

## **Puppet Master, Puppet and Set Designer in Family Business Successions**

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### **Resumo**

Este artigo busca analisar o processo de sucessão em uma empresa familiar brasileira. Empiricamente, foi realizada uma pesquisa qualitativa nessa empresa, de grande porte, sob a perspectiva bourdieusiana e por meio da Análise Linguística do Discurso. Os dados levantados demonstram que a sucessão de executivos nas organizações é muito mais que uma simples troca de agentes. A sucessão, como um jogo das relações de poder, envolve planejamento, astúcia, conhecimento do campo, certo domínio da *illusio*, da *doxa* e do *nomos*, e uso de capitais. Este jogo de poder pode envolver manipulações e blefes. De certo modo, observamos que o uso das categorias bourdieusianas ajudaram-nos a compreender melhor este jogo de poder no campo da administração das grandes empresas familiares.

### **Palavras-chave**

Sucessão. Relações de Poder. Empresas Familiares. Bourdieu. Análise do Discurso.

### **Abstract**

This article seeks to analyze the process of succession in a Brazilian family business. Empirically, a qualitative research was carried out in this large company. We analyzed the empirical corpus using the Bourdieusian perspective and a Linguistic Analysis of Discourse. Our data show that the succession of executives in organizations is much more than a simple exchange of agents. Succession, as a game of power relations, involves planning, cunning, knowledge of the field, a certain domain of *illusio*, *doxa* and *nomos*, and use of capital. This power play can involve manipulations and bluffs. In a way, we have observed that the use of the Bourdieusian categories helped us to better understand this game in the field of administration of large family businesses.

### **Keywords**

Succession. Power Relations. Family Businesses. Bourdieu. Discourse Analysis.

## INTRODUCTION

Power dynamics is a rather fascinating topic when members of a family, as the manager and owner, are gathered in a business. Even the discourse that states that corporate governance generates shareholder value needs to be shaped to the family business, as it brings together more than just mere business partners. This brings together parental relationships that are dissolved (or concentrated) by the company as a whole, from the board of directors to the managerial level (TROCCOLLI; LISBOA, 2018; CANÇADO; LIMA; MUYLDER; CASTANHEIRA, 2013; ESCUDER, 2006; TAVARES; GARCIA, 2017; LOLLA; AURÉLIO; JUNIOR; VELOSO, 2017; SILVA; NETO, 2018).

To find answers to this question, this paper aims to analyze the succession process in a Brazilian family business, according to the *Bourdieuian* perspective. Indirectly, it also analyzes the process of governance through which the company in question experienced, for in this particular succession process the family ceased to occupy the chief executive position of the organization for the first time in its history. The delivery of this position to an executive who is not a member of the founding family is part of a power dynamics game prepared by the Succeeded subject, who was still the CEO back then, to become the chairman of the board of directors as he had planned.

Authors such as Karaevli and Zajac (2013) and Ma, Seidl and Guérard (2015) regard succession as paramount for the continuation of family business management. In our view, this process can (and should) be structured (planned). However, we cannot fail to consider that it is also somehow structuring, for it produces actions/agencies that may or may not favor the organization, impacting its management and the direction of the business as a whole. Therefore, this paper also investigates succession as a process in which the material (the company) and the symbolic (the position of CEO, the rite of passage from this position to the chosen successor), the objectivism (the company and the position) and the subjectivism (being a successor, power relationships), as well as the individualism (the owner/CEO) and the group (the company's stakeholders) are combined.

An empiric, qualitative study was conducted in a large company based in Minas Gerais, Brazil. The initial idea was to address the history of the company by collecting the biographies of the agents involved. However, as research advanced, we came across a succession process in which the power dynamics had been carefully articulated and engendered. We then changed the focus from the company to the ongoing process, which we elected as the case to be studied. As for the method, we resorted to the nested case study (MILES; HUBERMAN; SALDANA, 2013; GIBBERT; RUIGROK; WICKI, 2008; YIN, 1994). The nested case strategy is adopted when, within a single case, the attention is given to the subunits/few subjects. As it is a research strategy that can be better explored in some respects, it offers significant opportunities to expand the analysis, increasing the opportunity for insights. In this particular study, the addressed subunits were the three respondents of this research: The Succeeded subject, the Successor and the Consultant. In-depth interviews were conducted a few times with each one of the three subjects, making it possible to construct their life accounts, their work trajectory in the company, and the succession process itself.

We aimed to capture constitutive elements of a process that is paramount for management. However, the intention herein was not to use data from the oral reports to illustrate typical forms of behavior, but to investigate the interdependence of factors that gave rise to specific combinations in the life history of each subject. The systematic observation of succession processes in companies is exceptionally complex. Each succession process is a game, and each game can only aim at an approach that is ultimately divided into parts and that, while dialoguing with other studies on the same topic, may contribute to the gradual and collective advancement of knowledge. For theoretical and empirical reasons, we relied on the analysis of the biographical narratives, that is, the respondents' life stories.

Therefore, based on their accounts and their importance in the expression of what is experienced through the unfolding of a narrative (PINEAU, 2006) concerning the company and the succession process, we conducted interviews and conversations with the primary agents involved in such process. These were in-depth interviews, aimed to reflect the experiences lived by subjects during the process. The life story methodology requires that we work with a few interviewees to deepen into their experiences. It was not possible to conduct in-depth interviews with other members of the founding family nor with other players participating in this succession, but sporadic conversations were held. This large company is grounded on family management, both in its shareholding composition, as well as in its board of directors. The collected interviews were transcribed and analyzed under the influence of the Bourdieusian approach, through Discourse Analysis.

At the end of that stage, we observed a succession game that excluded the family from the chief executive office, leaving its members to primarily occupy chairs on the board of directors, but subordinated to the new president, the Succeeded subject, who held the highest-ranking position. As researchers, we have created a metaphor for this studied game, in which the Succeeded subject acted as the great puppet master; the Successor, as the puppet; and the Consultant, as the "set designer". In a certain way, the use of Bourdieusian categories may help us understand the so-called succession process within the management of large family businesses.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Succession is a phenomenon that has been investigated in the context of family organizations, from various perspectives, such as Bayesian networks (LOCKAMY; CHARLES; LOHRKE, 2015), social exchange (DASPIT; HOLT; CHRISMAN; LONG, 2016), agency theory (MICHEL; KAMMERLANDER, 2014), game theory (MICHAEL-TSABARI; WEISS, 2013), and stewardship theory (CHEN; LIU; YANG; CHEN, 2016). Although Bourdieu's social theories may contribute significantly to the understanding of succession in family organizations, studies relying on such an approach are still scarce (LUBINSKI, 2011; OLIVEIRA *et al.*, 2014). We resort to the contributions of this author to understand the succession process in question and we begin this study by presenting some of the central notions of this social theory.

Bourdieu (2005; 2007) defines the field as the setting where social action develops for it is a microcosm of social space that aggregates individuals by affinity. It is the space where symbolic power relationships occur. The fields result in the legitimation of domination through the symbolic production that takes place within them and have subdivisions, which we refer to as subfields. Since they are hierarchically valued in different ways, the fields compete against one another, in the same way that the agents in their respective fields compete for positions within them. The agents hold three possibilities in the class struggle: fighting to ascend in the field, as well as to a socially superior field; fighting to remain in the position in which they currently are (stability); socially descending, while losing the previously occupied position in the field itself or binding themselves to a lower field (social decline).

The concept of *habitus* is critical to understand the organizational field, and Bourdieu (2007, p. 61) defines it as “[...] an acquired knowledge and a ‘having’, a form of capital (of a transcendental subject in the idealistic tradition) [...]” of the individual who is active in the field. When individuals bind to a field, they must bear the appropriate *habitus* to that field, at the risk of not being able to become legitimized in it. The symbolic capital is associated with *habitus* (BOURDIEU, 2005; 2007; 2010; 2013; BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 2010). This capital is the agent’s patrimony and is either constituted by legally guaranteed material (economically objectified) or incorporated property (subjectified in the form of cultural and social patrimony) (BOURDIEU, 2007). As patrimony, the symbolic capital represents a form of power over the field at a given moment and over the product accumulated through the work accomplished. It consists of the amount of capital accumulated by the agent in its various forms, such as economic, social (the product of social relations), and cultural (the product of acquired knowledge).

It should be emphasized that succession can be a tool used by agents to constitute and reconstitute the organizational field, through specific criteria adopted for the selection of its key executives (FITZSIMMONS; CALLAN, 2016). This process of constitution or reconstitution involves different types of capital. For instance, as for social capital, it is possible to observe, through the network of relations constructed by the agent (the successor), his/her visibility and the recognition of his/her management skills, the strategies adopted, his/her way of exercising leadership, and his/her management integrity and respectability. In cultural capital, new elements come into perspective, such as language competence, the desired technical formation, and the experience in business; economic capital refers to which class fraction this executive would represent in terms of the industrial, financial, and agribusiness sectors. Finally, they all conjure a form of symbolic capital that will be crucial for the companies’ succession and management processes (FITZSIMMONS; CALLAN, 2016).

Especially in the context of family organizations, relationships between individuals are a determining factor in inhibiting the transfer of control, and consequently of power, within the family *nuclei* (LOCKAMY; CARSON; LOHRKE, 2016). The successors are the winners of this “horse race” and to achieve that, they need to demonstrate understanding of the demands concerning the family that holds the control of the organization, as well as

enough political connections (MINICHILLI; NORDQVIST; CORBETTA; AMORE, 2014, p. 1171). Therefore, this context is appropriate for reading the organizational field based on Bourdieu's social theories.

Three other vital concepts coined by Pierre Bourdieu are *ethos*, *hexis*, and *doxa*. *Ethos* allows one to judge the behavior of the people with whom they relate, as well as make decisions and choices according to their *tastes*. In turn, through bodily *hexis*, we spontaneously or controllably (by monitoring our actions and expressions) demonstrate the bodily reflexes of our socialization and perceive information in our relationship with others (BOURDIEU, 2007). So, *ethos* and *hexis* are influenced by the *doxa*, whatever is common sense in the field, produced by the view of the dominant agents (the dominant class in a given field) who are popularly internalized and naturalized (BOURDIEU, 2007). This notion of *doxa* is similar to that of *naturalization* referred to by Taylor (2010; 2011) and Souza (2006).

Once again, we come across the potential of applying these concepts in the context of succession in family organizations. On the one hand, as Fitzsimmons and Callan (2016) point out, we must emphasize the existence of different forces that may potentially inhibit the accumulation of capital by the successors who aim to occupy dominant positions in organizations. One of these forces are the dominant agents, or using a management jargon, the *seniors* or *predecessors* who occupy the command positions in the field of management and, therefore, the succession as well. They can use strategies to preserve their symbolic capital, ensuring that certain perpetuity of the power (and management) dynamics is tied to their own interests. On the other hand, Bourdieu (2007) demonstrates that the new agents – who are the “new entrants” in the field – can rely on two different strategies to gain dominant positions. The first strategy is *succession*, accepting free competition in the field, based on its current characteristics, which include *doxa*, *nomos* and *habitus*; the second strategy is the subversion, which aims to redefine the structure and the current order.

According to Lubinski (2011), such capital mobilization would favor the maintenance of power, and it occurs in succession processes long before the formal replacement in critical positions. This happens because there are periods of anticipatory socialization in succession when different forms of capital are evidenced, analyzed and even transferred through relationships inside and outside the company, as well as formal education programs, demonstrations of knowledge and symbolic emotional bonds with shareholders and controlling stakeholders.

*Nomos* is another concept concerning the processes of legitimation established in the fields and it concerns the general laws that govern the operation of the social fields (BOURDIEU, 2005; 2007; 2011a). As society is subjected to a continuous process of evolution that changes its social structure, new fields emerge, promoting, in turn, a continuous process of differentiation. Due to that, it follows that every field, as a historically and socially constructed product, has a different form of *nomos*. “For instance, the *nomos* of the artistic field instituted in the nineteenth century was ‘Art for its own sake’. Both *doxa* and *nomos* are accepted, legitimized in the environment and by the social environment as conformed by the field” (Thiry-Cherques, 2006, p. 37).

It is important to say that both *doxa* and *nomos*, as instruments of legitimation of the fields and, therefore, instruments of power, are legitimized by symbolic violence. Symbolic violence is the imposition of meanings, in a disguised way, through the force, or rather, the power relationships established in the fields (BOURDIEU; PASSERON, 2010). Thus, any pedagogical action established in the field, whether educational or cultural, aims to impose the hegemonic *habitus* of that field in the social formation of the individuals inserted in it. As its dissemination is arbitrary, a form of violence is established, which, in this case, is symbolic violence.

Competitiveness in the social space requires that agents, as participants in the fields, are always interested in the disputes taking place within them. The notion of *illusio* corresponds precisely to such interest. *Illusio* is the knowledge of the agents regarding the rules of the game, which guide the competitiveness in the social space (BOURDIEU, 2005). The mastery over *illusio* allows competitors to manage their *habitus* and symbolic capitals more skillfully, increasing their chances of success in the competitions happening in the field.

It is possible to infer that the discussions carried out by Bourdieu on the imposition of the hegemonic *habitus* are associated, in the context of family business, with certain nepotism, which is a common trait in these organizations, and which leads, in many cases, to their decline (MHATRE et al, 2013; CUCCULELLI; MICUCCI, 2008). Factors such as biases in decision-making and the strength of relationship networks favor nepotism in this context, a factor evidenced by the maintenance of power through the selection of family members to take charge of the highest-ranking and senior management positions in organizations (LIU; EUBANKS; CHATER, 2015). Especially in family organizations, the predecessors have a project, not always consciously, of transmitting values and experiences that they regard as necessary to their successors, aiming to perpetuate the business (OLIVEIRA et al., 2014). Bourdieu (2007) calls this project *conatus*, and it also includes (i) the preparation for successors to arouse interest in the “project”, (ii) the search for ownership and identification of successors by the capitals built by the family, as well as possible conflicts or disagreements among these successors as for the perpetuity of the business.

The combination of the concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu allows us to develop elaborate analyses on the social power relationships operating in the organizational field, especially in succession processes carried out in family businesses. However, Misoczky (2003) argues that such concepts have not been appropriately articulated by the scholars of organization studies of the institutionalist, functionalist, neo-functionalist and neo-institutionalist lines of thought, hence reducing the complexity of Bourdieu’s approach and impoverishing the analyses. For this reason, we propose that the central concepts be articulated to allow the reading of the succession process in a given family organization.

This proposal is relevant, especially if we consider that research on succession often prioritizes quantitative analyses conducted from extensive databases and samples of companies listed on stock exchanges (CHIU; JOHNSON; HOSKISSON; PATHAK, 2016; GEORGAKAKIS; RUIGROK, 2017). However, measurement difficulties limit the explanatory capacity of the results, which reinforces the importance of different methodological approaches based

on longitudinal, procedural, clinical, qualitative, and psychological studies (PITCHER; CHREIM; KISFALVI, 2000).

It is also worth remembering that most studies on succession focus on the context of US companies, which are in relatively advanced stages of corporate governance (NAKAUCHI; WIERSEMA, 2015). Therefore, those works scarcely explore the social contexts of emerging economies, which are characterized by the relationship between families and business groups with different institutional logics (CHUNG; LUO, 2013). Notwithstanding the relevance of the Bourdieusian concepts regarding the advancement of knowledge on succession processes in family organizations, studies seeking to draw such a parallel are still scarce.

## **METHODOLOGICAL ASPECTS**

This paper ponders about succession in family organizations, resorting to Bourdieusian categories. The theme of succession in the family business is challenging to explore in itself and it refers, by its very nature, to the depth of the sociocultural fabric that also pervades companies. Therefore, it has been often silenced or camouflaged in the history of business management.

The object of this study was defined during research on the history of family business management. When conducting qualitative research, more precisely the biography of the various agents that made the history of the company in question, we came across a case of succession. Then, the ongoing study was temporarily halted, and we were able to follow that case.

Relying on the nested case-control (NCC) method, in which parts, subunits, and even few individuals are part of the construction of the case (MILES; HUBERMAN; SALDANA, 2013; GIBBERT; RUIGROK; WICKI, 2008; YIN, 1994), we conducted in-depth interviews with three agents directly linked to the succession process investigated herein. The interviews led to a *corpus* of accounts narrated by the respondents (PINEAU, 2006). We sought to perform an in-depth investigation of their social context so that they could reconstruct their experiences in their professional and succession trajectory. According to Abrantes (2014), the narratives should be accompanied by a discussion about the individual and the society, since the researcher intends to identify the relevance of the attitudes of the first towards the other group members. According to Machado (2018), the greatest challenge of the narratives is to reconstruct the relationships among the individuals in question. Therefore, the subjects' accounts on life, their trajectory in the company and the succession process would complement the subjective perspective of the institutional processes to which the agents are submitted, allowing a broader view of the individual/family/business interaction.

The case-control study method nested with the accounts requires that we work with a few interviewees, so as to deepen into their experiences. Thus, based on Barros and Lopes (2014), as well as on Dos Santos Bastos and De Souza (2018), we chose the three players that we considered paramount in this process: (1) the Succeeded subject, hereafter called

simply “the Succeeded”; (2) the Successor; and (3) the Consultant. That is how the three subjects will be identified throughout the text. Each of the respondents provided us with a particular perspective on the succession process under analysis, based on their personal views. This allowed us to address significant aspects of succession that are not typically addressed in research on this subject. The interviews were extended and recurrent, giving opportunities for comings and goings.

As soon as the interviews were transcribed, we proceeded to the analysis. Grounded on Bourdieusian categories such as field, *habitus*, *doxa*, *nomos*, *illusio*, and forms of capital (economic, social, cultural and symbolic), we proceeded to Discourse Analysis (DA), merging the theoretical reference of an author who has been linked to structural-constructivism, with an analysis technique belonging to the same school of thought (ARANHA; CARVALHO, 2017). One of the main advantages of using this technique is the possibility of interpreting what is said and rendered explicit and, above all, of working the ideology in between the lines, which is not necessarily explicit.

The discursive fragments of the respondents’ speeches that were selected, presented and analyzed in this paper were sequentially numbered, and the corresponding number is presented in parenthesis, at the beginning of each excerpt, so as to facilitate possible associations between the narratives and their location by readers.

## **THE DOMINANT AND THE DOMINATED: THE POWER DYNAMICS IN ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESSION**

The company investigated in this study, herein referred to as “Alpha,” is a large-scale company operating in the manufacturing industry. Alpha has more than 3,000 employees and annual net revenues exceeding 500 million BRL. Its capital is 100% Brazilian, and throughout its history, it has always been controlled by presidents coming from the same family nucleus, which holds the shareholding control. As usual, we have adopted a fictitious name for the research organization and avoided presenting detailed information to ensure its anonymity.

Our narrative and analysis surrounding Alpha’s succession process began when the then Succeeded subject took over the organization’s executive presidency, in the turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. His experience as a succession candidate aroused his interest in the subject and consequently influenced his actions when leading his own succession process.

(01) I succeeded the former CEO, [who was] a very dedicated person [...] He had been the CEO for many years, and everybody knew him. It was a tough succession. During my succession, at the time of [...], the professor [consultant’s name] took part, that was when I got interested in succession. Then, [consultant’s name] had been talking to some people, a group in the family, then one day he came up to me and said: [...] (Succeeded subject’s name), they’re going to choose you. That was in 2000. But I’m going to give you a piece of advice: Go away from here! Get lost! (SUCCEEDED SUBJECT).

(02) So, I did. I went to [American state] and stayed there for two and a half months at [university name], then I went to Europe to visit some plant installations. Because there was a shock in the perception of the CEO whom I succeeded, in terms of succession. We couldn't talk about it. It was a taboo, so that was the biggest problem (SUCCEDED SUBJECT).

The discursive fragment (01) presents the first evidence that successions are tied to a complex power dynamics aimed at conquering or maintaining the dominance in the field (that is, the organization), as it can be seen in the choice of the lexical item “tough” by the Succeeded subject to qualify the process that led him to the executive control of the organization. Other relevant evidence can be found in the sentence in which the interviewee comments on the following action of the consultant: “[...] he had been talking to some people, a group in the family [...]”. The indefinite determiner “some” implies that the conversation was held with certain individuals, to the detriment of others. It is inferred that there were different interests at stake in Alpha's succession process. Such interests would be defended by different groups within the family, as the phrase “a group in the family.” Once again, we come across an implied presupposition, for the indefinite article “a” indicates the existence of different groups in the family, instead of a single, coherent unit. The clause “they're going to choose you” implies that this particular group had significant power in Alpha's governance. This is so because this is an affirmative sentence, not mere speculation. The consultant had already mapped the power relationships and calculated the political aspects at stake. In Bourdieusian language, one could say that the consultant already had mastery over *illusio* and *nomos* in that particular organization or field.

In the discursive fragment (02), the segment “We couldn't talk about it. It was a taboo” proves how difficult it was for the top management team to discuss its power relationships. When he says that nobody was allowed to talk about succession, it is inferred that the discussions around the subject were restricted, only accessible to certain groups or persons.

We must emphasize that Alpha's statutory standards set an age limit for its executives to remain in office. When the Succeeded subject was assigned to the CEO position, he still had 15 years of management to lead. That was the time he had available to prepare his own succession and, possibly, to achieve a position on the board of directors (preferably as the chairman). From the formal point of view, the second succession process at Alpha, which is analyzed in this paper, began in 2011. Nevertheless, as it is possible to infer from the discursive fragments (03), (04) and (05), in 2006, the Succeeded subject had already begun to put into action, informally and disguisedly, his own succession plan.

(03) [...] but I felt that things started changing in 2006. Why? Because that was when he made a certain change in the board of directors. And because of this change, he took over certain assignments that were his, which are typical of a CEO, and of a president of a company of the [sector's name]. Those are specific here. So he took over some of those attributions and said: “Hey, sales manager, you should take care of this too; hey, plant manager, this is my responsibility, but you, [future successor's name], will take care of this too (SUCCESSOR).

(04) I woke up in the morning, I was having breakfast and said: “I’ll talk to [director’s name] and [director’s name].” That was in June 2006. I invited them for lunch. We went out to have lunch at a restaurant called [restaurant’s name] on [street where it is located]. I wasn’t in the mood...no friendly face, but we met for lunch anyway.. We sat at the table, and I realized the conversation wasn’t happening. I told them: “Look, I need you to leave the company” (SUCCEDED SUBJECT).

(05) It has to change now. Then I started talking about the change. Let’s do the following: you’ll have some time to retire, and I’ll have them pay your salary every month. You’ll get paid every month, but you must stay away from the company, ok? (SUCCEDED SUBJECT)

The words of the Successor in Fragment 03 shows that he made an accurate diagnosis of the context of the succession process that led him to the organization’s executive office. It is important to note that the Successor worked for many years as a consultant at a leading consulting firm specializing in business management, before being invited to work for Alpha. The experience accumulated in this area has possibly sharpened his ability to perceive details. In this fragment, he even specifies the date on which he believes the process began. Therefore, the Successor detected a significant change in the behavior of the Succeeded subject, as it can be observed in the following fragment: “Why? Because that was when he made a certain change in the board of directors.” According to the Successor’s view, the Succeeded subject was delegating tasks to prepare the potential candidates (Alpha directors) for the succession process to take place five years ahead. Nevertheless, as it can be seen later in this paper, this was not the Succeeded subject’s actual goal.

In Fragments (4) and (5), the Succeeded subject explains the actions taken by him to lead his own succession, according to his particular view of what would be best for the future of the organization. The sentence “I woke up in the morning, I was having breakfast and said: ‘I’ll talk to X [director’s name] and Y [director’s name]’” implies that the movements undertaken by the Succeeded subject had already been placed and derived from his tacit reading of the field. The two directors mentioned were members of the founding family and were part of the family group still associated with the former CEO. He needed room for maneuvering in the field, and by removing two players – in this case, the directors referred to as “X” and “Y” – he created an empty space in Alpha’s Board and the family, to be occupied by other players. The discursive fragments about retirement reveal a trade-off between the Succeeded subject and the former directors: they would lose their symbolic capital, but would continue to receive economic capital until they actually retired.

Later on, taking advantage of the liberated space, the Succeeded subject said his next step was to move some directors to new positions, as it is possible to observe in Fragment (06), which deals specifically with one of such changes.

(06) I arrive at Alpha, then I invite W [director’s name] to talk. “Listen, W, I need to move you to a new department”. W was the sales manager back then. And for me, the sales process is the most important in any company. [...] I call

W that very day and tell him “You have to occupy a different position. You’re always complaining about the industry department, so you’ll be relocated to the industry department”. I had to move him; he didn’t have the ideal profile (SUCCEEDED SUBJECT).

(07) [Successor’s name] got into the company in 2004. I needed to assign him to an executive position, but not a figurative one (SUCCEEDED SUBJECT).

(08) So, I needed to move [Successor’s name] and found him a position as a human resources manager (SUCCEEDED SUBJECT).

(09) “Take care of this for me, [Successor’s name].” At the time, it was HR, because here the HR management is traditionally assigned to the CEO. Back then, it was the only position directly subordinated to the CEO. “Take care of this,” so he left the spotlight, and things started moving forward (SUCCESSOR).

The segment “I had to move him, he didn’t have the ideal profile” in the discursive fragment (06) can be semantically interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation concerns the alleged lack of competence of the agent in question, according to the Succeeded subject’s perception, to head the sales department. The second possible interpretation is that the Succeeded subject was referring to the position of CEO while already thinking about the succession process; that is, he thought that, despite being a potential candidate in the view of Alpha’s Board of Directors, W did not have the ideal profile according to his evaluation. This interpretation is consistent with the information provided next by the Succeeded subject, as it can be seen in Fragments (07) and (08). The candidate who fitted the intentions of the Succeeded subject was the Successor. However, the organizational *habitus* privileged the members of the founding family. In fact, in the history of that organization, all previous CEOs had been family members. Therefore, the project of leading the Successor to the position required a strategy capable of overcoming the difficulties that would come along with power struggles.

Following his project, the Successor would occupy the management department subordinated directly to the presidency, that is, the Human Resources management (Fragment 09). That is, the Succeeded subject, as the Puppet Master, would go on pulling the Successor’s “strings”. Meanwhile, the Succeeded subject created a Human Resources office, which did not exist until then, to raise the Successor to the executive level of the organization (Fragments 07 and 08). Therefore, the choice of assigning the Successor to the human resources department was strategic for two reasons. Firstly, it would find no resistance by Alpha’s Board of Directors, as the HR was a staff department. Fragment (07) reveals that HR management was considered figurative, that is, it was a position that did not hold much symbolic power in the company’s everyday operations. Nonetheless, in the actual game, it became a department with symbolic capital from that moment onwards.

The second reason concerns the fact that, in Alpha, such department operates very closely to the CEO, as it can be verified in Fragment (9). Such proximity allowed the Succeeded

subject to work on the development of the candidate that was to succeed him, as it can be seen in Fragment (10). This is an example of a practical application of *conatus* as described by Bourdieu. The verbal expression “develop him” refers to the transmission of the values and experiences that the succeeded subjects deem relevant to be passed on to their successors. It should be emphasized that *conatus* involves a particular strategy of control, a way of perpetuating oneself in power through the actions undertaken by those who succeeded them and followed their footsteps.

(10) But then I started working. I had [Successor’s name] sitting by my side in the office and started to develop him. I’d take him on some trips, that sort of thing [...] (SUCCEEDED SUBJECT).

As soon as Alpha’s succession process formally began, a specialized consultant was hired to conduct the process. Initially, the process was conducted from two distinct fronts, namely: a search for external executives in the market, which led to the identification of three potential candidates; an internal selection among the directors, which led to the nomination of three other potential candidates, two of whom were members of the family that owns the company.

(11) Even during the mapping process, [there was] fierce resistance. It was absurd to think about markets. It was absurd to look for someone in the market that wasn’t a member of the [family name] to take over [Alpha] (CONSULTANT).

As Fragment (11) shows, there was no predisposition on the part of Alpha’s Board of Directors to hand over the management of the organization to an executive not belonging to Alpha’s staff, and, more particularly, to the founding family. The use of the expression “fierce resistance” shows that, within the power relationships established among the agents involved, the majority mobilized to render this possibility unfeasible.

Still regarding Fragment (11), it is evident that such resistance is not restricted only to individuals external to the organization. It also concerns the possibility of having a CEO who is not a member of the founding family, that is, someone who does not carry the family name. It is possible that the two-front model proposed by the Consultant eventually favored the Succeeded subject, albeit unintentionally, in his secret project of raising his chosen candidate (the Successor) to the position. This is why recommending external candidates to the board of directors faced “fierce resistance” against the plausible possibility of choosing someone in the organization who was not a family member; on the other hand, it showed that a candidate who was external to the family, but a member of Alpha was perceived as a less radical alternative.

(12) I’d say the following: “Look, I have two candidates”. It was a board meeting, and things were already moving forward. My candidate was the consensus candidate. But then I came up with a Machiavellian move, a stroke of genius. My candidate was [Successor’s name], but I didn’t tell anyone. Nobody knew it. And I played the consensus candidate, because I knew there would be some reaction against [Successor’s name] (SUCCEEDED SUBJECT).

At the beginning of the analysis, we stated that the Succeeded subject was conducting his own succession process “disguisedly.” It is worth noting, however, that this term has not been used derogatorily in this paper. The word choice aimed to stress the agent’s ability to play the game of organizational power relationships. The sentence “But then I came up with a Machiavellian move, a stroke of genius” corroborates this perspective. The use of the noun “move” demonstrates that the Succeeded subject itself is aware of the organizational power relationships, metaphorically, as a game. By using the adjective “Machiavellian” to characterize his move in the game, in addition to referring to Niccolò Machiavelli and his work, the Succeeded subject semantically classifies it as shrewd and cunning, demonstrating his commitment to making his will prevail over others against whom he competed. The account by the Succeeded subject in Fragment (13) demonstrates the agent’s sharp vision of power, which is interestingly aligned with Bourdieu’s theoretical perspective on symbolic power: “Symbolic power is, in fact, this invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it, or even that they themselves exercise it” (BOURDIEU, 2007, p. 7).

(13) There are reactions, of course, whether we like it or not, because the CEO position is a position of power. And people fight over power, even if it’s disguising it, or doing it under the table (SUCCEDED SUBJECT).

Hiding his true choice and taking actions to make his candidate viable during the process was strategic to prevent the candidate from suffering resistance that would render him unfeasible, as the Succeeded subject clarifies in the following passage:

(14) Because what couldn’t happen, and which didn’t happen in a sincere way, was that [Succeeded subject’s name] was nominating the CEO. If [Succeeded subject’s name] nominated the CEO, he would be weakened (SUCCEDED SUBJECT).

The phrase “and which didn’t happen in a sincere way” in the previous transcript, particularly the adjective “sincere”, explains the dissimulated behavior on the part of the Succeeded subject in conducting his succession process, as previously mentioned.

(15) The chairman of the board came up to me and said “[Consultant’s name], I think each candidate had better give a presentation about their specific plan”. I said: “Don’t do that. Don’t do that, because you’re going to assess their communication skills, and as much as I try to avoid the differences that I know, each of the three, I know what’s going to happen. Some people here will lose by lengths, and that would not necessarily be symmetrical in terms of how much they could contribute” (CONSULTANT).

(16) Then I said: “OK, then. But that will cause trouble”. So much so that later that was questioned by certain groups of shareholders. “That’s so unfair, because you know that [Successor’s name] has been trained [in that skill].” I gave the warning. “That guy came from [Name of the consulting company where the Successor had worked before joining Alpha]. He knows how to do that. He’s a PowerPoint pilot and he knows how to do things on stage” (CONSULTANT).

(17) And yet, in the end, because of this element, those who weren't happy with the decision brought up a discussion, in public, in another forum, saying: "You knew it, you gave a gun to a cop". I said: "It's true, we gave the warning. But you should know that the consultancy option, with or without PowerPoint, was like that" (CONSULTANT).

The facts narrated in Fragments 15, 16 and 17 refer to the development of a business solution plan that each of the three internal candidates remaining from the initial six-fold list should prepare to expose their strategic vision for Alpha. Curiously, as the Consultant explains in (15), the idea of incorporating this activity into the succession process, in order to evaluate the candidates as for this aspect, was proposed by the chairman of the board and not by the former CEO (the Succeeded subject), who was the most interested party in this proposal, for it favored his candidate significantly. Therefore, such fragments reveal the use of the cultural capital acquired by the candidates. During the process, the chairman of the board created an opportunity to assess this form of capital as a tiebreaker.

Therefore, after approximately 15 decades of history, Alpha's Board of Directors, even in the face of some resistance, elected, for the first time, a chief executive officer who did not belong to the founding family, but who had previously been an Alpha's employee. Also, this process possibly paved the way for the Succeeded subject to assume the chair of the board of directors, following up on his personal project of consolidating himself as the great dominant force in this social microcosm.

The collected data corroborates our view that succession processes are related to complex power dynamics aiming to conquer or maintain dominance in a given organizational field.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESSION AND POWER RELATIONSHIPS AT ALPHA: WHAT CONCLUSIONS CAN BE DRAWN?**

This paper has analyzed the succession process in a large-scale family business, framed by the contributions of Bourdieusian theory. Looking at the succession process as a real and symbolic power dynamics has allowed us to expand our understanding of the social phenomena surrounding management and family business. However, we must remind readers that this paper is only one among many possible glances at the succession process in family businesses. A glance that has sought to ponder about and register the complexity of what it is to work in a company, which must always be perceived as something multiple, dynamic, consisting of both lived and imagined experiences, of dreamed and fulfilled fantasies and projects.

From the *conatus* perspective, successions can signify the symbolic death of the Succeeded subject. If, in a certain way, the Succeeded subject is pleased by the perpetuation of power through the actions undertaken by the one who succeeds him/her and follows in his/her footsteps. However, the retirement, the end of his career, the restriction of domestic life, and the feeling of inactivity and obsolescence, among others, are also symbols of his own downfall and decadence. Perhaps that is why this form of symbolic death may not

apply to the Succeeded subject studied herein. A skillful puppet master and manipulator of power relationships, not only did he create his own successor, but he also drove his own rise to occupy the chair of Alpha's Board of Directors, by overcoming his adversaries and perpetuating his symbolic power in this large family organization and also in the scope of big enterprises, as Alpha is the national leader in its segment.

The data has shown that succession in organizations is much more than a simple exchange of agents. As succession is a game of power relationships, it involves planning, cunning and mastery over *illusio*, *doxa* and *nomos*. This power dynamics may involve manipulations and bluffing, such as in the occasion when the Succeeded subject led Alpha's advisors to believe that he supported a candidate other than the one he was actually working on to succeed him. Moreover, playing with power relationships also involves taking risks, such as when the Succeeded subject moved the "chess pieces" in his favor, by dismissing/retiring executives linked to a family nucleus that opposed his own, without the prior consent of Alpha's Board of Directors.

We observe that the *habitus* that framed Alpha's field aims to maintain the family domain over the organization, whether through shareholding control, the composition of the board, the board itself, and, more particularly, by holding the company's chairman position. Shareholders have broad power to intervene in executive functions and influence decisions, which are made by the majority and based on a form of consensus, which usually leads to resistance and struggle. Therefore, in the game of power relationships, as observed in some of the discursive fragments of this research, it is necessary to know how to cope with resistance. This is precisely what the Succeeded subject demonstrated to do well in overcoming the organizational *habitus*, which, throughout Alpha's centennial history, reserved its executive positions to family members, and was strongly averse to external candidates.

The importance of symbolic capital, especially in its integrated form, subjectified as cultural and social patrimony (BOURDIEU, 2007), has been observed in the data collected. Cultural capital is an essential form of capital for succession, as its possession legitimizes agents to occupy prominent symbolic spaces in organizations. Such importance was identified when the Succeeded subject had to leave the company when he was about to be chosen as Alpha's new CEO. At that occasion, he enrolled in a course at an American university and later visited European companies that operated in the same segment as Alpha, so as to deepen his knowledge of the market. Visiting European organizations also represented an enrichment of his social capital, by enlarging his network of contacts. However, it is important to emphasize that cultural capital is not restricted to intellectual property alone, but also the technical background of the agent in question. The Successor's technical competence, accumulated over many years of experience in business consulting, is represented in the case of the preparation of a business plan by the potential candidates and their presentation in PowerPoint format. The social capital was also clearly evidenced in the direct and "beneath-the-wings" contact between the Succeeded subject and the Successor.

Regarding *doxa* and *nomos*, we can draw a parallel with the existence of a governance clause in Alpha, concerning the age limit for the exercise of executive functions in the company.

In fact, this may have been one of the triggers of the agent's succession process. There was common sense in the company that the board of directors had to "own" the succession. Also, in previous circumstances, the importance of counting on the participation of external consultants to support and conduct the succession process had already been legitimized.

As succession processes involve power relationships, it is essential to highlight the agents' knowledge of their dynamics. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the mastery of *illusio*. The Succeeded subject proved to be an expert on the *illusio* of his field. An example of such expertise was the agent's ability to realize that the organization was mostly dominated by the same family nucleus linked to the former CEO, who had passed him by in the previous succession. He acknowledged that the board had to "own" the succession and correctly understood the importance of diligently conducting the process so as to avoid traumas among shareholding parties. However, he could also see the fragility of the company's governance, which was scarcely transparent and excessively focused on the interests of specific stakeholder groups. Given that scenario, he relied on his shrewdness and *illusio* in favor of his own interests to overcome the resistance of his opponents.

Although succession in organizations has been addressed in several specialized scientific publications, many studies approach the subject from the perspective of power relationships, conflicts, resistances and strategies of domination employed, through the narrative of the agents involved in the process. This article collaborates with the advancement of the study of succession in organizational studies by presenting data of this nature. Another collaboration of this paper to the scientific advance of this topic in organizational studies is the use of Bourdieusian theory in a study dealing with the symbolic power around the succession in a large-scale family organization, which sets a precedent for new studies.

This paper has presented data related to a particular case. Although power struggle around succession has been relevantly highlighted, other critical studies on the subject are needed to collect data from other organizations, with their own contexts and particularities, hence collaborating to broaden the knowledge on power relationships involving succession in large-scale organizations.

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