1991). Nowhere do these systemic complexities stand out more than when a family business faces generational succession. The literature on succession has frequently reported that succession is a high-risk proposition, citing the statistic that only 30% of businesses stay in the family from the first to the second generation, with this number declining to 10% from the second to third generation (Beckhard & Dyer, 1983). With 36 million baby-boomer Americans turning 65 over the next decade (and another 45 million in the next 20 years) (Whitehouse, 2010), issues surrounding family business succession are timely and important.

Succession in family businesses is so complex that multiple perspectives have been used to understand and explain it (Le-Breton-Miller, Miller, & Steier, 2004). These factors can be divided into two related domains, business and human. Examples of business factors include estate-planning, buy–sell agreements that transfer ownership, managing the business environment, use of professional management, choice of

[1] Poutziouris, Smyrnios, and Klein (2006) provide broad, middle, and narrow definitions of family business. The definition used here is the middle definition.

a successor, development of successors, and management of organizational change (Aronoff & Ward, 1992). For example, for an owner to pass a business on to a successor, the owner must be able to sell his or her stock while also pulling enough capital from the company to live comfortably in retirement. These business factors occur within the domain of human relationships (Handler, 1994). Relationship factors can be catalogued using a multileveled-systems view that includes the levels of the person, relationships, particularly the owner and successor (Berkel, 2007), the family, and the entire relational system (Breunlin, Schwartz, & Mac Kune-Karrer, 2001). Likewise, research on succession is equally challenging because these multiple perspectives cannot be incorporated readily into a single design (Brockhaus, 2004; Handler, 1994; Handler & Kran, 1988; McCollom, 1990; Zahra & Sharma, 2004). Instead, research on succession has examined specific factors affecting succession.

The research reported here focused on human factors associated with owners, as prior research has suggested that owner factors constitute an important predictor of succession (Davis & Harveston, 1998; Venter, Boshoff, & Maas, 2003). For example, the leadership styles of owners have been shown to correlate with succession. The ‘‘steward,’’ whose style of leadership is to watch over a business, has a better chance of succession than the ‘‘monarch’’ or ‘‘general,’’ whose styles glorify the power of leadership (Aronoff & Ward, 1996; Sonnenfeld, 1988). Attention has also been devoted to the psychology of business owners; however, these studies are largely anecdotal and based on the retroactive application of psychological theories to observations of owners (Kaye, 1996; Kets de Vries, 1985; Levinson, 1983). While there are many theories about owners and every consultant has anecdotal evidence about owners who will not let go, there is very little research utilizing the power of narrative data to generate grounded theory (Parada & Viladas, 2010).

This research focuses on how participants made sense of their businesses, their families, and the relationship between them, with particular emphasis on how they approached succession. In 2-hour, semistructured interviews, participants were asked to tell the story of their business, thinking about pivotal chapters in its evolution. We utilized a life-story interview protocol (McAdams, 2001) to explore owners' identities and the multifaceted relationships owners have with their businesses, their families, and succession. The data ‘‘are internalized and evolving life stories that reconstruct the past and imagine the future to provide a person's life with identity’’ (McAdams, 2006, p. 290). The value of these narratives is not in their factual accuracy, per se. Rather, the stories are valuable because they place history and succession decision-making in a context of *meaning*. Narratives are critical to understanding the chapters of ‘‘letting go’’ because they reveal the owners' authored contexts including their dreams of business creation, the challenges of business growth and evolution, and how they handle both such that they ultimately can or cannot let go.

To extract shared meaning across the 10 interviews, the transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory methodology that begins with the data to create categories explaining the succession story (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The analysis of these 10 narratives revealed that succession is *contextualized* primarily by the owner's internalized construct of the business, what we are calling ‘‘The business within,’’ and the impact this construct has on the marriage, the adult children, and retirement. These four influences, ‘‘The business within,’’ ‘‘The marriage,’’ ‘‘The adult children,’’ and ‘‘The vision of retirement,’’ have the potential to *facilitate* or *constrain* succession (Breunlin, 1999).

METHOD

Sample

Participants were eight men and two women who were either founders or second-generation family business owners. Nine of 10 participants were active presidents and/or CEOs of their businesses. All were or had been owner-managers. For simplicity, they will simply be referred to as owners. The nonrandom sample was collected through contacts of the authors' institution. To report the findings and protect confidentiality, participants were assigned a pseudonym. They are introduced in Table 1, which also includes relevant background information pertaining to them, their marriages, and their businesses.

Although Al, Don, and Gil did not have a child in the business at the time of the interview, all three report a continued wish for their business to remain a family business. And although the sample represents a mix of founders, second generation owners, and a founder's spouse, our attempts to ''cut'' the data along those lines did not yield any meaningful analytic differences. The emergent theory resonated across those subgroups.

Measures

The life-story interview protocol (McAdams, 1998) was constructed in order to optimize participants' storytelling. The protocol went in rough chronological order and asked participants to think about ''chapters'' as well as pivotal moments in the life of the family business. Participants were asked to describe their thoughts and feelings about the following succession themes distilled from a review of the succession literature: creation and evolution of the business, the meaning of the business, the family of origin, the involvement of spouse and children, family/business interface, issues of legacy, the business and the larger context, choosing a successor, gender issues, retirement, and organizational issues around succession (Breunlin, Schwartz, & Mac Kune-Karrer, 2001; Handler, 1994; Le-Breton-Miller et al., 2004). Early on, we recognized that some participants preferred to tell their story from their own vantage points, finding it difficult to constrain themselves within the framework of the protocol; therefore, at times, we adopted a flexible format that followed their story line while still tracking the protocol's main themes. Interviews lasted about 2 hours.

It is worth noting here that two of the 10 interviews felt qualitatively different to us. With two of the participants, we felt we were being offered a scripted tale that had been told before and that focused on those aspects the participant felt comfortable sharing. In the other eight interviews, we felt that the participants were on a journey with us, creating, in that moment, their story. These participants seemed to discover their narrative as they told it, and several experienced ''a-ha'' moments, telling us they had never viewed things in quite that way before.

Analysis

The 10 transcripts yielded over 500 pages of data that were mined using grounded theory analysis. Grounded theory is a ''procedure through which the social scientist systematically reads successive autobiographical texts, categorizing and recatagorizing narrative content in a continuously evolving effort to arrive at an inductive portrait of a given social phenomenon'' (McAdams, 1998, p. 491). Grounded

TABLE 1
Introduction of Participants

Name	Age	Marital Status	Race	Type of Business	Size of Business	Children	Children Currently in Business	Generation
Al	Early 60s	2nd marriage	W	Manufacturing	Microbusiness	2S/2D	0	Second
Beth	Early 50s	Widowed	W	Manufacturing	Medium	1S	1S	Spouse of founder
Cal	Mid 60s	1st marriage	W	Commercial services	Large	1S/2D	1S	Second
Don	Early 60s	1st marriage	W	Manufacturing	Large	2D	0	Second
Ed	Mid 80s	2nd marriage	W	Real estate development	Small	2S/1D	2S/1D	Founder
Fred	Late 50s	1st marriage	W	Real estate development	Large	1S/3D	1S	Founder
Gil	Late 60s	1st marriage	W	Office products distribution	Small	1S/1D	0	Second
Hal	Early 80s	2nd marriage	W	Manufacturing	Small	1S	1S	Founder
Ivan	Mid 70s	2nd marriage	W	Real estate development	Medium	1S/1D	1S/1D	Founder
Jane	Late 40s	Divorced	AA	Beauty care services	Microbusiness	1S/1D	1D	Founder

Note. The classification of business size is as follows: microbusiness <5, small <100, medium <500, large >500, as revenue figures were not available from all participants.

theory keeps researchers close to the data, thereby affording opportunities to explore complex psychological phenomena. Succession in family businesses is one of those multifaceted issues.

We began with close, word-by-word, line-by-line coding, which is the first step toward determining fit and relevance (Charmaz, 2006). Pairs of researchers prepared thematic analytic memos for each interview, that is, ''written record(s) of analysis related to the formulation of theory'' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 197). At team meetings, the two TAM writers led ''dialogs'' about their coding. These dialogs corrected for, or at least made explicit, the inevitable influences that shape any researcher's read of the data. As is always the case with grounded theory research, we saw the data through our own lenses—race, age, gender, and personal experiences with family businesses. Because some members of the research team had grown up in family business families, we were aware of our emotional reactions to the participants' narratives, remembering, for example, how the family business *felt* to us like a member of the family—for better and for worse! This process yielded 67 initial categories. The mean number of categories per interview was 16.7. The median number of categories was 18.

We utilized theoretical coding in order to move from open coding to the development of theoretical concepts. Several rounds of theoretical coding moved us from 67 categories to 16 major categories. For each major category, we wrote a ''data book'' containing every quote from every interview for that category and hypotheses about how the major category related to succession. The 16 data books were compiled into the Master Data Book. Another round of theoretical coding led to Master Data Book II, containing what we thought were the final 10 major categories.

Preparing a manuscript to report a grounded theory study is, itself, part of data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The writing process yielded the five major categories that are shown in Table 2. Table 2 shows how many times each participant had a quote that fit with each of the five major categories. We quickly recognized that the top two major categories, ''Differentiation'' and ''Trust,'' together accounted for 77% of the quotes. Moreover, both are internalized constructs best described as ''The business within.'' We transformed the five major categories into *four influences* because each seemed to have powerful bearing on whether succession would occur. The use of the term *influence* is intentional as it connotes a dynamic (vs. static) process. When an influence seemed likely to increase the probability of succession, we called it a facilitating influence. Conversely, when an influence seemed likely to decrease the probability of succession, we called it a constraining influence (Breunlin, 1999). This marked the final step in our creation of a truly grounded theory.

RESULTS

Figure 1 shows the impact of the four influences that constitute our grounded theory. The four influences are described below. Supporting quotes were selected for their richness and accuracy. As a team of practitioner–researchers, intervention was never far from our thoughts, and the clinical relevance of the results will be explored.

Influence 1: The Business Within

Repeatedly, participants approached the topic of succession not by describing the business ''out there,'' but rather as an internalized construct of the business that we called ''The business within.'' This construct blended the two most often coded

TABLE 2

Frequency of Quotations Coded for Each of the Five Major Categories (Four Influences) for the 10 Participants

Theme	**Al**	**Beth**	**Cal**	**Don**	**Ed**	**Fred**	**Gil**	**Hal**	**Ivan**	**Jane**	**# of Interviews in Which the Theme Appeared**	**Total**	**% of Total**
Differentiation (I1)	42	6	31	14	2	12	19	4	3	9	10	142	45
Trust (I1)	7	3	12	15	5	23	12	—	1	22	9	100	32
Traditional marriage (I2)	5	5	7	1	3	5	7	—	9	1	9	43	14
Natural successor (I3)	—	2	2	—	1	—	—	3	1	10	6	19	6
Vision of retirement (I4)	1	1	—	—	1	—	7	—	—	—	4	10	3
Total	55	17	52	30	12	40	45	7	14	42		314	100

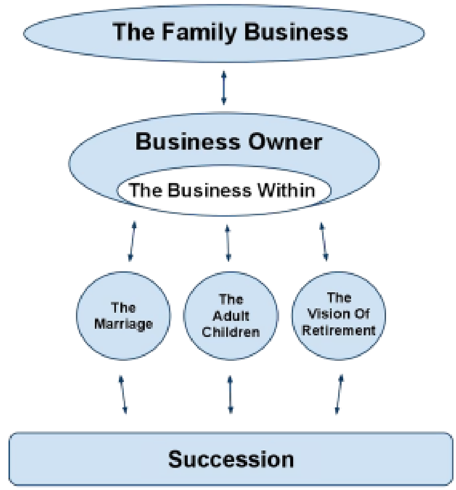

FIGURE 1. Influences on the Path to Succession.

categories: ''Differentiation'' and ''Trust.'' ''Differentiation'' refers to how connected vs. separate participants were from their businesses, and ''Trust'' refers to how little or much participants felt a sense of control over the future while valuing and accepting outside influences. Virtually all of the quotes could be qualitatively dichotomized as either low or high trust or low or high differentiation. We began to think of participants as high-differentiation or low-differentiation and high-trust or low-trust, as these qualities felt tied in meaningful ways to how owners approached succession.

Differentiation. ''Differentiation'' emerged in the interviews as an interaction of three related processes: (1) attachment to the business, (2) fusion of personal and business identities, and (3) control as personal expression. First, although participants across the board commented on the massive time, financial, and emotional resources demanded by their businesses (e.g., ''It's a 24-hour-job,'' ''monstrous amount of work,'' ''consumed by work,'' ''everything I do, everything I think,'' and ''it's my life'' said Ivan, Fred, Cal, Hal, Al, and Gil, respectively), so-called low-differentiation narratives exhibited a more entangled emotional and psychological attachment. Al explained, ''When someone says, 'are you going home?' I wonder, 'do they mean back to the shop?''' Gil sheepishly reported, ''When the business is going well, it's better than sex. It's just the ultimate high.'' He added, ''Maybe the business was my parent . . . because my parents and I had no interaction whatsoever . . . maybe that's why I clung to the business.''

Second, at times business attachment became so powerful that participants' identities seemed fused with the business. Al stated it best: ''That business is me . . . I'm probably that company.'' Don, Ed, and Ivan made these statements: ''I think the company is me,'' ''Ed is real estate,'' and ''It was my life . . . it is my life.'' Gil stated, ''I am totally identified with the business,'' and ''The death of the business is more upsetting to me than my own death.''

Third, low-differentiation participants seemed to fuse their identities with the business by exercising a very personal control over it. Al stated, ''I think that I can control it . . . if it fails, I always take it personal—I screwed up. And I do the other thing, too, when we have a good year.'' Cal stated, ''It is the opportunity to, uh, to do it the way that you want to do it . . . it becomes a little bit of an extension of your own personality.'' Regarding retirement, Al stated, ''I keep thinking, 'how do I have a key to make sure that it's still running . . . can I get in the back door? Don't lock me out!''' Cal stated, ''I'll fight it. I'll kick and scream.'' The seduction of personal control seemed so powerful that these participants were loath to give it up, for fear, it seems, of losing themselves.

By contrast, high-differentiation participants described control as simply a necessary part of business. Beth stated, ''I'm very much in control . . . of my own position. I just don't react emotionally to things. You can't! It's not good business to jeopardize a family-owned business with a lot of emotion.'' Fred explicitly differentiated his identity from his business: ''I could give up control . . . I'm secure. I don't care what happens. I'm in control of who I am.'' For Fred and Beth, a more clearly differentiated boundary between their businesses and their personal self-concepts seemed to facilitate their comfort with relinquishing control.

We speculate that these high-differentiation participants will more easily be able to hand over control of their businesses, in comparison with participants like Al, Cal, and Gil, whose self-concepts are more intensely attached, or even fused, with their businesses.

Trust. ''Trust'' emerged from our analysis as the second most robust category, accounting for 32% of the quotes. Although businesses naturally require owners to be discerning in whom they trust, trust varied greatly among our participants. Trust themes emerged in three domains: (1) participant's worldview, (2) coworker relationships, and (3) presence of rules.

First, the narratives of low-trust participants were marked by passivity, pessimism bordering at times on paranoia, vulnerability, and isolation, as characterized by Gil, ''You feel like a cork on the ocean . . . when I think about how many times we had to change our business plan,'' and ''Sometimes not only is the glass half-empty. I don't even see a glass!'' Al stated, ''My closest friends, who are business associates, I can't say anything about (plans for the business). It has to be very secret,'' and ''You can't let (employees) see you down.''

In contrast, participants with high-trust narratives felt optimistic, proactive, and connected. They viewed themselves as ''blessed'' or grateful recipients of special treatment. Don said he was ''blessed with a lot of good employees,'' ''blessed with a wonderful wife,'' and ''fortunate (to have) two great mentors who called it like it was.'' Ed credited his completed succession to his good fortune in having two sons with inherent ''ability.'' Jane commented, ''I love (the business)—It's been a blessing.'' Fred said, ''God blessed me with irrational self-confidence and happiness.'' High-trust participants seemed pulled toward a future of unending opportunity. Fred stated, ''You have alternatives, and so I took an alternative when it came.'' Jane's outlook was, ''I just feel like wherever I go, I'd just be who I am and do what I do, and it'll be something good out of that.''

Second, high-trust participants embraced the involvement of others in the business. Don said, ''My theory is that people are basically good.'' Fred stated, ''We preach that you have to . . . find happiness with other people's success'' (rather than be threatened by it). Jane viewed herself and her business in a mutually enriching relationship with her community: ''My clients are *really* good to me, and I'm good to them.'' Contrast these attitudes to low-trust narratives, in which coworkers were often portrayed as incompetent and unreliable. Al, for example, told us that ''they do such stupid things . . . the first phone call I got (on vacation) was asking me where the toilet paper was.'' The participation of nonfamily employees in a family business is indeed fraught, seemingly even more so for those owners who struggle mightily with trust issues.

While low-trust participants seldom spoke positively about nonfamily coworkers, for high-trust participants, success seemed tied to hiring talented people and trusting them to perform without micromanagement. Don and Ivan spoke enthusiastically about ''hiring some really good people, and turning them loose,'' and being ''very good at hiring people . . . and when I did that I always allowed them to do what they wanted to do.'' Ivan further explained, ''Whatever success I have had has been the ability to enroll people to get things done that I really can't do.''

Although many participants described employees as family, low-trust participants described themselves as more paternalistic. Cal said, ''I think I do tend to be a little paternalistic.'' Al explained, ''I treat my employees like family benefits-wise, to make sure they're taken care of.'' He described his managerial goal of ''keeping people and keeping them happy. Keeping them doing what they're doing,'' so that they don't ''go out on their own . . . You don't want that to happen.'' Conversely, Don offered a high-trust view of employees as family: ''We really do look at our employees as part of our family . . . and my theory is that people . . . don't need interference from others . . . let's not micromanage them.'' Similarly (and in contrast to Al), Ivan was proud when employees launched their own ventures: ''They usually go into business for themselves, which is good, because I really try to find those entrepreneurial spirits.''

Third, high-trust participants were transparent about the rules governing family members' entry and involvement in the business. Fred offered, ''None of the children were allowed to come into the business immediately after school.'' Ed's narrative was punctuated with ''rules'' governing family and business boundaries and expectations: ''Never make your children your partners too soon,'' and ''If we have difficulty in the office that we do not bring it into our homes.'' Family relationships, as well as the businesses, were trusted to survive and thrive through honest discussions about rules and expectations.

Low-trust narratives were characterized by an absence of information about expectations, rules, and evaluation of performance. Low-trust narratives also contained stories of troubled relationships with family members who had worked in the businesses. Both Gil's wife and Al's second wife had worked in their businesses but ''it did not work out.'' Cal said that when his sister worked in the business ''everybody felt like they had to treat her with kid gloves . . . and she dropped the ball,'' leaving with hard feelings that lasted ''a few years.'' Also, Cal sold part of his business to avoid confronting a potential conflict with family members.

Influence 2: The Marriage

Four participants were in their first marriage, four were in their second marriage, one was widowed, and one was divorced. We were moved by how prominent participants' spouses were in the narratives, reminding family therapists to weave the marriage into the web of constraints (Breunlin, Schwartz, & Mac Kune-Karrer, 2001). In particular, analysis revealed that ''Traditional marriages'' (the third thematic category), marriages in which rigid gender role freed the owner to maximize work effort while the partner assumed domestic functions, seemed potentially constraining.

The first marriages of all but one participant were described as traditional. Gil captured what we termed ‘‘The ying-yang dyad’’ by saying, ‘‘I have two worlds—and you know we used to joke around that I was the boss in X County, and [my wife] was the boss in Y County.’’ Al said, ‘‘It takes a strong woman behind you to—to keep it going,’’ and Cal said his wife ‘‘compensated’’ for his schedule by staying home. Traditional marriages ‘‘offer many benefits’’ (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p. 212) and were likely to have been facilitating influences when owners were building and running the family business and spouses were running the business of the family. However, what was facilitating during one developmental stage (a busy work life with young children at home) seemed to become a constraining influence as couples faced succession, retirement, and each other.

Some participants recognized how the structure of traditional marriage compromised marital satisfaction, even early on. Fred stated, ‘‘And so, [my wife] felt trapped. And she stuck it out. I didn’t know she was sticking it out. I thought everything was going swell.’’ Other participants downplayed the impact of traditional marriage. Al said, ‘‘Nobody really suffered very badly, either the business (laughs) or the wives, or the families—everybody seemed to survive.’’ The long stretches of time during which spouses led parallel lives distanced them from each other, inadvertently constraining succession. Not only did participants in traditional marriages seek to keep working, they also saw little for themselves in retirement. Cal said, ‘‘Oh, I think if we were around each other all the time we’d kill each other.’’ Gil said, ‘‘And I think it’s good that we both have our own interests, and I think the more interests she has, the better.’’

The four participants in second marriages revealed a compelling contrast. These marriages seemed to break the traditional mold with participants investing more in these relationships and second families and spouses having more influence. Al told us that his second spouse ‘‘is trying to teach me that there are other things to do.’’ Ivan said, ‘‘I have a great relationship with my (second) wife and with my family, too. I would do more but my wife is the one that says we’re not gonna run here and run there and leave (our daughter) home.’’ Perhaps the seemingly greater influence of the second wives in the study allowed these couples to envision gender-role bending that could facilitate, rather than constrain, succession and retirement.

Influence 3: The Adult Children

Somewhere in the narrative of succession, the successor is introduced. In the textbook scenario, the successor, a blood relative, is carefully chosen early in the story and actively groomed over decades until he or she is anointed (Ward, 2004). None of these narratives followed that plot line. Instead, the most often used description of the successor was that of ‘‘The natural successor’’ (the fourth thematic category): the owner’s child or son-in-law described as naturally having innate goodness-of-fit and competence. As such, the choice of successor was obvious and not controversial. In fact, none of the participants described an active grooming process.

Beth said, ‘‘It was just given that he would become a part of this business.’’ Hal’s plan for his successor began the day his son was born: ‘‘I kept saying, ‘boy, I hope that’s a boy.’ And we were sitting out in the hall and one of the nurses said, ‘would you like to see your son?’ and I said, ‘yippee!’’’ When asked how his sons became involved, Ed stated, ‘‘It’s just something that happened.’’ Ivan’s son-in-law took over the reins so naturally that when Ivan sat down with his daughter and son to tell them that he was going to make the son-in-law president, ''they both looked at me and said, 'what do you mean make him president, he is president. He runs the show.'''

It is worth noting that our read of the data suggested that participants may have, consciously or unconsciously, narrowed the field of potential successors by not considering their daughters and daughters-in-law for the job. When asked about the influence of gender directly, none of the participants acknowledged gender-blindness, but stories of natural succession felt gendered nonetheless.

Finally, not captured with verbatim quotes was the genuine affection participants felt for their chosen successor. They liked them as people, enjoyed working with them, and were very proud to have a relationship with them. Further, absent from their descriptions of the successors were reports of ongoing tension or conflict. It seems that participants with a natural successor knew they had good fortune!

Influence 4: The Vision of Retirement

Although all 10 participants were asked about retirement, only four of them said anything substantive about it. As we read and reread the narratives, it seemed the majority of participants were experts at avoidance and redirection when it came to those questions, at times seeming even to become a bit apraxic. Consistent with the literature, those who did discuss retirement tended to describe it negatively (Kim & DeVaney, 2003; Rudolph, 1985). It is easy to imagine how a fearful or pessimistic vision of retirement would constrain succession.

Gil reported, ''I think my biggest fear is not having something to do . . . and that just scares the hell out of me!'' He added that ''the odds of selling the business (and retiring) are pretty horrifying to me.'' Al stated that he simply did not know how to *do* retirement. ''I'd like to be relaxing . . . doing nothing . . . and all of a sudden, I'm trying to think of how I'm going to make a business out of collecting shells.'' In fact, he recommended that ''there should be a school for that.''

Only Ed was fully retired. He spoke with pride about being busy playing bridge, going to the track, having luncheon engagements, and getting massages. Some had scaled back their schedules. Four owned vacation properties and spent blocks of time there. Some had relinquished responsibility and, less often, authority. While some had a succession plan in place, most indicated that they would probably preserve some connection to the business for years to come.

While our participants' reluctance to retire can be viewed as an aberrant departure from the traditional trajectory of leaving work in one's 60s to embrace a discrete time of life known as retirement, it can also be viewed as part of a cultural shift in attitudes about retirement. This shift reveals seniors actively engaging in work well into their 70s and even 80s. This shift is occurring in all socioeconomic groups and is related to better health, increased life span, and the resultant challenge to acquire and handle financial assets that must be available far longer than in previous generations (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008).

Synthesizing the Findings

The grounded theory presented here is derived from narratives of family business owners who are facing succession but who have not, for the most part, completed it. The four influences (''The business within,'' ''The traditional marriage,'' ''The natural successor,'' and ''The vision of retirement'') discovered from the grounded theory

TABLE 3
Summary of Hypothesized Effects of Influences on Successful Succession

	Facilitating Succession	Constraining Succession
Influence 1: The business within	High differentiation from the business: less attachment, sense of self outside of business, and less controlling High trust: blessed worldview, open to outside influences (''securely attached''), and rules/expectations	Low differentiation from the business: enmeshed, no sense of self outside of the business, and controlling Low-trust: pessimistic worldview, isolated (''insecurely attached''), and lacking rules/expectations
Influence 2: The marriage	Gender-flexible marriage; open to role renegotiation	Gender-rigid marriage; stuck in roles that no longer serve the couple
Influence 3: The adult children	Natural successor	No natural successor
Influence 4: The vision of retirement	Open to and curious about retirement	Apraxic, fearful, and/or dreading retirement

analysis hold the potential to either facilitate or constrain succession, highlighting the importance of examining a business owner's web of constraints around succession (see Table 3). The web of constraints can involve intrapsychic/internal constraints, relational constraints, or both.

It is worth noting that Al and Gil, who had no succession plan, also had narratives revealing complex webs of constraints. Cal, whose narrative also seemed fraught with constraints, had a succession plan but had transferred no authority or responsibility to the designated successor. In his 80s, Hal had a designated successor, but he had transferred little authority or responsibility. His narrative suggested lingering ''business within'' constraints, making succession uncertain. In contrast, Jane and Beth had unfolding succession plans and had narratives characterized by facilitative, rather than constraining, influences. The likelihood of success seemed high. Don and Fred, who ran very large companies, planned to keep the business in the family but were seriously leaning toward nonfamily management. Ivan had, for the most part, successfully executed his succession plan but retained significant ownership and involvement in the business.

One striking result that permeates the narratives is the pervasiveness of ''The business within.'' Rather than understanding succession as an event happening ''out there,'' these participants all captured it as a struggle occurring within themselves. Whereas participants with high-differentiation and high-trust stories were more able to allow others to have access to this internal world and to influence it, those with low-differentiation and low-trust stories seemed trapped in their own reflections. Having this internal dialog in isolation seemed to amplify their struggles with differentiation and trust perhaps to the point where the dialog precluded space for healthy succession planning.

DISCUSSION

Limitations and Future Research

The current study is limited by its small sample size and exclusive focus on the narratives of owners. Future research must establish how the four identified influences interact with the larger family business system. Such research would include spouses, successors, siblings, and key nonfamily managers. Doing so expands the research focus to more individuals and more relationships, greatly expanding the complexity as well. For example, just the relationship between owner and successor has proven to be very complex (Berkel, 2007). Sonnenfeld (1988) examined owners and successors developmentally and posited optimal age differentials that facilitate succession. Research on succession undertaken in other countries offers promise of a cross-cultural perspective (Kaslow, 2006; Malinen, 2001). Because our sample, while representative, included only one white female owner and one minority female owner, the findings cannot be extrapolated to these groups.

Clinical Implications

This research indicates that when a family business and/or its owner are part of the larger family system, and, for whatever reason, succession is problematic, systemic therapists should incorporate both the owner and the business into hypothesizing about the web of constraints of the presenting client system (Breunlin, 1999). The following examples emphasize our research findings, particularly the configurations of *low trust and low differentiation narratives (LT/LD)* and *stagnant traditional marriages*. Hypothetical examples are extrapolated from our own clinical experience.

Presented below are four prototypical situations that share two significant challenges: how to access the business owner and how to help him face the inevitability of succession. These cases can be very frustrating and sometimes feel more like mediation than therapy as family members are rarely fighting about what they say they are fighting about (Kaye, 1991). They are rewarding when therapy helps those involved identify and move toward ''common interest'' to resolve long-held disputes. Deeper connections and more satisfying relationships can follow, but this is the ''frosting on the cake.'' Therapists who relish the challenge of larger and more complex systems will love this work.

Direct Consultation to a Family Business

Therapists who consult with family businesses know LT/LD owners as their most challenging clients. Many have no succession plan while others have one in their minds but have not engaged the stakeholders in serious and sustained conversation (Astrachan, Allen, Spinelli, & Wittmeyer, 2002). The initial request for consultation is often initiated by the next generation. Still, most therapists are willing to begin with any small ''opening.'' The path to the owner is treacherous and often guarded by professional advisors who appease the owner and inadvertently constrain succession.

The initial work is strategically designed to gain an ''audience.'' Family therapists know that, once started, the conversation is much easier to sustain. LT/LD owners preclude and resist possibilities because change is threatening and includes fear of retirement and more time in an empty marriage. The outcome can be futile unless the owner recognizes that succession is a matter of ''when'' not ''if.''

Stagnant Traditional Marriages

Always a challenge, these couple cases can be additionally constrained when one spouse is a LT/LD owner without a succession plan. Because these marriages have often been stagnant for years, spouses are living parallel lives. One owner quipped:

"for better or worse, but not for lunch." Getting a simple event like a lunch to happen can be the ice breaker for more work. Moreover, as a client in couple therapy, the owner's succession dilemma is accessible to the therapist. While treading cautiously, the topic of succession can be broached and the LT/LD risk assessed. As in all stuck marriages, change can be slow.

Alternatively, the nonbusiness spouse may present for individual therapy. This spouse is frequently ambivalent about the business, having reaped its financial rewards while blaming it for the marriage's hollowness. Bringing the owner into therapy is an option, but first the nonbusiness spouse needs a primer in the owner's constraints, particularly the power of the LT/LD narrative, and a level of compassion to prevent years of bitterness from compromising the couple therapy.

The Disillusioned Successor

These cases present in myriad ways. The successor may seek therapy to address frustration with his work, or he may have an unrelated presenting problem. The stress of working with the owner/parent and the felt stuckness that the owner will never retire can reach a breaking point. Helping the successor identify an owner/parent's LT/LD narrative, developing strategies to cope with the business, and even strategically examining whether or not to remain in the business are helpful (Birley, 1986). Suggesting small "probes" capable of shifting the owner can constitute work early in therapy. But eventually, the successor should invite the owner/parent to join the therapy as a guest. The threat that the successor might leave the business can be a powerful motivator for the owner.

As indicated in the present study and elsewhere (Werbel & Danes, 2010), the nonbusiness parent may also have a history of exerting "behind-the-scenes" influence with the owner. This usually creates a polarization that triangulates and angers the owner, further jeopardizing the working relationship of owner and offspring. Asking both parents into the therapy places the interaction in the room where it can be named and modified. Frequently, the successor's greatest asset is his children. Subtle and direct threats to restrict access to the grandchildren further poison the relationship, but the intense need of both parents to see the grandchildren can be a powerful bargaining tool.

Sibling Angst

Many middle-aged clients in individual and/or couple therapy have a family business and several siblings in their family. When the client's parent has grown the business with a LT/LD narrative, these siblings usually perceive the business as the preferred "sibling." Intense feelings of longing, competitiveness, and jealousy can exist among the siblings who never really had a chance to be Dad's favorite. Sibling angst can result in superficial relationships and cut offs. Just identifying the source of these feelings (the owner and/or the business) is therapeutic. Inviting the siblings to sessions to build "common ground" and then adding the owner and spouse creates powerful sessions. If the owner can be helped to take responsibility for his absence, the siblings can forgive and relationships can go forward.

Even more intense are configurations in which one sibling (usually the son as the present research suggests) works in the business and is viewed as the successor. Often none of the family members are content. The owner struggles to transfer ownership.

By the time he finally does, the successor is embittered from years of sacrifice. The buy-out is done primarily to benefit the sustainability of the business, so the non-business children feel not only neglected in their childhoods but further abandoned in the estate, the primary asset of which is the business. These tensions can remain dormant in the therapy unless the therapist actively pursues them. If they are surfaced, then options include bringing the siblings together in therapy or working with the family of origin.

When we set out to interview our participants, we had no preconceived notions of how they would narrate their business stories or what constraints to succession they would reveal. As systemic therapists, we did not anticipate that the vast majority of their stories would center on "The business within." The LT/LD narratives seemed to be very constraining. Organizationally, they may function like the capstone of an arch where the arch is the larger system that includes the family system. Capstones anchor the structure of the arch and enable it to bear great weight. With sufficient effort, however, capstones can be removed, reshaped, and replaced, thus changing the load-bearing characteristics of the arch. The new capstone becomes the successor who provides continuity and strength to the family enterprise.

It is not yet clear to us for which situations this is possible and for which it is not. That is a mission for future research. A hallmark of our research is the willingness of almost all of our participants to open up and tell us about "The business within." Perhaps the telling is the first step toward getting unstuck.

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