

Gendering of Family Firms: The Story of Family Funeral Homes

by

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*For Grant and Katie*

*In Memory of Donald*

## **Abstract**

### **Gendering of Family Firms: The Story of Family Funeral Homes**

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Using interpretive narrative analysis to examine a series of interviews with members of selected family businesses in the US funeral industry, this case study offers a deeper understanding about the gendering processes and structures in funeral service firms by exploring how gender intersects with individual identity negotiation. The theoretical foundation of this research was built on the gender in organizations literature and the literature about women and gender in family businesses. An analysis using Joan Acker's framework of gendering processes suggests that the family funeral firms demonstrated gendering similar to that in other business forms. Primogeniture was pervasive in the firms. Males were almost universally preferred for positions, particularly leadership positions. Interactions with family members and employees inside the firm as well as with people external to the firm construct and reproduce a gender order for women in this business. The socialization process that appears to be non-gendered becomes gendered at the secondary level. However, the stories that funeral home families told about their businesses suggest that, in some ways, family firms might provide less gendered structures and processes than other business forms. Because workers in a family firm hold family roles as well as jobs, they are less likely to be disembodied than the literature suggests is the case for other workers. Owners/parents are more aware of family responsibilities outside of work and are more flexible in allowing people to meet those responsibilities. The women in this study negotiated low-conflict gender identities in response to the gendered structures. The major contribution of this case study is the in-depth study of gender in the context of family-owned funeral homes. Additionally, this thesis stands as a unique example of critical, interpretive research in family business literature and is also a rare application of Joan Acker's framework for analysing gendered organizations.

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# Chapter One: The Story of the Stories

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## **My Story**

This story begins for me in 1974 when, at the age of 7, I was deemed old enough to go to work in the family business. On that first day of third grade and for many days after that, I left school and walked across a major thoroughfare and up a hill to “the office”. Thus began my more than thirty-year career working for and with my father in a variety of different businesses. For much of that time, we were the only two in the office – we two made up the entirety of the family business. My duties were simple at first. I was responsible for making coffee, replenishing toilet paper in the restrooms and making copies. As time passed, my responsibilities grew. When my father’s office administrator retired, he did not look for a replacement and I assumed most of her duties. By the time I was in high school, I was serving as the office administrator and bookkeeper. I continued to work for my father in the office during breaks and summer vacations during my undergraduate years. After college, I pursued other career interests and a master’s degree. I had little intention of returning to the family business, but, like many of the women whose stories follow, I had a job crisis - a bad experience with corporate downsizing - that left me looking for work. After a short search, and at my father’s urging, I found myself back in the family



business. This time, I wasn't an employee, a subordinate to my father, but a partner in his consulting practice. During this time, I also started a new venture in which my father was a principal investor and part-time employee. As the nature of the business relationship with my father changed, we were forced to re-negotiate the nature of our family relationship as well.

My life has been spent constantly juggling my role in the family as a dutiful daughter and my roles in the business as a worthy employee and partner. Our consulting practice continues to work primarily with family-owned businesses. A large percentage of our clients are in the funeral service industry. Since my father began working with family-owned funeral homes in the 1970s, our firm has worked with hundreds of funeral home clients, mostly in the United States and Canada; and we have served as consultants to international trade associations in the industry.

This positioning allows me to have the unique perspective from both inside my own family firm, but also as an outside observer to hundreds of other family firms. It also allows me a distinctive advantage as an outside "expert" in the funeral service industry. Most of our consulting clients are families in firms who are experiencing some difficulties and who are seeking solutions to their family and business issues. Many clients have experienced painful family conflicts. I have spent my career trying to help people (myself included) in family businesses negotiate these conflicts. Many times I have worked with women who cannot find their place in the family business. This dissertation is simply a continuation

of that practice of looking inside at my own story and my own experiences working with “Daddy” as well as an opportunity to continue my observation of other families working together and trying to find a better way to “do” family business. The goals of this project are to examine how women and men are situated in their family funeral firms and to develop a deeper understanding of gender and identity in these firms.

This case study examines stories to surface how families in funeral service construct the notions of “funeral home” against the societal constructions of men and women and explores how these constructions affect how women understand and negotiate their roles and identities in a family funeral home. Fifteen (15) family members in six (6) funeral service firms in the United States agreed to participate.<sup>1</sup> Nine (9) women and six (6) men were interviewed in family-owned funeral homes. The resulting stories were analyzed utilizing narrative analysis (Boje, 2001; Bruner, 1990; Czarniawska, 1998; 1993) . This chapter outlines the research questions, the methodology and the remaining chapters of this thesis.

## **The Case of Funeral Service**

Two major characteristics of the funeral service industry make it a uniquely-suited context for a case study of gender. First, the funeral business in

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<sup>1</sup> To protect confidentiality, all names of participants and their locations have been changed throughout this thesis.

North America is a very traditional, male-dominated business and women have been slow to enter the profession. As with many other types of family businesses, funeral home ownership succession remains a largely father-to-son process (Laderman, 2003). However, the industry is currently undergoing dramatic demographic changes. Gherardi and Poggio (2001) suggested that times of shift or change offer unique windows to study how the gender order is produced and, particularly, maintained. The gender composition of the funeral service industry is changing rapidly. In 2000, women made up a just more than 10% percent of licensed funeral directors in North America (Connors, 2004). By 2010, over 50% of the students in mortuary schools were women (Cathles, Harrington, & Krynski, 2010) and women accounted for 27% of all funeral directors (Fisher, 2015). More specifically, 57% of mortuary science students in the United States are women (NFDA.org) and 50% of the students enrolled in Atlantic Canada's only mortuary school in Kentville, N.S., are women (Regan, 2006). In addition to changes in the numbers of women in funeral service, other demographic changes are occurring in the industry. Funeral directors in the United States are the oldest, on average, of workers in any other occupation. As a result, funeral directors are expected to retire in greater numbers over the coming decade (Maciag, 2013). These retirements will, likely, lead to other demographic changes in the industry.

The second reason that funeral service provides a uniquely-suited case study for this research is that the North American funeral service industry

remains largely composed of family-owned firms. The top four publicly-traded funeral home operators (conglomerates) in the U.S. accounted for only about ten percent of market share in 2009 (nfda.org). Two of the most prominent and prestigious North American funeral service trade associations are composed entirely of family-owned firms. This thesis examines participants from member firms in one of those organizations.

In some ways, the study of any family business in North America, as in many parts of the world, is a study of business in general. To wit, United States tax return information suggests that eighty-nine percent of businesses in the United States are family-owned firms and that these firms employ a majority of the country's workforce (Astrachan & Shanker, 2003). In most countries, family businesses contribute between 60-90% of non-governmental GDP and 50-80% of all jobs (*EFB Position Paper*, 2012).

## **Research Questions**

Chrisman, Sharma, & Taggar (2007) argued for multilevel analysis in family firm research. The authors suggested that, in family firms, micro-level phenomena must be studied in light of the macro context and that macro phenomena are produced through individual interactions. In this thesis, I sought to understand how gender intersects with individual identity negotiation in family funeral home firms. At the organizational level, I was interested in

understanding gendered structures, what barriers families construct in their businesses and how these barriers affect the workings of the business. At the individual level, I examined how gendering affects how men and, particularly, women negotiate their identities in a gendered context. To these ends, this thesis explored several research questions.

*1. Why aren't there more women at the top levels of management in their family funeral service firms?*

In her work on gender in organizations, Gherardi (1995) contends that gender and power are inter-connected in any organization. As such, one way to examine the gendering in an organization is to examine the power structures. Women are increasingly entering the funeral service profession; over fifty percent of new professionals in funeral service are women. The percentage of women-owned firms has increased over the past ten years. However, only 14% of the funeral homes in the United States are owned by women (Stelloh, 2011). I completed a survey of the membership roster for one of the industry's trade associations and found that fewer than 10% of the member firms are led by women. This case study explores what barriers these family funeral service firms erect that keep women from prospering in their own firms. Additionally, this thesis studies funeral service firms in which women have successfully transitioned into top leadership roles. By interviewing people in firms where

women have become owners, I hope to surface how these women have negotiated those barriers.

*2. How is the gender order produced and maintained in family funeral service firms? How do these gendering practices and structures differ from those in other family firms or from those in other organizational forms?*

From a social constructionist perspective, one's identity and expression of gender is produced, reproduced and negotiated through social interactions. These interactions result in an order that manifests in a power differential based on biological sex (Acker & Van Houten, 1974). The gender order is, in part, produced and maintained through five, interacting processes that work together to create an underlying organizational logic (Acker, 1990, 1992b). This organizational logic resides in the underlying rules and assumptions that construct organizations (e.g., Acker, 1990; Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980; Dye & Mills, 2012; Mills, 1988) and is manifest in material form in the policies and rules in the organization. It is also produced and reproduced through symbolic constructions (Britton, 1997). These material and symbolic practices serve to maintain the gender order in the organization. A study of gendering explores how this gender order is produced, re-produced and maintained in organizations.

The above are examples of work examining gender in all types of organizations. This thesis seeks to fill a gap in the literature by examining gendering in a family business context, in particular in the funeral industry. A

small body of research about women in family businesses was done in the 1980s and early 1990s led by the work of Dumas (Dumas, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1998) . Although a great body of research about women in entrepreneurial contexts has developed since that time, very little work has built on Dumas' research in family business contexts. As outlined in Chapter Two, several searches of the family business literature found very few articles focused on women in family business. Almost no literature exists that has examined the gendered nature of family business. This thesis will attempt to give insights into the gendering of family business organizations by exploring the role of gender in family funeral firms. Also, we will contrast findings with the existing literature on gender in organizations to examine if family funeral homes are gendered in ways that are similar to or different from other types of firms. In other words, I will address how the material and symbolic forms differ in family funeral firms.

*3. How do women negotiate their various intersecting identities in family funeral homes? How do the ways in which these identities are negotiated play out in the workings of the family firms?*

Gherardi and Poggio (2007) studied women who challenge the symbolic gender order by entering traditionally male jobs. They suggested that these women present a challenge to both the traditional female role and, also, they challenge the traditional allocation of roles within the organization. Arguably, identity is discursively constructed (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007), in part, through

both identification with and distinction from others. Gherardi and Poggio suggested that women who enter traditionally male roles find themselves in an uncomfortable position of both identifying with and also differentiating themselves from men *and* women. This makes it especially troublesome to negotiate one's own identity in reference to the dominant symbolic gender order. Gherardi and Poggio also propose that women who challenge the gender order by entering traditionally male roles feel constant ambivalence in their roles in the organization. On one hand, the women report the need to adopt typical masculine behaviors (i.e., assertiveness, decisiveness, etc.) as a tactic to succeed in the organization. On the other hand, women who do not *perform* their gender in a way that is consistent with the organization or the society's notion of femininity are disciplined in their relationships with men and other women.

Curimbaba (2002) investigated the role ambiguities felt by women heiresses in family firms brought about by gender roles intersecting with family roles. Dumas (1989, 1990, 1992) suggested that, not only do women in these firms feel themselves in the double bind brought about by their location in a male-dominated environment, but they also feel ambiguities from their challenge to the family order. Women successors are "torn" between their role in the family (as daughters or siblings) and their role in the business.

The third set of research questions seeks to build on Dumas' (1989, 1990, 1998) work to better understand how women negotiate their various intersecting identities (daughter/employee/boss) in a funeral business. This third set of



questions also explores Acker's (1990) process of internal identity work. I examined the role socialization plays in the development of a business identity. Also, I examined how women in this type of family firm negotiate among their societal roles as women, with their roles in the family and their sometimes contradictory roles in the business. Specifically, I hoped to address the ways in which these competing identities are negotiated plays out in the workings of the business and in processes particular to family firms, such as leadership succession.

## **Reading the Stories**

Prior to 2002, narrative studies in the broad field of entrepreneurship were rare. However, Larty and Hamilton (2011) contend that narrative methods have increased dramatically since. A review of work in the family enterprise disciplines shows little use of narrative analysis in the research in this sub-field. I contend that narrative analysis is a methodological choice well suited for studying family business because this approach offers an opportunity to examine "everyday aspects of entrepreneurship" (Larty & Hamilton, 2011, p. 221).

A research project that examines how people construct identities, in any particular context, lends itself to the use of narrative analysis for several reasons. Gherardi and Poggio (2007) define narrative analysis as an examination of stories and the narrative practices with which they are constructed. Czarniawska

(1998) suggested that, because narratives themselves are organizational processes, interpretation of narratives is essential to the study of organizations. Narrative analysis focuses on how the narrator connects events and contexts (Bryman, Bell, Mills, & Yue, 2011). People in organizations construct narratives to make sense of their experience of reality and to construct their own identity in it. Thus, the aim of narrative analysis is to "elicit interviewees' reconstructed accounts of connections between events and between events and contexts" (Gherardi & Poggio, p. 26).

Narrative analysis is also particularly suited to the study of how gender is produced and reproduced in organizations (Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004). Boje (2001) suggests that narrative is both a text and a performance. Patterns of communication are the "interactive medium through which gender is constructed." (p. 31). In this way, gender is a performance that has both voluntary and involuntary elements. The way gender is performed is based on shared understandings of what the performance should be in various contexts. In most organizations gender is invisible against a seemingly gender-neutral background (Acker, 1990). A challenge to the gender order, such as when women enter the traditionally male domain of funeral home ownership, offers a unique opportunity to study the usually invisible symbolic order. Allowing people to tell their stories about these disruptions can provide access to the invisible gender, and presumably, other hidden processes (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007).

Secondly, this methodology allows marginalized stories to be surfaced.

Other methodologies have rarely allowed the personal stories of entrepreneurs to be told (Rae & Carswell, 2000). This marginalization is especially true of women. For this thesis, I interviewed women and men at various levels of family funeral service organizations. Prior studies have reported that women feel “invisible” both in family firms and, also, to customers and in other external relationships (Cole, 1997). In a rare recent example of research about gender and women in family business, Hamilton (2006) suggests that the highly-gendered notion of the entrepreneurial identity diminishes the role of women in establishing family firms. Additionally, much of the work of women in family firms is marginalized (Dumas, 1989). Stories of women successors are marginalized, not just in organizations (Dumas, 1992), but, also in popular press and academic research about family firm succession. In a rare look at the gendered nature of entrepreneurship, Baker, Aldrich and Nina (1997) examine the paradox that while women have made great gains in business ownership in the US, this fact has gone largely unnoticed by the popular and academic press, leaving women’s ownership to be largely invisible. As an example of this paradox, few studies have examined women as successors in family firms (Martinez Jimenez, 2009).

Finally, narrative analysis allows the researcher to focus on different stories at all levels of an organization (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). Women contribute to family firms in different ways, often invisibly, and at many different levels of the organization (Cole, 1997). Narrative analysis allows the researcher to collect stories from many different perspectives in an organization.

Czarniawska (1998) suggests that narrating is organizing, and narrating is an action. It is a theoretical framework that takes into account the relations between gender, organization and discursive practices. It is a methodology that is uniquely situated for research at the intersections of the performance of gender, the construction of the organization, in this case the “family-owned funeral home”, and the discursive practices that produce and reproduce both.

Narrative analysis is more methodology than method. Whereas method is concerned with tools for data collection, extraction or analysis, methodology is the study of methods and the underlying perspectives of those who use particular methods (Bryman, 2008). In other words, narrative analysis is an overall approach to research rather than a prescriptive sequence of steps or techniques. The form of narrative analysis used for this thesis is undertaken from the interpretivist perspective in that reality is viewed as subjective and as constructed through social interactions (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Peltonen, 2016). Working from this perspective, the researcher views herself as a partner, with the story teller and with the reader of the analysis in giving meaning to the stories. The analysis and the reading of it become part of the interpretation of the story. This research uses a thematic approach (Riessman, 2008) to create groupings of themes that surface from the analysis by reflexively and iteratively moving between the stories and the underlying theory. This form of narrative analysis is more concerned with what is said and why stories are told in a certain way than with the mechanics of how a story is told.

## **Contributions**

The goal of case study research is to “illuminate phenomena through detailed study of their occurrence in a particular context” (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010, p. xxxi). In keeping with this purpose, the major contribution of this thesis is that it provides an in-depth study of gendering in the context of the predominantly-male and largely family-owned funeral industry. As referenced above, the funeral industry was one of the last bastions of male-dominated work. Additionally, the unusual and taboo nature of the work done makes the funeral industry an interesting context in which to study women and gendering. However, with the exception of one very recent study (Donley & Baird, 2017) which looks at the effects of feminization on the industry, no one has explored the gendered aspects of funeral service in the scholarly literature.

Another characteristic of case study research is the use of what surfaces from deep exploration of a phenomenon in a specific context to expand existing theory (Mills et al., 2010). This thesis utilizes Joan Acker’s (Acker, 1990, 1992b) framework of gendering processes to examine the family funeral homes. Although Acker’s work stands as one of the few theoretical models for studying gender in organizations, there is very little application of her work in the literature. Another contribution of this thesis is that it builds on Acker’s theory by applying her framework and by offering some insights into her work.

Any family business offers a unique context in which to study organizations. While studying organizational phenomena in a small, funeral service context adds an additional layer of complexity, this context simultaneously affords the researcher a level of simplicity that is not available in the study of other organizational structures. The field of organizational studies is largely concerned with looking at inter-personal relationships in the context of the organization. Studying such relationships at the family business level allows us to examine the relationships in a more pure form in the sense that we are examining the relationships before levels of organizational and/or bureaucratic structure are imposed. In other words, relationships are not far removed from the structures. Indeed, in family business, the relationships are intertwined with the structures.

This thesis is an important addition to the family business literature for several reasons. First, both literature and anecdotal evidence suggest that, although women are increasingly entering their family firms, many issues related to women in family firms remain un-explored. Baker et al. (1997) pointed to the increasing ownership of women in business ownership. In the United States, women currently own 6.5 million non-farm businesses – about 28% of all the non-farm businesses (sba.gov). This number increased by about 14% in the period between 1997 and 2003. This growth is accentuated in family firms where ownership by women increased by 37% in that same period (Galvin, Astrachan, & Green, 2007). Even with this increasing balance in gender equity of ownership

of family firms, however, the topic of women in family firms is under-researched. Reviews in *Family Business Review* have suggested that we need a better understanding of the nature of a woman's career in a family firm (Martinez Jimenez, 2009; Sharma, 2004).

The study of gender as a social construction fills another gap in family business research. Prasad (2005) argues that feminist research in management and organization studies often fails to examine gender as a complex and layered social process. This is especially true in family business research as the majority of past work on women in family firms has examined gender empirically as a categorical variable (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017). In their review of family business succession research, Nelson and Constantinidis argued that only 8% of the 157 articles published on the topic of family business succession in the past twenty-one years approach gender as a social construction. The body of research on succession in family firms has approached the subject from a gender-neutral perspective which assumes that the succession process is the same for male and female successors. I liken this to past medical research where research on a specific treatment or drug is done on men and, then, the results are generalized to women. This is understandable in family firms where, traditionally, men made up the majority of successors and, as a result, the majority of research subjects. It is easy to see how gender neutrality is assumed in a context of gender homogeneity. Martinez Jimenez (2009) also suggested that women tend to be invisible in family firms (as in other organizations, but

more so). The strength of family roles keeps women's contributions in family firms from being more well-known. Other work (e.g., Bruni et al., 2004) has looked at the gendered nature of entrepreneurship. However, there is very little existing literature that has examined the gender order in family business specifically.

This work, hopefully, shines a light on the invisible discrimination that occurs in family firms. Not only does the gendering in family firms create distress and unhappiness for women in firms, it allows a firm, as Wang (2010) suggested, to waste the precious resource of a potential successor. Gender discrimination is, obviously, hurtful to the people and relationships affected by it. However gendering also limits the contributions of half of the family workforce.

Methodologically, this thesis answers the call for increased qualitative research in management and organization studies as a whole (Bansal & Corley, 2011) and in family business research in specific (Reay, 2014). The use of narrative methods in entrepreneurship research is a relatively new occurrence, with the majority of such work occurring in the past ten years (Larty & Hamilton, 2011). For example, Warren (2004) examined how women entrepreneurs construct their identities as entrepreneurs and as professionals. However, narrative analysis is a methodology that is virtually non-existent in family business research. I conducted a search with no date parameters of the four journals that have published the majority of the research on family firms, *Family Business Review*, *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice*, *Journal of Business*



*Venturing*, and *Journal of Small Business Management* (Zellweger, Kellermanns, Chrisman, & Chua, 2012), for narrative analysis in the family firm context. While the search produced numerous examples of narrative analysis in entrepreneurship research, it yielded only three articles related to family business research. As reference points, *Family Business Review* has published since 1988, *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice* since 2002. Both journals publish quarterly issues. I contend that narrative analysis is a methodological choice well suited for studying how gender is done (or performed) in family businesses.

Additionally, very little post-positivist (Prasad, 2005) or critical research (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) had been done in the family business arena. The positivist position is assumed in published studies in the family business field, particularly in case studies (Leppäaho, Plakoyiannaki, & Dimitratos, 2016). In recognition of this, Chenail (2009) suggests the need for qualitative family business researchers to recognize and articulate their epistemological orientations. Both Leppäaho et al. (2016) and Nordqvist, Hall and Melin (2009) argued for the need for more interpretive case studies in family business research because of their “the potential to enrich the discipline via deep and comprehensive theorizing on specific FB phenomena” (Leppäaho et al., p. 160).

Finally, this thesis seeks to make contributions in practice beyond the contributions to the scholarly fields. This research is important to me, personally, and to other consultants and advisors to family firms who might recognize gender issues in their work with clients so that they can help them reduce barriers that

create heavily gendered environments.

## **Summary**

Using interpretive narrative analysis to examine a series of interviews with members of selected family businesses in the US funeral industry, this thesis offers a deeper understanding about the gendering processes and structures in family funeral service firms. Specifically, I was interested in exploring the material and symbolic gender barriers for women in family firms and how women in these firms negotiate the construction of their multiple identities. The hope is that by better understanding what barriers exist and how women negotiate their competing identities, we might better understand how family firms can minimize barriers and how women might come to terms with their roles in the firm.

In Chapter Two of this thesis, I review and, then, merge the relevant bodies of literature from family business research, from management and organization studies and from gender in organizations. This second chapter begins by outlining theories that attempt to explain how family businesses are different from other business forms and how family influences the business. Next, I focus on the existing literature about women in family firms, outlining gaps in the literature and highlighting previous research about women's exclusion and visibility in family firms, role identity and gender bias. Chapter Two ends with a review of the literature on gendering and gender in organizations.

Chapter Three outlines the narrative analysis methods that were used in the thesis and explores the challenges of utilizing an interpretivist methodology in family firm research. This chapter begins by expanding on the use of narrative analysis in family business research and situates me, as the researcher, in the interpretivist perspective. Next, the research questions presented in Chapter One are further developed. The methodology chapter also outlines the method of “close reading” (Riessman, 1993) of narratives and the iterative analysis of *what* is being said and interpretation of *how* it is said *why* it is being said. Finally, the third chapter will examine issues of validity in narrative analysis research.

In a foundational work on gender in organizations, Joan Acker (1990) presented a framework to study gender in organizations. She argued that, to that time, no “systematic” (p. 140) theory of gender in organization existed. Chapter Four uses Acker’s (1990, 1992b) framework of gendered organizations to examine gendering in the family firms included in this case study. The stories of the people in the funeral homes were analyzed using the five processes outlined in Acker’s work. The chapter explores the ways in which family business are gendered. Additionally, Chapter Four examines some ways in which the family funeral homes appear to be less gendered than other organizational forms. This analysis chapter uses Acker’s notions of the disembodied worker and the ideal feminist organization as a way of further investigating gendering in these family firms.

In Chapter Five, I focus on Acker’s (1990) fourth set of processes, identity

development. The chapter explores how women develop a business identity in concert with and, sometimes, in opposition to, their family identities. Doing the mental and emotional work of identity development is how women and men make sense of the gendered nature of the organization and of the family and determine “appropriate” gender behaviours. Chapter Five ends with an outline of some of the strategies that the women in this study used to negotiate their competing family, business and gender identities.

The final chapter begins by revisiting the original thesis research questions and expands on the earlier chapters by drawing and discussing conclusions from the thesis study. This sixth chapter also summarizes the contributions of this thesis and synthesizes the theory to provide some insights and proposals for future research. In keeping with my vision to do practical research in this context, this chapter outlines the implications of this study for practice by family members working in FOBs. Next, I outline some limitations of this research. The thesis ends with an epilogue to the story.

# Chapter Two: Literature Review

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## Introduction

This chapter presents a literature review that aims to give theoretical underpinnings to this thesis. As this work is supported by two disparate scholarly worlds, I hope to make sense of the collision of the two. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to bring together several bodies of literature to identify what is lacking in the research, to synthesize the past and current research in each area and to provide a basis for the narrative analysis that will follow. This review will explore the literature in several main areas.

First, I will briefly examine the family business literature to provide a broad sense of existing research in this area. Because it is requisite in family business research to outline a theoretically-supported definition of *family business* from which the research is founded, the development of the definition used for this study will begin this chapter. Next I will outline some of the theoretical work that is the foundation for family business research. The third section of this chapter will examine the limited literature specific to women and gendering in family businesses. Since there is very little work in the family business literature that examines gender as a social construction, I will summarize the small body of literature that explores issues of women in family business from this perspective. I will also point to the lack of research on gender in family business beyond the

examination of gender as a categorical variable. The fourth part of this chapter will outline the gender in organizations literature. In it, I will explore the concept of *gendering*. I will also outline Joan Acker's theory of gendered organizations, which will be used as the theoretical framework for examining gendering in the family businesses in these case studies. Additionally, I will examine the related work on negotiating organizational identity. The major goal of this section will be to examine the relatively small amount of research that has explored how women's gender identities are formed and performed in family businesses and to illustrate how little theory exists about how women negotiate their identities in light of their competing family, business and societal gender roles. Finally, this chapter will end with some inferences made from synthesizing these bodies of literature. These inferences will inform the analysis of the narratives collected for the research.

### **Definition of Family Firm**

Because family firm research is in its adolescence as a field, there remains a "definitional dilemma" (Chua, Chrisman, & Sharma, 1999) for researchers as to what constitutes a family-owned business (FOB) and what differentiates this organizational form from others. Early researchers in the field used multiple, varying definitions of family firms. In fact, Westhead and Cowling (1998) identified seven definitions derived from family business research at that

time. This lack of definitional concreteness remains problematic because “there is no concise, measurable, agreed-upon definition of a family business” (Astrachan & Shanker, 2003, p. 211). Family business scholars argue that consistency in definition is necessary for theoretical development through reconciliation and possible replication of research findings (Chua et al., 1999). Obviously, this lack of definitional agreement is more important for empirical work at the macro level (e.g., a body of research that estimates the economic impact of family businesses) than it is for case study research from the interpretive perspective. Because interpretive research aims for plausibility rather than generalizability (Weick, 1995), the importance of the defining the definition used in the research is less important for scholars working from this paradigm. Nonetheless, it has become common practice in family business research to both define and justify the definition of *family business* that is used in a study.

Some previous work has argued that family businesses are more heterogeneous than homogeneous; therefore it is impossible to develop one all-inclusive definition that will work across industries, cultures and firms (Westhead & Howorth, 2007). However, it is suggested that every study needs definitional clarity to show how it fits into the domain of family business research by highlighting the commonality with other research in the field (Zahra & Sharma, 2004). This issue is highlighted by the fact that, in a recently published *Family Business Studies: An Annotated Bibliography* (De Massis, Sharma, Chua, & Chrisman, 2012), each annotation includes the definition or criteria that was used

in each article to define the family firm. Although, there seems to be a narrowing of definitions used in recent research, in fact, there is no agreement as to what criteria should be used to distinguish family firms, distinct from other kinds of firms, as research subjects.

There does seem to be some convergence on the idea of using multiple criteria, both firm and family characteristics, to define the firm. Astrachan, Klein, and Smyrnios (2002) argue that a definition of *family* is an elemental requirement of a family business definition and that this crucial element is missing from many definitions. They go on to suggest that the simple, dichotomous distinction between family and non-family firms is “artificial” and that firms should be categorized on a continuum of family involvement across several dimensions.

Chua et al. (1999) argue for the development of a definition based on the theoretical justification for the study of family business as a unique type of organization and the ability to distinguish a family business from other business types. The Chua et al. proposed definition is based around the concepts that a dominant coalition made up of members of a family control the vision of the organization in a way that is potentially sustainable across generations. They contend that research should start with an understanding of the vision pursued by the firm. They suggest, compellingly, that questions concerning the vision, intentions and dominant coalition be used in studies to define firms.

Astrachan and Shanker (2003) categorize definitions into three groups based on the family involvement in the business: one broadly inclusive, one



narrow to include only businesses with multiple generations of one family involved, and one definition taking the middle ground. Astrachan and Shanker's broad, most general and inclusive classification defines a family business as one that has some family participation and in which the family has control over the strategic direction of the firm. The narrowest definition suggests that family firms are those in which multiple generations have or have had influence on the firm and in which one or more members of the family have management responsibility.

Although the firms studied for this thesis would meet the test of even the narrowest definition of family firms, I am using Astrachan and Shanker's (2003) middle definition because it includes both firm and family characteristics and it includes the very important criterion for family vision and intention for continuation of the firm (Chua et al., 1999). Therefore, for this thesis, a family business is one in which the founder or descendent of the founder plays a role in running the business *and* the business owner intends to pass ownership of the business to another member of his/her family. Additionally, to address the concerns of Astrachan et al. (2002) regarding the importance of defining "family", I will follow their suggested course of action by specifying the familial relationships of those involved in the study.

## **Family Business Theory**

Very little attention in the scholarly literature was paid to family business, distinct from other business forms, until the 1980s. As evidence of this, the first issue of *Family Business Review*, the first and, for many years, the only scholarly journal focusing on family business topics, was published in 1988. One of the most important issues in family business research is the theoretical foundation for exploring differences between family firms and other business forms (Chua, Chrisman, & Steier, 2003). Although a number of theories have been used to conceptualize “family business” and to attempt to describe the unique qualities that differentiate the family business form from other business structures, the prevailing theories used to describe family business structures were developed in the 1980s.

The predominant model of family business is the three-circle model or the systems model (Tagiuri & Davis, 1992). This model conceptualizes a family business as three overlapping systems, usually represented as a Venn diagram with three circles, each overlapping the other two. The first system is the business (management), the second is the family, and the third is ownership. Members of the family business are situated in one of seven different groups symbolized by the different locations on this diagram. Where an individual is located in the system affects his/her interaction with other members of the family business, with his/her perspective on the business, and, also, with his/her lived

experience as part of the business. For example, an individual who is situated at the intersection of *family, business and ownership* (i.e., a family member who works in the business and also has ownership) will have a different experience with the business than someone who is situated only in the *business* section (e.g., a manager who is not a family member and does not have ownership).

According to the Three-Circle Model, what differentiates a family business from another business structure is that the family system and the individuals in it interact with those managing the business and with those owning the business, adding another level of complexity to the business system. All three sub-systems must be integrated and functioning at a high level to allow the business to perform at its ideal level. Non-family businesses are only required to integrate the business and ownership sub-systems for optimal performance (Poza & Daugherty, 2014).

Another predominate theory of family business is agency theory. Agency theory suggests that in other business forms, the separation of ownership and management create conflict between the two groups because of different, competing interests. These competing interests create agency costs. According to the use of agency theory in the family business literature, family businesses are different because there is little or no separation between ownership and management and, therefore, the issues of conflicting agency are minimized. Chrisman, Chua and Sharma (2005) suggest that altruism and entrenchment are the two concepts that offer an agency-theory backed explanation of how family

firms differ from other types of firms. Researchers have used agency theory and the idea of altruism to suggest that the lack of separation between ownership and management is problematic in that it makes ownership more likely to make management decisions in favour of the family over the business (Barrett, 2014). However, other views of altruism suggest that family members might be more likely to make personal sacrifices for the long-term good of the firm. Likewise, research on entrenchment suggests both positive and negative agency costs associated with family members being entrenched in management (Chrisman et al., 2005).

Both agency theory and the resource-based view (RBV) borrow from the strategic management literature. The resource-based view of the firm holds that firm resources which are rare, valuable, inimitable and non-substitutable can be sources of sustainable competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Family firms are suggested to have potential resource advantages over non-family firms, primarily due to human capital (Sirmon & Hitt, 2003). The weakness of using the RBV as a theoretical basis for studying family firms is its implicit view of the profit imperative which family firms do not always pursue over other goals, such as continuation of the firm (Chrisman et al., 2005).

Building on agency theory, stewardship theory offers another model of the differences between family business and other forms. Stewardship theory suggests that family businesses are unique because of the desire of the firm leaders to act as stewards of the business in order to pass it down to future

generations (Poza & Daugherty, 2014). Stewards identify with the firm at an emotional level and are, therefore, committed to its success (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006).

Both agency theory and the RBV approach come from the strategic management approach to research and both have an orientation toward firm performance (Chrisman et al., 2005). For these reasons, neither is appropriate in this thesis for the conceptualization of the family firm. However, the Three Circle Model lends itself to a study of how people and structures interact in a family firm. Likewise, Stewardship Theory is useful in suggesting family members' emotional attachment to the family firm that goes beyond maximizing personal gain (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2006).

### **Succession**

Because of the low percentage of family firms that successfully transfer ownership from one generation to the next (Daspit, Holt, Chrisman, & Long, 2016), succession has been and continues to be the most-researched topic in the family business literature (Dawson, 2014). However, research on how women affect or are affected by succession is limited. Little empirical work has been done related to women and succession (Martinez Jimenez, 2009). The study of gender in the family business succession literature, for example, lacks any theoretical foundation. Despite calls for the use of theory from other fields to build the family business body of knowledge, theory from the gender in organizations literature has not been applied to the topic of family firm

succession. Research on gender and succession has declined since 2010 with most of the work that does exist being of a limited nature with regard to gender (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017).

Succession is a process occurring at multiple levels of analysis (Decker, Heinrichs, Jaskiewicz, & Rau, 2017). Long & Chrisman (2014) reviewed family business succession literature and suggested that this body of literature can be categorized based on the study's level of analysis: individual attributes (of either incumbent or successor), interpersonal or group relations, and firm processes and strategies.

Le Breton-Miller, Miller and Steier (2004) created the most-used model of the family business succession process. Their model conceptualizes succession as a four-stage process influenced at each stage by the business and family contexts. In the first stage, the guidelines and timing are outlined and potential successors are identified. Most of the succession research related to sex or gender has focused on the first stage and on the inclusion or exclusion of women from the consideration set (Decker et al., 2017). This research has suggested that women are not considered and do not consider themselves as candidates, due to practices such as primogeniture, the practice of choosing the oldest male in the family as a successor (Martinez Jimenez, 2009). As an example, Botero and Gomez Betancourt (2017) found that Latin American women were heavily influenced by traditional societal gender roles. These gender roles had implications for women entering the family business, especially in male-

dominated industries. Women in this study were not considered for jobs that were seen as “masculine” and were excluded from governance of their family firms. Even though they often achieve higher educational levels than their brothers (Garcia-Alvarez, López-Sintas, & Gonzalvo, 2002), daughters often do not consider the family firm until a critical event occurs (Decker et al., 2017).

The second stage of the succession process involves the “nurturing”, training and development of potential successors (Le Breton-Miller et al., 2004). Very little research exists that explores socialization and training of potential successors. In the family business literature, socialization refers to the process of induction into the business structures. Socialization occurs in two stages. The first stage, family socialization, is shared by all children in the family. The second stage of business socialization is reserved for identified successors (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2002). Iannerelli (1992) found gender differences in how potential successors were socialized and suggested that socialization differences result in dissimilar opportunities in the organization.

In the third stage, the successors are identified. Sharma (2004) suggested that there is no “systematic” research that allows us to understand the factors that contribute to women being identified as successors. Chrisman, Chua, and Sharma (1998) suggested that gender is one of the least important considerations for incumbents in choosing a successor. However, Decker et al. (2017) questioned this finding, given the strong evidence of primogeniture. The authors argue that gender plays a key role in the next generation’s decision

about whether to take over the family business. Daughters' intentions about assuming leadership are strongly influenced by family gender roles (Decker et al., 2017).

Finally, the actual transition of control and/or transfer of capital occur in the fourth stage of the succession process (Le Breton-Miller et al., 2004). The limited research related to gender and the fourth stage suggests that father-daughter succession processes feature less conflict than other succession scenarios (Dumas, 1989). Father-son transitions tend to be competitive which leads to conflict (Haberman & Danes, 2007). In much the same way, mother-daughter transitions create disharmony as the daughter finds it difficult to establish her own identity and her leadership style is compared to the mother's (Vera & Dean, 2005).

### **Family Constitutions**

A family constitution is a document that is produced by a family as a result of meetings and agreement. The family constitution or family protocol is set of rules and procedures for governing the family firm and family relationships (Gallo & Tomaselli, 2006). Constitutions are the documentation of family agreement on, among other things, family history, values, family and firm values and rules for family member entrance into the business. Family constitutions are linked in the literature to success of firm continuity and increased performance (Arteaga & Menendez-Requejo, 2017).



## Women in Family Business

### Gaps in the Literature

The early literature on women in family business made a compelling case for the need for research on women in family firms as well as for the striking lack of empirical study about women in these firms (e.g., Nelton, 1998; Salganicoff, 1990). Dumas (1992) contended that there were no previous empirical studies conducted on daughters in family firms. In 1990, Salganicoff suggested that research on women in family business was in its infancy with little research existing beyond anecdotal evidence or case studies. A 1990 special issue of *Family Business Review* begins with the editorial in which was argued that, on the topic of women in family business, “serious papers can be counted on one hand” (1990, p. 121). Indeed the point is made because, in that special issue, only one empirical paper is included. The others are conceptual, editorial and biographical works.

In the twenty years since, this remains a largely under-researched area. Several searches confirm this dearth of research. First, a recent annotated bibliography (De Massis et al., 2012) includes only three articles about women in family business in the 215 annotations. It is generally agreed that four journals, *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *Family Business Review*, *Journal of Business Venturing*, and *Journal of Small Business Management*, publish the bulk of family business research (Zellweger et al., 2012). A search of these four

journals with no date parameters for the terms *women* and *family business* in the abstract field yielded between seven (7) and twelve (12) articles, depending on the search engine. Two new journals, *Journal of Family Business Strategy*, published since 2010 and *Journal of Family Business Management*, published since 2011 have published, since their inceptions, a combined total of four articles with the term, *women*, in the abstract. Finally, I completed a search on the *Family Business Review* (published since 1988) web site for the keyword *women* that yielded twenty (20) articles. Of those, only five were published since 2000. In the twenty years since Dumas' work and the early calls for research in this area, little has been done. The most recent article about women in *Family Business Review*, published in 2009, was a review article re-issuing the call for research on women in family firms.

As scarce as the literature on women in family business is, the literature about women working in funeral service is even more limited. Searches of peer-reviewed literature in both ABI-Inform and in Academic One File yielded a total of three articles about women in funeral service. The articles from these searches about women in family business, generally, and women in funeral service, specifically, comprise the bulk of this review.

As succession is cited as the primary issue of concern for FOBs (Sharma, 2004), it is one of the most studied issues in the literature on women in FOBs. However, Brockhaus (2004) reviewed existing succession research methodology and outlines several gaps in the research, including the topic of women, as areas

for future inquiry in the area of family business succession. Humphreys (2013) found only thirteen (13) articles that dealt with women/daughters in succession. Humphreys argued that only five studies (Curimbaba, 2002; Dumas, 1989, 1990, 1992; Vera & Dean, 2005) have examined daughters in succession as the main focus of the research.

Colette Dumas produced some of the earliest work on daughters in family firms (Dumas, 1989, 1990, 1992) based on her research of family firms in southern California in the U.S. Dumas suggested that, to that point, research on family firms, particularly around the issue of leadership succession, assumed male incumbents and male successors. She pointed to a contemporary practice of using gender neutral references in reporting succession research as a false way of representing research that considered gender. Instead, she contended that this practice is exemplary of the field's failure to recognize women or the potential differences between men and women successors. She argued that the research on the importance of the affective aspect of family business along with the prevailing body of research which suggested gender-based differences in affect, or emotion, necessitated the study of family business issues specific to women. She also suggested that the practice of assuming gender-neutrality is dangerous. Given the gendered nature of family firms and differences in socialization and identity formation for men and women in their family firms, it is likely that their experiences are different as well. With her arguments about the importance of considering gendered processes in family business research,

however, Dumas' work addressed gender largely as a variable of difference and outlined distinct differences between men and women in family firms, particularly around the notion of identity development.

Dumas (1998) grouped research about women in family businesses into two categories. The first group deals with *barriers* to participation and leadership. Dumas' second category includes research related to *opportunities* for participation and leadership. In a critique that is similar to critiques of feminist research, Humphreys (2013) suggested that past work has tended to look at barriers that women in family businesses face rather than exploring factors which contribute to women being successful. Bjursell & Backvall (2011) argued that literature about family business positions women in family firms as problematic. Martinez Jimenez (2009) agreed that, while early work on women in family businesses focused on obstacles or problems that women faced, recent work has become more positive with a focus on opportunities for women.

In examining the literature that has been published since 1989, three categories are most relevant to this thesis and the study of women, gender and identity in family firms. I briefly outline these three groups of literature below. First, I examine the literature dealing with the exclusion of women in family firms. Next, I will summarize the small body of work related to women's roles in family firms. The third category of literature pertains to gender bias and gender discrimination in family firms.

## **Exclusion of Women in Family Firms**

The increase of women in the workforce in general is mirrored by the increase of women working in family firms (Haberman & Danes, 2007). While more women are in the workforce, women hold a small percentage of upper management positions. Women inhabit only twenty-four percent (24%) of senior leadership roles across the world. That percentage is a slightly lower twenty-three percent (23%) in the United States. Almost one-third of all businesses in the United States have no women in senior leadership roles (Grant Thornton International Ltd., 2016).

As recently as the early 1990s, the literature contended that, even though women are participating members of family firms, daughters were not usually seen as potential successors in a family business (Dumas, 1990). Much of the writing is critical of the traditional practice of primogeniture. Wang (2010) suggested that primogeniture is very much a contemporary practice for choosing successors in family firms. This process limits opportunities to women and, perhaps, makes it less likely that they will join their family firms (Dumas, 1992; Vera & Dean, 2005).

This issue is not specific to North America and, in fact, seems to be consistent across cultures. For example, case studies of the succession process of three family firms in Portugal found that daughters were excluded from consideration as successors (Howorth & Ali, 2001). More recent literature from the U.S., however, points out that daughters are increasingly chosen as the

leadership successor in family firms (Nelton, 1998; Vera & Dean, 2005).

Chrisman et al. (1998) surveyed Canadian family firms and suggested a growing recognition in practice of the suitability of a daughter to succeed a parent in leadership in a family firm. Vera and Dean (2005) reported that the percentage of U.S. family businesses whose expected next successor is female has risen to thirty-four percent. Remery, Matser and Hans Floren (2014) suggested that FOBs in the Netherlands offer good opportunities for women to work, but not to lead.

In fact, both women family members and non-family employees, are more likely to have opportunities in a family business than in other corporate forms (Salganicoff, 1990). In support of this argument, in the United States, family firms demonstrate slightly less division across gender lines in top positions. The 2007 American Family Business Survey stated that twenty-four percent (24%) of surveyed family firms have a female CEO or President. Additionally, the survey suggested that this percentage is likely to grow as thirty-one percent (31%) of responding firms report that the next CEO or President will be a woman (Mass Mutual, 2007). Another survey of 525 of the world's largest family firms reported that family firms have, on average, 3.5 non-family women in executive positions (Ernst & Young Global Ltd., 2015). Thus, while this more recent research is encouraging, the practice of excluding women from leadership positions in family firms is still prevalent in many cultures and in many industries, such as the one studied in this thesis, viz. funeral service.

## Women's Roles in Family Firms

Past research has tended to look at women as a group, rather than looking at specific roles (Humphreys, 2013). Also, there is little to no research about how women develop and negotiate identities in family firms. However, there is a small body of work related to women's roles in their family businesses.

Dumas' work in the early 1990s was the first to examine daughters in the succession process in family firms in the United States. She looked at the influence of the important father-daughter relationship on the development of the daughter's identity in the business (Dumas, 1989, 1990, 1992). Her work suggested that while sons often search for *independence* from their fathers in the process of developing their personal and business identities, daughters who develop a "mature, personal identity" (Dumas, 1990, p. 177) are able to do so by *interdependence* with their fathers. This notion of interdependence is largely based on the notion of care taking. Women who are interdependent are able to balance taking care of themselves, their fathers and the business. Dumas also suggested that women in a family firm who display this interdependence, as opposed to independence, may be viewed as being less desirable for leadership roles in the business, as independence and autonomy are often valued in those roles.

Wang (2010) also proposed that daughter succession is about "complementarity" (Dumas, 1992, p. 44) and not conflict. In reviewing Dumas' work on daughters, Wang suggested that daughters are excluded in succession

and are even excluded in favour of “quasi-family members” (p. 476) such as sons-in-law. Also building on Dumas’ work, Humphreys (2013) argued that women tend to enter a FOB with the intention to “help” the family and the business. Men enter with the intention of running the show. Remery et al. (2014) concurred with Humphreys (2013) in discussing that men and women have different expectations, constructed as “ambition” in their work, for their positions in the FOB. Men aim for sole ownership in the firm, while women tend to aspire to shared ownership.

Although women have found employment opportunities in family firms, they have traditionally been in functions that are more in keeping with their family roles (Martinez Jimenez, 2009). Daughters who enter family firms are often assigned gender-appropriate work. This work does not cause conflict in the family business. It is when these women enter managerial or ownership positions in the firm, often due to a family crisis, that they find themselves in a triple bind, stuck among their family, their business and their societal identities. Women who challenge the family-business system are often disciplined by strained relationships with their mothers who are threatened by the daughter’s new role in the firm (Dumas, 1992). Sibling rivalry and tension is created when a daughter achieves a better position in the firm than an elder son (Barnes, 1988). In Dumas’ study (1992) of daughters in 18 family-owned firms, she made the case that women in family firms are, in several ways, under-utilized resources. In her study, none of the daughters were judged to be suitable for employment in



the business until a family or business crisis forced the family to consider the possibility of the daughters in the firm. She also found that the women themselves had not originally considered joining the firm and that their mothers did not wish them to join the firm because of perceived conflict in the family. She posited that this is partially because the family members were not able to view the women in a role in the family business, as these roles were contradictory to their family roles.

This positioning of male and female children differently begins early in a child's life in the family and in the business. The family business literature, both academic and practitioner, points to early socialization in the business as a key predictor of a successful succession from one generation of ownership to the next (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2002). Overbeke, Bilimoria and Perelli's (2013) research in the United States suggested that daughters do not consider the possibility of entering the family business. This is more likely for daughters in families with traditional gender roles. This blindness to daughters as potential successors reduces both the supply and demand of daughter successors.

Donley and Baird (2017) explored the effects of the feminization of the U.S. funeral service industry on gender narratives and beliefs. They suggested that narratives about gender contribute to stereotypes of gendered divisions of labour in funeral service. These stereotypes that essentialize women's and men's skills tend to limit the roles women play in funeral homes. Women are assigned to the roles of caring for grieving families and arranging funerals, rather

than to roles of embalming, and body removal. Another U.S. study (Cathles et al., 2010) argued that licensing requirements in the U.S. also serve to limit the role of women in the embalming function.

## **Gender Bias**

In 1995, Galiano and Vinturella examined gender bias (although not gendering) in U.S. family firms. They suggested that bias in family firms takes the form “directly or indirectly” (1995, p. 178) of steering women away from joining the family firm, of directing women to gender-appropriate roles (i.e., caring and nurturing) and of overlooking women in the succession process. A more recent study also pointed to this bias by suggesting that both parents and adolescents still prefer male successors in their family firms in Germany (Schröder, Schmitt-Rodermund, & Arnaud, 2011). A majority of sixty percent (60%) of the German firms studied were in a male-dominated industry (construction) like the funeral industry studied in this research.

In the most recent review on women in family business, (Martinez Jimenez, 2009) suggested that, while the discrimination issues women face in family firms is similar to that faced in other types of firms, there are some unique problems encountered by women in their family firms. In a study of female heirs in Brazil, Curimbaba (2002) pointed to the visibility of women in the family business system as being a key indicator of whether their contributions in their family firms are invisible or undervalued. Invisibility in family businesses takes

many forms. For example, women in family firms are more likely than men to work unpaid in the firm because they have a sense of helping the family (Martinez Jimenez, 2009). More importantly, women are often invisible as potential successors in their firms (Curimbaba, 2002).

## **Gender in Organizations**

### **Gendering**

The next section in this literature review examines the gender in organizations literature. Specifically, I review the literature that discusses how gendering occurs in organizations and how the gender order is produced, re-produced and maintained in organizations. This thesis uses Joan Acker's framework to examine the gendering process in organizations. Although Joan Acker's framework has been used to explore gendering processes in a few organizations (e.g., Parsons, Sanderson, Helms Mills, & Mills, 2012), no one has yet taken her framework to examine how gendering occurs in a small, family business context, such as a funeral home.

Broadly speaking, in the field of Management and Organization Studies (MOS), the issue of gender is explored through alternative and mutually-exclusive paradigms (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The majority of work is approached through positivist (or objectivist) analysis in which knowledge is viewed as universal and fixed (Prasad, 2005) and in which gender is generally

explored only as a categorical, independent variable. Much of the qualitative work in MOS is approached through a postpositivist position analysis focussed on the problematic nature of how gender, or other phenomena of interest, is socially constructed (M. Calás & Smircich, 1996; M. B. Calás & Smircich, 2006)<sup>2</sup>. Acker and Van Houten (1974) not only exemplify the latter approach but were instrumental in developing the approach within MOS. In their pivotal piece on gender in organizations, Acker and Van Houten (1974) outlined gender as a social construction, rather than as a biological trait of people. The authors described their concept of the *sex power differential* which is characterized by a distinction between male and female jobs and a power ordering of jobs so that males hold higher-level (and more powerful) jobs than females in organizations. Acker (1990) argued that gender segregation of work and the inequality that results are created through organizational practices and processes. Because organizations are one arena where gender is practiced, some aspects of gender identity are created by organizations. However, even research done from the interpretivist paradigm, which supposes that reality is subjective and constructed through interactions among people (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), fails to recognize that, although the reality of gender is negotiated through these interactions, it is negotiated between actors with unequal power (Mills, 1988). This failure to recognize gender distinctions occurs for several reasons. First, gender

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<sup>2</sup> This latter category arguably includes a number of feminist traditions that include interpretivist, socialist, psychoanalytic, postmodernist, and postcolonial or transnational feminism (Calas & Smircich, 1996, 2006)

distinctions are so embedded and taken-for-granted, that they are not easily surfaced by research participants. Additionally, past interpretive research has been based largely on men's accounts of subjective reality that fail to notice the power differential (Hearn & Parkin, 1983).

Britton (2000) theorized that the literature uses several different views to describe an organization as being gendered. The first view is that typical bureaucratic organizations are inherently gendered, in that they are structured to create a difference between masculinity and femininity and that those different gendered characteristics are valued differently. A second way of arguing that an organization is gendered is to examine the degree to which it is dominated by one sex category. Lastly, organizations (or occupations) are gendered by the discourses surrounding them. Britton suggests that analysis of gendering should move beyond examining the gendering, itself, to explore the processes that make the gendering oppressive. In other words, gendering is not the problem that we should be exploring. We should be examining the discrimination that results (Gherardi, 2003). Thus, Britton suggests that researchers should be examining both context and how organizational structure interacts with individual performances of gender. Gender is a key force in determining power differences (Scott, 1986). People not only perform their own gender, but they "do gender to the other" (Czarniawska, 2013, p. 62). In other words, we perform our own gender, but we also ascribe it to others, in large part through discriminatory actions.

Building on Acker and Van Houten (1974), West and Zimmerman (1987) first introduced the concept of “doing gender”. This conceptualization offers that gender is “a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction” (p. 125) rather than an internal state of being. West and Zimmerman also contended that we do gender by managing our behaviours and interactions to be consistent with the normative expectations of behaviour for what West and Zimmerman call our sex category.

### **Gender Citizenship**

Gherardi and Poggio (2007) use the concept of *gender citizenship* to conceptualize the idea that “doing gender” is embedded in organizational interactions. Gender citizenship is situated at the intersection of gender and organizational culture. Each organization has a unique *citizenship culture* that is produced in reflection of the greater societal notions of citizenship and also of the organizational culture. In this way, different organizational cultures reflect the societal conception of citizenship in different ways. This arguably results in different collective ideas of what is ‘fair’ between men and women. Gender culture is reproduced differently in different organizations (Mills, 1988, 2017). Acker’s (2006) notion is that all inequality regimes are constructed in “ordinary” processes of the organization. Gherardi and Poggio (2007) suggested these gender cultures can be represented by a continuum of cultural regimes. They proposed a typology of different organizational conceptions of gender citizenship

by positing that gender regimes exist on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are organizations characterized by the construction of “sharp distinction between gender competencies” (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007, p. 139). At the other end are organizations whose gender citizenship translates into relative parity of professional roles and tasks. These regimes do not exist solely across organizations but within them as well. Gherardi and Poggio also suggested that, because gender is situated in the relational context of the interactions of the people and the symbolic context of the societal and organizational cultures, it is always necessary to analyze the context in which gender is done.

Gender citizenship (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007) is the manifestation of the social practice of the struggle of people in an organization to make sense of the social and legal norms in forming their individual and the collective identities in the organization. West and Zimmerman (1987) expand on Goffman (1977) in discussing “role conflict” which occurs when a person does not do gender in a way that is normative or accepted. West and Zimmerman use examples of women engineers or physicians. “What is at stake is, from the standpoint of interaction, the management of our ‘essential’ natures, and from the standpoint of the individual, the continuing accomplishment of gender.” (p. 140).

Gherardi and Poggio (2007) proposed that construction of new models of gender citizenship will require an awareness of the fact that gender is situated in organizations and that the organizations themselves must be changed for the cultural regime to be changed.

## **Material Practices that Maintain the Gender Order**

Although gender is situated in organizational culture and is manifest in the gender citizenship of organizational members, Acker (1990) suggested that the normalness or the taken-for-grantedness inherent in an appearance of gender neutrality renders it almost invisible. However, this symbolic order becomes visible in the material practices that serve to maintain it. Women and men are both implicit in reproducing the gender order by maintaining these barriers. Women who challenge the gender order must endure a rite of initiation or other tests to prove their worth in the organization. These women present these tests as an inevitable obstacle that must be overcome to successfully enter the male world. The women report having to be “better” or more capable than men and having to establish credentials, skills or abilities to demonstrate a “right” to be in a traditionally male position (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). For women in family firms, these “rites of passage” also involve having to negotiate and prove one’s worth in the firm in contrast to the role as daughter in the family. During this process, women must differentiate and prove themselves, not only to employees and outsiders, but also to their fathers (Dumas, 1992). Gherardi and Poggio (2007) suggested that women feel that, because their presence is such a disruption to the “normal” that they must perform at a higher level to prove themselves worthy of the complications brought on by their presence.



## Joan Acker's Theory of Gendered Organizations

Joan Acker's (1990, 1992b) framework for analyzing gender in organizations is based on several suppositions about the nature of gender in organizations. First, she suggests that that every day organizational practices create gender segregation of work, wage, power and status equalities. Secondly, organizations are one context in which people produce and reproduce both societal and individual gender identities. Additionally, a part of individual identity is created through interactions with work processes and structures.

Acker suggested that gendering occurs in five interacting processes. Acker (1990) stated that her five set of processes are connected, inter-related and are part of the same whole. However, she also suggested that they can be analyzed separately. In later work Acker (1992b) presented this framework as a group of four, not five interactive processes. Based on the analysis of Dye and Mills (2012) and the review by Joan Acker (2012) that the fifth process, *organizational logic*, should indeed be included in the framework, the analysis in this thesis will be based on the original five processes.

These processes manifest in concrete organizational activities. Acker (2012) suggested that this framework can be used to make the invisible structures of discrimination visible. In organizations, the gender subtext (Benschop & Doorewaard, 1998) is reproduced by organizational structures and practices. These practices, when viewed in isolation appear to be gender

neutral, but they construct meanings that replace visible discrimination. Acker (2012) suggested that this gender subtext allows the idea that equality is achieved to coexist with these practices that reproduce and extend inequality.

This thesis will utilize the original five processes in two ways. First, each of the five processes will be used individually as a way of organizing the interview material. Secondly, and more importantly, the framework will be applied in a holistic way to view the gendered nature of the family firms in this study.

This framework is very consistent with the use of narrative analysis as an analytical method in this research. Acker's framework suggested that gendering is a layered process wherein each processes works both alone and in interaction with the other processes to maintain the gender order in an organization.

Narrative analysis is a method that requires one to examine the data in a layered and iterative way (Riessman, 1993).

This first set of processes is the organization's gendered practices. These are the practices that create visible, structural patterns of division between genders in organizations (Acker, 1992b) or what Dye and Mills referred to as the "delineation between men's and women's work" (2012, p. 284). These patterns are often re-created by the policies of the organization, many of which seem gender neutral on the surface, but which reproduce division of work, wages and power along gender lines (Acker, 1992b). Acker contended that this process can be visible to the casual observer (1990). These divisions encompass "allowed behaviours" (1990, p. 146), physical location of people (i.e., office space, work

locations), and where people are located in the corporate and political hierarchy. Acker gave examples of gender divisions such as hiring practices and policies. Other examples would be division of labour along gender lines or the positioning and size of offices in an organization. In the family funeral homes studied for this thesis, gendered divisions manifest in the practice of primogeniture. The practice of choosing a male child, often the oldest, as the leadership successor was universally apparent in these organizations. Shawn, a sixth-generation funeral director in his family's firm, described his older brother's view that, "he thought that's what the men in this family should do".

Acker described the second group of gendering processes as cultural practices such as symbols, artifacts, or images that justify or reinforce the gender divisions (1990). These are the symbols that maintain or justify organizational or societal images of masculinities and/or femininities. These symbols are gendering in that they serve both to maintain gendered differences while also maintaining an overt appearance of gender neutrality. Acker asserted that attributes assigned to "successful" organizations: aggressiveness, competitiveness, goal-orientation serve to recreate these images of masculinity (Acker, 1992a) by assigning value to those traits we traditionally associate with masculinity (Dye & Mills, 2012). This second process could be exemplified by the public images the organization presents in advertising or in the symbols that are valued or important in the organization. In funeral service, this process is evident in the licensing practices in the industry and in the symbolism of the

embalming role in these family firms.

The third set of processes in the Acker framework is the interactions between people, particularly those “patterns that enact domination and submission” (1990, p. 147) and “create alliances and exclusions” (Acker, 1992b, p. 253). In a family firm, this third set of processes might be evident in how societal or family roles are re-enacted in the family firm in practices such as primogeniture. In an earlier paper (Parsons et al., 2012), my co-authors and I suggested that, while Acker’s framework is the most developed theory for analyzing gender in organizations, it is also under-developed and that the gendering of an organization is not just an internal phenomenon. In other words, an analysis of gendering in an organization should include investigation of external relationships (i.e., funding organizations, suppliers, customers, government, etc.) as well as internal interactions and how these interactions affect the gendered nature of the organization.

Study participants told stories that demonstrated how internal interactions with family members and firm employees both reinforce gendering and the gender order, and, also, serve to protect women from the resulting discrimination. For example, Grace told a story of being sabotaged by one brother while being protected from the attempts to undermine her by another brother. External interactions, such as those with other funeral service professionals also serve to gender the organizations in which these women work. Shawn told a story in which a (female) funeral director in neighbouring town requested that he sign a

death certificate rather than his firm-president sister because, “she made the statement that she would rather a male funeral director sign the death certificate other than my sister because people look at it.”

The fourth process is found in the individual’s efforts to make sense of herself and to construct her gendered identity and the corresponding appropriate behaviours as a member of the organization. This identity work is done to ensure a person’s survival in the organization and serves to reinforce the gendered nature of the organization (Acker, 1992b). This process is evident in how people negotiate gender-appropriate work and present themselves as gendered (Acker, 1990). The men in this study reported much earlier socialization in the main functions of the business. In fact, the women universally told stories of little to no introduction to the funeral side of their family businesses. This lack of socialization led to difficulties for the women in developing their identities in the business.

The fifth, and often forgotten (Dye & Mills, 2012), process has to do with the taken-for-granted, underlying assumptions and practices in organizations that create social structures – the organizational logic. Organizational logic refers to implicit rules and underlying assumptions that construct what organizations *should* be (Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980). Organizational logic exists in what Schein (2004) would call the deepest layer of organizational culture. It is one of the building blocks in the “fundamental, ongoing processes of creating and conceptualizing social structures” (Acker, 1990, p. 147). Organizational logic has

both a material form and a symbolic form (Britton, 1997). The organizational logic manifests itself in the material form of company rules, procedures, policies, memos, etc. Acker (1990) suggested that these manifestations become “truths” embedded in organizational structure.

Part of the symbolic aspect of organizational logic is the gender sub-text that exists in society and in organizations. Acker suggested that both women and men participate in the interactions that reproduce this order in organizations. Smith (1987) introduced the idea of the gender subtext. The subtext is found in “concealed” (p. 152) practices and social interactions that produce power relations and gender distinctions (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). (Dye & Mills, 2012) Dye and Mills (2012) argue that analyzing the notion of organizational logic is necessary to make sense of the gender subtext. The other four processes are both a product of and a component in the production of the gendered substructure (Benschop & Doorewaard). The organizational logic is responsible for allowing the production and reproduction of the gender subtext.

Acker (1990) used the job evaluation system as an example of one process in which the organization logic is manifest in organizations. In their study of Pan American Airways, Dye and Mills (2012) suggested that a strong discourse of family in the organization allowed the integration of the other four processes and reproduced the underlying organizational logic of gendering. Likewise, in family firms, the discourse of family pervades the stories and serves as a force for the reproduction of gendered practices in these organizations. The

systems model (Tagiuri & Davis, 1992) suggested that the family system overlaps with and affects the ownership and management systems in the family business. In family firms, the discourse of family is the underlying force for the construction of the social elements in the firm.

Organizational logic maintains the gender order in organizations and in society. “Organizational logic is anchored in and helps to reproduce the fundamental structuring of industrial societies, in which the production of things and services for which money is exchanged is clearly separated in time, place, form of organization and conceptualization from the reproduction of human beings and everyday life.” (Acker, 1995, p. 139). Dye and Mills (2012) suggested that organizational logic is not a distinct process, but that the first four sets of processes should be examined through the lens of organizational logic. Thus, organizational logic is the process by which the first four processes become taken-for-granted, “concrete” structures in organizations. In this thesis, I will use the analysis of the organizational logic as a way of synthesizing the other four processes and viewing the Acker framework more holistically.

## **Identity**

Identity is a key component in Acker’s fourth process, and is part of how people in organizations perform their gender. In the family funeral home context, family, business and gender identities all play a role in how people perform, or

feel they should perform, their gender. Czarniawska (2013) differentiated between the study of the end product of identity construction and the examination of the process of construction itself. This thesis examines both the process of identity construction, as well as one end product of the process – identity.

Gherardi and Poggio (2007) posited that it is far more complex for women to make sense of their identities in an organization where they are disturbing the symbolic gender order. Such is the case in many family firms. Gherardi and Poggio presented a nuanced view of individual identity construction which is particularly valuable. They view gender, not as a “unitary and definitive” product of social construction, but as an ongoing performance that an individual constantly constructs and reconstructs against multiple societal (or organizational) discourses. In other words, one does not *do* gender, one *performs* his or her gender (Martin, 2006). Czarniawska (2013) also positioned identity construction as a never-ending process, rather than an essential trait or an end product that people create for themselves. She suggested the concept of “negotiating selves” as a frame for analyzing gender in organizations. She suggested that it is necessary to investigate both identity and alterity (“the otherness of self”) in order to understand the process of identity construction. Identity construction is a never-ending process. This view suggests a metaphor of identity construction as a dance whereby an individual constantly positions herself or himself, given the music of the societal discourses that are imposed upon him or her, and in concert with the other dancers who are performing their



own identities.

One of the main ways one performs his or her own identity is by narrating it for others. In other words, people tell stories to make sense of their experience and, also, as a means to perform or construct their identity. Identity is derived, in part, as we position ourselves, relative to others in the conversations we have with them (Czarniawska, 2013). For example, as discussed in Chapter Four, Abby told stories that suggested that she was never able to fully develop an identity as a valuable member of her firm in part because her conversations with her brothers served to remind her that she and her position were not important to the firm.

Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) suggested that organization is itself a language that has to be performed in a context. Language is the action through which people construct the structure of the organization. This language, contextualized against the “larger social narratives” (p. 18) serve to form identities within the organization.

Thus, individuals are constructing their organizational identities by performing this dance in opposition to other organizational narratives. This identity formation becomes even more complex when the organization is also a family. A “dancer” in a family organization must negotiate and construct a self in concert with not only societal discourses and organizational narratives, but also with those of the family. Identity construction begins for children in the family context as they construct their identities both by identifying with and by

differentiating themselves from their family. Role in the family becomes a key part of one's identity (Dyer, 2006). Negotiating competing identities becomes more complex for women in family business during ownership transition (Handler, 1992).

Dumas (1990) proposed three types of identity structures for women in family firms. The first identity type is what Dumas (1990) called *Caring for the Father*. This sense of identity has insufficient structuring of a personal identity. Daughters with this structure have an identity that is, largely, an extension of their fathers and is based on a dependent attachment to the father. Other women have an overly structured sense of identity, what Dumas (1990) called the *Taker of the Gold*. These women have very rigid structuring of identity and have an overly individuated sense of self. They are independent of others and tend to act only for themselves. Dumas (1989) contended that the *Caretaker of the King's Gold* identity "represents the healthy development of the daughter's sense of identity" (1990, p. 176) and is achieved by simultaneously taking care of the father and ably managing the business.

Women who challenge the symbolic gender order by entering traditionally male roles present a challenge to both the traditional female role and, also, they challenge the traditional allocation of roles within the organization. Identity is discursively constructed, in part, through both identification with and distinction from others. The women in the Gherardi and Poggio (2007) study found themselves in an uncomfortable position of both identifying with and also

differentiating themselves from men *and* women. This makes it especially troublesome to negotiate one's own identity in reference to the dominant symbolic gender order. This is evident in how women's narratives positioned them relative to the Other.

Gherardi and Poggio (2007) proposed that women who challenge the gender order by entering traditionally male roles feel constant ambivalence in their roles in the organization. On one hand, the women in their study reported the need to adopt typical masculine behaviours (i.e., assertiveness, decisiveness, etc.) as a tactic to succeed in the organization. On the other hand, women who do not *perform* their gender in a way that is consistent with the organization or the society's notion of femininity are disciplined in their relationships with men and with other women. This has become known as the double bind. If they act as women, they accentuate their difference from what the organizational logic constructs as ideal behaviour. If they display typically feminine behaviours, they are judged as not fitting the requirements for success in the organization. Similarly, empirical research in this area suggests that women are evaluated unfavourably when they behave like men, but also when they don't behave like women. Outcomes for men and women who behave the same are different (Heilman & Chen, 2005).

Applying these theoretical insights from the gender and organizations literature to family businesses, it seems that women in family firms may be in a triple bind. Consistent with the women in Gherardi and Poggio's (2007) work,

women in family firms reported fears about being “too” successful because they may be seen by others as being too masculine (Freudenberger, Freedheim, Kurtz, & Kurtz, 1989). The women in Curimbaba’s (2002) study reported the role ambiguities felt by women heiresses in family firms brought about by gender and family roles conflicting with business roles.

Dumas (1989, 1990, 1992) suggested that, not only do women in these firms feel themselves in the double bind brought about by their location in a previously male-dominated environment, but they also feel ambiguities from their challenge to the family order. Women successors are “torn” between their role in the family (as mothers, wives, daughters or siblings) and their role in the business. This conflict in roles is characterized by the need to perform in “professional” ways to be successful as a family firm manager/owner which conflicts with the role as “daddy’s little girl” (Dumas, 1992). Women in Dumas’ work report confusion over when to assume the role as a professional and when to assume the role of a daughter. Additionally, these women reported resistance, particularly from male employees and their own mothers, to any attempts to define their business roles in ways that conflicted with societal or family notions of those roles. The role conflict is, perhaps, more distinct for women because they often enter the family business without a clearly-defined role and remain “structurally invisible” (Dumas, 1989, p. 37) in the firm. This makes the business role that they are to perform a moving target and more difficult to orient against their family role.

Gherardi and Poggio (2007) discussed how the rhetoric employed by those in their study serve to discipline those (women) who do not follow the rules by impacting their relationships and limiting their success in the organization. Just as women who behave in ways that are inconsistent with the social construction of their roles in any organization, women in family firms who behave in ways that are inconsistent with their role in the family are penalized through relationship difficulties with their parents or their siblings.

## **Summary**

This chapter has outlined the relevant family business and gendering literatures, beginning with a look at the debate on defining *family business*. Many definitions of “family business” exist in the literature. Existing literature argues that defining the term is necessary for all empirical studies. While generalizability is not of particular importance in a qualitative case study, I recognize the importance of defining the domain of the young field of family business research. To that end, I am using a definition, based on Astrachan and Shanker (2003) that recognizes both family and business characteristics and suggests that a family firm is one in which a family is in control of firm direction and in which the family intends the firm to continue into subsequent generations.

The field of family business research is a relatively new one; therefore, leading voices have reached out to other disciplines to bridge the gap between

fields to add to the theoretical base in family business (James, Jennings, & Breitzkreuz, 2012), and this is increasingly happening as family business research spreads across disciplines (Short, Sharma, Lumpkin, & Pearson, 2016). Because there has been no theoretical foundation for studying gender developed within family business, I turned to the work in the gender and organizations field (Mills & Tancred, 1992) and Joan Acker's (1990) framework of gendered organizations to provide a basis for this thesis.

There is little overlap in the family business literature and the gender in organizations literature. The study of gender in the family business literature has largely used gender as a categorical variable (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017) and has been focused on outcomes of gendering such as problems or discrimination faced by women in family firms. In contrast, the gender in organizations literature has explored the organizational structures, processes and interactions that produce gendered environments. This body of literature has examined gendering across a variety of organizational types, but few examples exist that explore gender as a social construction in family firms (Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017), particularly in funeral service firms. Although Acker's theory of gendered organizations is frequently cited in the gender in organizations literature, there are very few examples of research applying that framework for analysis. The Acker model has not been used in family business research.

What follows is the narrative analysis of the stories of the people in their

family-owned funeral homes. Narrative analysis is particularly suited to this examination of gender for several reasons. First, a narrative approach allows exploration of everyday interactions and constructions (Larty & Hamilton, 2011). The preceding review of gender characterizes gendering as an invisible process that is produced and reproduced through people's interactions. Second, narrative analysis attempts to surface marginalized voices, such as the voices of "invisible" women in family firms. Finally, organizational members negotiate their own identities through stories. It is anticipated that it will be more complex for women in family firms to make sense of their gendered identities and that this complexity will be apparent in the stories women in these organizations tell. Additionally, it is expected that the way these identities are negotiated play out in the workings of the business, particularly in succession.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

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## **Introduction**

One of the contributions of this research is to provide an example of critical methods in family business research. As argued earlier, there is a dearth of research in the family business field using critical methodologies, in general, and using narrative analysis specifically. However, in this chapter, I outline the argument that narrative analysis is a methodological choice well-suited for studying how gender is done (or performed) in family businesses and how people negotiate their roles. This chapter will first re-visit the research questions developed in Chapter One. Next, my ontological and epistemological perspectives will be positioned to frame the project. Finally, the research methods will be outlined, including a discussion of the dimensions of narrative analysis that render it as an obvious methodological choice for research in this domain.

## **Research Questions**

As stated earlier, the major objective of this research is to understand what structural and material practices in family funeral firms serve to gender these



organizations. These are the “everyday” practices that narrative analysis is particularly suited to examine. Additionally, I seek to understand how gender and role negotiation intersect in family firms so that we may better understand what barriers families construct in their businesses and how these barriers affect the workings of the business. As discussed earlier, both gender and roles are socially constructed, in large part through narrative. To that end, this narrative analysis will seek to explore several research questions.

- *Why aren't there more women at the top levels of management in their family funeral service firms?*
- *How is the gender order produced and maintained in family funeral service firms? How do these gendering practices and structures differ from those in other family firms or from those in other organizational forms?*
- *How do women negotiate their various intersecting identities in family funeral homes? How do the ways in which these identities are negotiated play out in the workings of the family firms?*

## **Interpretive Perspective**

Because narrative analysis is rarely used in family business research, it is not surprising that very few family business case studies are approached from the interpretivist perspective. Leppäaho et al. (2016) reviewed 75 family business case studies published between 2000 and 2014. The great majority

(89%) of the case studies demonstrated qualitative positivism. The remaining eight case studies the authors categorized as demonstrating interpretive epistemology and methodology wherein the researchers “embrace context, narratives, and the personal engagement of the investigator” (Leppäaho et al., 2016, p. 161). The value of interpretive work in family business is that it allows for a deeper understanding in complex family and business systems (Nordqvist et al., 2009).

The narratives created for this thesis (i.e., the interviews) were created by the narrators and by me asking questions and making comments that shaped the narrative. Approaching this research from an interpretive perspective implies epistemological and ontological positions. Interpretive research focuses on understanding the “ways in which social reality is meaningfully constructed and ordered from the point of view of the actors directly involved” (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 254). From this standpoint, the narrative does not represent concrete “truth”, but only the interpretation of events that the narrator, the researcher, and the reader have created together (Riessman, 1993). Riessman describes the representation of events in the narrative analysis process as having five layers of interpretation. First, the narrator makes interpretive choices in what she notices during the event and in what she chooses to tell when re-presenting the event to the interviewer. Likewise, the researcher makes interpretive choices when transcribing and analyzing the narrator’s stories. Finally, the reader of the analysis is involved in the last level of interpretation when he/she is reading the

written report. Thus, narrative analysis, performed from this perspective, aims to provide “partial, alternative truths” (p. 22).

An interpretive position implies a certain degree of reflexivity in the research. Reflexivity refers to need for researchers to be reflective about their role in creating an interpretation of reality. All researchers bring their own knowledge, experiences, values and biases to a research project (Bryman et al., 2011). Researchers’ personal experiences impact the kinds of questions they ask, the language that they use and the results that they generate through interpretation (Alvesson, 1996). Consistent with the interpretive position is the notion of what Bryman et al. (2011) call, *deconstructive reflexivity*, which suggests that the researcher should continue to question her own beliefs and assumptions (Alvesson, 1996) and should allow for the existence of multiple, valid versions of interpretation (Bryman et al., 2011). In this case study, the implications of reflexivity required me to be aware of how my familiarity with the families and the firms, my knowledge of the industry and my ability to speak in funeral service jargon might affect the questions that I asked and how the respondents constructed their narratives. Additionally, it was important for me to question my interpretation of the narratives. My prior knowledge of the history and family members in each firm suggests that it is likely that I was more involved in the construction of the context of the stories than a researcher with no prior involvement with the firms might have been.

Narrative is very context sensitive (Bruner, 1990). Therefore, the researcher doing narrative analysis must also be very aware of the context in which the stories took place. Knowing the context is important for understanding how meaning is created within a culture. Gherardi and Poggio (2007) specifically used narrative analysis to examine the gender in the context of organizational gender. Borrowing from the field of narrative therapy and reflexive research (Etherington, 2004), I recognize myself as a co-creator of the stories told in these interviews of funeral home owners and family members. Because of my background as a consultant, I have strong working knowledge of the industry and, in some cases, the family history that give context to these stories. I recognize that, because of my relationships, I was able to ask questions that lead interviewees to “thicken their stories” (Etherington, p. 74). From the interpretative perspective, this involvement of the researcher in the creation of the narratives is not particularly problematic. In every interview, whether the researcher has a strong connection to the interviewees or not, the researcher makes interpretative decisions throughout the analysis that serve to create the researcher’s one interpretative of the narratives, rather than *the* interpretation.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

As discussed in Chapter One, funeral service was chosen as the context

for this research for two reasons. First, funeral service is a traditional, male-dominated industry in the United States. However, it is undergoing a dramatic shift in gender composition because of large numbers of women entering the field as funeral directors (NFDA.org). Additionally, a majority of funeral homes in the U.S. are family-owned (Martinez Jimenez, 2009).

For this case study, fifteen (15) family members in six (6) funeral service firms agreed to participate. Because gender is produced through interactions with other people (West & Zimmerman, 1987), I chose to interview both men and women. Nine (9) women and six (6) men were interviewed. Participants were identified and recruited to the study based on their membership in the trade association, which assured family ownership of the firm. From the membership in this association, I identified a limited number of firms in which women held leadership and/or ownership positions and which were within 500 miles of my home. Because of past experience as a consultant with the trade association, I did have a past professional relationship with three of the six firms.

In keeping with the definitional criteria outlined in Chapter Two and in Astrachan et al. (2002), firms in this study were determined to be a family business if they were one in which the founder or descendent of the founder plays a role in running the business *and* the business owner intends to pass ownership of the business to another member of his/her family. Following the recommendation of Astrachan et al., Figure 1 outlines the family relationships of the participants.

<b>Participant*</b>	<b>Generation of Family in the Firm</b>	<b>Position in Firm</b>	<b>Relationship</b>
Bob	4 <sup>th</sup>	Owner	Father
Jane	5 <sup>th</sup>	Manager/Owner	Bob's Daughter/John's Wife
John	5 <sup>th</sup>	Manager/Owner	Jane's Husband
Susan	5 <sup>th</sup>	Owner	Mary's Sister
Mary	5 <sup>th</sup>	Owner	Susan's Sister
Grace	5 <sup>th</sup>	Manager/Owner	Daughter of Owner
Patricia	4 <sup>th</sup>	Manager	Andrew and Ellen's Daughter-in-law
Abby	4 <sup>th</sup>	Manager/Owner	Andrew and Ellen's Daughter
Andrew	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Owner	Patricia's Father/Abby's Father-in-law
Ellen	3 <sup>rd</sup>	Owner	Patricia's Mother/Abby's Mother-in-law
Stephanie	6 <sup>th</sup>	Owner	Owner's Daughter/ Shawn's Sister
Shawn	6 <sup>th</sup>	Owner	Owner's Son/ Stephanie's Brother
Luke	4 <sup>th</sup>	Past Owner	Sophie's Father
Sophie	5 <sup>th</sup>	Owner	Luke's Daughter

**Figure 1: Family Relationships**

\*All names have been changed to protect confidentiality of participants.

## **Interviews**

The fifteen interviews were conducted in either the funeral home (business) or home of the interviewee, whichever they chose. Because I was encouraging participants to construct stories of their experiences in any way that

they chose, all were interviewed using un-structured, in-depth interviews. Interviews began with two prompt questions designed to “encourage narrativization” (Riessman, 1993, p. 54). The interview began with me asking participants to describe their earliest memories of the business and to recount how they first came to work in the business. The remaining one to two-hour interviews were unstructured. Participants were simply asked to tell their stories of life in the family funeral home. I used occasional follow-up questions to expand narratives. From these interviews, the narratives that are the basis of this study were identified and analyzed.

### **Why Narrative Analysis?**

Prior to 2002, narrative studies in the broad field of entrepreneurship were rare. Larty & Hamilton (2011) contend that the use of narrative methods in entrepreneurship has increased dramatically since. However, the same is not true in family business research. Aside from one article (Dawson & Hjorth, 2012) in *Family Business Review*, the only academic journal dedicated solely to family business research, no other articles using this methodological approach have appeared over the past five years. A search in another journal that regularly publishes family business research, *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice*, reveals only two articles stating the use of this methodology. Additionally, it is exceedingly rare for any critical methodology to appear in family business journals (Leppäaho et al., 2016; Nelson & Constantinidis, 2017). This thesis,

then, draws on the call in Dawson and Hjorth for more diversity in methods and is based on agreement with the authors that increased rigor in the field does not have to mean a narrowing of method.

Because of the nature and history of family business research which was originally rooted in case study research carried out by family business consultants and counselors (Winter, Fitzgerald, Heck, Haynes, & Danes, 1998), it is surprising that narrative methods have rarely been used to better understand people in a family business context. I contend that narrative analysis is a methodological choice well suited for studying family business for many reasons. First, a narrative approach offers an opportunity to examine “everyday aspects of entrepreneurship” (Larty & Hamilton, 2011, p. 221) or of any organization. Because the narrative functions to help people create the meaning of everyday life, narrative serves to join “everyday actions” into a form that aids in people’s understanding of those events (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative analysis in family firm research allows the researcher to examine how people construct and reproduce the business through their everyday interactions (Dawson & Hjorth, 2012) and how stories are used as a way to construct identities in those firms (Boje, 2001). Narrative analysis should allow a researcher to hear stories from all levels and parts of an organization (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007).

Also, this methodology allows marginalized stories to be surfaced (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). Members of family firms, as in all organizations, are continually going through a process of negotiating power and control where



marginalization of some parties is inherent (Haberman & Danes, 2007). Boje (1995) suggested that prevailing discourses in organizations serve to silence or marginalize some narratives. Prior studies have reported that women feel “invisible” both in family firms and, also, to customers and in other external relationships (Cole, 1997). Stories of women successors are marginalized, not just in organizations (Dumas, 1992), but, also in popular press and academic research about family firm succession. In a look at the gendered nature of entrepreneurship, Baker et al. (1997) examine the paradox that while women have made great gains in business ownership in the US, this fact has gone largely un-noticed by the popular and academic press, leaving women’s ownership to be largely invisible. As an example of this paradox, few studies have examined women as successors in family firms. Dumas’ work in the 1990s on family firm successors suggested an assumption that a son would be chosen and groomed for succession, and women were not even considered in much of this work (Dumas, 1992). More recent work concludes that daughters continue to be overlooked as candidates for management succession in family firms (Wang, 2010). Narrative analysis examines “everyday” stories, the telling of which allows people to structure or make sense of extraordinary situations (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). Bruner (1990) says that “the function of a story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern” (pp. 49-50).

Finally, narrative analysis is also particularly suited to the study of how

gender is produced and reproduced in organizations for several reasons. In most organizations gender is invisible against a seemingly gender-neutral background (Acker, 1990). Women owners in family businesses, particularly in funeral service are not the norm. Any challenge to the gender order, such as the ones presented in this case study, in the form of a woman entering a male environment is an extraordinary event (Czarniawska, 1998). People use narrative to make sense of events that do not align with the societal ideal (Riessman, 1993). A narrative is an individual's attempt to connect the ordinary or "normal" (i.e., the gender order) to the extraordinary. Bruner (1990) describes narrative as a narrator's way of dealing with events that are different from the normal ("canonical") in an effort to make sense of them and to make the narrator feel secure with the difference. Gherardi and Poggio (2007) chose their subjects based on the idea that a challenge to the gender order, such as when a woman enters a traditionally male domain, offers a unique opportunity to study the usually invisible symbolic order. A daughter succeeding a father as the owner of a family firm is still a rare enough event to suggest a challenge to the existing gender order (Haberman & Danes, 2007). So, a disruption in the gender order offers a unique glimpse of the order, and Gherardi and Poggio write that allowing people to tell their stories can provide access to the invisible gender, and presumably, other hidden processes. Therefore, narrative analysis is the appropriate methodology for a study of how women negotiate their conflicting roles and how they "narrativize" (Riessman, 1993, p. 3) the experiences that

demonstrate this challenge to societal norms.

## **Analysis**

Generally, *narrative analysis* implies a broad methodology rather than a structured method (Riessman, 1993). It is a theoretical framework that allows the researcher to take into account the relations between gender, organization and discursive practices. It is a methodology that is situated at the intersection of the performance of gender, the construction of organization and the discursive practices that produce and reproduce both (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). Narrative analysis does not prescribe a method, but rather an iterative and layered way to analyse data, the method of which is dependent on both the research project and the researcher's paradigmatic position (Riessman, 2005). For those situated in the interpretative paradigm, reality is constructed through interactions with others. Each person's narrative represents only that person's unique reality, rather than one perspective on a concrete reality. Stories are the way in which people create their own identities and, also, how they attach meaning to the events of their lives (Etherington, 2004).

Narrative analysis does not constitute a simple level of analysis. Narrative analysis assumes the production and the reproduction of the narrative as part of the interpretation (Czarniawska, 1998). According to Riessman (1993), important elements of method are to determine the definition of narrative that will be used; to decide what aspects of the narrative will be used for interpretation; and to

answer the question, "who determines what the narrative means and are alternative interpretations possible?"

Gherardi and Poggio (2007) define narrative analysis as an examination of stories and the narrative practices with which they are constructed. The Gherardi and Poggio method, on which the method for this research is loosely based, is constructed on Czarniawska (1998) and the assumption that narrating is organizing. Narratives themselves are organizational processes. People in organizations use narratives to make sense of their experience of reality and to construct their own identity in it. The aim of narrative analysis is to "elicit interviewees' reconstructed accounts of connections between events and between events and contexts" (p. 26). I concur with Czarniawska (1998) who suggested that, because narrative is the primary vehicle of organizational knowledge and communication, interpretation of narratives is essential to the study of organizations. Boje (2001) suggests that narrative is both a text and a performance. In this same way, gender is a performance that has both voluntary and involuntary elements. The way gender is performed is based on shared understandings of what the performance should be in various contexts. Patterns of communication are the "interactive medium through which gender is constructed." (p. 31). Thus, because narrative is part of the production of gender, the narratives should be explored in a study of gender.

As a methodological approach, narrative analysis research is a layered and iterative process. First, the researcher must look at the narrative as an

artifact and view *what* is being said. It was during this phase of analysis that I transcribed the interviews and pulled the pieces of narrative from the transcript. As my method is modeled after what Riessman (2008) calls the *thematic approach* to narrative analysis, my aim here was to create theme categories or to group the stories into a typology of themes. Next, the stories were examined for *how* people organized the stories and used them. I looked at the structure (plot) and the context of the stories to surface the way the story was used to make sense of events, produce relationships with other people and to construct identities. Finally, in a critical NA, the *why* of the stories was examined to surface whose interest is served in telling the stories (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). It was during this part of the analysis that I reflexively linked the narratives being studied to the context and to the theoretical foundation of the Acker framework to offer an explanation. While I am presenting these parts of the analysis process in a sequential way, I do not mean to imply that they are purely so. "Close reading" (Riessman) of narratives requires a researcher to continually return to *what* is being said and *how* it said in order to interpret *why* it is being said.

The first layer of analysis is built on the traditional view of narrative as an artifact, focusing on general concepts and on *what* is being said. It was during this stage that I transcribed the interviews and identified the parts of the transcription that were narratives. In narrative analysis, "analysis cannot easily be distinguished from transcription" (Riessman, 1993, p. 60). The process of repeated listening, transcribing and reading constitutes a major part of the

analysis. During this process, the researcher is listening and reading for insights related to the broad research questions, but often, other, more specific questions emerge (Riessman). In stage one, the researcher must use some technique for reducing the text to the core narrative. What the researcher includes as narrative is one of the levels of interpretation informed by the evolving research questions, where she is situated epistemologically, her theoretical foundation and "her personal biography" (p. 61). During this part of the analysis, I transcribed the interviews and identified the parts of the text that met the conditions of a narrative. In other words, I pulled out the parts of the interviews that had plot. The plot is a device used by a narrator to organize events sequentially in a way that serves to makes sense of them or makes them meaningful (Bruni et al., 2004). A plot assumes both a sequential order and action with agency or intentionality by the actors (Bruner, 1990). This part of the analysis also involves identifying themes (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). Riessman describes the dangers of either reading the material too literally for content or reading with notions of pre-conceived theoretical connections. Also in this stage, I worked to identify the gender subtext and to uncover and classify themes and to draw conclusions "on the various ways that people live and give meaning to their experiences" (Gherardi & Poggio, p. 25).

While there are many guidelines for identifying narrative, Riessman (1993) suggests that transcription and identification of narrative are interdependent activities. Bruner (1990) argues that, while parts of a narrative must be

sequential, a narrative is more than a sequence of events. What gives narrative meaning, is plot. Bruner outlines four necessary conditions for narratives. First the narrative must describe some action over which the actor had agency or control. Second, the narrative must include some sequence of events. Next, the narrative should show contrast between what is considered normal and actions that violate those norms. Finally, the narrative should demonstrate some emotion from the narrator's perspective.

Most sources agree that narratives demonstrate some structural elements, like sequence and plot. Narratives have a plot that is placed there by the narrator. A narrative includes three elements: an initial state or condition, a major happening and subsequent state or condition that occurs as a consequence of the major happening (Czarniawska, 1998). Ultimately, some guidance exists for identifying narrative, but it is ultimately the researcher's interpretation of the text. This study follows Czarniawska by identifying stories that demonstrate three required elements. First, a narrative depicts the protagonist's original state or condition, an important event, and the condition or situation that resulted from the action. In other words, a narrative has to have a plot that is placed there by the speaker. Riessman (1993) suggests that narrative is "talk organized around consequential events" (p. 3). Both sequence and structure are important in analyzing narratives. Plot is important because a plot is what turns a listing of events into a narrative of why the event is important to the outcome (Polkinghorne, 1988).

The second layer of analysis is concerned with *how* stories are told. In this version of narrative analysis, I was more interested in the perspective of the storyteller than in the story itself. Czarniawska (1998) suggests that interpretation of a narrative is situationally negotiated. This stage of narrative analysis is concerned with investigating how narratives are constructed and organized. The researcher is looking at how people make sense of and impose order in their lives. We are interested in how the teller of the narrative is using the plot to construct himself or herself and what plots are used. This step also examines *how* the narratives are organized to gain insight into how the interviewees used the narrative to order their experiences (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). Gherardi and Poggio describe this step as “reconstructing narrative sequences, demonstrating how they produced and reproduced a specific symbolic gender order” and “how the plot served to confer plausibility and sense on unexpected situations”.

It may seem elemental, but it is an important point that I was only marginally interested in the “what” is being told. The story itself is not nearly as interesting as the way it is used to construct individual and group realities. The final step was to examine the *why* the story is told in a particular way to investigate whose interest is served in the telling. From the interpretive position, this step recognizes that there are multiple ways in which the story could be told. Gherardi and Poggio (2007) describe this third stage as answering the question, “Why did they recount the story in a particular way?”. According to Gherardi



and Poggio, this stage of the methodology attempts to uncover how stories show ambivalence and is especially useful in examining the “hegemonic character” (p. 26) of every discursive practice. They suggest that this portion of the method is especially important for studying gendering because of the potential to expose the social construction of those aspects of the gender order that are seen as naturally occurring. This stage also involves relating the narrative to the historical, organizational, and societal contexts as well as the theoretical foundation. Hamilton (2006) suggests that the reflexive approach requires the researcher to “be familiar with” (p. 259) the existing theory without being led or constrained by it. It was during this stage that I iteratively applied the narratives to Acker’s (Acker, 1990) five gendering processes.

## **Summary**

Narrative analysis is a very useful methodology, but it does have several limitations. First is the question of validity of the analysis. Second, no canon or set or prescribed rules of method exist for narrative analysis. Finally, as discussed earlier, narrative studies do not aim for generalizability. Riessman (1993) suggests that, because each telling of a story represents a different reality for the teller, that the idea of validity must be re-conceptualized. She outlines four ways of approaching validity in narrative analysis. One criterion for determining validity is the persuasiveness of the analysis. She suggested that

persuasiveness can be improved by supporting theoretical propositions with specific evidence from the narratives and by considering the potential of alternative interpretations. A second way to validate narrative analysis is to ask those who participated in the study to review and comment on the results. Third, an analysis must show coherence. A final criterion is the extent to which there is future potential for other work to continue to expand on the theory suggested in the narrative analysis. Because of the structure of this research, it would be difficult for me to involve study participants in validating the analysis. Also, it is virtually impossible to predict whether future work will be built on the theory provided by this analysis. Therefore, this thesis will focus on demonstrating persuasiveness and coherence.

I have outlined the case that narrative analysis is well-suited for family business research and for this thesis. Etherington (2004) concurs that a researcher with a social constructionist perspective should use a methodology that probes the construction of meaning. Chapter Four will outline the results of the narrative analysis using the Acker framework to examine the social constructions of gender in family firms.

# Chapter Four: Gendering Begins at Birth

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## **Introduction**

Once upon a time there was a little girl who dreamed of growing up one day to be a funeral director. Her parents involved her in the business from an early age and told her often that, “one day this will be yours.” She grew up with a goal of owning the funeral home that bears her family name. So, beginning in childhood, she spent her spare time working in increasingly meaningful positions in the funeral home and learning all she could about the business. After her schooling was complete, she joined the family business with the goal of succeeding her father as the President of the firm. She felt perfectly at peace because she was where she always imagined she would be.

People use stories to make sense of their realities and to negotiate their identities (Søderberg, 2003). Stories are one way in which people make sense of their lives and where they fit in specific contexts (Riessman, 1993). While narratives are created in the human mind (Bruner, 1987), they are not created in

isolation. We use stories to negotiate our relationships with others, as we adjust our stories to other people's reactions to them (Søderberg, 2003). Shared stories help people situate themselves and give meaning to their lives (Polkinghorne, 1988).

The women in this study who shared their lives with me did not tell stories like the fictional one above. As children, these women and their families did not construct their future placing the girls in the business. For virtually all of them, their association with the business was "accidental" and their identification with the business came much later in life than it did for their brothers. Even after they joined the family firm, the women did not envision themselves in positions of leadership with the firm.

Family business consultants, like me, suggest to clients that the succession process begins at birth (Hausner & Freeman, 2009). The gendering of the family business also begins at birth as the invisible processes that create gendered divisions in the business are produced in the family long before they are reproduced in the business. This chapter analyses the themes that surfaced in the narrative analysis using Joan Acker's framework to holistically explore the gendering processes in these six family funeral homes.

## **Gendering in Family Firms**

### **Primogeniture**

The first gendering process in Acker's framework is the "construction of divisions along lines of gender" (1990, p. 146). She describes this process as the production of visible structures and the "ordinary organizational practices" (Acker, 1992b, p. 252) that maintain the gender order. This process goes beyond simple division of labour based on gender. It is the consistent practice of these gendered divisions that are designed to re-produce the gender order (Dye & Mills, 2012). In other words, these practices create taken-for-granted ideas about what is men's work and what is women's work. In Acker's framework, this is the only one of the gendering processes that can be the result of conscious decisions such as company policies and procedures. While these decisions are gender neutral on the surface, the decisions are based on perceptions and ideas of how gender should be done. These overt policies and practices often result in gendering that is "hidden" in that they ostensibly have nothing to do with gender, but they manifest in hegemonic distinction of power.

Although Acker seems to suggest that the analysis of this process should be more than counting men and women in different kinds of work (Acker, 2006), patterns of people holding positions in an organization can give an insight into divisions along gender lines. These divisions of gendered work are manifest across corporate forms. As outlined in Chapter Two, men, in general, are more

likely to reach leadership positions in organizations. However, women, both family members and non-family employees, are more likely to have opportunities in a family business than in other corporate forms (Salganicoff, 1990).

In some ways, the stories of the funeral home families support these findings about family businesses and suggest little evidence of Acker's gendered divisions. The funeral homes examined in this case study were selected because they represent firms in which women inhabit the CEO position or are the designated successor to the position. In fact, one of the funeral homes in this study is owned and managed by a woman who is the second-generation woman CEO. In this case study, it could be argued that these family businesses demonstrate less division along gender lines.

In other ways, however, Acker's gendered structures are as evident in these family firms as they are in larger, corporate forms. What makes family firms unique is not that work is divided along gender lines or that men, in general, are favoured for top leadership positions. While both of these things seem to be demonstrated, in a family firm, a *specific* man is favoured for the top position, often from birth. The hidden practice in family firms that creates the taken-for-granted assumption of men's work and women's work is primogeniture, the right of succession given due to sex and birth order. Primogeniture is alive and well in these funeral home families. These family business children grow up internalizing this gendered structure, each knowing his or her "place" in the business, even as a young child. This is manifest in the stories as the people

describe their early relationships with the family firm. Shawn described his brother's assumption that, because he is a man, he would work in the family funeral home.

Other than that, my brother was more or less...he thought this should be my life's ambition...No I just think he thought that's what the men in this family should do and that's what we...  
Yeah, I mean I always knew this was going to be here.

*Shawn, 6th generation, early 30s*

Acker (1990) notes that gendered division of work is the only one of the five processes that is potentially visible to observers (1990) and results from conscious decisions (1992a). Two participants from a firm in this study recognize and articulate the conscious and visible decisions that explicitly situated their brother as the heir apparent in the family. They recognized that their mother wanted, very badly, for their brother to join the business in order to be the mother's successor as CEO of the firm. In these stories, two sisters, in their sixties, describe this overt gendering of positions in their family, and their mother's stated preference for the older son.

Yeah. My brother Tom came here... let's see if I can figure it out, because he was 40 years old when he first came and that was another thing. She wanted it so much that I don't think

she...she didn't think that women had (a place here)...it was really funny because she was a woman, but you know... He would have loved to have been a farmer, that's where his heart is. I think that mother gave him an offer and, see we all wanted to please her because we loved her...She found a house for him to live in because it worked out financially. She did pay for his school; she did a bunch of things...Oh yeah, he got licensed.

*Susan, fifth generation, 60s*

Yes, I think that she still thought everybody wanted to see a man do a funeral. They didn't want to see a woman. ...He (Tom) was a teacher...well, we had this big meeting about what was going to happen...Oh mother had an irrevocable trust which she set up at that point and she wanted Tom to run it. Again, she was thinking that no woman, except her, could do anything with the business, so Tom was the logical person since she didn't think Jason could. So I said "I'm not in agreement with that", that it be definitely decided, because at that point Tom was not involved...I can't remember how old Tom was, but Tom was married and had children and he was actually teaching in Special Ed down in Anytown in the country and he was doing some farming and he was happy doing what he was doing and that's probably where he should have stayed. I think



mother gave him the opportunity and then he decided to come and do this. I'm not sure if it wasn't to help mother more than it was for himself.

*Mary, fifth generation, 60s*

The stories of the sisters above are unique in this study. Most of the women did not recognize the gendered practice of primogeniture as being an above-the-surface process in their family firms. In most of the other stories told by people in this study, the gendered structure and practice of primogeniture are evident, but not as the result of conscious and explicitly-communicated family rules. Instead, the practices that create gendered divisions are made visible in the narratives the people tell about visualizing future roles for themselves, their siblings or their children in the business. In the following two stories, the women tell stories that position joining the family firm as a thought that did not occur to them in their growing-up years.

Well, I mean, I never...Yeah. I never thought, being a teenager or a college student, I never thought of this business, it never occurred to me.

*Grace, fifth generation, 40s*

Stephanie's narrative includes her assumption that her brothers would join the family business but that she and her sister would not.

I didn't really plan on joining the business. I have an older brother and sister and a younger brother. *Of course* (emphasis mine), the boys had always said they were going to be in the business. My sister's a teacher. I actually went to school and started out in pre-veterinarian. I didn't want to take all the Math and Physics again, I had taken it all in high school and, for some reason, I didn't want to go through it again. My father said that I would work the summer at the funeral home and I did and it was...First year after college, freshman year coming back, between my freshman and sophomore year. He said I could either find a job or I would work at the funeral home and, being a typical college student, I wasn't going to find a job. So I worked here and it really wasn't what I expected. I thought I'd be scared and I wasn't.

*Stephanie, sixth generation, early 30s*

Luke, a fourth-generation owner of his family firm has, in my past interactions with him, been a great champion of his daughter, Sophie. He often brags on her intelligence, her top-quality education and her abilities. However, when asked about the time when Sophie joined the family firm, he also told a story suggesting that, before she joined the firm, he had no vision of her doing so. His story begins when Luke and his wife, Jaime, received a telephone call from

Sophie and her husband, Jacob.

We got a telephone call, Jaime and I, it was Sophie and she said “Jacob and I want to talk to you.” I said “oh, we’ll come up and we’ll go out to dinner”. So I told Jaime and we jumped in the car and headed north an hour and the whole way up Jaime is just tickled pink because she’s thinking she’s going to be a grandma. So we got there and went out for dinner and we are sitting around the table and she said “dad, Jacob and I want to ask you something.” I said “what’s that?” and she said “would you consider if we would come down and give us a shot at being funeral directors?” You could have knocked me over because I didn’t see that.

*Luke, fourth generation, 60s*

The people in this study told stories that suggested that girls grow up without any vision of themselves with a role in the business. One explanation for this is that, because they internalized the gender order, and women did not fit in the family or the firm’s order. Another explanation is that women simply did not see themselves in the business because of the taboo of women doing the “messy” work of body preparation.

Consistent with the family business literature, the invisible practice of primogeniture prevailed in the family funeral homes. Only one of the women in these stories was the first person considered for the top leadership position in her

company's most recent leadership transition. In the following passage, Bob acknowledges his preference for his son, Sam, over his daughter, Jane.

I had always told the kids growing up, "well if you want to be in the funeral service, this is good" and of course having I guess the sexist attitude that "well it takes a man to be in the funeral service", I just totally bypassed the fact that (my grandmother) had been running the show for all of these years. So naturally we are thinking, okay Sam is the heir apparent. Sam worked a couple of summers with me in River City and ...It was all I could do to keep him awake. Of course he was just not interested.

*Bob, fourth generation, 50s*

In this case, although Bob suggests that he gave both of his children the same message about their opportunities with the family firm, the male child was favoured, and his position in the firm was assumed because of his gender and birth order. Other options were not considered until the father was confronted with the son's obvious expression of disinterest in the business.

The family business literature firmly establishes the interest and willingness of the successor as a key component in the effectiveness of a leadership succession in a family firm (Le Breton-Miller et al., 2004; Sharma, Chrisman, Pablo, & Chua, 2001). Chosen successors who are not committed to the firm may demonstrate destructive behaviours (Bowen, 1993). In the following story, Patricia, the current manager of the family firm, describes her brother-in-

law's, Zach's (the eldest son), disinterest to the point that it leads to destructive behaviours.

Zach decided in 2003 that he didn't like this, he didn't like the hours, he wanted out. By that time we were starting to have morale issues because he thought he was Donald Trump's son. "I don't have to do that, I don't have to work nights; I don't have to work weekends" and treating staff kind of in a bad way. So he was bought out. Well he took that money and he started a spec house, did an apartment, and he's bankrupt. He lost everything, including his marriage. So that has created some animosity I think between the kids. Mike and Abby don't want to be partners with Zach again. They love their brother but they know he doesn't make wise decisions and this business requires more than an 8-5 Monday through Friday.

*Patricia, fourth generation, 40s*

Zach's sister, Abby, also tells a story about her oldest brother's dislike for the business and customer complaints about the business. What is interesting in Abby's story is that she perceives that her parents, especially her mother, want Zach in the business, even with his obvious disinterest that lowered the level of service the business was delivering.

Over the years, we've had challenges. Just as an example, my brother Zach was here, he was the one who was the funeral director and after maybe two years of him being here, it became really clear I think to all of us but maybe, I don't know how much my parents knew, but I know Mike (husband) and I knew, Patricia (sister-in-law) wasn't even here yet, that Zach didn't want to be here, he wanted to be doing anything but this, but felt kind of trapped. Over time it got worse and worse and worse and he would say, just as we've all kind of done this, it's like "okay, I'll try to be the preneed person, maybe that will get me out of at-need and that will make me happier and he wasn't really happier with that. Then he said "okay I'll run the pet crematory" and that didn't work and "I'll do this at the cemetery"...so he tried a lot of different things and he, at that time mom and dad had gifted stock to us which was very generous and wonderful, but anyway. So they did that and Zach decided he wanted to leave, so we bought his stock and he left. Ever since he left, Mike and I were very happy he was leaving because it was draining to work with someone who you know didn't want to be here. We had families complain about him to us...It was very hard. My parents never wanted to hear that. Then you would feel...and maybe that's another thing. Like if we weren't family, we would have no qualms telling my business partners that we've had

complaints about this staff member, but it was my brother. So I would try or Mike would try to bring it up and mom would say “he’s a wonderful funeral director, he’s just wonderful, people are just jealous of him around here” as if they were the ones that had stirred up things and we would say, “no this was a direct comment made to me”. People said “I will never use you again if I have to work with him”. Those were some strong things and it was because he was rude to people and impatient with people.

*Abby, fourth generation, 40s*

In other cases, the favoured male was characterized as angry, volatile and a poor manager of people. In the passage below, Mary tells a story about her brother, Tom, the chosen heir to the family firm, describing his management style. As is common in funeral service, customers or clients are referred to as “families”. In a nod to the historical male dominance in the field, Mary uses another common industry term and refers to the firm’s funeral service staff simply as, “the men.”

One time...Tom was bad about humiliating the men. If they didn’t do something right, he would reprimand them in front of...not in front of the families, but in front of the other people (employees) and talk to them in a very degrading manner, which was another

thing that he learned from mother, because that was the language she used at home. She didn't use it here, but she used it at home with them... Right before...when mother was dying actually, we were called down here, Susan (sister) and I were called down here, and they (the employees) said "well, we just want you to know that none of us will work for Tom". They were all sitting out there in the back room...Yes, and they said "none of us will work for Tom" and so I was like, oh...so once mother had died, Tom was pretty much gone.

*Mary, fifth generation, 60s*

Other families tell stories about the male child who was "the chosen one" even when he demonstrated emotional or substance abuse problems. Grace's brothers entered the family firm years before she did. They were in management positions and were seen as the logical next-generation owners. In this passage, Grace describes her brothers' issues with substance abuse and their lack of commitment to the continuation of the family business.

I don't really remember how my role evolved, but it did. I guess along with that whatever challenges my brothers had were beginning to be more obviously, Jason definitely with alcohol and James as well and other issues as well. Certainly their level of



commitment, their genuine level of commitment sort of became an obvious problem in terms of.... When was sort of the height of the corporate buyouts and stuff? It was probably about the time I came into business. Maybe the 90s, yeah. So that's another thing that was sort of always looming out there, "well we can just sell this place and get money, easy money, easy out". I kind of got the sense that both of my brothers...that would have been something they would have been very much in favour of.

*Grace, 5<sup>th</sup> generation, 50s*

Although there are some indications that women are increasingly being chosen as successors in their family firms, primogeniture prevailed in this case study. It seems plausible that under certain circumstances, a daughter would be a preferred successor. However, in this case study, all but one family told stories that indicated a son as the first choice for ownership succession into the next generation. This held true in spite of several conditions that might have (and ultimately did) indicate a daughter as a more likely choice. In these stories, the age of the parents or the children did not matter. The male child was preferred, regardless of the age of the incumbent(s) or the age of the children. Women who were involved and committed to the business were not considered before their brothers. Men were chosen first, regardless of their level of interest in funeral service. The family business literature suggests that women in family

firms tend to achieve higher educational levels (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2002). This finding was supported in this study. However, men were chosen regardless of the experience and capabilities of the men or the women involved. When I began the interviews with these families, I was interested in what effect family history of women in leadership positions would have on the gendering processes in these firms. Interestingly, a male child was preferred, regardless of the firm's history of strong women leaders. Another situation that might plausibly create a family view that a daughter was a more acceptable choice would be one in which the male heirs suffer from mental health issues. However, the male child was preferred regardless of the mental health of the potential candidates. Le Breton-Miller et al. (2004) found that one of the most important indicators of the success of a family business leadership transitions, as conceptualized by the satisfaction of the family participants, was the strength of the relationship between the incumbent (parent) and the potential successor (heir). However, in this study, the male child was preferred, regardless of relationship between the incumbent and the children. The male child was preferred.

## **Organizational Culture**

Acker's second gendering process is found in the artifacts, symbols and images that give legitimacy to the maintenance of gendered structures (1990). These are symbols of the organizational culture that are, on the surface, gender

neutral but that serve to reinforce a privileging of “masculine” traits or that associate technical skills with gender. In later work, Acker referred to this gendered substructure simply as *organization culture* (2012). The implicit and explicit manifestations of cultural values guide gender distinctions (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012) or the lack of them (Sayce, 2012).

### **Licensing**

One way in which both lines of gender division and the symbols of gendered culture are very evident in funeral homes is through licensing practices and, in a related way, how work that requires a license is assumed in funeral homes. In this industry, a distinction is often drawn in practice, and by law in some states, between the work of a funeral director and that of an embalmer. A funeral director is tasked with the visible work of meeting with and supporting grieving families, arranging and directing funerals. By contrast, embalmers deal with all of the more hidden physical and technical parts of the work in the “back room” or the “prep room” involving body handling and preparation.

In the United States, funeral service licensing is regulated by each state. All states require a person to be licensed to serve as a funeral director or as an embalmer. In the past, and until the 1990s, most states had separate licensing processes and requirements for the two different jobs. According to the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA), twenty (20) states in the U.S. still maintain separate licenses for the funeral service roles (dual licensing). Thirty states have

what is referred to in the industry as a single license. In other words, a single licensee is certified to serve as both a funeral director and as an embalmer with one license. Only one woman in the study who works in a state with dual licensing, and who, therefore, had the option to pursue one or the other license, obtained both her funeral director and embalmer licenses.

Licensing plays largely into cultural division of labour along gender lines. While the industry, itself, is male-dominated, the laws and practices create a context in which embalming is largely positioned as men's work. Research findings suggest that the proportion of women funeral directors is 18-24% lower in states with a single license requirement (Cathles et al., 2010). In fact, it is probable that dual licensing was instituted historically to allow wives to be involved in the funeral business without having to study embalming or to embalm bodies. Stephanie reported that one state served by her funeral home has a single license regulation, but also issues a special "spousal" license to allow a spouse of a funeral home owner (presumably a wife) to serve in the capacity of a funeral director under the supervision of her spouse (husband).

The interviewees in this study report gender patterns related to licensing in several ways. Although licensing is gender-neutral on the surface (i.e., anyone may choose to seek the requirements for licensing), in practice, the embalming function is highly gendered. It is positioned as men's territory. As such, the people interviewed for this thesis positioned embalming by women as special, unusual or different from the norm.

Interviewees report different expectations for men and for women in the preparation room. Some people in the industry consider themselves to be embalming specialists. For many, however, embalming is seen as a necessary first step to “move up” into a position as an arranging funeral director who meets with client families and directs funerals. Having worked in the “prep room” is a badge of honour that elicits respect from colleagues. This is where there is an interesting dichotomy in the way in which family funeral businesses are gendered. Women have been accepted into the more prestigious funeral director role for decades, while still being shielded (under the guise of protection) from earning their stripes as embalmers. In the interviews, many women report some form of protection from having to serve in the embalming function. For example, Ellen describes an impending change in state licensing laws as an impetus for her entrance into the family business. Because her state was in the process of changing the law to require a single license, her father-in-law (then the owner/manager of the firm) urged her to start serving her apprenticeship as a funeral director so that she would not have to go to mortuary school or be licensed as an embalmer.

I served my apprenticeship about '71. I started and I didn't want to be involved in working out of the home, but my father-in-law sort of talked me into it and he was wise to have done that. He and Andrew had talked about it and the state changed their law in that

you were going to have to have a single license to be an embalmer and a funeral director and if you applied and were accepted in their apprentice program for just a funeral director before this deadline, then you could come in.

*Ellen, 3rd generation, 60s*

Ellen goes on to describe how she views embalming as “not her territory”. She might venture into the prep room to help with the less-technical tasks of dressing or applying cosmetics to a body that do not require an embalming license.

Now I would help and still will if in a pinch to style a ladies hair, to put some makeup on and do a few things like that, but I have never seen an embalming, I don't want to, I feel like that's not my territory, I'm not going to do it. I would help dress someone, I would go in and help...sometimes it would take two people to get somebody's arm in something or their knee highs on or whatever. I've done that, but as far as doing anything, going in there and setting features or anything, I've never done it and I'm not going to. I won't overstep what I'm trained to do.

*Ellen, 3rd generation, 60s*

The culture and the hierarchy in funeral homes positions women in the embalming function as unusual at best. Because a woman in the embalming suite is remarkable, women's narratives both problematize and, also, attempt to make sense of their appearance there.

I was very blessed to have worked in most every aspect of the business except for the accounting and actual business end. I was involved in funerals, I was involved in embalming, and I of course as an apprentice, I got all kinds of experience in all the different parts of embalming and later I *actually did embalm* (emphasis mine). I did flowers, I did most everything, certainly maybe not as well as some of the guys and sometimes maybe better, but I had a good bit of experience. Of course, my size and my...it was more of a love to do it than I had to do it.

*Susan, fifth generation, 60s*

At worst, women in the embalming function are constructed as problematic and "wrong". Patricia tells a story about the reaction of people in the community that reinforces the abnormal or unusual nature of a woman in the prep room.

We live in an area that people don't realize you have to be a funeral

director to make arrangements. They think that Ellen or Abby (single-licensed mother-in-law and unlicensed sister-in-law), that they can do every bit of that. They're amazed when they find out that I embalm. That is the thing that people can't believe... Yeah. It's like, "who will embalm her?", "I embalmed her last night". Or "you did that?" That sort of thing. I don't know that's really a big deal for people. People don't put a lot of thought into that. They don't think about that sort of stuff.

*Patricia, 4th generation, 40s*

Jane reinforces the embalming function as men's work and demonstrates the problematic nature of women embalming when she describes embalming as something she does, "like any of the guys". Like Patricia, she goes on to discuss how she is more comfortable with the less technical work of dressing and applying cosmetics or "cosmetizing".

You know, it's been okay. Especially if I will get back in the prep room and dress the body and casket a body like any of the guys. Sometimes I do have to do it by myself. It has been well received. I haven't really had anybody say "oh you're a woman, I don't want you to meet with..." a lot of times they are kind of like "oh, it's nice to see a female, I always think of funeral directors as male and old,



it's nice to see a young female". Actually, I probably get more positive reinforcement than I ever have received negative reinforcement. ...I can still cosmetize, dress casket, so...I actually really enjoy that part. It just kind of gets you away from the office and kind of away from the...it just kind of lets you get back there and just kind of have some peace and quiet honestly. Embalming was never my strong suit, but I enjoy dressing, casketing, cosmetizing, so, yeah.

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

Gendering structures and culture are evident in how licensing is pursued and applied. These gendered processes are also manifest in how other functions, such as driving vehicles are gendered through "ordinary organizational practices" (Acker, 1992b, p. 252). A power hierarchy determines who drives which vehicles in a funeral procession. Usually, the driver of the limousine (or family car) enjoys higher status than the driver of the flower van or other vehicles that don't carry the grieving family or minister. Consistent with Ferguson's (1984) argument, a hierarchy, itself, is highly gendered, and the positions at higher, more powerful levels are constructed to be for men. In the gendered hierarchy of funeral service, a woman driving the "wrong" vehicle is viewed as problematic, just as is a woman in the preparation room.

I met a family and it was...the son-in-law was a Colonel ... and they went to my church, this would have been ten years ago maybe longer...I met with them and I drove the limousine and I remember one of our (male) funeral directors calling me incessantly leading up to it. "Don't you want me to drive? Do you really think you should drive the limousine?" I think he thought the Colonel would not see me as a, I don't know, didn't have any respect or trust for me because I was a woman and I was younger.

*Grace, 5th generation, 40s*

### **The Disembodied Worker**

In at least one way, family firms seem to be less gendered than other types of firms. Implicit in Acker's (1990) idea of organizational logic is the abstract concept that a "job" is implicitly gendered because it assumes a disembodied worker. The notion of the abstract worker suggests that organizational logic positions the worker as abstract and disembodied because "he" exists only for work.

The job is analyzed as separate from the worker doing it. Because this disembodied worker exists only for the job, he can have no responsibilities outside the work. Inherent in this idea is an assumption of a gendered division of labour with men working in paid labour and women assuming duties of caring for the home and children. In some ways, the members of the family funeral firms told stories that exemplified this notion, particularly in past generations. The

narratives that follow demonstrate some discourse that the men exist for the work, but that the women cannot be dedicated to the business at the same level because of the pull of the family system to which they must give priority.

In most ways, however, the narratives that the funeral families produced do not demonstrate the idea of disembodied workers. In fact, these firms uphold the ideals of a feminist organization. Acker suggests an ideal feminist work environment is one in which the workers are not disembodied and where caring work is as important as any other work (Acker, 1990). In part, this might be that, because the workers are “real” people, family members whose life stories and whose other obligations are well known to everyone in the organization, they cannot be disembodied. The family system and the business systems are overlapping in a family firm. They cannot be separated. As a result, obligations in the family system of women (and men) in a family business cannot be separated and are considered and embraced. Additionally, funeral service is a profession in which caring work is highly valued in the business system.

Perhaps because it is difficult to disembody a family member, particularly a child, the leader/parent in the funeral service firms demonstrated some recognition that workers have responsibilities outside the job. Family members, if not other members of staff, have flexibility to care for the non-work responsibilities in their lives. Women in this study report being able to work flexible schedules, something that is very difficult in the funeral service industry. In the following story, Jane discusses how her schedule will change after the

upcoming birth of her first child.

Of course my grandmother was not a director when she had my dad and my aunt. I mean, she was maybe involved as far as speaking to the families, but she was not involved in the day-to-day operations by any means, so it will be interesting. I am taking maternity leave for about three months, but after that, I am hoping to work Monday through Friday with weekends off, knowing that if I need to work a Saturday or Sunday I can, but hoping that will be the case. We'll see. It will be interesting. A lot of sacrifice probably on a lot of people's parts, but...Yeah, I don't know. It's interesting...There is another female director here that her children are in school and it's just different because both John and I have the same job. Most couples have the luxury of having at least one parent or one of them having weekends off where as John and I do not. So we are just kind of having to figure that out, probably as we go.

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

The flexibility that allows women in family firms to embody their gender in the workplace comes with a price. Salganicoff (1990) suggests that women feel a tension because the family wants them to care for the business but, also,

produce and care for children to continue to the family line. Women in the family firm feel an extra sense of responsibility that non-family members might not feel.

Yeah, it felt like it was working. I was always really appreciative of being here, being family because I know that I got a lot of...I didn't punch a clock. If I needed to leave early, I could leave early and it wasn't a huge issue. I always was very appreciative of working with my family and very, very cognizant of the fact that there were some perks to being a family member; that you didn't have to be quite as rigid as if I worked for someone else. It seems like it worked fairly well... I can remember I had two of my children after coming to work here and when I had them, I was back to work at least a little bit within two weeks of their birth. I would bring the baby in...I mean, I wouldn't work all day, but there was certainly...I don't know if it was ever said to me, I doubt it was said, that "you need to be here", but I felt a sense of obligation to be here, which was weird, but anyway I did. I think if I had been just an employee, I would have taken six weeks off and wouldn't have even thought about it. So that was sort of the flip side of being family, you feel, I've always kind of felt that I have some benefits of being a family member, but I also have a responsibility to step up and do things that maybe we wouldn't expect staff people, non-family members to

do. I'm fine with that, because I think that's part of the job, part of having your family name on the sign, is you jump in and do things so that your staff can have time off or so they can have more flexibility. Like holidays, we've always worked holidays or been responsible for holidays so they can all be off. I'm okay with that because that also means that if I need to take a day off during the middle of the week because my child has a fieldtrip, I feel like I can do that and not feel guilty about it.

Abby goes on to describe the family support, particularly from her husband in caring for her children. That support allows her to work in a business that is never closed.

So that's kind of...I had sort of a wide variety of experiences and I just never would have wanted...I always said I didn't want to do anything with the funeral home because of the hours and then I ended up being in one here and my husband was able to have the flexibility when he started working for himself to stay home if we had a sick kid or do things where I had less flexibility. In time, then I really began...I mean, I do enjoy what I do and I began to see that there was sort of a path that had been...I had been on a path that led me here and I was glad that it did and this is much more

fulfilling than any of the other business-type things I did.

*Abby, fourth generation, 40s*

Balancing work responsibilities and family responsibilities is much more challenging when both spouses work in funeral service. In Sophie's case, her husband supports her ability to care for their children by caring for some of the day-to-day management of the company, which allows her to work a flexible schedule.

I try to work three days a week and every other weekend, try. So I try to have Wednesdays and Fridays off and then every other Saturday and Sunday, that's my goal. It doesn't happen very often but that's my goal. He (husband) does more of the day-to-day management stuff and I'm fine with that. I don't like reading numbers, I don't like looking at balance sheets, that's not...I don't care about that stuff. It's important, but he likes to do that. When there's significant issues like the accountant or the attorney comes in and says, we need to tweak these things or we need to look at this or whatever, then I'm part of those conversations, but the general day-to-day stuff, he most often makes those decisions himself unless it's something I'm really against or we don't see eye to eye on something.

Sophie goes on to describe how her co-worker, who is also her parent, helps to care for her children when she has work obligations at night.

You say you never sit down at dinner at night; this is our dinner at night. We don't have one that's the stable, which is challenging for me. Like I can't count on him (husband) to be home at 5:00 so I can go to my hospital board meeting, I don't know if he's getting home or not so I always have to plan on babysitting. Fortunately, I've got a lot of family that I've been able to "hey dad, I'm going to go eat, I'm going to drop the kids off". Fortunately I have that family or I couldn't do it because two people in funeral service that have no stability to their schedule in addition to running and managing it and filling in all those sick days and vacation days and then the community activities that we both participate in by choice, by me, makes for no structure in our world ever.

*Sophie, 5th generation, 30s*

## **Interactions**

Interactions that are guided by and that reproduce gendered divisions make up Acker's third set of processes (1992a). Acker argues that interactions among people are the basis for what organizations do and the production of



gender is “inside” those interactions (1992b). However, this process also encompasses the ways in which people “do” gender by re-enacting their societal roles (Martin, 2006). This reproduction of societal roles in organizations enacts domination and submission. It is through these interactions that people re-enact societal and family roles in the organization.

The three-circle model of family business represents a family firm with three interacting systems. The family, business and management systems interact and each system affects the others. Additionally, the three systems overlap in such a way as to provide a different perspective for each member of the family business, depending on his/her place in the system (Poza & Daugherty, 2014). When applied to the gendering framework, the three-circle model suggests that women in a family business are doing their gender by re-enacting overlapping family, business and societal roles. Women’s gender and family roles are both reinforced through interactions with other members of the organization, with other members of the family, and with members of the community that they serve.

### **Internal Interactions**

Interactions with family members in the family firm reinforce gender roles. In this case study, women were likely to be reminded of what is “normal” gender behaviour, particularly as they move into positions of power in their family firms. Several women reported receiving some form of correcting behaviour from their

brothers as they occupied leadership positions in the firm. On the surface, the repercussions of upsetting the family gender order took the form of sibling rivalry (Barnes, 1988). However, Abby described internalizing her brothers' belittling comments and questioning the importance of her role in the firm.

The whole time I've been here, I've sort of been trying to justify being here. It didn't help any, because we had various people over the years say, "well if anybody's job is expendable, it would be yours" and I was like... My brothers would say...the one thing was "if somebody bought this business, they would probably get rid of you because you're just fluff, it's a fluff job". So that was frustrating. It was like, "well I think I make more of a difference than that". I say that and I don't think they really were...I think that's probably a legitimate comment, I think it's just I took it very personally. I don't know, I think I began to realize a few years ago that I needed a backup plan because at that time ...the three of us kids had some ownership and so...Zach was still here and I didn't really think any of us were going anywhere, but I kind of thought, I need to work on having some kind of plan if we were ever to sell this business or if something were to happen that I'm no longer here, what can I do? I mean honestly, what can I do?

*Abby, fourth generation, 40s*

Grace also told a story that demonstrated the subtle, sibling rivalry “teasing”, but also a more explicit punishment she received from one of her brothers for violating the gender order. Grace’s story also exemplifies a unique aspect of how gender is created in family firms. In these firms, interactions both reinforce gendering and the gender order, and, also, serve to protect women from the resulting discrimination.

Eventually we started to develop this property and we were going to build this (new) chapel. My dad definitely, he never wavered, he just said “you can manage it; you can run it, that can be your place”. I’m sure that my brothers were like “hm, must be nice” and I know some of the employees joked and called it the “Grace Mahal”. Okay. I think being here at this chapel when it opened, you can’t ever be prepared for the way people react to change and there was a lot of jealousy...I was pretty much prepared for that in terms of internally with my co-workers, but I wasn’t prepared for the animosity from one of my brothers...I would have been paranoid if I really knew some of the undercurrents. I don’t remember what my brother John specifically said or did, but it was just painfully obvious that he was trying to sabotage me and I was just totally unprepared for that. My brother, Jason, I mean who knows why the personalities emerged this way, but he just stepped up to the plate

and he said, this is ridiculous. He told my dad “John’s really got a problem with what Grace is doing and it’s ridiculous”. He went to John and said “what is wrong with you?” and that kind of snuffed it out for the most part.

*Grace, fifth generation, 40s*

Another woman, Stephanie, who is currently serving as President of her family’s business after her father’s retirement, reports that her father has fully supported her transition into the leadership role. However, after her marriage he continues to remind her, in a subtle way, of her expected gender role.

No. The only other thing I will say is I didn’t change my name. I wasn’t going to change it just because I have eight licenses. I was 35. I had already been here ten years. I’m licensed in two states, funeral director, embalmer, insurance. At this point, everything had been transitioned from my dad, every bank account. I said, it’s not like...I told my husband “I’m not 22 coming out of school and have nothing in my name”. I said “it would take me years to change everything”. So he adjusted to it. My father writes everything out to Stephanie Smith, which would be... Married name, yep. It doesn’t bother me to be referred to by my husband’s name, I just for the business end of it I didn’t want to change it.... I think this is

his subtle way of saying he wanted me to change my name...I run into problems here all the time (with families served by the funeral home). I say "see, that's why women should just keep their name".

Stephanie then goes on to discuss how she thinks her name gives her some protection, almost like armour, from the gender discrimination she might normally face in the business.

It upset my husband a little bit, but I described to him, "well when they call, it helps to be a Smith. I'm not going to have to face some things that other females are going to have to face because I had the last name. I'm aware of that. If you're a young female coming into the business and don't have the family business to go with your name, you're probably going to have struggles that I didn't have...I would think respect sometimes, being taken seriously. A lot of times guys just don't think girls can be funeral directors...Other funeral directors. That might change as the older generation kind of comes out but I would just think...here they knew I could do it because I started and I did everything, but I think a lot of times you'll get "how can you possibly", "you can't lift this guy" or "you can't make removals, you're not going to wash a car". I think you run into that stereotype. Do I think there are females out there that

do it? Absolutely, but I think they're going to have some roadblocks that I didn't have.

*Stephanie, sixth generation, early 30s*

### **External Interactions**

Parsons et al. (2012) suggested that external interactions of an organization should also be examined in applying Acker's framework. Interactions with vendors, customers, funding sources, and media should be included when investigating this third set of processes. Both men and women in the family funeral homes told stories of gendered interactions. The interactions with others inside the family business, both family members and non-family employees, serve to reinforce gender roles. Additionally, interactions with those external to the organization remind women in leadership positions when they violate constructed norms of gender behaviour.

These external interactions contribute to the production of gender by reinforcing hierarchies associated with specific functions or jobs positioned as men's work. The narratives of the funeral home families show many of the positions at upper levels of hierarchy to be highly gendered in their distribution of power and status (Ferguson, 1984). Women in this study discussed how their interactions with vendors and client families contribute to their difficulties in successfully performing their gender. Most of the women interviewed for this study recounted stories of acceptance by client families. However, most

recounted at least one story of being reminded of their gender in subtle or in not-so-subtle ways.

For example, the function of signing a death certificate carries some import in the hierarchy. Stephanie's brother, Shawn, tells the story of his sister, a funeral director and embalmer and the President of their firm, upsetting the gender order by signing a death certificate.

We did some work for a funeral home in another state and they didn't do a whole lot of calls, maybe 10-15 a year. We'd do the embalming for them and she (sister, Stephanie) would sign the death certificate and, it's funny, because the lady who's over there is a funeral director but not an embalmer and she made the statement that she would rather a male funeral director sign the death certificate other than my sister because people look at it...she's from a small town and she doesn't like that at all, it just, that was the only situation. In Smithtown, they were so used to it because when we bought the funeral home over there, Jane Doe was really a part of the funeral home, so they were used to dealing with a woman.

*Shawn, 6th generation, early 30s*

Interactions with client families also reinforce societal gender roles.

Almost as an afterthought in our interview, Grace told a story of an interaction with a client family when she was reminded of her gender and her sexuality.

Also in this business, you have to be very careful with how you interact with people of the opposite sex. It could be anybody, but people can take your compassion and care in the wrong way in this business very easily. ...I don't know. I think we all have to be careful about putting our hand on somebody's back or touching people and different things in society now. I think for me...did I ever tell you the story about the woman who came in and said that I came on to her husband? ...No, it's kind of crazy and it taught me a big lesson. We had a family, a couple that came in and it was the husband's father that died so we were dealing with the daughter-in-law and the son of the deceased. I met with them and I would say he was kind of peculiar. He was hard to read in the process, but we got through it. He seemed to be more comfortable at the end of the process than he was at the beginning and he left and his wife kind of stayed behind and helped us finish up some paperwork and she made the comment to me and to some other staff members, she said "you all have just done a great job so far, I didn't want to tell you this, but his husband did his whole dissertation on why funeral homes are irrelevant and why the death care industry..." it



was very anti-funeral. I said “okay, great”, thinking to myself why did she even tell me that. She laughed and said “but I really think he feels comfortable with you, so everything’s fine”. So when she told us that, of course we all...an antennae went up and we were like, oh my god, this guy’s anti-funeral, we’ve just got to go out of our way to make everything okay. It was a traditional funeral, so they came in to...he was very close to his dad, so they came in for the initial viewing and I was here to take them in the room and I don’t think there were other family members, I don’t remember, but definitely I was dealing with the son and daughter-in-law. He was very emotional, but pleased with how his dad looked. We had a chapel service the next day and things were just normal as far as I knew. I believe the burial may have been out of town, so I want to say that I didn’t travel to the cemetery, I was here at the chapel for the service. I knew the minister that presided over it and everything was fine. Within the week his wife came in and I probably was doing something, but she caught Blanche who was our aftercare person at the time who worked for me, she just caught her as she came in the door and Blanche probably would have met her in passing and maybe interacted a little bit with her and she said “I need to talk to you” and they sat down in one of the conference rooms and she basically said I’m here to complain about Grace.

She started talking and Blanche said, "I'm not sure that I should really be the one to hear this because I report to Grace" but she went on and she basically said that I had come on to her husband and that I had rubbed him on the back and wouldn't stop touching him and on and on and on. Of course, I don't remember at what point Blanche came and got me and said "what do I do?" I don't know if she left, I don't remember what happened, but she just was really upset. We were all kind of like deer in the headlights. At that point I'm wracking my brain "what did I do?" I'm starting to question myself. Inappropriate to say, but trust me, this was not Brad Pitt and I was no more...I mean, not that I would even act on that, but I certainly was not attracted to him and definitely she had sort of put us on guard a little bit when she said he doesn't like funeral homes and had done his whole research paper and blah, blah, blah. I don't remember if she came back or I called her, but I tried to sit down with her and talk, but she just looked me in the eye and said "you were flirting with him, you came on to him, you rubbed his back" and I was like "oh my gosh" and I tried to defend myself in the most genuine, professional way that I could.

*Grace, fifth generation, 40s*

In addition to client families, interactions with peers and colleagues also

reinforce the gender order in funeral service. Several participants in this study discussed dealings with local, regional and international trade associations as being important to the family in the firm. They also described gendered interactions with these associations. Ellen positioned women in leadership roles as both unusual and as gratuitous or benevolent placements by men in power.

No. I do think that women...I really have had a problem with, I tell my husband but I don't tell other people, (Regional Association), we've been members for over 50 years now. But I have felt like they are still operating in the dark ages with not as many women that get appointed to the different board members. They have a few and the first one several years ago and she was top notch and she could have gone on to be the president, but it just bothered me that they just never did that. The state has had women presidents before. Not as many, but they've had some. It's just always bothered me because I felt like that shouldn't be because there are so many women in funeral service and why not let them go that route. Yeah, it's weird. I do feel like that's a real...I've told Andrew and he had that position because he was former president and he said it came up sometimes and he said they have been able to nominate them, it's not that. He said there would never be anything that came up that said "we're keeping women out", it's nothing like

that. He said it wasn't that at all and he doesn't know why. He said he thinks it is just some of the mind set of some of the older funeral directors they just...even though they had their wives working right with them. They're not making it beyond there. You get a few but. It just doesn't make sense. Why do I think it is? Because I think that there are maybe the ones that might have an interest are not being offered the opportunity that it just probably doesn't enter their dumb minds to ask them if they would like to go up higher. You know? If Patricia was interested in doing something like that, I'd be all for it and she'd be good at anything she did, but so many times I think the woman's been content to just stay in her job evidently or felt like there was no option and back...a grandmother of eight girls and two boys and coming from a family of three girls and one brother, I just know that women...none of us ever felt like we were held back or anything, so it's not like that I feel that way, but I do feel like that's something they are going to have to catch up with the rest of the world. Times are changing and have been for too long for them to be in that position because they would have a huge field of people to pick from, I think. If you get right down to small groups too like (Local Association), they've had a few women that were president of the Association and then they'd have them be on committees and stuff like that. For a long time, they didn't even do

that. They would...it was always nominating the male to do things, but then they changed. ...I don't remember because I think it's been so slow, to me it's been slow. I'm strong for the women, but I'm not one of these that burn your bra type. I really am not ultraliberal. I'm not overly conservative in the sense that I don't see all...I look at grey areas as well as black and white and I try to be that way and I really do think that way, but I really can be turned off by a man or woman who is dominant to the point of being in your face about stuff and I think that maybe that's made some men, maybe I don't know that, that they have seen those bullish women that they just didn't like being around and they didn't want to be in charge, so maybe they held them back for that reason. I don't know.

*Ellen, 3rd generation, 60s*

Susan, a funeral home owner in her sixties, did serve in a leadership position for one of the national associations of funeral directors. Consistent with stories women told about entering leadership positions in their own firms, Susan describes her movement into this leadership role as being circumstantial, almost accidental. Additionally, she describes not feeling that she belonged in this group of all men.

You mean my experience with being on the board and all?

Anyway, it was an opportunity, an opening that came, it was circumstantial. I guess everybody feels like “how did I get”...you know it’s kind of like “I’m not good enough, how in the world did I get here”. That’s what I was thinking really. I guess any of the guys feel that way too. I think I tend to see things away, I look away from it and I saw it as a divine intervention that for whatever reason I got there, well it was divine intervention that I got there. It was preparing me for other roles that I have or will have in the industry, this business. I sat at the table with some very bright and accomplished funeral directors, owners, it strengthened me personally. I don’t know even at this point how it impacted the Association. I don’t know if people decided, “well god, I can’t believe she’s on the board”. Or did they say “that’s great”. I mean finally they have noticed that a woman can be on the board or did they say “women have no place on the board”. So I really don’t know. For me, I was stretched tight like a piece of thread...Because of the challenges. It was the hardest thing I ever did in my whole life as far as meeting I guess my own expectations, meeting what I thought a board member should be and I really had no experience at all. I came without any...I mean I had been an officer in little groups in local clubs, but they were all small, small

groups. I mean it was kind of like winning an academy award in funeral service...These guys think that is just like, you've arrived. I think they do think that. That's what I mean by you feel like you've won an Academy Award...It is quite an achievement. So I saw being on the board as an entirely different thing than a man would have. I saw it as an opportunity to learn and hopefully fulfill the obligations I had to the association. I didn't feel like I went to that board with any experience or feel like I had anything to offer except for the fact I had been around for so long.

*Susan, fifth generation, 60s*

Sophie echoed the sentiment that these trade associations reinforce the gender order in the industry. As a result, she does not participate in any industry groups. Instead, she retreats to the "safer" environment of her family firm and community.

We have a local organization and it's all local funeral homes and, honestly, there's not one firm in this community that I'd ever work for and I'm not saying that because they're my competition, I don't believe in what they do, I don't believe in how they do it, I think they're very arrogant, pompous people and, again, not because they're competition, I just don't respect their business. I don't

respect what they do. I don't want to sit in a group and listen to them talk and get drunk and laugh and hee haw... I don't think that does anything good for you and I feel like a lot of those organizations, that's what they do and that's not me. So I would rather put my energies and efforts into my family and my local community where I am...they are the ones supporting our organization, not the guys sit at cocktail hour, they're not the ones I'm serving. Some of the organizational events like (event name), I think it's an old boy's school, it's an old boy's club. I haven't gone in a few years, but I don't think there's a great respect for females in the industry. I don't think there's a lot of respect for women funeral directors by the 60 and 70-year-old guys because I think they have a notion of what the funeral home should be and what they've known it to be. I say that and then my grandfather however had a great deal of respect for whatever I had to say, but he was my grandfather and was around me daily. I don't think that they were quick to listen to what you said and if they were listening, they weren't retaining and/or giving much credit to it.

*Sophie, 5th generation, 30s*

## **Socialization**

Berger and Luckmann (1966) define *socialization* as a temporal, inductive



process that initiates people into the objective social structures in which they live. Garcia-Alvarez et al. (2002) suggest that early socialization of all potential successors is an important variable in ensuring continuity of a family firm. They also suggest that socialization should be consistent for all potential successors in the next generation. However, differences in how sons and daughters are socialized into the business appear early in their lives.

Socialization of family members in the family firm occurs in three stages. During the family socialization stage, what Berger and Luckmann (1966) called *primary socialization*, family values are conveyed to children through relationships with parents and other close relatives. In a family-owning business, this primary socialization often overlaps with the business. This is evident in the funeral service business. Socialization is a unique process in funeral service because of the nature of the business. Funeral service businesses are never closed. Client service must occur at all hours of the day or night and seven days a week. Until the 1980s, this 24/7 blending of family and business life was more apparent, as it was very common for the owning family to live in an upstairs or side part of the funeral home. Because of the nature of this business, socialization happens earlier for children in a family funeral home than it might for other businesses. In many ways, this always-open business environment allows for non-gendered socialization opportunities. In fact, every participant reported early memories of being around the business, either because they came to the funeral home to see a working family member or because their grandparents

lived in the funeral home. Sophie and Jane tell exemplary stories of visiting the business in early childhood.

Probably the earliest memory would be when we were kids and we used to come down and play office in the funeral home. We'd hide under the desks and pretend that our phones rang and we'd grab the phone and say "Smith Funeral Home," and then laugh and think that was really funny. We'd play hide and seek through the building at night time.

*Sophie, 5th generation, 30s*

I guess my earliest memory of the family funeral business in general was staying with my grandparents as a young child. They lived attached to the funeral home. I just remember coming and visiting or staying with my grandparents. I always remember my grandfather going in to work or my grandmother going to see a family. Basically that is my first memory of the funeral home and the funeral business was just coming to stay with my grandparents and then seeing them work.

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

The lines between family and business are especially blurred in funeral

service. Mary told a humorous story of being driven to school in the funeral coach.

I was to some extent involved, not directly until 2000, other than coming to visitations. As a child, being brought here. We lived out in the country and we rode a bus, there was a bus that came from Smallville to Metropolis and brought people who worked in Metropolis from Smallville. We lived on the route, so I would get the bus and come to school, just a little way out from here. The bus would drop me off at a Dairy Queen where someone in a hearse would pick me up and take me to the Catholic school. I was always in the newspaper as coming to school in a hearse, you know the school newspaper "Mary is still riding to school in the hearse." I was mortified. My whole life has been sort of intertwined with the funeral home. That's a first huh?

*Mary, fifth generation, 60s*

Socialization began early even for the two participants who did not grow up in the business, but who married into funeral home-owning families. Both have memories of coming to the funeral home on high school dates with their future husbands.

Well as I was telling you, Mike and I started dating when I was 15 and a lot of our dating years, he was working here. He was going out and setting tents and setting markers and washing cars so that we could go on a date on the weekend, so it was a real part of our relationship early on. I never went with him. Then when we got engaged, I did go with him on removals. I would ride...like if he would go to the hospital, it often would happen when we had a date. He would get a call and it was a pager system then, we didn't have cell phones that you could stop and say "hey what's going on". We would come back and get the removal vehicle and go to the hospital and I would sit in the car and he would go do what he needed to do. So it just really became a part of our life really early.

*Patricia, fourth generation, 40s*

I don't remember anything hardly about him in eight grade and ninth grade. We went to spring formal together. We didn't date until the fall and after that we dated until we got married at 19. My education in funeral service is very personal because of the fact that at 15 years old, I was brought to the funeral home because they lived upstairs over it and we would date because he would have to go out on ambulance calls with his dad and he would have to work some. Yes they did. All of them had them then and he was

a member of the lifesaving crew, so he had learned all these things, but anyway, I was at the funeral home a lot and then he took me up to his grandmothers who was one of the founders of the place and saw her around Christmas and he introduced me to people and the family and I was still 15 years old, I was going to be 16 in January. So I met all of them and listened a lot about what their involvement was.

*Ellen, 3rd generation, 60s*

Berger and Luckmann (1966) call the second stage of socialization, *secondary socialization*. In the secondary socialization stage, family members acquire role-specific knowledge and knowledge about how the family and business interact. While the first stage introduces children to the business, this critical second stage introduces children to the specific work of the business. The stories funeral families told about secondary socialization demonstrate “construction of divisions along lines of gender” (Acker, 1990, p. 146). Additionally, the gendered symbolism of the embalming function becomes evident in secondary socialization of children in the business. In the narratives from these women, the differences in the socialization stories centered on the major service-giving functions of the business like embalming and direct funeral-related work. As part of the socialization process, men report being exposed to the service side of the business and, particularly, the embalming function at a

very early age. Women, even those who are currently serving as president or CEO of their companies reported very little exposure to funeral service or to the embalming process. In fact, none of the women told stories about seeing the embalming or preparation room where embalming is done.

As an example, Jane was not socialized in the business, aside from visiting her grandparents who lived in the funeral home. She mentioned that while her brother, “kind of worked in high school and kind of figured out that was not for him,” that she was “very sheltered”. In fact, she never worked in the business prior to joining the firm. Her first experience with the business occurred after completing a college degree and mortuary school.

I would venture into the office occasionally when there was nothing going on to say hello, but that was pretty much...I was actually very sheltered from the funeral business growing up. My dad and mom did not live...we had a home outside of the funeral home. Basically it was just when I was brought to the funeral home or stayed with my grandparents was basically my earliest memory of the funeral home. Then in college I was doing my major at State University in Business Management and I wasn't sure that I wanted to deal with disgruntled employees all day every day. I was pretty far up my major so it was just best to go ahead and complete that. The beginning of my senior year was when I talked to Dad and Papa about coming into the funeral business. Then they actually made the offer the

Christmas before and I had thought about it and I always knew I wanted to help people in whatever job I did, so it's really just a natural progression from there to finish my degree in business and then go on to Mortuary Science School.

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

Grace had more early socialization in the business than Jane. However, the work was very in keeping with gender roles. In telling about her early interaction with the business, Grace says that she and her sister were "...thrust into clerical or administrative roles" while her brothers worked more in the operations of the business.

Yeah, I did. I have an older sister and so she and I both would be fill in answering the phones. We actually had a switchboard then, so switchboard operators if you want to use that word. So we both answered the phone and when I was in high school and my class schedule was more abbreviated, like my senior year, I would come in, I'd go into the accounting office and just do basic input stuff that they gave me to do, so just administrative stuff, very limited capacity. It's the whole stereotype because my sister and I...my sister has never been in the business except just as a high school or college student part time, but we were both thrust into clerical or

administrative roles and my brothers would have both been washing cars and, you know, one of them actually did more of the grave opening and closings and stuff like that. We definitely would have been introduced into the business officially, unofficially, via sort of stereotypical roles. So did some summer work, that kind of thing, after school work and stuff, clerical. So yeah.

*Grace, 5th generation, 40s*

One set of siblings, Stephanie and Shawn, what seem to be very similar stories about socialization into the business. When asked about their earliest memories of the firm, both told stories of “playing office” on the phones at the funeral home.

Probably was coming over with my father...probably age 5 or 6 and they had the phones, they had two lines, so you could call each other, so my younger brother, Shawn, and I would come over and would call each other. We would both be in the building, but because there were two lines, we were fascinated with the fact that basically we could sit in the same room and call each other and talk and that is my earliest memory of coming over.

*Stephanie, sixth generation, early 30s*



I can remember coming in and playing on the phones because you could talk from phone to phone.

*Shawn, 6th generation, early 30s*

Both Stephanie and Shawn began secondary socialization while working on a part-time basis and doing all the work of the firm, from cleaning to washing cars to transporting bodies. However, Shawn began work early in high school while Stephanie did not work until she was in college. What is striking, however, is the first memory of the funeral home that Shawn recounted was of being very young, three or four years old, and visiting his father in the preparation room.

Oh man. I was pretty young, I'd say three or four. We lived over just across the street before we moved up to River City. I remember, I don't know if my dad was doing prep work or hair or something, but I remember being in the prep room and working, him setting me on the counter. I think it was an instance where it was just him and me at home and he had to do something. Yeah. I can remember that. He must have been doing hair or something for someone because I don't ever remember seeing my dad actually embalm a body. Other than that, my memories are just being here as a child were limited.

*Shawn, 6th generation, early 30s*

Another man, Bob, tells a story of very early exposure to the funeral home, visiting the preparation room and being put to work as a young child. However, even with the model of his strong grandmother leading the firm, his daughter, Jane, tells the much different story of her lack of socialization in the business to the point that she was “very sheltered”.

My earliest recollection of funeral home is, I remember being over in the [Funeral Home]. That was the big white house and this had to be back in the mid to late 50s, mid 50s... I was 4 or 5 years old and remember being in the old funeral home and my grandmother and grandfather, and I can still see their rooms when you walked up the steps in the front door, a little office in the parlor room on the left and another parlor room on the right and the preparation room was in the back on the right. Upstairs, my grandmother and grandfather lived up there with their housekeeper and that's where I stayed when mother and dad would go out. They babysat for me there all of the time. That was my earliest recollection that this was a funeral home and it was always “the funeral home”. I vaguely remember seeing the preparation room and these tables and a machine and so that was my earliest recollection, right when I was 4 or 5 years old I guess. Out of that building, I used to go out on the

flower van with my grandmother and [Funeral Director] and I remember going out on many services and my grandmother was the dominant force on the service. The arranging of the flowers was her deal. When it came to directing the funeral, she directed a funeral ...we would go in and put...the rule was, every piece of flowers that was sent would be put in that church. I know we would have 30 and 40 and I remember carrying the flowers in, I mean this was when I was 6 or 7 years old, however old you are to be able to do that, maybe 8. Every petal had to be picked up when you would move it. She was very meticulous about the flowers. I grew up and lived in the funeral home here from the time I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade on. That made for an interesting childhood because the business took precedence over everything. I was answering the phone when it would ring enough times, it would not be uncommon for me to say "Jones Funeral Home" and I would try to...I remember taking a death call one time. It's like the phone was ringing and ringing and nobody ever got it and it was like I had this vision of somebody just standing there and I picked it up and they said...and it could have been an ambulance call, it could have been a death call, it could have been somebody coming in, but it was a death call because I remember and I had just enough presence and sense of mind to say it's Mrs. Smith at the Hospital has died. So at least I got the

name and where she was so they could call back and find out the other details. So that was early on. I was young.

*Bob, fourth generation, 50s*

Andrew also told a story of his early, significant involvement with funeral work in the business.

I guess I decided but I guess it was almost forced and I use that term lightly. In the eighth grade I can remember driving a truck to put tents up for funerals and deliver the vaults and all of that and I thought that was a big deal at 13 or 14. We were running an ambulance service, as most funeral homes did. I went to the rescue squad and took a first aid class that Red Cross was doing and at 15 or 16 I was running on the ambulance taking people to the hospital and it just sort of moved on and, after I went away to school, I just thought you know, I've been exposed to this, I don't know why I want to pursue anything else. I, on my own choice, came into funeral service but I think that early exposure, my grandfather, my dad, my mom, driving hauling flowers, putting up tents, driving ambulance, it just seemed like a natural progression to go on a little bit further.

*Andrew, third generation, 70s*

None of the woman told any stories related to early memories of the embalming function. Additionally, all the men in this study told stories of very early entry, at least by high school age, into the business. The women told stories of either minimal or much later exposure to the business.

Luke and Andrew narrated their earliest memories that are illustrative of the role early secondary socialization has in creating an identity as a member of the firm.

I remember when this building was built and we moved in the business and I asked him one time about “what goes on in that room back there, the preparation room?” and he took me back there and I couldn’t have been much more than about the sixth grade or something, seventh grade, somewhere in there...It made me realize, gosh, this is the discoloration that is caused by a person being dead, we are able to remove that through the embalming and that works much better and we are putting the cream on here to keep the skin tone soft and all the things that come with embalming. He was giving me a true reason why that was being done, so that was really a thing I will remember.

*Andrew, generation, 60s*

Like Andrew, Luke was socialized into the central work of the business at an early age and began to see a role for himself there. In comparison, both of their daughters were socialized very little around the work of the business and at a much older age.

Right away I go back to...hm, that's interesting, because I really go back to...I've got memories of the physical plant really early on. The building itself and how it was laid out and being in it in the early, early years. We never lived there, but I don't have memories of it work wise until I started hanging around to work a little bit. I remember...again, my first really recollections was working...my only work experience has ever been working for the business. I can remember working in the furniture store with dad because I can remember my first day there, we were carrying a mattress and I knocked over a light off of a dresser in the mattress department and broke it. I remember that real distinctly. I can remember the day that I decided to give it a try because dad and I were on the door at the funeral home, swinging the doors we called it, in this little hallway we had there at the time. I said something about enjoying seeing some people and stuff and that got into a let's talk back and forth while we're waiting to open the door the next time for the next person to come in sort of thing. We got into a conversation of this

might be an interesting business to try or it might be fun to do this. No, this was high school, this was probably junior in high schoolish. To which he said “well I have all the confidence in the world that you’d make a good funeral director” and just that sentence did it. I don’t recall after that having much other...that was kind of the decision point.

*Luke, fourth generation, 60s*

The 24/7, life-or-death nature of funeral service does, perhaps, provide opportunities for early socialization that other business types don’t provide. That early, primary socialization is valuable to children in creating a relationship with the firm. However, the differences in how secondary socialization occurs create a disadvantage for women in learning the work of funeral service and, more importantly, in creating an identity for themselves with the firm.

## **Summary**

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the story narratives. As discussed above, the practice of primogeniture was evident in the vast majority of stories. From my previous experience in the industry, I had a sense that licensing laws and practices were of great importance in this industry. However,

after analyzing the narratives told by the participants in this study, the notion of licensing and use-of-license as a gendering practice emerged. A theme that was more nuanced in the interviews was the gendering of socialization in the business. Funeral service provides a unique opportunity for critical early socialization of children in the business. However, differences in how children received the important secondary socialization clearly appeared in the iterative reading of the narrative accounts.

The stories that funeral home families tell about the environment of their businesses suggest that, in some ways, family businesses might provide less gendered structures and processes than other business forms. Because workers in a family firm hold family roles as well as jobs, they are less likely to be disembodied than the literature suggests is the case for other workers. As a result, owners/parents are more aware of family responsibilities outside of work and are more flexible in allowing people to meet those responsibilities.

However, in many other ways, the family firms represented by the people in this study appear to have created very gendered environments. Primogeniture was pervasive in the firms. Male children were almost universally preferred for positions, particularly leadership positions. Interactions with family members and employees inside the firm as well as client families and others in the industry construct and reproduce a gender order for women in this business. Even the socialization process that appears to be non-gendered becomes gendered at the secondary level.



Given the gendered nature of family firms and differences in how male and female children are socialized in the business, it is likely that identity formation experiences are different as well. In Chapter Five, I will discuss the role of identity in the gendering of family firms. I will also outline the strategies that women use to master the “dance” of negotiating conflicting family, business and gender identities and roles.

# Chapter Five: Identity Development in a Gendered Environment

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## Introduction

In Chapter Four, I explored gendering structures of the family funeral firms using the first three processes in Joan Acker's framework of organizational analysis. This chapter will focus more specifically on Acker's fourth set of gendered processes that Acker argues "help to produce gendered components of individual identity" (1990, p. 147). The first three processes in Acker's framework focus on practices, structures and interactions at the organizational level and, in the case of family firms, at the family level. The fourth process of identity development occurs at the individual level as people "construct personas that are appropriately gendered for the institutional setting" (Acker, 1992a, p. 568). Together, the gendered structures and the identities that people create to make sense of the structures produce the organizational logic. In this chapter, I will explore how identity development, particularly the development of gender identity, occurs in family firms and the strategies that women and men in this study used to negotiate their gendered identities given the gendered structures of the funeral home.

Identity development is what Acker refers to as "internal mental work"

(Acker, 1992b, p. 253) as individuals negotiate organizational gender rules to develop their gender identities (Acker, 1992a). This is the process that occurs as people try to make sense of the gendered structure of the organization and what that means in terms of “appropriate” gender behaviours they should exhibit. This internal mental work happens as women try to negotiate gender-appropriate work behaviours, which produce gendered components of individual identity. In a family business, this fourth process is more complex as women must develop their identities both in the organization and in the family. They must negotiate “appropriate” gender behaviour based on the gender order in the family and in the organization. Acker suggests that this process can be exemplified by conscious selection of gender-appropriate work, dress and “presentation of self as a gendered member of an organization” (1990, p. 147).

## **Identity Development in Family Firms**

In her work on daughters in family firms, Dumas (1990) defined identity based on Erikson and Kohut (Erikson, 1968, 1975; Kohut, 1984). She wrote that identity is “primarily an unconscious process that unites personality and links the individual to the social world” (p. 171). Identity is the means through which people organize and make sense of their experiences (Dumas, 1990), and, also, the internalized behaviours that we associate with our particular roles (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). Identity formation begins through relationships with parents

(Dumas) and continues as people interact with the social world. The social context, in part, outlines what behaviours are considered acceptable or “normal” for each part of one’s identity. People in family business often have competing identities in the family and in the business. This creates identity conflict when one acts in a way that is not consistent with expectations for that role (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). Jane describes this conflict of negotiating which role she should be playing at any given time.

That’s always a challenge. I know I am kind of always being probably left out in all those different roles. Sometimes it is hard to know which one to put on, but most of the time at work I try to just have the work hat on. Yes, I am John’s wife. Yes, I am Bob’s daughter. However, when I am at work, I am Jane, funeral director. So I basically try and focus on that as much as I can and try to separate them, so they don’t cross over, so people don’t think, “well gosh, she’s at work, she’s trying to be John’s wife while she’s at work” or “she’s trying to be Bob’s daughter at work” so just trying to focus on the task at hand I guess is what I try to do. I’m not always successful, but you know...

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

## **Conflicting Family and Business Roles**

In many ways, identity development is more complex for people in family firms. Perricone, Earle and Taplic (2001) argue that stakeholders are constantly dealing with the contradiction of the role in the family and the role in the business. Role conflict is more distinct for women because they often enter the family business without a clearly-defined role in the firm (Dumas, 1989). Women in male-dominated fields find themselves both identifying with and also differentiating from men and other women, making it especially troublesome to negotiate their own identity. Women who do not follow the role “rules” produced by the gendered organization are disciplined through their relationships in the firm and through limited success in the organization (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). Thus, it might be more complex for women in leadership positions in the funeral service industry to negotiate roles and to make sense of their own identities than it would be for men in the same position. Additionally, the way these identities are negotiated plays out in the workings of the business, particularly in succession because identity construction becomes even more complex for family firms during an ownership transition (Handler, 1992). Members of family firms in transition especially struggle with the conflict between individual needs and family or firm needs (Perricone et al., 2001).

## **Organizational Masculinity**

Collinson and Hearn (1994) suggested that *masculinity* can be

conceptualized as the “discourses and practices” (p. 6) that serve to categorize someone as a man. Although there are multiple forms or versions of masculinities, or the way in which masculinity is done (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Kerfoot & Knights, 1996), in the organizational context, all versions are linked by an intentional and rational desire for control (Kerfoot & Knights, 1996).

Acker suggests that part of the difficulty for women in developing an identity in any organization is the prevailing masculinity created by the gendered structures in most firms. In fact, Collinson and Hearn (1996) suggested that this masculinity prevails to the point that men are assumed to be associated with organizational power and position. Acker posited that organizational symbols create an image of the organization as masculine that is reinforced in popular culture and press (Acker, 1992b). By positioning organizations as being aggressive and competitive, thus masculine, they become gendered entities. Sayce discusses a “...pervasive masculinity that unconsciously influences the way trustees think and act...” (p. 307). This positioning (“posturing”) becomes a gendering process that women try to negotiate, contrasting their femininity against the masculine organization.

The analysis of this process in the funeral service firms in this study shows an interesting contradiction in the gendered culture of the organizations. On one hand, the cultures demonstrate the “pervasive masculinity” found in many organizations (Sayce, 2012). As an exemplar of this masculine posturing, Grace told this story about a company meeting.

My dad told me once, ...and I don't know what the setting was but we had some meeting and I spoke out or whatever I said...he laughed afterwards and said "you don't realize" he said, ... "You're the only one without a set of balls in the room, but you had the biggest set of balls in the room." Something to that effect. I laughed and I thought, I guess...I didn't really think about myself being the only woman in the room, I just never thought of it that way, which is probably a good thing.

*Grace, fifth generation, 40s*

Britton and Logan (2008) discussed that, while certain occupations are highly gendered, the degree to which work is gendered is dependent on the organizational context and the level of gendering. In that vein, funeral service presents an interesting tension or conflict in the gendered nature of firm cultures. It is important to recognize a multiplicity of kinds of masculinities that men perform (Alvesson & Billing, 1997). Collinson and Hearn (1994) suggest there are five different versions prevalent in the management context. Each represents what Alvesson and Billing (1997) call the "cocktail view of gender" (p. 85) in which each version of masculinity is composed of varying amounts of masculinity and femininity, but with masculinity and a concern for power and control being the dominant ingredient.

The organizations in this study represent a form of masculinity that does not neatly fit into any of the Collinson and Hearn (1994) categories. Funeral service firm cultures are rooted in those behaviours that are essentialized to be women's work. While the occupation is gendered as male (and male dominated), funeral directors often develop identities as care givers or helpers to the families they serve. Much reference is made to the emotional side of the work that they do. Multiple examples of this culture of emotional care-taking appear in the narratives. The contrast between the masculine organization and the culture of caring appears most noticeably in the stories told by the men interviewed. All but one of the men interviewed constructed narratives about their work that repeatedly used words like, *caring* and *helping*. Bob told the story about his first exposure to the embalming function, which emphasizes the notion of caring and loving and, also, the artistic side of embalming.

Well, he (Bob's father) was a taskmaster. It had to be done exactly correct or that just wasn't good enough...I asked him, "could I see what you do back there" and I will never forget him giving me this most detailed, caring explanation of the embalming process and why he was doing what he was doing with just the upmost respect and care for the body of that loved one and emphasizing that this is a family member that we are taking care of and he was master of someone that just was so caring and, although they were doing



what has to be done in the embalming process, it was done in the most caring, loving way and that was an educational moment he gave me that I will never forget. It made me realize, gosh, this is the discoloration that is caused by a person being dead, we are able to remove that through the embalming and that works much better and we are putting the cream on here to keep the skin tone soft and all the things that come with embalming. He was giving me a true reason why that was being done, so that was really a thing I will remember....

*Bob, fourth generation, 50s*

Bob's son-in-law, John, created a similar narrative about helping people when discussing what attracted him to his wife, Jane's, family business. He uses the same kind of language about caring and helping.

The short response would be, I was smitten by Jane and I followed her here and it just...I find it very much a calling because I know I wouldn't be able to continue to do what I am doing on a day-to-day basis without knowing that I'm actually helping the family. When I can put my head down on my pillow at night knowing that it's a difficult job to be in, but you're making it just a little bit easier for those families who are really struggling in this, probably the most

difficult time in their life. So you feel like you are making a difference and it's so much easier to have someone you can empathize with.

*John, 5th generation, early 30s*

During the interview, Andrew talked about some of the changes in the industry. However, he made the point that what remains in the industry is the chance for people in it to care for others.

I don't know, other than looking at where funeral service is going with all of these generations, the X generation, the Q's, the A's, whatever they're going to name all these people at different ages. People's attitudes about the finality of life and what they do want and what they don't want. With all those changes, I think there's still a great opportunity for people to take care of people who don't know what to do about taking care of their loved one. Yeah some do, but generally when they have a death in the family, they don't call the electrician or the plumber, sometimes they don't even call the doctor, they'll call the funeral home first. So there's that connection and I think it's going to be changing a lot, but I think there's going to be some good opportunities as these next generations move into managing and running funeral homes...I just

regret that I probably won't be around to see it, because it's going to be pretty exciting I think.

*Andrew, third generation, 70s*

Throughout the time I spent with Shawn, he spoke about the business and his relationships in a very straightforward way. His responses were, in general, "all business." As a result, I was somewhat surprised when I asked him to discuss his favourite part of the business. He constructed an answer similar to the other men.

I guess just being there for family and friends. It's a hard time. It's tough. Meeting people and every family is different, so it's not repetitive, something new every day.

*Shawn, 6th generation, early 30s*

This tension between the masculinity of the organization and the femininity of the work leads to what Dellinger (2004) calls an embattled context. For Dellinger, an embattled context is one in which some elements of the organizational culture challenge the dominant forms of masculinity. In Dellinger's work, men in the embattled context used three different strategies to distance themselves from the feminist culture of the organization. However, the men in the funeral homes did not distance themselves from the feminine culture.

Instead, they seemed to create identities that embraced the role of doing emotional, caring work. Hollander and Bukowitz (1990) suggest that family businesses elicit nurturing behaviours from both sexes. In this case study, it is possible that this strong identification with emotional work is due to the nature of the organizational culture or because of the nature of a family business. The caring aspect of funeral work serves to soften the masculinity of the organizations. If, indeed, femininity can be understood as the antithesis of masculinity (Alvesson & Billing, 1997), then it might be somewhat easier for women to negotiate their identities in an organization in which the “cocktail” of masculinity includes larger amounts of femininity.

### **Successful Socialization**

As discussed in Chapter Four, organizational identity is created, in part, through socialization. Successful socialization occurs when there is a high level of consistency or “symmetry” (p. 183) between one’s view of objective and subjective realities and leads to a state where one’s socialized wants and needs are aligned with one’s circumstances (i.e., the roles they are playing) (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The women in this study have transitioned or are transitioning into business roles as the leader of their organization. The literature would suggest that, because of the lack of socialization in the business, women have difficulty negotiating the gendered environments and seeing themselves as

capable of running the business, so this becomes self-fulfilling (Duller & Kepler, 2013). Also, discrepancies between messages communicated in primary and secondary socialization may cause failure of the socialization (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2002). For example, when primary socialization is highly gendered, it can create inconsistencies for women in leadership in their family firms. When this is the case, an *unsuccessful socialization* occurs, and the individual is led to consider questions of identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Because the women I studied have ultimately moved into top leadership positions in their firm, the literature on preparing children for leadership succession is relevant and, somewhat, parallels the work on socialization. Success in family business leadership transition is commonly conceptualized as the satisfaction of the stakeholders with the succession process (Dyer, 1986; Handler, 1990; Le Breton-Miller et al., 2004; Sharma et al., 2001). Sharma et al. (2001) model five factors that lead to satisfaction with the succession process, one of which is the acceptance of individual roles. In this way, successful socialization and identifying with the role as leader are linked to successful succession as leader of the family firm.

Dumas' (1989, 1990) concept of the *Caretaker of the King's Gold* outlines her notion of a fully-developed, or "healthy" identity structure. A woman with this structure has passed through the *Rites of Passage* and "assures her sense of identity by affiliating herself with her father while taking a very active role in this affiliation" (Dumas, 1989, p. 41). Thus, a woman who has established her place

in the business while maintaining her family relationships can be said to have achieved successful socialization in the business. Even though the women interviewed for this thesis were introduced to the business much later in life than their fathers or brothers, the majority of them told stories that suggest successful socialization into the business. In reading these stories, a pattern emerges in the socialization processes for the women who seem to have had successful socialization and who report comfort with negotiating their family and business identities. These women negotiate low-conflict identities that do not challenge their gendered structures of the organization or the family.

### **Negotiating Gendered Organizations**

The women I interviewed did not tell stories that explicitly recognized their firms as gendered environments. In fact, they positioned gender as a non-problem. Women made sense of the gendering in their family firms by choosing (either consciously or subconsciously) to create a narrative that the gendering does not exist or it is not problematic for them. When asked to tell stories about problems they had encountered being a woman in this male-dominated business, the women tended to position gender discrimination as a non-event. Most of them explicitly stated that their gender was not a problem for them. However, all of the women told at least one story that clearly illustrated gender discrimination. For example, Stephanie, a woman in her late-30s and a sixth-generation owner

of her family firm responded to the prompt about problems she had experienced in the following way. In this passage, Stephanie uses the term, “families” to refer to client families, not her own.

I don't know, but I did not experience it. I did not experience anything with regards to being a female from the staff. Do I experience that from some families sometimes? Yes..... Families. Unfortunately sometimes you just...and it's usually with the male of the group. ... It's usually with the male and it's not blatant, but that downgrading, their tone, some of their comments. I had one situation the minute my dad stepped into the room, everything was fine. They try...sometimes they'll try to push you a little harder to see if you'll give in quicker. ... On price, on caskets. They'll try to intimidate. Like I said, I could probably think of about five times in ten years it's happened, which that could be...my brother might say the same thing, the he's had five families try to intimidate him.

*Stephanie, sixth generation, early 30s*

Another way in which the women de-problematize the gendering is to attribute any discrimination to factors other than gender. Grace suggests that his sabotage of her work was “unintentional” and attributes unwelcoming behaviour to an employee's negative disposition.

...we had a director, an older gentleman who had a funeral director's license who managed our cemetery, but he also managed the visitation process that we would have over here, that was sort of makeshift. He kind of had his little kingdom where he, you know. I wasn't prepared for Robert, who was the older gentleman who has since passed away. He was sort of trying to sabotage things along the way and I thought, golly. But it was a good experience, not an easy one...As we moved forward, there were a couple of times when...I shouldn't say that he intentionally did it, but I felt like we had on more than one occasion a grave was opened in the incorrect place, which was of course his responsibility, not mine, but when it would happen his attitude was, he was never greatly concerned. It was more of a case of kind of creeping around the building and saying "well you didn't do this" or "you didn't do that" or just little things. I guess I shouldn't say sabotage because that's kind of strong, but I think it was just more of an overall sort of spiteful spirit. I think that has less to do with me. That's their issues, not mine and really not a symptom of anything in the business, but you know how that is.

*Grace, fifth generation, 40s*



When asked about problems she had encountered, Jane told a story of a prominent man in her town that preferred to meet with her father to make funeral arrangements. Jane suggested that this request for her father instead of her was a result of her age and the man's status, rather than her gender.

Not that anybody has told me straight to my face. There was an attorney in town that I handled the services for his dad I guess and he expected my dad to meet with him and I don't know if that was more of a thing, I don't think that was an attack against being female, I think that was just maybe an expectation that he thought the owner would be meeting with him since he was a district attorney.

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

### **The Accidental Funeral Director**

Vera and Dean (2005) reported that half of the women in their study became involved with their family firms on a temporary basis. This is consistent with Dumas (1992) who found that women are brought into the firm to help with a specific project or on a short-term basis, but end up remaining and growing their areas of responsibility and authority. This study supports these findings, as most of the women in the family funeral homes tell stories of crisis or accident that led them to first join their firms. While that finding is not new, these

narratives, viewed through a gendering lens, offer a different perspective on this notion of why and how women identified with their family firms and their positions in it.

As a way to begin the unstructured interviews, all of the people in this study were asked to tell stories about when and how they joined the family firm. The narratives, by both men and women in the study, reinforce the notion that the women did not have a conceptualization of themselves in the business, and the business did not fit in their life stories. As discussed in Chapter Four, the gendering structures in the family served to keep women from entering at all. Once they do enter, however, the women position their entry into the business as an accident. To make sense of their presence in the business, after growing up with little identification with the firm, women narrated stories in which a critical life incident precipitated their entrance. The women create a narrative about joining the family business that positioned their joining as a happening outside their control, not an intentional choice. The events of their lives made it impossible to do anything else, and so they joined the business. In this way, they are not purposefully disturbing the un-named gender structure or upsetting family gender order. They create an identity as an “accidental” funeral director.

In the current study, five of the women spoke of their expectation that their work in the funeral home would be a temporary solution to a critical problem, either in their lives or in the business. These women and their families positioned their first interaction with the business as being temporary. Grace told a story

about beginning work “for a little while”.

Yeah. And when the twins were born that was kind of...I still wasn't thinking, in fact I thought they would be born in June so I would be ready to go back to school (as a teacher). You know, the school year, I guess teachers report back early August. No, I thought they would be born in July, excuse me and I thought I'd have just one, but life has a funny way. So any way, twin pregnancy, the timing of it, I was not able to start back to teaching school. I was married at the time, obviously and I knew I had to get back to work. My dad said, why don't you consider coming into the business, why don't you just work a little while at one of the chapels and his idea...

Yeah. So at that time, my dad was probably considering...I don't know if he already owned the property, but we owned the cemetery next door, so he was probably considering building this chapel. He may have even said to me, eventually we will have something in Centre City and you can work there. I was a new mother of twins, I don't really know how seriously I took any of it. I was just like “I need to work” and you know?

*Grace, fifth generation, 40s*

Seven of the eight women in this study first came to work at their family

firms because of a major job transition. Four women first joined their family firms because they had lost a job and needed work, a spouse had lost a job, or because they had become disillusioned with their work and were looking to change careers. They told stories that placed the family funeral home as a simple solution. Two women reported coming to work when re-entering the workforce after having children or after finding their current jobs were incompatible with their duties as mothers of young children. In these cases, again, the family firm offered them flexibility and ease of re-entering the paid workforce. The other two women entered either because of the death or retirement of a firm-leading parent. Abby told the following story.

When I got married, I moved to Gotham City, so there I worked for a head hunter for lawyers and other legal staff-type people. So I worked there and then I had my first child and so after I had her, I stayed home and then had my second child and then my husband, at that same time I was pregnant with the second one, he worked for MegaCorp and his job, there were like 10,000 jobs eliminated across the country for the division that he was in, so he lost his job and he had a nice severance package and we could kind of live on that for a while, but his field was so focused, so specific, that there weren't a whole lot of jobs. My mom never could understand why he couldn't just get a job in computers and work everywhere. It

was a very specific network that he knew how to work on. Anyway, mom and dad said “if you would like to move back to Greenbow, we will make a place for you and you can be our aftercare coordinator” so we came back here and that was 20 years ago. I had never thought I would be back here in the funeral home, never really felt like I wanted to, so it was a wonderful gesture that my parents gave and it was sort of, at that point in our life, a necessity. My husband was open to moving here so he had done some construction work for us, so he ended up getting a job doing commercial work. So that’s kind of...I had sort of a wide variety of experiences and I just never would have wanted...I always said I didn’t want to do anything with the funeral home because of the hours and then I ended up being in one here and my husband was able to have the flexibility when he started working for himself to stay home if we had a sick kid or do things where I had less flexibility. In time, then I really began...I mean, I do enjoy what I do and I began to see that there was sort of a path that had been...I had been on a path that led me here and I was glad that it did and this is much more fulfilling than any of the other business-type things I did.

*Abby, 4th generation, 40s*

Other women positioned their decision to join the family firm as one where

they were the last alternative or the only remaining choice between remaining a family firm and being sold. These women and their families seem to make sense of disturbing the primogeniture by creating a narrative about preserving the family legacy. In this sense, it is acceptable for them to take over because the only other option is a sale. Jane and her father, Bob, tell a similar story about Jane's first thoughts about joining the firm.

Well, my grandmother passed away in 2001 and I was still in college at that time. It was just like this light bulb in my mind. You know, if I were to live out of the state or out of the area and have a job completely unrelated to funeral service and come back and visit home and come back and see that the funeral home had been sold or something. It might have been way later down the road; I just don't think I could live with myself. I think I would have felt really bad that it wasn't passed down to the next generation... He (brother, Sam) kind of worked in high school and kind of figured out that was not for him. I kind of knew my brother wasn't going to, so if I didn't then there would be no other family legacy to come in. So that was pretty much the deciding factor, just wanting to carry on my grandmother and grandfather and then dad, to carry on the business was a big factor. And then always knowing that I wanted to help people, it just seemed like the perfect combination. It's a

start.

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

Jane always told me, she said “Dad I don’t want to be in funeral service, you work too hard and that’s just not what I want to do”. However, I think she had an epiphany one day when she was going back to school and she can tell you this when you talk to her, but I think she was riding right down this road and saw the sign there and it just all of a sudden, a light went on, “gosh that’s my family business, I need to do something and I need to figure out what I am going to do, I want to run my family business” so she called me and had this conversation by phone and I said “well Jane, I think that’s great”.

*Bob, fourth generation, 50s*

Narratives of the accidental or temporary leader were also used by these women as a strategy for negotiating a disturbance of the gender order, particularly at upper levels in the family firm. These women create identities that position their rise into a leadership position with their firm as being unintentional and temporary. Stephanie told this story about how it was decided what roles she and her brother, Shawn, would occupy in the firm.

Really, I don't think we ever had a conversation about it, it just kind of worked out that it was...I'm probably more driven. I like to work, he likes to socialize. He would tell you all this himself. When it comes to making decisions, he for the most part prefers not to have to and I don't mind doing it. I had an older brother that we really thought would run the business, he had all intentions of doing that. There was a family dispute and he left and so then, I guess...he left the week before I graduated from mortuary school and came back. So it was very quickly and, at that point, it was probably just a trial. I was the one here doing the stuff. Shawn came in a year after me, we were back to back at mortuary school. At that point...

*Stephanie, sixth generation, early 30s*

Grace, also, was careful to construct a story that demonstrated her lack of intentionality in rising into a management position with her firm. She created a narrative that suggests she would have yielded her position to "anyone else" who was capable of doing the work. In her situation, "anyone else" in her family would be brothers or male cousins.

I don't think that, when I look back and think did I set out and say "oh I'm going to manage the business one day", absolutely not.



Truthfully, if there were someone else capable of it, I probably would have gladly...I guess I would have, I don't know. I think when you get into an organization and if you're an intelligent person who really cares and sees how things work together and don't work together and you're intuitive. I just felt like there were so many things...I didn't say well I'm going to do this because, I just naturally jumped in where I saw a need or if I saw something that needed to be improved or I knew needed to be changed, I would feel very driven to make that happen and at the same time...

*Grace, fifth generation, 40s*

### **Negotiating Roles**

Identities are negotiated through social interaction with others. In a family firm, it is often necessary for the women to negotiate their roles not only with their parents, but also with their siblings or spouses who are involved in the business. When family members accept their roles, they are more likely to work together to create a successful succession process (Sharma et al., 2001) and, it stands to reason, allow for successful socialization. This acceptance of roles is evidenced in FOBs through harmonious, trusting family relationships, and by lack of bickering and jealousy (Malone, 1989).

Because family roles are relative to those of other family members, a woman cannot negotiate her role in isolation. When family members feel inconsistencies in their roles, they are more likely to behave in opportunistic ways

that may not be in the firm's best interest (Sharma et al., 2001) and conflict such as sibling rivalry may be the result. Grace told this story of her relationship with her brother as she began to take on more of the management of her family company.

There's a lot of difficulty working together when you don't work alongside somebody every day in the same building and all that kind of stuff, so communication challenges. I was pretty much prepared for that in terms of internally with my co-workers, but I wasn't prepared for the animosity from one of my brothers and also we had a director, an older gentleman who had a funeral director's license who managed our cemetery... I don't remember what my brother Tom specifically said or did, but it was just painfully obvious that he was trying to sabotage me and I was just totally unprepared for that. My brother Brian, I mean who knows why the personalities emerged this way, but he just stepped up to the plate and he said, this is ridiculous. He told my dad "Tom's really got a problem with what Grace is doing and it's ridiculous". He went to Tom and said "what is wrong with you?" and that kind of snuffed it out for the most part.

*Grace, fifth generation, 40s*

Vera and Dean (2005) posit that siblings who have clearly defined roles and work together for an extended period of time have less rivalry when one sibling becomes the leader of the firm. Sibling accommodation occurs when siblings agree on their respective roles and positions and leads to a spirit of working together among siblings (Handler, 1990). Grace illustrated both rivalry and accommodation when she described her current relationship with her brother after twenty years of working together.

I thought, oh gosh no, we don't see eye to eye on things, but we did ultimately and we do ultimately want the business to run a certain way. My brother Brian actually does too. He's come a long way from where he was. There are still a lot of challenges there and there's still some teeth gnashing and tug-o-war at times, but for the most part, he's on board. I think any of the little unexpected bumps in the road are gone, because we know what to expect. I know when to anticipate some friction with him.

Two of the women interviewed for this thesis work with their husbands. In both cases, the women are from the funeral home owning family and their husbands joined the business as a result of marrying into the family. For these two women, it was necessary to negotiate their business identities with their husbands. Jane told a story about negotiating her business role with her

husband. In this story, she tells of being both direct with her husband and of negotiating a low-conflict, gender-consistent role.

Sometimes...I think at the beginning John was protective of me and thought he needed to speak for me and it got, I guess it got to the point where he spoke for me and it wasn't correct and so I had to kind of go back and we had to visit that and be like, "I appreciate you trying to come in and think you are protecting me; however, I need to speak for myself in these situations and let the company know where I am on certain things" so yeah, once that was kind of established that was good. John has a more, I would say he is more business oriented and likes the numbers and things...but he is still very empathetic and emotional. But me on the other hand, I am more empathetic, emotional, think of those things before I think of numbers and how is this going to impact the business, so it's a good mix.

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

Another strategy the women employed for managing their competing business and family selves was intentionally trying to separate the business and the family. Most of the women spoke of trying to minimize the overlap between the family and business systems. Jane created this narrative to describe how she

and her husband, John, separate their work and business roles.

We try not to talk too much about it at home, but...It does, it just naturally does. When you both work for the same company, I mean, you can't really leave it all at work. We try to. Our home is usually our place where we can relax and enjoy each other outside of the funeral home so sometimes we have to say to each other "you don't need to go in today, it's your day off, they've got it, they will call if they need anything." Sometimes you have to tell each other that to remind ourselves, it's okay, we can take a day off. Yeah. We both enjoy outside activities, like exercising and different things. Usually it's more of if there is an issue that's at work is when we bring it home and we talk about it, like if something is going wrong or if there is a conflict within the company, that's when a lot of times it comes over to home. Usually difficult circumstances are things we bring home. Usually it is just a normal day, things have gone well. It creates no problem. I think it is difficult circumstances and the conflicts are few and far between.

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

Stephanie also talked about creating a separation of her work role as company president and her family role as mother.

I'm not active. I don't go to a lot of conventions or anything. To me, it's just difficult. When I leave here, it takes a week to catch up, so I'm weighing that. Now I'm not doing it because I have a 2-year-old daughter. My time with her is with her. People are like "well why don't you bring her to work?" I said "because when I'm at work I need to work and when I'm at home I need to be with her, I don't like to cross it because even when she's just here, I can't focus, I can't focus on her and I can't focus on work". So when I leave here, I like to be with her on my free time. I could travel to conventions and take her, but for the most part, I don't enjoy conventions and, really a lot of times, I think about getting involved in like the State Board and stuff, but time wise, it's just...not possible.

*Stephanie, sixth generation, early 30s*

By separating competing family and business roles, women are also adopting low-conflict business identities by giving primacy to the family system. Acker (1992b) argues that the gendered concept of a job makes it difficult for women to negotiate an identity consistent with the expectations of the organization. The women in this study overwhelmingly told stories of having to choose between the demands of the business and the demands of the family.

Without fail, the women in this study gave primacy to the family and gender-appropriate role over the competing business role. This is illustrated by Patricia, who had just been placed in the position of manager of the family firm.

I want Andrew and Ellen (in-laws) to come to my house for Thanksgiving and Christmas and us not talk about work, but have the relationship we have always had and that really continues to be a real concern for me, because as much as I love this place and what I do, the relationship is number one to me.

*Patricia, fourth generation, 40s*

## **Gender Identity**

Cole (1997) argued that women in family firms were forced to choose between the family firm and the family to give the majority of their time and energy. In the funeral home stories, the narratives suggest that both men and women negotiate their gendered environments by choosing a low-conflict identity that privileges the more gender-“appropriate” system. The men in this study tended to privilege the business, while the women give primacy to their family responsibilities.

In one interview, I asked Shawn how his wife, Meredith, had adapted to being the spouse of a funeral director. In response, he created a story demonstrating the demanding nature of the funeral business. Shawn also clearly

positions the business system as his greatest priority.

She's still accepting it. When we first...I mean she dealt with a sister who died in high school so death was a traumatic part of her life. When she would first come in here, she would only come in the front door. It would freak her out if she saw a body, she wouldn't go near it. To that aspect, she will go in any room now except the prep room because she doesn't have an interest in seeing that, but it doesn't bother her. The hours still trouble her a little bit. I can't...I was still doing removals when we first started dating so she went through that, me leaving at three in the morning and coming back. Occasionally I still have to take them if someone's on vacation. I think it's difficult for her. "You were supposed to be home at 5:00, why aren't you home?" Well, it's because we don't shut our doors at 5:00, I have to stay until 6 or 7 to take a family, go home, come back. She thinks my name's on the door, so I should be able to do whatever I want. She has something she wants to do and I can't leave early, "well just leave" and you can't, she thinks owning a business should be less time and not more time.

*Shawn, 6th generation, early 30s*



Similarly, Luke told a story of setting aside family obligations for business ones.

Before the time of pagers and before all that stuff, I can still highly remember if we wanted to take the kids to get an ice cream cone at the Dairy Queen, I'd call dad up and say "we're going down to the Dairy Queen and I'm going to walk down Fourth Street, Main and up...so if we had an ambulance trip, he would know where to find me so he could pick me up and go on the ambulance trip for a death call because there weren't pagers, there weren't anything. So for the first four or five years of being in the business...Jaime always said ...I never left home because I couldn't move without letting my parents know what movement I was making because they needed that support.

*Luke, fourth generation, 60s*

Luke's daughter, Sophie, continued this theme of the men in her firm privileging the business system.

We'd play hide and seek through the building at night time because we didn't have cleaning service as a child, so after calling hours, the staff that worked calling hours cleaned, swept and picked up and then we'd go

down and if we wanted to see our dad, that's where we had to be, because he lived there. That was his full-time responsibility was caring for the firm.

*Sophie, 5th generation, 30s*

Interestingly, both Sophie and Luke told stories about Sophie's choice to place priority on her family responsibilities. These types of stories were repeated by the people in this study.

Sophie was much more home with the kids....She had made the decision at that point she as just going to work one day a week or a day and a half or two. An interesting dynamic that came on there is, she loves her family, but she also likes the human interaction of the adult level, so she's working three or four days now and likes that responsibility.

*Luke, fourth generation, 60s*

That is probably the single hardest thing that we deal with daily. I am one that's very sensitive. He (husband, Jacob) works really, really hard at the office and he works really, really hard in the community. When he gets home he doesn't do anything. When I get home, I'm still scheduling the kids and I'm still doing the school

stuff and I'm doing laundry, mowing the grass, doing the grocery shopping and I do love to cook, so I do cook. Probably my biggest area of weakness is knowing when to stop and letting myself have quiet time, so I go to the gym at 5:45 in the morning and go to spinning class and then sleep for three hours or four hours and that's enough to make me function to do it the next day. I'm not good at saying "stop the insanity" and getting off things. I'm a filler inner. This year we finally hired someone to mow our grass, which sounds so silly, but it's like an hour out of your week. He doesn't like to do it and he'd rather spend his time doing something he enjoys than doing something he thinks someone else should be doing.

*Sophie, 5th generation, 30s*

The men and women told stories that demonstrated this contrast. Both men and women negotiated the gendered organization by adopting the "appropriately gendered persona" (Acker, 1992a, p. 568). The men choose an identity that gives primacy to the business system while the women give primacy to the less-valued family system. The gender distinctions are apparent in the stories told about the importance placed on caring for the family. Ellen told a story about her father-in-law's offer of employment at the funeral home in which he outlined the "proper" behaviour.

He (father-in-law) said, "Your hours can be flexible, you have to be full time and we'll pay you" but he said "we'll let you go home early, to go around school bus time", stuff like that because I had to work some on Saturday and Sunday and get babysitters and so forth. Our youngest child started kindergarten, so that worked out really well. I really did come home behind the school bus a lot of days when the kids got off the bus. I'm glad I did that.

*Ellen, 3rd generation, 60s*

### **Caretaker**

Dumas (1989) suggested that a major motivation for daughters to work in the family business is the desire to take care of their father and of the business. This identity as *Caretaker of the King's Gold* emerges as the daughter is able to negotiate her conflicting roles to identify with both the role of caregiver, supporter, and champion for her father and as leader of the business. This identity as a helper to her father is also a low-conflict identity that is accepted by other family members.

My memory is so bad, Donna. I think probably one thing that I would say that kind of just happened along the way would have been hiring folks. There's no question that I could work alongside

dad and got along well with him and could communicate with him and vice versa, so people who were looking to reach out to him would perhaps by default reach out to me or whatever. I probably had some decision making sort of dropped in my lap from that standpoint...I don't really know how that happened, it just kind of did. I guess because he had an office over here once we built it and I was over here and there as sort of doing a little bit of everything. I think I probably started, in terms of how did it evolve and leadership or managerial stuff, maybe in the hiring process, maybe in seeing as you know from being around the business, preneed and aftercare sort of came up along with me. Those were ways for me to get involved.

*Grace, fifth generation, 40s*

Dumas (1990) also suggested that, because women form their identities based on relationships, it is useful for women in family business to have a mentor relationship with their fathers around which their identity in the business is developed. As opposed to sons, daughters do not need to replace or transcend their fathers in order to develop a strong identity in the business. This could, in part, explain why the women in this study were able to negotiate what Dumas called the healthy, *Caretaker of the King's Gold*, identities.

Oh it's great. It's good. I mean, it's really good. I can't speak from an outsider's perspective because I am the boss' daughter, but it has really been a good thing. Dad's a great boss and mentor. I learned a lot from him and he's taught me a lot of just ways to do things that create a better working environment and just meeting with families and things. So I have learned a lot from him. He's, like I said, been a great mentor. A great role model to look up to in the future when he might not be around as much. I was able to speak my mind about things, and he would not get offended whereas if (brothers) or (male cousin) had said it, he wouldn't have listened or he would have been offended and/or both. I don't know if that's because he thinks I'm a lot like him or he just respected my opinion or what, but he would listen when I said things that he didn't necessarily want to hear.

*Jane, 5th generation, early 30s*

## **Summary**

On one hand, the literature and these narratives would suggest that negotiating identities may be more difficult for women in a family business because identity must be produced against the conflicting gendered structures of both the family and of the business. Acker's (1990, 1992b) second process, the

production of symbols that reinforce gender divisions, suggests that one reason that women have trouble negotiating an organizational identity is because of difficulty positioning their femininity against a highly masculine image of the leader. However, because of the nature of funeral service, the women and, particularly, the men, embrace the feminine nature of the work. This might, in part, explain why the funeral service women were able to successfully socialize and develop identities as leaders of their family firms.

The women in this study used several strategies to negotiate their “appropriate” gender identities. First, the women created narratives that positioned gender discrimination as non-problematic. Secondly, the men and women in this study negotiated the conflict between the women’s early socialization and their entry into the family firm by creating a narrative of the accidental and temporary worker. Finally, women created identities in the firm that created little conflict with the organizational and family logic.

Chapter Six is a conclusion to this thesis. The chapter begins with a discussion of the research findings about the gendering processes in family funeral homes and the contributions of this thesis. The final chapter also includes a discussion of the implications of this research, both for future research and for family business.

# Chapter Six: ...And They Lived Happily Ever After

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## **Introduction**

The people in the six funeral home-owning families interviewed for this thesis narrated stories of their lives and their firms. The stories they graciously shared have allowed me to examine gendering in the unique context of a family-owned funeral service business. This chapter begins by reviewing the study's contributions and research questions and by exploring both the good news and the bad news of what I learned about gendering in those family firms. Next, I outline some of the limitations of this research. I would argue that any deep study of gendering should have the objective of learning what produces and maintains a gendered order so that structures can be changed. To that end, the next section offers some implications for future research and implications for practice, both for family business members and for their consultants and advisors. I end, appropriately, with an epilogue to my story and to the stories of the funeral home families.



## **Theoretical Contributions**

### **Exemplary Family Business Research**

The major contribution of this case study is the in-depth study of gender in the context of family-owned funeral homes. This thesis stands as a unique example of research in family business for several reasons. First, the thesis answers the call to bridge the gap between family business and other fields. The theoretical foundation of this research was built on the gender literature from management and organization studies. In reviewing both the gender in organizations and the family business literatures, little overlap was found. The family business literature tends to view gender as a binary, categorical variable and focus on the outcomes or problems associated with gender differences. The contribution of applying the gender in organizations literature to the family firm context is the focus on the underlying organizational processes, structures and logics that produce gender.

This thesis also borrows a narrative analysis methodology that is common in critical management studies and entrepreneurship research but is very unusual in the family business context. In a like vein, this thesis contributes to the literature in exemplifying case study research from an interpretive position and from the ontological perspective which views gender as a social construction rather than as a concrete, binary characteristic of people. Interpretivist research, such as this thesis, is rarely found in the family business literature. Interpretivist case studies aim to give an in-depth, rich description of a phenomenon in a given

context with the aim of producing analysis that recognizes the complexity and the heterogeneity of family firms (Nordqvist et al., 2009).

### **Joan Acker's Framework**

This thesis also borrows from the feminist literature to use Joan Acker's much-cited, but rarely-used framework for analyzing "gendered institutions" (Acker, 1992a, p. 567) to examine the funeral service firms. The application of the Acker framework in the family funeral service firms contribute to the feminist literature in several ways. This study suggests that, because of the interaction of the family, business and ownership systems, an examination of gendering in family firms must consider the family system as well as the business systems. Additionally, while the family funeral firms demonstrate gendering processes similar to those in other business forms, this analysis also found that the family system and nature of the funeral business offered some protection from the discrimination that resulted. These processes that serve to ameliorate the gendering could, perhaps, be duplicated in other business forms.

With one notable exception (Dye & Mills, 2012), Acker's theory of gendering organizations has been used as an abstract theoretical model rather than as an analytical tool. This thesis addresses her under-studied model by applying it to the analysis of the family funeral homes. In applying this framework, I gained insights into using her work.

Acker (1990) suggested that her framework was a "theoretical strategy" (p. 145) for examining organizations as gendered processes. Although she described the processes as all being components of the same reality, Acker

argues that each process can be seen separately in analysis (1992b). In this way, the framework is useful for looking individually at the components of gendering. The Acker model is well-suited to family business research because it addresses gendering processes at both the organizational and the individual levels. Because of the complexity brought about by the interaction of individuals with the family and the business systems, family business research requires analysis at different levels.

While the Acker model provides one of the only theoretical models for studying gender in organizations, using it presents some methodological challenges. While the model is very useful conceptually, it does not outline analytical tools for using it. Additionally, the gendering processes in Acker's model are, with the exception of the production of gender divisions, hidden and below-the surface processes. Exploring hidden processes is very difficult in that they are unseen by the people reproducing them. This thesis provides one example of using interpretive narrative analysis as a tool to apply the framework and to surface the invisible processes.

### **Organizational Logic**

The final, "forgotten" fifth process (Dye & Mills, 2012) of Acker's framework is the organizational logic. Organizational logic is the system of underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions about the organization and practices that serve to structure organizations (Acker, 1990). In Acker's (1990) description of job evaluation systems, the ongoing use of a system that evaluates a job devoid of the person performing it and that values certain work over others is

based on this organizational logic and serves to maintain the structure of the organization. In family firms, the discourse of the family and the maintenance of family roles in the firm serve to maintain the logic and its resulting structure.

The fifth process of organizational logic allows for recognition of the ongoing and changing nature of gendering processes (Dye & Mills, 2012). The other four gendering processes in Acker's framework both create and are created by organizational structures with a gendered substructure (Benschop & Doorewaard, 2012). The organizational logic is responsible for allowing the production and reproduction of the gender subtext. Likewise, the logic allows the gendered arrangement of work, rules about appropriate gendered behaviour, and the relationship of work and family to continue (Acker, 1992b). So, these organizational rules and structures become so taken-for-granted that they take on a logic of the "way things are done." Analyzing the organizational logic is about synthesizing the gendering of the four processes holistically.

Acker (1992a) suggested that seeing organizations as gendered requires one to examine the organizational logic by asking, "not why are women excluded but to what extent have the overall institutional structure, and the character of particular institutional areas, been formed by and through gender" and "how have the subordination and exclusion of women been built into ordinary institutional functioning" (1992a, p. 568)? In a family firm, the organizational logic is more complex as these questions apply to the organization as well as to the family. The process of organizational logic is used below to re-visit the research

questions that guided this research.

### **Research Questions**

The analysis of the narratives of men and women in their family funeral homes suggest some plausible responses to these questions that are considered below.

1. *Why aren't there more women at the top levels of management in their family funeral service firms?*

Acker (1992a) argues that this question should be answered by examining the extent to which the structures of the organization are gendered. The four gendering processes in Acker's framework work in aggregate to construct the organizational logic of a gendered organization. In these family funeral homes, hierarchies and structures are gendered to manifest in clear distinctions of what are "appropriate" identities for each gender. Obviously, some women are rising to the top levels of management and ownership in their funeral service firms. The women interviewed for this case study have done just that. However, existing research suggests that they are not the norm (Stelloh, 2011). For several reasons, it is surprising that the women in this study successfully moved into primary leadership roles. The family funeral homes examined for this case study appear to have gendered structures in many of the same ways that the literature suggests gendering in other organizations.

One common theme across all the families interviewed for this thesis was

the invisible practice of primogeniture. A man, and the oldest son, specifically, was the incumbent leader/parent's preference to lead the firm into the next generation. In this study, the underlying preference for the male child was so strong that it held true across all situations that might have negated the practice of primogeniture. The male child was preferred, regardless of the age of parents and children and regardless of the time period in which the transition was occurring. It is not surprising that the older women interviewed for this thesis told stories of being passed over by brothers. However, the youngest women participants in the study who have transitioned into firm leadership in the past five years told the same story of initially being overlooked in favour of their brothers. The preference for male successors held true even in the firm that had been led successfully by a woman in the past. In this family, the incumbent strongly favoured male successors. It is possible that this was to be expected in an industry that has been male-dominated until very recently. Sadly, however, this finding is in keeping with the family business research that suggests that male family members are considered preferable regardless of competence or ability (Wang, 2010). In five of six families in this study, female successors were not considered until after a male successor failed in the family business due to mental illness, addiction issues and/or inability to work with employees. This practice of primogeniture has been produced and reproduced so that it becomes an embedded, taken-for-granted practice or logic that likely prevents more women from rising to leadership positions.

Another apparent result of gendering in these funeral home firms is that the underlying logic of funeral service and family meant that women clearly did not grow up expecting to work in, much less lead, their family businesses. People create stories, in part, to negotiate their identities in response to the structures of their families, organizations and society. In their childhoods and adolescences, these women did not create stories that positioned them as part of the business. Likewise, their families did not create stories in which the women would join the funeral home or move into leadership roles. The families simply did not see the women as being part of the firm. The women's identities did not develop connected to the family firm. As a result, once they did join their family firms, it was more difficult for the women to develop a sense of identity with the business. It is certainly more difficult for their identities as leaders to develop. These women did not envision themselves as leaders in their firms. They only became leaders "accidentally", after other options had been exhausted.

A second clear finding from this thesis is that the underlying logic leads to socialization that is much different for men and for women. The 24/7 nature of the funeral service industry provides ample opportunity for early primary socialization in the business. Both boys and girls have early exposure to the business. However, the funeral home women were exposed to the important secondary socialization into the family business much later in life than their brothers. They were more likely to be initiated into the business through administrative roles than with roles in the central core of the business. The

underlying narrative about the “messy” side of business meant that women were introduced to the central functions of body preparation and care much later in life or not at all.

Finally, it is possible that more women do not rise to leadership ranks in family firms because it is difficult for women to negotiate their competing roles. The stories from this study suggest that the more feminine type of masculinity found in the funeral service firms might make it somewhat less problematic for women to position themselves against the masculine organization. Even so, the women in this study had difficulties negotiating their competing family, business and societal roles. As a result, women adopted low-conflict roles in their firms and in their families. This will be discussed more below in the discussion related to the third set of research questions.

*2. How is the gender order produced and maintained in family funeral service firms? How do these gendering practices and structures differ from those in other family firms or from those in other organizational forms?*

Symbols, images and ideologies manifest and reproduce the gendered structures. These distinctions are reinforced through the organizational culture and through interactions with those internal and external to the organization. Acker’s (1990) notion of organizational culture is that the symbols and manifestations of organizational values reinforce and guide gender distinctions in organizations. This case study surfaced both good news and bad news in terms



of the gendering of the included organizations. In many ways, the family funeral homes I examined exhibit gendered cultures consistent with other types of firms studied in the gender in organizations literature. The gendering of the family funeral service firms occurs across the same processes as it does with other firms. In other ways, however, these family firms exhibit some of the characteristics of an ideal feminist organization.

Licensing is one highly gendered symbol in funeral homes. Licensing regulations are, on the surface, gender neutral. However, in practice in the family funeral homes, the licensing requirements are used to re-create divisions along gender lines and part of the underlying logic of the culture. This gender order, the social construction of what is men's work and what is women's work is produced and reproduced in how children in the business-owning family are socialized to work that requires a license, in how the people in these firms are licensed and in how women doing embalming work is positioned as unusual or problematic. Additionally, the gender order was maintained by problematizing women performing other functions seen as men's work, such as driving certain vehicles or signing death certificates.

The interactions with others inside and outside the family funeral homes serve to reinforce gender. Interactions with family members and other employees underpin what is acceptable dress, behaviour and function for women and men. Women in this study were reminded of what was expected, "normal" behaviour as they stepped into "not normal" roles as leaders. Additionally, in these firms,

interactions with those outside the family firm -customers and vendors- also reinforced the gender order.

However, there is much good news to be found in the family funeral homes. In some ways, the firms were less gendered than other types of organizations. Additionally, the overlapping of the family system with the business system provided women some lessening of gender discrimination. These funeral firms seemed to resemble in some ways, ideal feminist organizations by offering some flexibility for women and recognizing their family as well as their business responsibilities.

The culture of these family funeral homes demonstrates an interesting tension between the masculinities of an organization that construct how and in what way someone performs being a man (Collinson & Hearn, 1996) that Ferguson (1984) argues are present in any organization and the caring work that the people in these funeral service firms do. It is possible that this juxtaposition is present because of the kind of work done in funeral homes and that this same kind of tension would not be present in other organizations doing more “masculine” kinds of work. It is also possible that this conflict is present in all family firms because they are argued to have cultures that are more caring and loving. It has been suggested that both men and women in family firms are more likely to engage in nurturing behaviours. In fact, some women in family firms may become “overnurturers” (Hollander & Bukowitz, 1990, p. 142) to the point that they take on too much responsibility for others. These family funeral service firms attached

more value to caring behaviours, both those involved in the work of providing death care and, also, in the work of caring for other family members. As a result, it is plausible that women are more likely to see how and where they fit in these organizations and that the caring work they do is more valued than it might be in other organizations.

One reason that family firms, in general, might be slightly less gendered, or gendered in a different way, is that it is more difficult for the worker who is also a family member to be disembodied. Acker (1990) argued that the disembodiment of a worker, the removing of the person and the other realms and responsibilities of her life from the notion of a job, is inherently gendered. Instead, Acker suggested that a worker is not an abstract person without presumed family responsibilities doing a job. In a family business, the worker might be a daughter whose family responsibilities are well-known and, even, encouraged. This is especially true for pregnant daughters or daughters who have given birth to grandchildren. In this way a daughter cannot be disembodied. Therefore, it is more likely that leaders of family businesses will provide flexibility and, also, provide other accommodations that allow workers, at least those in the family, to care for their children and to assume their other, outside-of-work family responsibilities.

3. *How do women negotiate their various intersecting identities in family funeral homes? How do the ways in which these identities are negotiated play out in the workings of the family firms?*

People in the organizations create gendered identities relative to and in maintenance of the organizational logic. In a family firm, a person's identity in the firm is also tied to individual and family identities. In funeral service, the business identity becomes gendered very early as boys identify much earlier with the family business. Boys grow up seeing their future selves as heir to the family firm kingdom. Girls, however, identify with the firm much later in life and have a much more difficult time creating their business identities. Women in this study were introduced to work much later than their brothers. When women were given opportunities as children and young adults, their responsibilities were more administrative and they were sheltered from the core work of the funeral home. However, most of the women interviewed for this thesis ultimately reported a successful socialization into the business.

In this study, I have explored several plausible explanations for why these women have risen to the top of their firms when other women might not. I argue that the women in this study were able to do this by finding strategies that allowed them to successfully negotiate their competing identities. These strategies allowed the women to adopt low-conflict identities while taking on leadership roles in their family firms. Women in this study tended to privilege a gender-appropriate family role by privileging their family responsibilities over their

business duties. They also created narratives of their rise into positions of power as being accidental. The men and women interviewed for this study talked about separating the family and the business systems as a way to make sense of the conflict created by the systems overlapping. Finally, they were able to socialize in the business and achieve the “healthy” identity that Dumas (1990) called the *Caretaker* identity by developing a mentoring relationship with their incumbent-leader parent (usually their fathers).

The majority of the women in this study dealt with conflicting identities by choosing to create low-conflict identities, as opposed to identities that challenged the prevailing family or gender order. Even in cases when the women moved into leadership positions in lieu of brothers or male cousins, they positioned these moves as being accidental and void of essentialized masculine traits such as competition or ambition. These women did not join their family firms until they experienced major life transitions in work, marriage or motherhood. Most did not move into leadership positions until their brothers were proven to be unwilling or incapable of leading. The narratives the women created were centered round a story that featured the women as unwitting or unwilling heroines who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Their move into leadership was not a calculated move on their parts, but “just happened”.

Another strategy that women employed to negotiate conflicting identities was to choose a gender-appropriate role within the family. All the people in this study reported having trouble balancing both their business and their family

responsibilities and so they were forced to choose one over the other. The men in this study tended to give primacy to the business system, while the women tended to give primacy to the family system. Several of the women in this study who worked with their husbands allowed their husbands to assume primary responsibility for business activities while they assumed responsibility for caring for the family. This was true, even for the two women who were part of the business-owning family and whose husbands joined the firm only after marriage.

The funeral home women told stories that indicated they passed through a rite of passage (Dumas, 1990) in their business and personal relationships with their incumbent parents. Contrary to the women in Dumas' study, none of the funeral home women told stories of feeling guilty about this transition. Instead, they seemed proud that they had progressed from a place of helping Daddy to a place of taking care of Dad's business after he is gone. Again, this indicates the women's ability to create healthy, interdependent business identities and to successfully negotiate conflicts with their family identities.

These women were able to socialize and create an identity for themselves in the business due to following an iterative process in which they started at the bottom of the firm, gradually took on more responsibility and transitioned into a leadership role. The socialization process was marked by a strong mentorship relationship with a parent (usually a father). The women were not in their father's shadow, but they were interdependent with their fathers. Dumas contended that this construct of Caretaker was indicative of the formation of a healthy business

identity as opposed to a dependent or self-involved identity. Additionally, the women demonstrated the ability to negotiate roles and responsibilities with siblings and spouses.

## **Limitations**

This thesis does not aim for generalizability. Rather, the objective is to provide a richer, deeper exploration of an organizational phenomenon in context (Leppäaho et al., 2016). In this case, the research aimed to gain a deep, rich understanding of gendering in the FOB context and to generate a “thick” description of such. I only propose to present one, plausible interpretation of the interviews. Consistent with the reflexivity required by the interpretive paradigm and by my relationship with the people, firms and industry in this study, I remain open to alternative interpretations. Alvesson (1996) calls this acceptance of other possible outcomes, the “postponement of closure in the research process” (p. 469). The iterative nature of narrative analysis required me to postpone closure on analysis as I read and re-read the interview transcripts and listened repeatedly to the interview tapes. In this way, I was reading or listening anew each time for another possible theme or outcome to emerge.

I presented several arguments for the use of the funeral service industry in this case study. It is a traditional, male-dominated industry composed largely of family-owned businesses. Because of the nature of the work done by these

businesses, they tend to attract people who seek to care for and serve others. Additionally, there is an underlying complexity to the organizations because of the kind of work they do and the stigma associated with death and dealing with the dead. At the individual level, the people attracted to funeral service work and to the kind of work done in these firms create cultures of caring. In my experience using personality inventories as a consulting and training tool, about 60% of all funeral directors share the same dominant personality dimensions. It is possible that some of these findings would not be replicated in other industries.

The women interviewed for this thesis were selected because they had already or were in the process of rising into leadership roles in their family firms. Of the nine women interviewed, seven were leading their family funeral homes at the time of the interviews; one was in a managerial role and in the process of succeeding her father as owner/leader of the business. The ninth woman had led the company in partnership with her husband and was partially retired. Therefore, this thesis is based on the stories of women who were successful in transitioning into the leadership role. This study does not examine stories of women who were not in leadership roles.

Additionally, all of the women in this study had brothers. As a result, their identities were developed, in part, relative to brothers. They were socialized later than their brothers. They were not considered for leadership in their firms until their brothers, usually older ones, failed. Some limited research has suggested that in families with no sons, daughters are identified as successors or heirs to



the business early in life (Garcia-Alvarez et al., 2002). In those cases, the identities of women might develop differently.

Lastly, the sample of people interviewed for this case study was relatively homogenous in terms of race and class. The homogeneity of the participants leaves open questions of intersectionality (Acker, 2006). Additionally, all of the funeral homes represented are in the United States. Cultural differences in family structures and values affect both the family and the business systems in family firms. Also, differences in funeral customs would likely result in different organizational structures and practices.

## **Implications for Practice**

The analysis of the funeral home families' stories surfaced some of the "invisible" practices that produce and maintain patterns of gender in family funeral firms. Additionally, this thesis explored some of the strategies women use to negotiate competing and conflicting identities. These findings have several implications for practice, first for those families working in funeral service, and, perhaps, for those people working in other types of family firms and for family business consultants and advisors.

Gender is discursively created. Narratives produce and reproduce the logic that creates gendering. Family members should recognize the language they use with their children and the stories they tell them about the business.

Parents could consider talking about the workings of the business and potential future roles, including leadership roles, with both sons and daughters. This is especially important in industries such as funeral service where women have been excluded and where the nature of the work is difficult, messy or taboo for women. In narrative terms, parents should tell stories that position their children, especially girls, in the family business. Additionally, parents should be aware of the importance of socialization for children in the business. It is a well-established recommendation that children should be introduced to the business as early in life as possible. This allows them to get a sense of the business and to make informed decisions about whether to join the family firm or not. It is important that parents resist the logic that guides daughters into administrative functions and away from the main work of the business. Finally, this study suggests that parents should be very aware of the importance of establishing a strong, supportive mentoring relationship with their children who do enter the family business.

Since family business consultants or advisors often enter the business during a transition when children are grown, the consulting implications from this study relate to secondary socialization. Consultants can disrupt the prevailing logic by helping families see all the candidates for succession by including any daughters who may have been excluded from the process. Advisors can facilitate the development of paths through which women, who may not have considered a career with the family funeral firm, can enter. Also, consultants

should look for divisions across gender lines or differences in what is considered men's or women's work in a family firm. It is important for consultants to point out any gendered divisions created by licensing or certification practices in firms. Most importantly, consultants can be useful in helping families outline a socialization process that allows both men and women to join their family firms in meaningful positions, to learn all aspects of the business and to have incremental increases in responsibility and authority. As an example from this study, Stephanie talked about her entrance into the business as being one where she did everything from washing cars to removals of bodies from homes and hospitals. Lastly, advisors can be useful in helping parents develop relationships and processes that allow them to mentor and support their children as they develop in the business.

A family constitution is a document that outlines the policies that the family will use in working together and usually includes language about when and through what process family members can join the business and move into leadership and ownership positions (Poza, 2015). Family business consultants should suggest that families in business develop a family constitution to outline important areas regarding the relationship between the family system and the business system. More implicitly, a family constitution can address ideal practices for children joining the family firm and outline a structured succession process in which all candidates are considered. The constitution would be an ideal document in which a family could outline non-gendered practices related to

succession, licensing and embalming.

## **Implications for Future Research**

This thesis is a unique look at gendering in one type of family business that has not often been studied. Future research could expand to examine gendering in more organizations across industries. The gendering analysis in this thesis was done using Joan Acker's framework. Hopefully, this thesis will pave the way for other research using her analytical model.

It would be also useful to explore whether the differences between the women in the family funeral homes and the women interviewed for Dumas' work are due to the specifics of the funeral home industry or due to differences in the social context that have emerged in the past twenty years.

At least two of the women interviewed for this study made brief mention of their awareness that the benefits they experience in their family firms might not be shared by non-family women employees. It is very possible that the identities developed by non-family women are much different than those of women who are part of the owning family. Further development of this study could include stories of non-family members to explore whether the absence of the family system affects how they negotiate the organizational logic. Additionally, it would be interesting to explore whether some of the protection from discrimination felt by women in the family is also felt by non-family employees or male family

members.

As discussed above, the funeral home women whose stories were analyzed for this thesis were successful in rising to leadership positions in their firms. The review of literature for this thesis indicates that other women might not successfully socialize in their family firms. Future research might examine the socialization process for women who do not become leaders in their family firms and contrast with the process outlined here.

Other research could delve deeper into how women join their family firms. For instance, questions regarding how women make decisions to join their family firms could be explored. Also, research could examine how family firms, or consultants to them, could create a career path that allows children entering the business to learn the elements of the business and to earn the trust and respect of those already working in the business.

Existing literature suggests that a mentoring relationship is more important for the identity formation in daughters than in sons. The nature of the parent-daughter mentor relationship should be more developed. Questions regarding how such a relationship is developed should be explored. Also, the need exists to understand what happens in the mentoring process and what elements create a healthy and supportive mentoring relationship.

Lastly, and related to the previous suggested course, future research should investigate whether a mentoring relationship must be between a parent and child to be helpful in the child's socialization into the business. Several

women in this study reported receiving support and mentoring from non-family key managers in the business. Some family firms hire non-family transition managers to bridge the gap between one generation's leadership and the next. A potential course of inquiry could examine the efficacy of such a mentoring relationship in helping a next generation woman achieve a successful socialization and build a health identity in the business.

## **Epilogue**

One of the findings of this thesis is that the relationship with a parent, especially a father, is a crucial element in the ability of women to successfully navigate competing identities and to socialize in the business. While writing this thesis, my father and I navigated together his long, debilitating illness and his death. After he passed away, I came to realize how important my relationship with my own father was in helping me negotiate my family and business identities and in my socialization in the business. He was very aware of the stories he told me. As an example, when I was very young, he began a bedtime ritual that he thought would help me to both see and to be prepared for a gendered world. Every night as he tucked me into bed, my father would say with deep sarcasm, "You know girls aren't as good as boys." He also created narratives from the very beginning in which I was part of the family business. I was introduced to the business very early in life and was given increasingly "meaty" work to do. My father was a wonderful and supportive mentor in my professional development.

He also served as a mentor to some of the women in this study, and he was mentioned multiple times in their stories. Several of the women told me that my father was among the first people to suggest to them that they could be successors to the leadership in their firms.

One benefit of being partially embedded with research participants is that I have continuing contact with some of them. That gives me a unique opportunity that many researchers do not have after the research has ended. The narratives do not end for me. I have at least a glimpse of the next chapters of these stories with which I am so familiar. So, these funeral home families go forward, trying to steer through the complexities of family business. With the exception of the one participant who has retired, these women have continued to lead their firms. In most cases, the incumbent fathers are transitioning out of the businesses into retirement, and the women are assuming control of the firms. The firms live on into the next generation and the people in them continue to serve grieving families.

The End

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