

# Gender-related factors in family business succession: a systematic literature review

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**Abstract** Succession is one of the most discussed topics in family business research. However, despite the changing professional and family roles of women and the growing number of female CEOs worldwide, published works in the body of literature have relatively little to say on the role of gender in succession. The article reviews the recent development in the literature related to women in intergenerational succession in family businesses with the aim of systematizing gender-related factors affecting intra-family succession, and also proposes directions for future research. Based on a sample of 35 studies published between 2005 and 2017, this paper categorizes the gender-related factors found in the literature into three categories: environment and context, people, and processes. Subsequently, the paper summarizes the current state-of-the-art in light of these three categories. Since the research on the role of gender in succession is fragmented and lacks an overall direction, we present multiple directions for future research. The present review contributes to the body of literature on the development of family business by comprehensively systematizing existing gender-related factors affecting succession.

**Keywords** Family business · Succession · Gender · Incumbent · Successor

**JEL Classification** L26 · M21 · M12 · J16

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## 1 Introduction

Intergenerational succession has for a long time been one of the most discussed topics in family business research (Benavides-Velasco et al. 2013). At the same time, there has been relatively little research on women and their role in family business succession. In the past, women in family firms were seen as family members rather than as potential successors (Frishkoff and Brown 1996). Although they are seemingly “invisible” (Gillis-Donovan and Moynihan-Bradt 1990), women have always played irreplaceable roles in family firms, often only serving as regular employees or supportive mothers or daughters.

In recent decades, the professional and family roles of women have been changing. While female CEOs represented only a few percent in the 1970s, today they account for up to 24 percent worldwide (Grant Thornton 2014). This trend, however, has not been reflected in the family business literature. According to Sharma (2004, p. 14), “no systematic research has yet been directed towards understanding the contextual and individual factors that buoy these women into leadership positions, their performance goals in terms of family and business dimensions, or the leadership and managerial styles adopted by them”. Hence, researchers have to resort to the findings from the non-family business literature.

Of course, women in family firms have to face similar issues as women in other, non-family firms. But, on the other hand, there are unique issues associated with the intertwining of business and family, such as conflicts among family members, or a fragile authority between family and non-family members (Dumas 1992). Therefore, the role of women in intra-family succession certainly deserves further academic attention.

The present work intends to answer the following research questions: (1) what is the current state of knowledge concerning the role of women in intergenerational succession in family businesses? (2) How is gender being studied within the family business succession literature? (3) What factors affect the succession process from a gender perspective? (4) How could this field be studied and expanded in the future in order to further develop the current fragmented knowledge? These questions shall be addressed through a systematic literature review that is designed to provide an exhaustive summary of the extant literature and to systematize the existing findings (Tranfield et al. 2003).

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. First, we provide theoretical foundations for the topic of gender in the family business succession literature. Subsequently, we present our methodology and research sample. Then, we present and summarize the findings. Finally, suggestions for future research and concluding remarks are presented.

## 2 Gender in the family business succession literature

We are witnessing the emergence of new gender theories that aim to challenge the predominant masculinity and to promote entrepreneurship as an activity that is

equally open to people of both genders (e.g. Ahl 2006; Ahl and Marlow 2012; Hamilton 2013). With their growing importance, we can also note the contribution of women to the family business literature. However, these studies are still rare.

Although gender theory only started to develop during the 1980s, it has undergone several distinctive phases. Ahl (2006) proposed to categorize the field into three main perspectives according to epistemological standpoints. Early studies based on the feminist empiricism perspective approached gender as a variable based on biological sex. Over time, this approach has shifted to the feminist standpoint perspective which emphasizes the different experience of women as compared to men. Both feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint perspectives attempt to emphasize the similarities and differences between men and women. On the other hand, the post-structural perspective dissociates itself from previous efforts to foreground the uniqueness of a woman and her experience and questions whether gender can be taken for granted. According to this perspective, gender is socially constructed and dependent on different contexts (Alvesson and Billing 2009).

In the broad family business succession literature, gender is often one of countless variables rather than a significant factor that shapes the content, process and context of succession. To illustrate this fact, we resort to the recent reviews in the family business research. Sharma (2004) presented a review of more than 200 articles in which she concluded that women and their role in family firms have remained mostly in the shadows. Benavides-Velasco et al. (2013) present an extensive bibliometric analysis of more than 700 family business studies in 75 journals, which spanned over a period of almost 50 years, identifying gender as one of the primary topics of 26 articles. It is noteworthy that the authors classified gender in combination with ethnicity under one category, thus insinuating its marginal impact. In a similar spirit, they suggested using gender and ethnicity as moderating variables to enhance a “complete range of management practices and strategic decisions in family businesses”. Furthermore, another study presented by Litz et al. (2012) also does not provide any favorable outlook for women in the family business research. The authors include an input into their survey from more than 80 family business scholars and yet there is not one single mention of gender. A more recent bibliometric analysis presented by Xi et al. (2015) does not comment on gender at all. Clearly, we can expect to find other review papers which neglect the role of women in family business research.

The existing reviews dedicated to succession in family firms generally do not provide better outcomes. The existing literature offers review papers that present overviews of succession from various perspectives as well as a great set of generalized empirical findings (e.g. Handler 1994; Brockhaus 2004; Nordqvist et al. 2013; Daspit et al. 2016; Nelson and Constantinidis 2017). However, except for the recent review of Nelson and Constantinidis (2017), comments on gender issues are mostly limited to fragmented paragraphs or acknowledgements that are worthy of further investigation.

The alternative is to refer to reviews explicitly addressing the issue of marginalized women in family firms. Being clearly neglected in practice and theory, to date only a few authors have decided to review the fragmented findings. Besides the aforementioned review by Sharma (2004), three other authors have presented

important contributions to the issue of women in family firms. In a review of 48 articles published since 1985, Jimenez (2009) examined the obstacles and positive aspects of women's involvement in family firms. Inevitably, the author also discusses the issue of daughters and obstacles they must overcome in order to achieve leadership positions in family firms, and concluded that the question of how women enter and run family firms still remains unclear. Another relevant review presented by Wang (2010) focuses exclusively on daughters in family firms and their chances as candidates for succession. Wang is noticeably more pessimistic as he argues that the succession process is heavily biased by gender and that the underestimation of daughters in the succession process results from both macro- and micro factors which render their capabilities almost invisible. Along with Sharma (2004), he concluded that the research on women in family businesses still suffers from fragmentation and a lack of empirical studies. Most recently, Campopiano et al. (2017) analyzed and organized the content of 87 academic articles focused on women's involvement in family firms, out of which 16 have been devoted to women's succession in family business.

To sum up, the studies of Jimenez (2009), Wang (2010), and Campopiano et al. (2017) represent one of the very few existing reviews focused on women's involvement in family firms, but none of them have focused on gender issues in succession.

### 3 Methodology and research sample

To review and organize the existing findings on gender-related factors affecting intra-family succession, we used the systematic literature review approach based on the guidelines of Tranfield et al. (2003). This methodological approach is well established in the family business literature and has been used by many authors of systematic literature reviews (e.g. Sageder et al. 2018). The process of a systematic literature review has been developing over the past few decades and despite its relative youth, we follow a general consensus in our research. Our review process is based on three stages: planning, conducting the review, and reporting and dissemination (Davies and Crombie 1998). The final step of the planning stage is the elaboration of a review protocol, which provides information on the search strategy, specification of the inclusion criteria and data-extraction process and thus helps maintain the objectivity over all of the executed steps.

As aforementioned, the role of gender has been a relatively marginal topic after a series of early pioneering studies. The starting year of the search was selected based on one of the most prominent reviews that summarizes, besides others, the role of women in family businesses which was Sharma (2004) and the overall scarcity of articles focused on facets other than father-son successions published before 2005 (Humphreys 2013). Moreover, many pioneering family business researchers have been practitioners and consultants to family businesses rather than academics (Brockhaus 2004). Instead of being based on well-designed empirical studies, succession in family business research has been predominantly examined using qualitative methods, especially the case study approach (Heck et al. 2008), while being

rather descriptive and based on small sample sizes. Therefore, our research focused on studies published between 2005 and 2017.

Relevant studies were collected from the following databases: Business Source Premier (EBSCO), EconLit (EBSCO), Emerald Fulltext, JSTOR, ScienceDirect (Elsevier), Scopus (Elsevier), SpringerLink, SSRN-Social Science Research Network, and Web of Science. Subsequently, we extended our sample by a manual search in the following journals which publish family business studies: *Family Business Review*, *Journal of Family Business Strategy*, *Journal of Family Business Management*, *Journal of Business Venturing*, and *Small Business Economics*. We searched for the terms “family firm”, “family business”, “succession”, “succession planning”, “daughter”, “women”, “mother”, “father” and “gender” in titles, keywords and abstracts. Then, in line with Plumeyer et al. (2017), we screened references of recent literature reviews (Daspit et al. 2016; Nordqvist et al. 2013; Nelson and Constantinidis 2017), but this process did not yield any more relevant papers.

Our initial sample consisted of 202 sources published between 2005 and 2017. Subsequently, we applied predefined exclusion criteria. First, we limited the sample to original research papers published in peer-reviewed academic journals written in English. In other words, we did not include conference papers (15 sources), books and book chapters (7 sources), teaching cases (4 sources), dissertations (10 sources), those not focused on family business (51 sources) and those that were not written in English (12 sources). The reason why we imposed constraints on document types is the fact that articles published in academic journals are more likely to have undergone a diligent peer-review process. For instance, unlike conference papers, journal articles usually pass multiple review iterations which add scientific value throughout the review process. Hence, consistent with Campopiano et al. (2017), we assume that articles in academic journals are most likely to have a major impact on the field.

On the other hand, unlike other authors of systematic literature reviews (Plumeyer et al. 2017; Sageder et al. 2018) we did not limit the results to any particular pre-selected class of journals. This approach, which is based on the idea that innovative research ideas may even appear in lower-ranked academic journals (Tranfield et al. 2003; Jones et al. 2011), is consistent with the procedures used in extant reviews in the family business literature (e.g. Basco 2013; Mazzi 2011; Suess 2014). The subsequent exclusion stage was based on an analysis of abstracts and discussion sections of the remaining papers.

We note that authors have approached gender in multiple ways. A number of studies simply ignore the gender of succession process participants; this issue concerns not only empirical studies, but also conceptual papers, such as those of Brun de Pontet et al. (2007) or Royer et al. (2008). However, it should be noted that some scholars admit that neglecting the gender in their research presents a potential limitation and a possible direction for future research (e.g. Cabrera-Suárez 2005; DeNoble et al. 2007; Mussolino and Calabrò 2014). In other studies, gender figures as one of the descriptive variables, but authors do not reflect on its existence or influence at all (e.g. Cater and Justis 2009; Gagnè et al. 2011; Marshall et al. 2006; Meier and Schier 2014; Tatoglu et al. 2008; Cabrera-Suárez and Martín-Santana 2012).

Other authors acknowledge the potential importance of gender; however, for various reasons, they have decided to remove it from their analysis. Some authors justify

this by the fact of having only a small proportion of women in their samples (Ansari et al. 2014; Venter et al. 2005), while other scholars have deliberately selected firms with only male representatives in order to control for gender (Salvato and Corbetta 2013). Finally, other authors use gender as a control variable, but when presenting results, they do not report on this (Eddleston et al. 2013; Schleppehorst and Moog 2014).

As our main goal was to review the recent development in literature related to women in intergenerational succession in family businesses and to systematize gender-related factors affecting intra-family succession, we excluded 68 articles which either ignored gender or did not comment on it when discussing results. The final sample consists of 35 studies. As expected, multiple studies in our sample were published in two prominent journals publishing family business research: *Family Business Review* and *Journal of Family Business Strategy*. However, there are other journals which published more than one source on gender-related issues in family business succession, such as *International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship* or *International Small Business Journal*. The complete list of journals is reported in Table 2.

Subsequently, we have developed a coding protocol inspired by the review of Henry et al. (2016) on gender in entrepreneurship research. The protocol used the following categories:

- study type (review, conceptual, or empirical paper),
- country,
- year of publication,
- sample size,
- industry,
- type of respondent (whether the study focused only on one side: either successor or incumbent, or took into account the perspectives of both sides),
- focus of research,
- key findings,
- suggestions for future research.

Moreover, we also coded another two aspects that are related to the gender perspective, namely

- approach to gender (gender as a variable, feminist, or postfeminist),<sup>1</sup>
- percentage of women in the research sample.

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly to Henry et al. (2016), we use three labels to categorize approach to gender: gender-as-a-variable (GAV), feminist standpoint theory (FST) and post-structural feminism (PSF). Under the GAV approach, gender is simply used as an equivalent to sex. FST approach assumes essential differences between men and women (such as facts that women are more risk averse or cooperative). PSF assumes that gender is socially and culturally determined.

Table 2 provides the summary of key findings from the systematic literature review.

Due to a relatively short list of studies, each paper could have been analyzed by both authors independently. To evaluate inter-rater reliability, the authors used percent agreement. Disagreements were then discussed in order to come to a consensus, especially when evaluating the approach to gender, the focus of research, and the key findings of individual studies.

Concerning the methodological approach, our final sample consists of 29 empirical papers (12 quantitative studies, 17 qualitative studies), 4 literature reviews and 2 conceptual articles. This is in sharp contrast with the family business field as a whole, which is dominated by quantitative studies (Campopiano et al. 2017; De Massis et al. 2012; Reay 2014). On the other hand, we note that most qualitative studies do not comment enough on their sampling methods, as well as the characteristics of the examined sample, such as industry type or firm size.

Finally, we organized the findings into a framework of gender-related factors affecting intra-family succession. The framework identifies three individual albeit partly overlapping categories: environment and context factors, people, and processes. These can be further divided into several subcategories. This classification was partly inspired by the framework presented by De Massis et al. (2008), which classifies possible factors preventing intra-family succession in general. Table 1 presents the individual categories and factors. The following sections describe each of them in detail.

**Table 1** Gender-related factors affecting intra-family succession

Category	Subcategory	Factor
Environment and context	Cultural factors	Primogeniture Gender stereotypes
	Organizational variables	Industry affiliation
People	General	Gender differences in management styles
	Incumbent-related factors	Willingness to relinquish control
	Successor-related factors	Education and prior working experience
		Willingness to join Willingness to lead
Relational factors	Incumbent-successor relationship Relationship with siblings Relationship with other family members Relationship with nonfamily members	
Processes	Successor selection	Selection of successors
	Successor development	Mentoring Transfer of knowledge
		Transfer of values

## 4 Environment and context

*Primogeniture* In patriarchal societies, the oldest son has been predestined to take the reins of a family business. As birth right (primogeniture) has long been a tradition in various cultures, incumbents have typically determined their successors based on gender and age (Keating and Little 1997). Firstborn daughters were rarely considered for succession, even if it meant that the owners had to sell the firm (Stavrou 1999). According to Barnes (1988), it can possibly be attributed to the existing family hierarchy. Younger sons and daughters are positioned at a lower rank than the eldest son, and they face greater difficulties and must make greater efforts. Moreover, even the oldest daughters who had been selected as successor did not receive appropriate coaching and training, which undermined their potential to succeed in leading positions (Lansberg 1988).

On the other hand, some authors suggest that primogeniture is on the decline (Barnes 1988; Kaye 1992) and that successor selection is becoming driven by more objective criteria (Humphreys 2013). For instance, Deng (2015) presents a case study of four female successors in China who were groomed to run the family firm at an early stage. The author, however, acknowledges that the convenience sampling method used in this study inevitably results in under-representation of certain groups of population, those being non-successor daughters. Although based on only a few observations, Deng (2015) provides partial evidence that even in countries with a strong male primogeniture tradition such as China, daughters can be selected as successors at an early age.

However, the extant literature suggests that to date, the preference for male successors over female successors is still existent in the world; the preferences and wishes of parents influence succession criteria and eventually the whole succession process (Haberman and Danes 2007; Otten-Pappas 2013). Even in countries with a high level of gender equality and female leadership participation, it seems that primogeniture remains an issue. For instance, Bennedsen et al. (2007) examines whether the gender of the firstborn affects a departing CEO decision to appoint a successor in Danish family firms. The authors find that the frequency of intra-family transitions of control to firstborn daughters was substantially lower as compared to firstborn sons. At the same time, it seems that the incumbent's gender-biased preferences are reduced under critical events in the family that lead to an unplanned succession (Ahrens et al. 2015).

The decision of an incumbent to sell the family business or appoint a non-family CEO rather than to transfer leadership to the daughter can be culturally dependent. For instance, under the specific Chinese one-child policy conditions, daughters are typically not considered for future appointment even if they are the only child; hence, Chinese family firms may face several constraints on intergenerational succession (Cao et al. 2015). Similar observations have been made not only in China or Asia in general (Halkias et al. 2010), but also in other countries. For instance, in Denmark, even if a daughter is the firstborn child, there is a considerable probability that a non-family, professional manager will be appointed (Bennedsen et al. 2007).



*Gender stereotypes* Related and broader issues are the existence and perception of gender norms and discrimination within both the family and the society. Recent findings suggest that daughters perceive gender discrimination more from outsiders than from employees (Vera and Dean 2005); such outsiders can include teachers, friends or other relatives (Overbeke et al. 2013). Also, the perception of gender norms by incumbents and successors seems to be different. For instance, Overbeke et al. (2015) presented an interesting insight into this subject by observing differences between the beliefs of fathers and daughters concerning gender discrimination in the society. Fathers in the study believe more than daughters do that there is far less discrimination.

Two qualitative studies have attempted to explain the way daughters deal with gender norms and expectations. According to Overbeke et al. (2013), daughters may tend to challenge gender roles in external aspects (such as education or professional career) outside the family business, but they also tend to accept gender norms in family businesses. Hytti et al. (2016) propose a similar idea; daughters aspiring to succession actively challenged the gender norms, but at the same time, this behavior was balanced by accepting gendered expectations such as working in subordinate positions. This sensitive balancing between the social expectations and their ambitions allowed daughters to establish the family business leader identity first in the eyes of their family and then with other stakeholders.

It seems that gender-related stereotypes represent an impediment to establishing legitimacy in the eyes of other stakeholders. Successful female successors reported that employees wanted to test the competence of young women, especially if they had known them as children (Constantinidis and Nelson 2009). These obstacles are even more pronounced in the cases of women who became successors due to critical events. Hytti et al. (2016) describe how daughters negotiated their gender in order to fit within the masculine business life. Daughters had to adopt a masculine-type ownership identity in order to eventually construct an identity as family business successors.

*Industry affiliation* The industries in which individual family firms operate may play important roles in daughters' decisions to not work in family firms, even if they have their own entrepreneurial intentions (Schröder et al. 2011; Schröder and Schmitt-Rodermund 2013). Females may perceive a lack of interest or welcome in male-dominated industries. Together with young age, daughters may have difficulties in building legitimacy in the eyes of family business stakeholders (Haberman and Danes 2007). In the study by Deng (2015), women had to make the extra effort to convince their male subordinates to follow their instructions.

Gardiner and Tiggemann (1999) examined the effect of male-dominated industries on female leadership style. Female managers in such industries were more likely to adopt task-oriented leadership, rather than relationship-oriented leadership. However, this unexpected "unfeminine" approach encountered resistance from the employees.

Hence, how can daughters overcome the gender stereotypes without losing credibility in the eyes of family members and other stakeholders? Hytti et al. (2016) present a case study where a daughter working in a male-dominated industry was able to adopt the feminine leadership practice by wisely using the firm's female clientele

and her own ability to switch identities in different contexts. What is more, a sound relationship with the incumbent chief of staff appears to be the key to establishing sound relationships with stakeholders, as the parent may facilitate access to business networks and dispel doubts about the daughter's competence (Gherardi and Perrotta 2016).

## 5 People

*Gender differences in management styles* Although the stereotypical vision of men and women may suggest that both sexes approach strategic and management practices in a distinctively different manner, the opposite appears to be true. According to the conclusions of a vast review of the entrepreneurship literature presented by Jennings and Brush (2013), even though the strategic objectives may vary between female and male entrepreneurs, there is very little evidence in the existing literature that the same could be said of managerial practices.

In our systematic review, management styles of women and men were one of the investigated characteristics. Consistent with the above-mentioned review, Sonfield and Lussier (2009) reported that there are no fundamental differences between male and female family leaders in terms of management style.

The possible minor differences being mentioned in the general management literature may be due to the fact that men prefer rationality, dominance and risk-taking (Schmitt et al. 2008), while women prefer cooperation, communication and creative solutions (Eagly et al. 2003). Frequently-mentioned traits of female leadership include the preference for collective decision-making over individual decision-making (Sonfield and Lussier 2012; Remery et al. 2014; Avloniti et al. 2014), empathy and patience (Allen and Langowitz 2003).

In family firms, management style is often transferred from one generation to another. However, studies that precede our review did not specifically address the transfer of leadership style (Jimenez 2009); meanwhile, it is more than likely that transfer of leadership is especially relevant for cross-gender succession, given the isolated reports that the leadership style of the incumbent correlates with succession (Aronoff et al. 1996; Sonnenfeld 1991). Prior studies suggest that the leadership style of the "steward" who tends to watch over a business has a better chance for a smooth succession than the "monarch" style of someone who glorifies the power of leadership.

Nonetheless, leadership style can become an obstacle of succession when a father does not agree with his daughter's management style. Since daughters adopt the feminine, more collaborative and caring management style, fathers may assume that their daughters will not become efficient future leaders. Overbeke et al. (2015) report similar findings; when a father perceived that his daughter was expressive or cooperative, he was more likely to rule her out as a potential successor. By contrast, the instrumentality that is typical of men makes them seemingly better qualified for leadership positions in the eyes of fathers (Spence and Buckner 2000). As with other discussed obstacles, Humphreys (2013) shows that a sound relationship based on

trust and honest communication can help accommodate the differences in management styles.

Equally as little is known about the transfer of leadership style in family businesses led by women. Vera and Dean (2005) found that daughters felt themselves in the shadow of their mothers as their managerial style was continually compared by others with that of their mothers. Apart from this study, no other paper has paid attention to the transfer of managerial style in mother-owned firms. The fragmented findings clearly point to the fact that despite repeated calls for a deeper investigation, the area of managerial style transfer remains wide open.

### 5.1 Incumbent-related factors

Since the mainstream family business literature has long been silent on gender issues, most of what we know about succession in family firms is based on the intergenerational transfer between fathers and sons. Transfer of power from mothers to their children has been addressed very sporadically in the existing literature. Historically, the gender of the incumbent belongs among the least-measured variables used in family business succession studies (Le-Breton-Miller et al. 2004). However, with respect to the recent advances in the social sciences literature, assuming a gender-neutral context is a fragile situation.

While early studies (Dumas 1992; Harveston et al. 1997; Kaslow 1998) suggest that same-gender succession is different from cross-gender succession, this proposition has not been elaborated any further. There are a few exceptions in the extant literature. Sharma et al. (2003a) controlled for the same- and cross-gender succession and found no differences in satisfaction with the succession process between these two groups. Similarly, Cadieux et al. (2002) specifically address succession in women-owner family firms and fail to find any significant difference from male-owned firms, but they bring to light several intriguing facts which call for further investigation. In a survey of family owner-managers in 6 countries, Sonfield and Lussier (2009) examine whether gender plays a role in succession plans and, consistent with Cadieux et al. (2002), they find virtually no significant gender differences.

On the other hand, in a qualitative study, Vera and Dean (2005) compare father–daughter and mother–daughter successions. All of the interviewed daughters taking over the family business from their mothers reported major difficulties as compared to daughters involved in father-daughter successions. Not only had the daughters to prove to their mothers that they are competent to become successors, but also their leadership style was constantly compared to their mothers' style by non-family employees.

To sum up, in the current family business literature, the gender of the incumbent is still rarely taken into account.

*Willingness to relinquish control* One of the well-known factors preventing succession is the incumbent's willingness to relinquish control. Often incumbents are not willing to retire even after the transfer of formal leadership and they tend to hold the reins of the family and the business past their tenure (Handler 1994; Sharma 2004). This phenomenon has been observed especially in founder-led firms

(*founder's shadow*), where founders often consider their firm to be part of their identity, and are unable to choose a successor or accept their own mortality (Davis and Harveston 1998). Incumbents tend to avoid the question of retirement and describe it in a negative way (Solomon et al. 2011). This evasive attitude may eventually lead to the fact that children lose the slightest interest they might have in taking over or even working in the family firm.

While a number of family business studies describe this phenomenon in great detail, the role of gender therein is generally not recognized (Gagnè et al. 2011). While several studies report that a father's influence lingers over the family business after his retirement (Barrett and Moores 2009; Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013), daughters may be able to better cope with the interference by a father, since women prefer a participative leadership style and care about quality interpersonal relationships. Daughters seem to show a more empathetic understanding of a father's urge to continue being involved in the family business (Deng 2015; Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013)

Concerning mother-owned family firms, empirical evidence is very scarce. In a study of more than 700 US family businesses, Williams et al. (2013) found no differences between female-owned and male-owned businesses in terms of intents to transfer management to future generations. However, there is also evidence that business-owning mothers are deeply connected to their firms (Cadieux et al. 2002). According to Vera and Dean (2005), mothers tend to hold the floor even after a successful succession, as they demand perfection and the last word in decision-making even after their retirement. The frictions that emerge may result in a poor trust and communication between the mother and her child (Cadieux et al. 2002).

On the other hand, Koffi et al. (2014) report that mothers left their place to their successors having a total confidence in their abilities, while fathers informally retained control as successors did not have their full confidence. Barrett and Moores (2009) presented one case in their study where a mother in 17 years of work in a family firm had never discussed with her daughter the date when she would step down. Usually, such a situation creates pressures on successors who must cope with the incumbent's omnipresence and a dilution of decision-making, but this particular case provides an illustration of an unusual level of trust between both women.

These conflicting findings could be attributed to a successor's gender. However, as there are only a few studies which take into account the gender of both incumbents and successors, more research is needed in this regard.

## 5.2 Successor-related factors

Both the ability and will of successors to take over the family firms are necessary prerequisites of a successful succession. Prior studies discuss three common aspects of successor competence: education, experience working in the family business and prior work experience (Dyck et al. 2002).

*Education and prior working experience* Regarding skills and education, there seem to be only minimal gender differences except for the fact that female successors are more likely to become university graduates (García-Alvarez et al. 2002;

Remery et al. 2014). However, due to a perceived lower chance of becoming future successors, they often choose fields of study that are unrelated to the core business of the family firm (Schröder et al. 2011). This decision may negatively affect their potential for succession. Further, Overbeke et al. (2013) report that some daughters who majored in business-oriented fields were not able to connect their learned skills to a leadership in the family business, thus unconsciously reducing their potential for succession.

After graduation, daughters often work outside the family business and do not consider taking over the family business (Vera and Dean 2005; Deng 2015). The fact that daughters are more inclined to work outside the family firm was also empirically supported by quantitative studies. For instance, Schröder et al. (2011) report that girls displayed a higher likelihood of choosing other employment, or even tended to prefer establishing a new venture. Zellweger et al. (2011) report of similar results in their study, as gender was a significant predictor of the preference for employment outside the family firm.

On the other hand, work experience outside the family business can represent a particular strength for daughters, since it displays their competence to succeed in a more objective, outside business world (Vera and Dean 2005; Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013), as well as their willingness to take a risk in pursuing their own career (Halkias et al. 2010).

*Willingness to join* Emotional aspects play an important role in considering whether to join the family business. They are even more pronounced in the case of daughters. Their preferences to join the family business are related to whether they are meant to take over a leadership role or not (Constantinidis and Nelson 2009; Schröder et al. 2011). Compared to sons, daughters feel a greater emotional attachment to family firms. Moreover, daughters' attitudes to the family business are also influenced by the family's attitude towards them. Interestingly, daughters find their father's job more rewarding than sons do, while at the same time parents prefer male successors (Schröder et al. 2011).

Hence, the thought processes that determine the intent to join and eventually take over a family firm depend on the successor's gender. Sons are usually considered from an early age to become potential successors and leaders. Their mindset is reinforced by explicit or indirect messages received from within the family that they are expected to follow in their father's footsteps (Overbeke et al. 2013). Accordingly, their attitudes and beliefs are shaped during adolescence. On the other hand, daughters often do not perceive the expectations that they will become future leaders during their teenage years. Therefore, they are less committed to taking over the business and, as previously noted, they often choose to work outside the family business or they establish their own firm (Lasпита et al. 2012; Zellweger et al. 2011). These intentions are particularly pronounced when the scope or industry of the family business does not fit to a daughters' personal wishes (Constantinidis and Nelson 2009; Otten-Pappas 2013).

Despite the permanent exposure to the family business during their early life, daughters do not consider the family business as a career or life path as they grow up (Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013; Humphreys 2013). However, if necessary, they are willing to join the family business in order to support their parents (Vera and Dean

2005; Deng 2015) or help to keep the business in the family (Deng 2015). This is in contrast with sons who report more on their business and personal interests as reasons to join the family business (Halkias et al. 2010).

*Willingness to lead* It transpires that it is often the successor who must express the wish to become a future manager. Daughters often have no intentions to take over the family firm (Vera and Dean 2005), but their initial motivations may change after joining the business and they start to be more interested in leadership roles (Humphreys 2013). There is some evidence that is consistent with the proposition of Sharma et al. (2003b) that the initiative to start the succession process may come from the daughter (Constantinidis and Nelson 2009; Haberman and Danes 2007). Since daughters are generally less prepared for succession, they have to demonstrate their interest in taking over the family firm (Hytti et al. 2016). In the study of Haberman and Danes (2007), the interviewed family firms in US never considered transferring their business to daughters until the daughters themselves made the request. Obviously, that resulted in less planning and a shorter period of knowledge transfer.

Daughters' willingness to lead can quickly change when a critical event occurs in the family. The occurrence of critical events leading to the succession of daughters is reported across all qualitative studies in our review (e.g. Otten-Pappas 2013; Overbeke et al. 2013). Most often it can be an illness or death of a father or a brother, a brother's decision to leave the family firm, or job loss of the daughter or her partner. Overbeke et al. (2013) found that most daughters who had taken over family firms by no means considered becoming successors before the crisis event occurred. The sudden necessity for appointing a daughter as the manager has a negative impact on her readiness to become a leader.

### 5.3 Relational factors

It is typical for family firms to adopt family-centered goals, and good interpersonal relations often take priority over value maximization in family firms (Davis and Tagiuri 1989; Stafford et al. 1999). Family harmony and consensus on the selection of a successor are vital conditions affecting the succession process as well as family cohesion. At the same time, women seem to seek good relationships, not only with incumbents, but also with other family members (Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013). This section discusses the gender-related issues in light of four possible types of relationship in family firms: the incumbent-successor relationship, the relationship with siblings, the relationship with other family members, and the relationship with non-family members.

*Incumbent-successor relationship* While potential successors need to look trustworthy in the eyes of other family members, the most crucial relationship is definitely that between incumbent and successor (Lansberg and Astrachan 1994). Since family firms are typical of long-term orientation (Lumpkin and Brigham 2011), incumbents who have gained a wide spectrum of knowledge and experience related to their firms during their leadership (Lee et al. 2003), may be unwilling to share such knowledge and experience with their successors if their mutual relationships are poor.

In father-daughter relationships, there are specifics that are commonly not addressed in the general succession-related literature. Consistent with the prior conceptual assumptions of Hollander and Bukowitz (1990), the evidence suggests that fathers tend to be overprotective of their daughters in trying to shelter them from failure (Henry et al. 2013). A father may see his daughter as a business partner, but at the same time, as his child that needs protection (Vera and Dean 2005), thus unconsciously indicating the belief that his daughter has limited managerial skills. This ambivalent perception may generate tension between both parties, making it difficult for the daughter to establish authority in the eyes of family members, but also in the eyes of other stakeholders (Hollander and Bukowitz 1990).

In several cases, daughters admitted that their involvement in the family firm was a way to build a relationship with their fathers (Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013). Since female leadership is characterized by a preference of consensus over enforcement of own opinion, it is not surprising that daughters admit the tendency to tone down any disagreement between involved parties (Deng 2015).

Open communication is a major factor which makes fathers acknowledge the commitment of their daughters to the business (Otten-Pappas 2013). When fathers share their vision of the future of the business, there is a higher chance that daughters will be involved in some form of decision-making and eventually become successors. However, Glover (2014) suggests that even when a father acknowledges her daughter and is willing to share decision-making, his decisions are directed to the future activities rather than to daily operations, which may hinder the daughter's preparedness for a future leadership role. Nevertheless, daughters' communication abilities allow them to find common ground with fathers and give them the courage to grapple with the demanding position of business leader.

The evidence on mother-owned family firms is only scarce. According to Vera and Dean (2005), daughters who take over the business from their mothers often complain about their mutual relationship, while in father-daughter successions, the relationship between a daughter and her mother was without conflict. On the other hand, Koffi et al. (2014) propose that female incumbents might contribute well to the succession process, because their relationship with the successor is built on confidence, ability to act maternally and spontaneous offer of support. Unlike male business-owners, they usually do not put the successor under a battery of tests before credibility is established.

Unfortunately, Koffi et al. (2014) did not take into account the gender of the successor, although it will certainly play an important role. For instance, Overbeke et al. (2013) suggest that while sons generally perceive acceptance by their fathers, over 40 percent of daughters struggle for their father's approval.

*Relationship with siblings* Daughters are often "invisible" when it comes to a family business (Curimbaba 2002). Their managerial skills are often underestimated when compared to those of their male siblings. Prior findings about daughters' perceptions of being overlooked in terms of professional capabilities are consistent overall. They have to exert extra effort to prove to their families and fathers that they are capable of leading a business. Daughters often perceive that their brothers receive different treatment and education (Haberman and Danes 2007; Overbeke et al. 2013). Further, even when a female successor receives a business education

and possesses external working experience, she may perceive herself as not being considered in an equal manner. At the same time, unequal treatment of children is a frequently mentioned source of conflicts in the family business literature (Avloniti et al. 2014).

If multiple children are interested in taking over leadership of the family firm, an increased competition between siblings can arise. In their conceptual paper, Avloniti et al. (2014) suggest that sons have a higher likelihood of experiencing sibling rivalry than daughters. However, empirical findings on this important topic are very limited in the family business literature.

Generally, it seems that the likelihood of a daughter becoming a successor decreases in families with at least one male sibling (Haberman and Danes 2007). However, the fact of having brothers does not automatically mean that a daughter has no chance to succeed. There is still the chance that other siblings will not be interested in running the family business (Vera and Dean 2005; Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013). A son's lack of interest in managing the family firm may induce the incumbent to give a chance to a more motivated offspring, including a daughter.

In families with no male successors, the situation is much clearer. If a founder has the "intention for succession", his daughter may be seen as a legitimate successor, hence receiving the appropriate education and training from an early age. Under such circumstances, daughters enter the business as employees and they naturally progress towards leadership (Constantinidis and Nelson 2009) with the support of an uninterrupted learning process (Barrett and Moores 2009).

*Relationship with other family members* In family firms, members are involved in family relationships as well as business relationships, which results in the necessity for managing dual relationships (Cole 2000, p. 352). The intertwining of business and family may result in conflicts that may harm the business (for instance, its reputation or organizational structure) as well as the family itself. At the same time, formal decision-making processes in family firms are complemented by informal aspects stemming from the family sphere. Family members who are not involved with the business may be involved in business discussions, and can eventually serve as a valuable resource for the business as they provide important emotional support (Vera and Dean 2005; Matzek et al. 2010).

Early studies considered women to be invisible in the business sphere, but although they were not presented as owners or managers, women may take an important role within the family domain and influence the formal leaders to such an extent that business decisions are made jointly (Hamilton 2006; Haberman and Danes 2007). However, most of the studies mentioning mothers suggest the persistence of gender norms, as mothers stayed home and did not work or they participated in formal decision-making (Overbeke et al. 2013; Deng 2015).

Regarding succession, mothers often have an important, albeit informal role in the whole process. When bringing up children and young adolescents, they act as advisors in the process of making career plans (Dietrich and Kracke 2009).

It seems that daughters are able not only to build good relationships with incumbents, but with other family members (Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013). Among other reasons, this finding can be attributed to the preference of "feminine" managerial style, which is more participative and supportive in nature. Due to the



orientation to team solution and cooperation, women play an integrative role and contribute to finding consensus in families (Allen and Langowitz 2003).

*Relationship with non-family members* According to the existing body of literature, the gender of both the incumbent and the successor seems to be important with respect to relationships with non-family members—either employees or other people, such as friends. In multiple studies from our sample, daughters experienced various difficulties or cues when taking over family firms or while being prepared for a take-over role.

In their qualitative study, Vera and Dean (2005) found that the management style of daughters was often compared to their mothers' style by non-family employees. To avoid such comparisons, daughters tended to create their own business by making important changes in the organizational structures of the family firms. However, Vera and Dean (2005) also suggest that this phenomenon occurs more frequently in mother-daughter succession and they call it the "mother's shadow conflict". Naturally, incumbents and their confidence in the successor's ability can also be a valuable factor in gaining credibility in the eyes of employees. According to Koffi et al. (2014), mothers are particularly helpful in this regard as they tend to put a great effort into establishing good relationships with their successors. This manifested confidence itself helps build a successor's credibility among employees.

Overbeke et al. (2013) reported that some daughters were receiving cues about their roles relative to the business from non-family members, such as teachers or friends, and other associates when they were young. Constantinidis and Nelson (2009) found similar evidence noting that, especially in male-dominated sectors, it is more difficult to be accepted as a woman leader; these difficulties are even more pronounced if the workers have known woman leaders as children. In a more recent study, Deng (2015) suggests that daughters are more likely to be challenged by non-family members, especially when their father is still around.

To sum up, it seems that the gender of the incumbent does play a role concerning the relationship with non-family members; daughters often face various social obstacles that sons do not have to overcome.

## 6 Process factors

*Selection of successors* It is generally recognized that the selection of successors has to be based on rational and objective criteria. It seems that integrity and commitment are more relevant than technical skills, since these characteristics may help to maintain a family reputation in the eyes of the stakeholders (Chrisman et al. 1998; Sharma and Rao 2000).

As aforementioned, the selection of successors may still be affected by primogeniture and gender stereotypes existing in the society. At the same time, it seems that such factors start playing a minor role. For instance, Humphreys (2013) reported that fathers evaluated their children on the basis of objective criteria, and daughters having the right skills and education were preferred over their older brothers. Furthermore, the role of gender in successor selection plays almost no role under the

impact of critical events in the family that lead to an unplanned succession (Ahrens et al. 2015).

It should be noted that a possible underestimation of daughters during the selection of successors is not always deliberate. Daughters may perceive that their opinion in decision-making is not appreciated enough, while their fathers do not even realize this fact (Glover 2014). However, empirical testing of such assumptions becomes intricate as incumbents may not be willing to openly communicate about their gender stereotypes (Solomon et al. 2011).

To improve the successor selection process, De Massis et al. (2008) suggest the following measures: formalizing the criteria for successor selection, and defining the composition of the team in charge of the assessment of potential successor(s). Obviously, some recommendations from the general family business literature can be used to minimize the gender-dependent bias in this stage of succession planning.

*Mentoring* Since daughters often become successors in times of crisis, obviously, they often do not receive proper succession planning. A worse post-succession performance caused by a lack of training may contribute to the “popular”, yet most probably false opinion that women are worse managers than men (Constantinidis and Nelson 2009).

While primogeniture is still existing in some societies, multiple studies report that the preference for male successors starts to play a minor role in successor assessment and that incumbents start to prefer skills and experience over biological pre-determination (Humphreys 2013). It is therefore appropriate to discuss the role of gender in forming the successor’s competence. The extant family business literature generally agrees that successor training should be started at an early age (Longenecker and Schoen 1978).

One of the basic prerequisites of a smooth succession is the cooperation of the incumbent and the successor (Brockhaus 2004), which can often take the form of mentoring. Mentoring can become a powerful method of successor development; those successors who had been mentored believed it was a vital tool for success (Boyd et al. 1999).

In our review, one of the distinctive features of successful father-daughter successions was the father’s role as a mentor (e.g. Vera and Dean 2005; Mischel and Iannarelli 2011; Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013). Successful female successors frequently commented that their fathers were open to discuss business decisions and willing to assist; the relationship with their fathers was open, close and professional. Fathers acting as good mentors provide support over the whole succession process (e.g. Overbeke et al. 2013; Humphreys 2013). For female successors, who often lack the appropriate training, fathers represent one of the key pillars of their business education (Humphreys 2013; Overbeke et al. 2013). Hence, mentoring can substantially improve the knowledge transfer by facilitating the learning of technical skills and providing emotional support (Deng 2015; Henry et al. 2013). Conversely, daughters who were not initially offered this form of learning had difficulties gathering the relevant information for decision-making (Overbeke et al. 2013; Barrett and Moores 2009).

*Transfer of knowledge* In order to achieve a smooth succession process, past research provides empirical support for the necessity of an effective knowledge

transfer between generations (Morris et al. 1997). The previous literature reports significant differences between sons and daughters in terms of the transfer of explicit and tacit knowledge.

Daughters who are not considered as potential successors suffer from a lack of professional training and experience (Barrett and Moores 2009), which can represent a barrier to explicit knowledge transfer. However, daughters seem to greatly benefit from tacit knowledge transfer. Women view their business as a cooperative network of relationships rather than a source of profit (Brush 1992), and they are able to cope with the lingering presence of their fathers (founder's shadow). Since their relationship with their father is more interdependent than independent (Dumas 1992), their positive approach to the fathers' continuing influence can contribute to an efficient tacit knowledge transfer.

Studies that allow comparisons between men and women suggest that the gender of the incumbent also plays an important role in knowledge transfer. For instance, Koffi et al. (2014) observe that while both genders accentuated internal and external training, female incumbents placed a greater emphasis on the training of a successor in a more tacit manner, such as mentoring and coaching.

*Transfer of values* One of the strengths of a sound incumbent-successor relationship is the fact that it helps founders convey their values to the next generation. According to García-Alvarez et al. (2002), founders' values attributed to the family and the business shape the socialization process of potential successors. Through the socialization process, founders can ensure that the culture of the firm will survive their leadership. As aforementioned, prior studies report that incumbents tend not to hand over the reins of leadership entirely and their shadow remains an obstacle to the completion of the succession process. This stalemate appears to be a greater problem for sons, as they cannot deal with fragmented decision-making as easily as daughters.

According to Humphreys (2013), shared values both in business and family is one of the distinctive characteristics of a father-daughter relationship. This fact suggests that in father-daughter succession, the incumbent is more likely able to convey the culture of the firm and the family to the next generation. When fathers share their vision of the future of the business, there is a higher chance that daughters will eventually become successors.

It is also noteworthy that women, in general, contribute to the creation of continuity in family firms (Poza and Messer 2001). As such, they play an important role in transferring family and business values to the potential successors (Dugan et al. 2011).

## 7 Directions for future research

In view of the fact that succession has belonged among the most discussed areas of family business research, it is surprising to realize how little we know about the role of gender in this complex process. In this section, we suggest an extensive variety of topics that are worthy of further investigation. Some of the presented propositions may be further related to intergenerational succession in family businesses in

general; others are specific to the role of gender in succession and are the outcomes of our systematic review.

## 7.1 Environment and context

*Cultural context* It can be assumed that national culture and history influence the very nature of families. The cultural context affects not only the behavior of families, but also the operations of family firms (Chrisman et al. 2002). Studies examining succession in Asian family firms (Cao et al. 2015; Deng 2015; Halkias et al. 2010; Mathew 2016) clearly illustrate that the cultural and social context matters in intra-family succession.

Compared to earlier reviews based on mutually similar cultures of the Western world, our sample of studies is geographically more diverse (see Table 2). While several studies use multinational samples, those authors do not discuss the cultural context; with the exception of Zellweger et al. (2011) who control for cultural influence, whereby they combine international data to obtain larger research samples (Sonfield and Lussier 2012). In future research, exploratory studies can help explain the mixed findings presented by past studies. In this matter, Nason et al. (2012) explore the cultural influences in father-daughter succession in 14 countries using the case study approach. These cases provide interesting insights into national contexts. However, comparative analyses of differences due to national specifics in father-daughter succession, or succession in general, have yet to come.

The cultural context thus opens an interesting area of research, not only for succession in general, but specifically for the analysis of gender in succession. While several studies have examined primogeniture as a cultural phenomenon (Kuratko 1993), it is evident that primogeniture still influences family business succession in some countries. Calls for a greater attention to this issue have already appeared in previous reviews (Brockhaus 2004; Sharma 2004). However, in our review, we have not observed any theoretical or empirical progress since their publication.

*Industry affiliation* Although our review reveals some findings regarding the industrial context on the succession process from the perspective of women, much still remains unanswered. Studies that base their analysis on a sample of firms operating in various industries rarely took this factor into account (e.g. Humphreys 2013; Overbeke et al. 2013; Smythe and Sardeshmukh 2013; Schröder et al. 2011), but some authors acknowledge that it was a limitation of their study. This opens up space for future studies that would identify additional challenges that daughter successors have to face, with a particular emphasis on the impact of industry affiliation and related stakeholders.

*Privately-held firms* Most of the existing research papers, especially quantitative studies, have been focused on publicly listed firms. However, in most worldwide countries, the main contributors to national economies are privately-held companies. Consequently, prominent family business journals currently call for research focused on privately-held family firms (Carney et al. 2015).

While these firms receive growing academic attention (e.g. Uhlaner et al. 2007; Arosa et al. 2010; Carney et al. 2015), quantitative studies focusing on

**Table 2** Summary of studies in the sample

References	Journal	Study type	Sample size	Approach to gender	Type of respondent	Percentage of women	Focus of research	Key findings
Sharma and Irving (2005)	ETP	Review		GAV = gender as a variable; FST = feminist; PSF = post-feminist	Focus only either on successor or incumbent			
Vera and Dean (2005)	FBR	Empirical, qualitative	10 female FB owners in the US	FST	Y	100% women	How daughters face challenges during succession	Father-daughter succession is reported to be less problematic than between mothers and daughters as mothers refused to give up control
Hamilton (2006)	ISBJ	Empirical, qualitative	2 generations in 3 families in the UK	PSF	N	predominantly men, one woman	Establishing a family business from founder's and successor's perspectives	Proposes alternative discourse on gender relations in family businesses and calls for a deeper understanding of the role of men and women
Bennedsen et al. (2007)	QJE	Empirical, quantitative	5334 successions in Denmark	GAV	Y	39% for first-born men, 29% for first-born women	Decision to appoint either a family member or an external CEO	The frequency of intra-family transitions of control to firstborn daughters is substantially lower compared to firstborn sons

**Table 2** (continued)

References	Journal	Study type	Sample size	Approach to gender	Type of respondent	Percentage of women	Focus of research	Key findings
Haberman and Danes (2007)	FBR	Empirical, qualitative	22 Family farms in the US	FST	N	50% men, 50% women	Power structures and interactions among family business decision teams on management transfer	It is necessary to involve multiple stakeholder perspectives within the family business into the management transfer and the decision team needs to interact as a group to prevent conflict and feelings of exclusion
Barrett and Moores (2009)	JMO	Empirical, qualitative	13 women from 12 FBs in 5 countries	PSF	N	100% women	How women move into the family business leadership roles	Daughters are not systematically groomed for leadership and their learning phases tend to be disordered
Constantinidis and Nelson (2009)	MIR	Empirical, qualitative	138 college daughters, 11 daughters of FB in Belgium and US	FST	Y	100% women	The role, condition and aspirations of daughters of family businesses	Although family business may help with daughters' careers for obtaining skills and experience, the question whether a daughter decides to take over depends on the existing gender dynamics

**Table 2** (continued)

References	Journal	Study type	Sample size	Approach to gender	Type of respondent	Percentage of women	Focus of research	Key findings
Sonfield and Lusier (2009)	IJGE	Empirical, quantitative	593 FBs in six countries	GAV	Y	6 countries, maximally 39% women	A comparison of men and women as owner-managers of family businesses	Authors report no significant difference between women and men family business owner-managers in terms of management style
Jimenez (2009)	FBR	Review						
Halkias et al. (2010)	IJEV	Empirical, quantitative	63 students in 13 Asian countries	GAV	Y	53% men, 47% women	Father-daughter succession in Asian family-owned businesses	In comparison with sons, daughters in Asian countries tend to detach themselves from the family business and gain their independence as they do not mind working outside the family business
Wang (2010)	JFEI	Review						
Mischel and Iannarelli (2011)	AJEB	Empirical, qualitative	1 family firm in the US	FST	N	X	How successors learn to be entrepreneurial	Family business works as a longitudinal learning experience for children from a very young age and thus stimulate their entrepreneurial development

Table 2 (continued)

References	Journal	Study type	Sample size	Approach to gender	Type of respondent	Percentage of women	Focus of research	Key findings
Schröder et al. (2011)	FBR	Empirical, quantitative	106 children and parents of FB in Germany	GAV	N	69% men, 31% women	Determinants of career choice intentions of adolescents	Daughters perceive their father's occupation as more rewarding than sons, while parents preferred sons for succession. Parents thus should support daughters who are interested in entrepreneurial intentions
Solomon et al. (2011)	FP	Empirical, qualitative	10 FB owners in the US	GAV	Y	80% men, 20% women	Experiences of owners with family business succession	Incumbents with lower levels of trust and differentiation from the business feel isolated with their struggle to plan a succession process
Zellweger et al. (2011)	JBV	Empirical, quantitative	5363 university students at 87 universities in 8 countries	GAV	Y	56% men, 44% women	How founders, successors, and employees differ in terms of locus of control and entrepreneurial self-efficacy	Female students are more likely opt for employment outside the family business



**Table 2** (continued)

References	Journal	Study type	Sample size	Approach to gender	Type of respondent	Percentage of women	Focus of research	Key findings
Sonfield and Lus-sier (2012)	JFBM	Empirical, quantitative	811 FBs in 8 countries	GAV	Y	27% women	Issues of gender stereotype in a managerial context	The owner-manager's preference for individual or group decision-making is influenced by his/her gender
Humphreys (2013)	JFBM	Empirical, qualitative	14 female successors in Canada, Scotland	PSF	Y	100% women	How daughters take the lead in family businesses	The relationship between the incumbent and successor is a centrality of the succession process and mentoring support by the incumbent as its key aspect
Oiten-Pappas (2013)	JFBM	Empirical, qualitative	6 cases of female succession in Germany	FST	Y	100% women	Female successor commitment	Successor commitment model developed by Sharma and Irving (2005) is not fully applicable to female successors and their experience. Authors found it to be a dynamic concept as they observe a shift over time between types of commitment

**Table 2** (continued)

References	Journal	Study type	Sample size	Approach to gender	Type of respondent	Percentage of women	Focus of research	Key findings
Overbeke et al. (2013)	JFBS	Empirical, qualitative	8 non-succeeding daughters, 7 female and 6 male successors in the US	FST	Y	29% men, 71% women	Factors that may contribute to daughters' self-assessments of succession	Daughters subconsciously surrender to gender norms and devalue their leadership skills
Schröder and Schmitt-Rodermund (2013)	JVB	Empirical, quantitative	152 adolescents in FBs in Germany	GAV	Y	62% men, 38% women	The career development of adolescents with a family business background	When parents support children in exploring various career possibilities, children will more likely develop an interest in getting involved in the family business on their own
Smythe and Sardeshmukh (2013)	SER	Empirical, qualitative	7 female successors in Australia	FST	Y	100% women	Themes of the high-quality relationship in father-daughter succession	Daughters use a family firm as a way of bonding with fathers which facilitates the succession process
Williams et al. (2013)	FR	Empirical, quantitative	716 FBs in US	GAV	Y	70% men, 30% women	Transgenerational intent and influential factors	Female-owned firms do not differ from male-owned ones with respect to transgenerational intent
Avloniti et al. (2014)	IEMJ	Conceptual paper			Y	X	Sibling rivalry dynamics and their impact on the succession outcome	

Table 2 (continued)

References	Journal	Study type	Sample size	Approach to gender	Type of respondent	Percentage of women	Focus of research	Key findings
Glover (2014)	IJGE	Empirical, qualitative	1 small family farm in UK	FST	N	X	Power struggles and gender issues of the daughter as a future successor	A daughter must change her identity in the business in order to overcome gender bias
Koffi et al. (2014)	EE	Empirical, qualitative	5 male and 4 female predecessors; 5 sons and 4 daughters in Canada	FST	N	50% men, 50% women	How incumbents bring credibility to successors	Male and female incumbents differ in their approaches to building the credibility of their successors
Remery et al. (2014)	JFBM	Empirical, quantitative	232 successors in the Netherlands	GAV	Y	83% men, 17% women	Differences in education, capabilities and ambitions regarding succession between men and women	While men aim for full ownership, women prefer shared ownership regardless of the presence of children or perceived capabilities
Ahrens et al. (2015)	JFBS	Empirical, quantitative	589 male and female successors in Germany	GAV	Y	77% men, 23% women successors	Labor market constraints in CEO succession contests in family businesses	While sons are the preferred choice for the family CEO, the selected female successors seem to be superior in terms of human capital
Cao et al. (2015)	JCF	Empirical, quantitative	1654 family SMEs in China	GAV	Y	89% men, 11% women	How a one-child policy influences succession in China	A daughter as the first-born child imposes constraints on family business dynastic management

**Table 2** (continued)

References	Journal	Study type	Sample size	Approach to gender	Type of respondent	Percentage of women	Focus of research	Key findings
Cicellin et al. (2015)	IJBGE	Conceptual paper			Y	X	The leadership style of the predecessor and interaction with a daughter or a son as a successor	
Deng (2015)	JFBM	Empirical, qualitative	4 female successors in China	FST	Y	100% women	Factors facilitating and impeding succession from father to daughter in family businesses in China	Confucian values on parent–child relationships encourage daughters' engagement in the family business
Overbeke et al. (2015)	FIP	Empirical, quantitative	50 pairs of father and daughter in the US	PSF	N	50% men, 50% women	Drivers for and barriers to daughter succession	Shared vision for the future of the business between father and daughter is central to daughter succession
Gherardi and Perrotta (2016)	IJGE	Empirical, qualitative	20 family SMEs in Italy	PSF	Y	100% women	Gender and legitimacy in family business succession	Daughters' perception of gender inequality may result in lower levels of legitimacy as they prefer domestic rather than industrial engagement

**Table 2** (continued)

References	Journal	Study type	Sample size	Approach to gender	Type of respondent	Percentage of women	Focus of research	Key findings
Hytti et al. (2016)	ISBJ	Empirical, qualitative	4 daughters from FBs in Finland	PSF	N	100% women	How daughters construct identities as family business leaders.	Daughters overcome the gendered difficulties by producing a masculinized identity as a strong owner
Mathew (2016)	IJESB	Empirical, qualitative	1 FB in India	FST	X	X	The characteristics, challenges and chauvinism toward female successors	Strong motivation, intention for growth and success increase the chances of becoming a successor candidate
Nelson and Constantiniadis (2017)	FBR	Review						

*AJEB* American Journal of Economics and Business Administration, *EE* The Entrepreneurial Executive, *ETP* Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, *FBR* Family Business Review, *FP* Family Process, *FIP* Frontiers in psychology, *FR* Family Relations, *EMJ* International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal, *IJBGE* International Journal of Business Governance and Ethics, *IJESB* International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business, *IJGE* International Journal of Gender and Entrepreneurship, *IJEV* International Journal of Entrepreneurial Venturing, *ISBJ* International Small Business Journal, *JBV* Journal of Business Venturing, *JCF* Journal of Corporate Finance, *JFBM* Journal of Family Business Management, *JFBS* Journal of Family Business Strategy, *JFEI* Journal of Family and Economic Issues, *JMO* Journal of Management and Organization, *JVB* Journal of Vocational Behavior, *MIR* Management International Review, *SER* Small Enterprise Research, *QJE* The Quarterly Journal of Economics

intergenerational succession are missing. Apart from case studies and surveys employing small samples, quantitative empirical studies have been rather rare (Westhead 2003; Scholes et al. 2007). To sum up, to date, the role of gender in succession in privately-held family firms is a completely ignored, yet potentially fruitful area of research.

## 7.2 People and processes

*Transfer of leadership style* Although the management literature offers numerous studies on gender differences in management style and recent findings suggest that these differences are not wide (Jennings and Brush 2013), we cannot be sure that these findings also apply in family firms. Feminine leadership style is more open and empathetic, and less competitive; these traits can efficiently reduce the conflict between the business and family spheres.

The existing body of literature has not shed much light on how the transition of the managerial style is reflected in the further life of the business. This area alone presents challenging research questions. For instance, what role does the incumbent leadership style play in succession and how do gender-related issues impact it (Cicellin et al. 2015)? A number of potential research topics can be centered on female incumbents and the differences between the two genders concerning the transfer of management style in the succession process (Mussolino and Calabrò 2014). The perspective of “maternalistic” leadership style is still in its infancy, but it is safe to say that the application of theory of matriarchy in family businesses is worthy of further investigation (Smith 2014).

*Mother-led and mother-owned firms* Taking into account the changing family and professional roles of women and the increasing number of female CEOs worldwide, we note that the incumbent’s gender is one of the most neglected topics in succession in the field of family business. In most empirical studies concerned with the role of gender in succession, the respondents are current or future successors and in general, the gender of the incumbent is not taken into account. This gap offers a wide spectrum of possibilities on how to further advance the family business succession-related research.

For instance, we can assume that the incumbent’s gender affects the preferences in successor selection (Ahrens et al. 2015). The fragmented findings point to a complicated relationship between daughters and mothers who maintain the identity of leader during and after the transfer of leadership; the literature reports similar findings in father-son successions. If we assume that cross-gender succession is more harmonious, is it possible that mothers prefer male successors?

While it is known that mothers in non-executive roles in family firms play a significant role in forming the career intentions of children, it is not clear whether the same holds if they occupy the management positions.

In the promising topic of mother-owned family firms, other interesting research questions may arise. How do mothers act as mentors? How do they share their knowledge and experience with their successors and how do successors use the transferred knowledge in same-gender and cross-gender succession?

Another interesting area of research is the attitude of female entrepreneurs toward ownership structures. Remery et al. (2014) find that Dutch male successors sought for full ownership, while women preferred shared ownership; however, we do not know anything about the preferences of the incumbents. If female successors prefer shared ownership, can it also affect their decisions on ownership arrangement when they become incumbents?

*The socialization model of daughters* The acquisition of knowledge and values by female successors presents a particularly interesting area of research. While some researchers already devoted their attention to the socialization model of daughters under primogeniture and gender stereotypes in the society, the studies have mostly been qualitative and generalized empirical findings are still missing. Notwithstanding, it will certainly be interesting to evaluate the socialization process in cultures and societies where the cultural and social barriers are eradicated. Such research would need to be longitudinal in nature.

*Life cycle of daughters* Another interesting area of research may be based on the findings of Davis and Tagiuri (1989) who find that life cycles of fathers and sons affect the succession process. Their values, behaviors, and attitudes alter over time and hence the quality of their relationship depends upon their age. Several authors concur that daughters tend to take over the business at a later age (Vera and Dean 2005). This might be attributed to the fact that women are not groomed as potential leaders and therefore they spend their early years in building a career outside the family firm, or they have children prior to joining the family business.

Smythe and Sardeshmukh (2013) suggest examining the influence of the daughter's lifecycle (marriage, child and upbringing) on their relationship with fathers and the likelihood of appointing daughters as new leaders of family firms. Since a sound father-daughter relationship is frequently considered to be the key pillar of a smooth succession, the lifecycles of both parties may yet have hidden influence on the process. Moreover, a comparison between daughters taking over family firms in their twenties and thirties and daughters becoming leaders at an older age may reveal factors that improve the number of successful female successors (Overbeke et al. 2015).

*Spousal relationships and grandparents* Many authors agree on the fact that women are able to influence internal processes in family firms even when they possess no formal powers of decision-making. The spousal relationships and their impact on succession thus represent another promising area for future research (Sonfield and Lussier 2009). Moreover, the literature regularly omits the influence of older generations. In the context of gender, grandparents may influence both incumbents and successors over a significant span of their lives. According to Laspita et al. (2012), grandparents may have an appreciable impact on the career intentions of offspring. In a world where family structures have moved to higher rates of parental separation, grandparents may play a substantial role in the development of their grandchildren. In the academic literature, the role of gender in this process is not mentioned at all.

*Gender differences in approach to risk* The existing literature suggests that women and men differ in their appetite for risk (Borghans et al. 2009; Niederle and Vesterlund 2007). The authors commonly conclude that women are more risk averse than men, which is supposed to be reflected in all aspects of their decision-making,

including their choice of profession and also their investment decisions (Eckel and Grossman 2008). However, thus far, there is no study which investigates what is the role of risk perception of incumbents and successors in their decisions in the succession process. If we take into account the fact that daughters often choose to pursue a career outside the “secure” family business, which can be seen as a relatively risky decision (Halkias et al. 2010), the answer is not clear cut. Hence, gender differences in the approach to risk and their impact on family business succession represent another potential area of research.

*Access to finance* Decisions whether to take over or hand over a family business are undoubtedly influenced by financial factors. The existence of gender stereotypes that were described earlier in this paper could lead to the question of whether women face discrimination in credit markets. However, the evidence is not consistent; while some authors find that women-led firms are credit constrained, other scholars suggest that women do not face discrimination from banks (e.g. Cavalluzzo and Cavalluzzo 1998; Cavalluzzo et al. 2002; Alesina et al. 2013). Moro et al. (2017) find no evidence that banks are biased against female managers; however, female-led firms are more likely to be discouraged from being borrowers as they anticipate being rejected. As a consequence, firms managed by women obtain less bank financing, which can compromise a firm’s performance. Recently, Mascia and Rossi (2017) found that female-led firms face worse price conditions for bank financing, and firms whose leadership changes from female to male are more likely to benefit from an improvement in interest rate levels. To sum up, the evidence is still inconclusive and the question of what is the role of gender in the access to finance in general, and credit in particular, is not yet resolved, notwithstanding the potential impact on intergenerational succession in family firms.

*Joint effects of risk-propensity and difficulties in accessing credit* Incumbents in family firms seek long-term firm survival and stable growth. With regard to father-daughter or mother-daughter succession, two conflicting forces are in action: a more prudent approach can act as a stimulus to hand over the firm to a daughter since, even if the expansion can be constrained because of a lack of risk-appetite, at the same time incumbents can grant a greater probability of survival for the firm. On the other hand, if women struggle to access finance and are too prudent to the point that they do not apply for finance, handing over the firm to a woman can compromise the expansion or even the survival of the firm. Hence, the joint effects of risk-propensity and difficulties in accessing credit can present other interesting avenues for future research.

### 7.3 Theoretical and methodological issues

*Gender theoretical framework* Family business research has heavily relied on agency theory and the resource-based view (Chrisman et al. 2010). These approaches have greatly contributed to the existing knowledge in many areas of related management disciplines; on the other hand, they seem to be rather limited when it comes to such an elementary problem such as that of the role of gender. In recent years, a particular theoretical development is happening in the entrepreneurship literature. Although



women have different entrepreneurial experiences and are less likely to start new ventures, cases in the literature assume a gender-neutral perspective (Marlow et al. 2009).

Our review has mainly focused on what topics of succession are covered from the gender perspective, and not as much on how gender is being studied within the family business succession literature. For this reason, the review includes studies based on various theoretical perspectives on gender. In the family business literature, gender is commonly considered to be a simple variable and studies that involve gender tend to emphasize the uniqueness of women by comparing the similarities and differences between women and men. In this regard, the state of knowledge concerning women and their role within the field of family business is similar to that in the general entrepreneurship literature. According to the extensive review of Henry et al. (2016), empirical studies on female entrepreneurs continue to be based on comparisons of men and women.

Hence, we see a huge potential for the application of gender theories in the family business literature. These theories offer an entirely novel perspective on succession beyond the currently predominant treatment of gender as a simple binary variable. In order to understand the role of women in family business succession, it is essential for scholars to not attempt to impose the gender of survey participants; once the participants are not asked directly, the role of gender emerges spontaneously. The study of Hytti et al. (2016) is an example of papers which took advantage of this approach. To sum up, gender theory may greatly contribute to family business research.

*Comparative studies and narrative analysis* Everything we know about the role of gender in intra-family succession derives from a very limited number of studies. To advance the topic, the future research should take advantage of the existing knowledge on father-son succession that has long been the center of academic attention. This body of knowledge may represent a basis for comparisons of similarities and differences of family firms where leadership is not transferred between male family members. Comparative analyses can provide valuable insights.

As we already noted, same-gender and cross-gender succession are presumably different. Our review has presented the existing findings on father-daughter succession and several studies in our sample (Haberman and Danes 2007; Sonfield and Lussier 2009; Henry et al. 2013; Remery et al. 2014) compared it with father-son succession. Based on previous findings, we propose that cross-gender succession is smoother than same-gender succession. First, there is some evidence that father-daughter succession is more harmonious than father-son succession. Likewise, Vera and Dean (2005) suggest that mother-daughter succession can be problematic from the relational point of view. Taking into account the missing evidence on mother-owned firms, comparative studies may help nuance gender differences.

While the methodological rigor made some forward progress in the last two decades, many topics would benefit from novel approaches. In recent years, we may observe the gradual emergence of interpretative methodologies in the field of family business research that may better address the complex social environment of family firms (Dawson and Hjorth 2012). In particular, narrative analysis may contribute to a better understanding of the roles of different actors in multiple contexts and hence

it is especially appropriate for niche topics where the existing knowledge is deeply fragmented, such as the role of gender in succession. It appears that gender-related issues in intra-family succession are yet too unexplored to employ quantitative research, which is ill-suited to studying gender-based processes (Henry et al. 2016).

## 8 Conclusion

In this paper, we have reviewed and summarized how gender is approached in family business succession studies. We conclude that more than 30 years after the publication of the first related study, mainly exploratory studies have been undertaken and generalized empirical findings are still missing. On the other hand, the existing body of knowledge offers many promising directions for a future research agenda.

This systematic review contributes to the development of the family business literature by comprehensively systematizing existing gender-related factors affecting succession and identifying research gaps that require academic attention. Besides theoretical contributions, the review can have practical implications. If policy-makers realize how the gender of individual family members affect and shape the complex process of succession in family firms, there is a chance that less family firms will fail in the transition to a next generation.

However, this study also has limitations. Since we focused on research and conceptual papers, we could have omitted conference papers or published research notes that can contain interesting insights into the topic.

Since more than a half of the papers in our sample have been published in the last 4 years, it can be assumed that the issue of gender in intra-family succession will be addressed in the near future. However, how far this will go and how fast this will proceed could be well depend on whether scholars will be able to deal with serious methodological and theoretical difficulties; in this paper, we present the possible next steps. Without taking a new direction, the field is likely to only continue to slide over the surface and to generate the same findings that were seen several times before.

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