

Research Applied: *FBR* Précis on A Family Imprinting Approach to Nurturing Willing Successors

Jordan Rich (JR): Welcome to the *FFI Practitioner* podcast. Today we are pleased to feature Pilar Marques, Associate Professor of Strategy and Family Business at the University of Girona in Spain. She is the first author of the September 2022 *Family Business Review* article, “A Family Imprinting Approach to Nurturing Willing Successors: Evidence from Centennial Family Firms.” *Family Business Review* was the first scholarly journal to be published in the field of family enterprise and is part of the Research branch of FFI.

Welcome to Pilar Marques.

So, let's begin with a definition of imprinting and how it applies to the family firms, Pilar.

Pilar Marques (PM): Well, imprinting is the process of influencing family members' position on or feeling toward the family business. In our case, it is influencing the willingness of the next generation to engage in the family business. The logic of imprinting is that there are some influences that result in some imprints, or marks, such as values or motivations that maybe [are] strong enough and persistent over time to [affect] the decisions of the next generation.

JR: In the work you're doing, in the article you're doing, you refer to imprinting on “siblings,” so let's clarify what you mean by “siblings” in this context.

PM: With “siblings,” we mean the next generation of family

members. In this article, we consider the multiple influences that the set of siblings is subject to. [These children are] influenced by several sources: the predecessors in the family business who normally are from the previous generation, [as well as] other members of the previous generation, the current generation, the business itself, schools and other institutions or organizations.

JR: Is this a conscious effort to “imprint” something, some value system, or is it something that happens naturally? Or is it a combination of the two?

PM: It is a combination of the two. And I would say that probably the unconscious part, or the spontaneous kind, is the more influential. Parents imprint children, especially when they are young, by means of implanting influence, such as how the parents communicate in the family, how they communicate about their jobs, about the family business. But also, they are [making] decisions that influence the children. [Parents] plan their schools, their after-school activities, their leisure options, et cetera.

JR: There's always the issue where you have four or five children in the family and three out of the five are following the steps that we expect them to, maybe one or two go in a completely different direction. What role does imprinting have in that case? How do we explain how imprinting might impact the outlier?

PM: Following our [the authors'] imprinting view, we could

find several explanations for this. Imagine that the youngest son, who is six years younger than his youngest sibling, and twelve years younger than his older sibling, imagine that this person is influenced by his parents—the predecessors in the family business, probably, and the previous generation. And this influence [on the youngest son] is different [than the influence on his older siblings] because his parents have a different maturity; they are older than they were [when their first son was born] and they have even been affected by some disruptive events in their life, maybe some health issues, maybe their marriage has not gone well, maybe there is a second marriage, and times have changed. Over six years, or over twelve years, things could be very different. This behavior of parents is consciously and unconsciously influencing their son in general, as well as how [the son] relates to the family business. Imagine also that this son is going to a different school from his siblings, and has different experiences and hobbies, this person maybe likes music or travel, might get a scholarship somewhere else, and eventually he [might decide] to have a different career related to music, cinema, or whatever else.

JR: We don't want to ignore social media and its impact. How does that affect the imprinting in families these days?

PM: Social media probably provides a different context for younger children in comparison to older ones, and probably it introduces more sources of influence that may introduce variety among siblings. The idea of our study is that it seems that the family influence itself has quite a strong effect on [children],

increasing or decreasing the likelihood that they are willing to join the family business or not. So, in spite of the individual differences, we find some commonalities within families.

JR: Let's talk about the mechanisms of imprinting and how families can learn how to use them effectively to bring about success in the family business.

PM: We explored mechanisms, directly asking the [rising] generation about the main influences and we asked the predecessors about the same topic. There is a variety of mechanisms. I'd say that most of them are emerging or spontaneous, including the effect of the father or mother figure as a role model, or being mentors or using persuasion to help their children decide or to try to guide their children in [a certain] direction. But also, encouraging education relevant to the family business is a mechanism that we found. [Another mechanism we found] was to predicate past entrepreneurial stories or models. We also found things happening to the next generation, like the time spent in the family business while they were very young children or adolescents, or if later they had work experience in the family business—or in work outside the family businesses. All of these things condition some of them positively and some of them negatively, [in regard to] the willingness to be a successor in the family business. And then, there are also things that parents or predecessors tend to do, like facilitating or discouraging the entrance into the family business, or things that they have been doing for as long as they have been raising their children, such as supporting diversity, supporting their [children's] entrepreneurial spirit, or supporting their

children's own goals.

JR: Is it safe to say that for parents or predecessors who are positive, giving, and reaching out to their families, generally imprinting works better in that regard?

PM: I would say that parents or predecessors who [present] the family business positively, as a job, as a mission in their life, as a thing that helps them grow and is compatible with the needs of the family, I think that they become more successful in imprinting. Because what we found is that the willing successors were people who were feeling positive about the family business, who felt that there was a project there, there was a legacy to preserve and that they could be relatively happy there.

JR: We'd love you to comment on these findings from your article: When families' motivation for imprinting their siblings is focused on family business preservation, promoting entrepreneurship among their siblings, the likelihood of willing successors is higher. When their motivation for imprinting is based on values promoting free will of siblings, the likelihood of willing successors is lower. Comment, if you will.

PM: What we found in our research is that in some families there are more candidates [available] to be successors in the family firms, or more candidates to join the family business in different ways. In those families, what we found is that the previous generation had the motivation to influence their children, very much focused on the family business. So the family business was important, was [seen positively], was a

[good] challenge for their children. And not exactly the same, but in some other cases, parents or predecessors were more open in [encouraging] their children not only to be positive about the family business, but to be positive about being entrepreneurs, [the predecessors] were motivating [the children] to take risks, to engage in new projects that maybe could be added to the existing family firm, or perhaps [they could be different businesses]. And in this second [entrepreneurship-centric] case, there was a [significant number] of children [who chose] to be successors in the family firm. But in the last case [free-will centric], there were parents who said, “Well, we don’t want to influence our children so much as regards to their future. We don’t want them to be forced to continue the family business. We are [encouraging them to] follow their callings.” In these cases, [parents] were encouraging children to engage in other training, to follow their vocations, their dreams. In these [free will-centric] cases, it was difficult to find successors. So then, they needed [other] strategies to convince their children to join the family business.

JR: Indeed. And as we know, all people are unique, all families are unique, and it poses a challenge for advisors. But how can advisors incorporate the research on imprinting and bring about more success in the family business?

PM: With our paper, what we propose is a process approach, to understand a little bit how this influence on children is happening. We identify the sources of imprints, the motivations behind imprinting, the mechanisms used, the timing of such

influence, the resulting imprinting in terms of values and motivations, and eventually, the likelihood of willing successors. I think that only [through] understanding these processes may you understand why your [children] are willing to join or not your family business and this is a step, this is something that is interesting for predecessors or for a coach or a consultant who's helping [the business]. But even more so, it's more interesting to understand this process so that you can prevent a bad result. If you are willing to have more candidates to be willing successors, then you can manage a little bit this process, so that the likelihood of having candidates increases. I say that you can manage this process a little bit because I don't think that this process has to be manipulated and used to an extreme so that children have no choice but to continue the family business. But being conscious of the influence of predecessors, parents, and of all the experiences that children have, that have an influence on their future, may allow you even to optimize their process a little bit more and help them follow the path that you think is better for them—it might be the family business, but it may also be something else. It's not the only path.

JR: Share with us why you're so excited about this research.

PM: I think that we [wrote] a paper that is both theoretically interesting and also interesting for practice. It tells us a bit about some differences between family firms, commonalities within family firms and families in business, but also it explains a little bit the heterogeneity within the same family and family business. So, I think it has very good things that are very much

appreciated in the field, talking about the heterogeneity of family firms, but also at the same time talking about commonalities, homogeneity. And it's nice to see how [the interviewed companies] have survived for generations because, something that I didn't mention, the companies [we researched] were more than one hundred years old. So we thought that they were doing something well to survive for so many years, which was indeed the motivation behind the research—understanding more why these companies were surviving.

JR: The more that advisors understand the mechanisms in general, the better they can dispense advise and hopefully help.

PM: And they can help families better design their children's futures—futures that increase the likelihood that children are willing to be successors without forcing them to be successors.

JR: Pilar, thank you again for your hard work and for sharing it with us today. We appreciate it.

PM: Thanks to you for listening to me and for giving me the opportunity to explain my research.

JR: Thanks to Pilar Marques for this conversation about how and why families may nurture the willingness of their children to engage in the family business. FFI's mission is to be the global network of thought leaders in the field of family enterprise. To learn more about the *Family Business Review* and FFI

membership, go to www ffi.org.

For more *FFI Practitioner* podcasts and articles, or to submit one of your own, go to [ffipractitioner.org](http://ffipractitioner org). I'm Jordan Rich. Thanks for listening!

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR



Pilar Marques, FFI Fellow, is an associate professor in the Department of Business Administration at the University of Girona. She is currently the director of the Chair of Family Business and the director of the Masters in Entrepreneurship and Business Development at the University of Girona. Her current research is related to family business, especially regarding corporate social responsibility and innovation. She can be reached at pilar.marques@udg.edu.

INTERVIEWER: **Jordan Rich** is celebrating a quarter century at one of America's top legacy radio stations, interviewing thousands of celebrities, authors, actors and interesting personalities throughout his career. Jordan is co-owner of Chart Productions Inc, and also teaches voice-over acting. His main focus these days is in podcast creation and production, featuring conversations with the world's most creative people.