

Research Article

# Succession in Family Business: An Analysis through the Concept of *Conatus*



## Sucessão em Empresas Familiares: Um Olhar a partir do Conceito de *Conatus*

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** the purpose of this paper is to introduce some contributions of the *conatus* concept to the research of family business succession. **Methods:** succession is one of the most discussed topics in family business research. Hence, this theoretical paper aims to collaborate to the field through the exploration of Bourdieu's conceptual framework. **Results:** the *conatus* is a family project that should be perpetuated for and by its future generations. The understanding of succession processes through this concept enables, among other possibilities, the comprehension of elements such as the transmission of a founder's project to next generations of a business family responsible for the *conatus* perpetuation. **Conclusion:** the *conatus*, a concept positioned within Bourdieu's broader theoretical framework, offers alternatives for understanding and explaining the succession in family businesses in a more consistent, precise way, thus providing analytical foundations that can contribute for deepening our knowledge on still little explored topics in the field.

**Keywords:** family business; succession; family; Pierre Bourdieu.

### RESUMO

**Objetivo:** objetiva-se, com este artigo, introduzir algumas contribuições do conceito de *conatus* para a pesquisa sobre sucessão em empresas familiares. **Métodos:** a sucessão tem sido uma das temáticas mais discutidas no campo de estudos sobre empresas familiares. O presente trabalho, de natureza teórica, procura agregar contribuições a essa literatura, compreendendo a dinâmica da sucessão através da exploração do quadro teórico-conceitual desenvolvido por Bourdieu. **Resultados:** o *conatus* pode ser interpretado como um projeto cultivado pela família e que deve ser perpetuado para e pelas futuras gerações. Assim, a compreensão da sucessão a partir deste conceito permite, dentre outras possibilidades, apreender as particularidades da transmissão do projeto construído pelo fundador para as gerações sucessoras da família, que seriam os responsáveis por perpetuar ou não o *conatus*. **Conclusão:** o conceito de *conatus*, posicionado no âmbito do quadro teórico-analítico mais amplo trabalhado por Bourdieu, oferece alternativas para a compreensão e a explicação da sucessão em empresas familiares de uma forma mais consistente e aproximada da realidade observada nesses processos, fornecendo fundamentos que podem contribuir para a elucidação de perspectivas ainda pouco exploradas na literatura sobre esse tipo de organização.

**Palavras-chave:** empresa familiar; sucessão; família; Pierre Bourdieu.

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## INTRODUCTION

The field of research about family businesses has significantly evolved over the past few decades (Holt, Pearson, Payne, & Sharma, 2018; Payne, 2020; Sharma, Chrisman, & Gersick, 2012). Research on this type of organization has been conducted from a variety of topics and theoretical approaches (Short, Sharma, Lumpkin, & Pearson, 2016). Among the recurring studied research topics are succession, the interaction between family and business, strategy, entrepreneurship, governance and ownership structures, the differences between family and non-family businesses, culture, and performance (Borges, Lescura, & Oliveira, 2012; Litz, Pearson, & Litchfield, 2012; Sharma, 2004). These subjects converge toward the constitution of a broad and diversified theoretical framework, which makes it possible to problematize the strategic, managerial, and organizational particularities of family businesses.

In this scenario, there is room for considering specific elements that contribute for a deep understanding of family businesses. On the one hand, there are business elements, including strategy, strategic planning, succession planning, governance, professionalization, and performance, constituting variables that make it possible to apprehend differences in relation to non-family firms (De Massis, Kotlar, Campopiano, & Cassia, 2015; Jayamohan, Mckelvie, & Moss, 2017). On the other hand, there are family elements, including aspects related to social, emotional, cultural, symbolic dynamics, and family relationships, constituting perspectives for the identification of heterogeneity among different types of family businesses (Chrisman, Chua, Pearson, & Barnett, 2012; Neubaum, Kammerlander, & Brigham, 2019).

Among the topics that concentrate publication, succession has been the most investigated theme in family business research (Borges et al., 2012; Cisneros, Ibanescu, Keen, Lobato-Calleros, & Niebla-Zatarain, 2018; Daspit, Holt, Chrisman, & Long, 2016). Most of these studies focus on business aspects, such as governance, performance, growth, and factors of success and failure (Borges & Lescura, 2012). However, the subject still demands new research, since there are critical elements of this process that have not been understood with breadth and depth in the literature (Basco, Calabrò, & Campopiano, 2019; Bizri, 2016).

Here lies the research problem that motivated the elaboration of this article. The complexity of the succession is derived, among other issues, from the responsibility attributed to the future heir for perpetuating the family legacy. Such legacy carries both objective and material as well as subjective and symbolic

aspects involved in the family firm. This context has been explored by some studies about succession in family businesses (Blumentritt, 2016; Carr, Chrisman, Chua, & Steier, 2016; Gagné, Marwick, Pontet, & Wrosch, 2019; Jaskiewicz, Combs, & Rau, 2015; Parker, 2016; Richards, Kammerlander, & Zellweger, 2019). However, these works do not use theoretical approaches that are more adequate to understanding subjective elements, as the *conatus* concept, explored by Pierre Bourdieu (2010).

The *conatus* can be understood as a project enhanced by the family and that must be perpetuated for future generations. The term, as highlighted by Bourdieu (2010), is not simply a project of a physical, material, objective nature — as a heritage, an organization. The *conatus* notion presented by the author contemplates the values, beliefs, feelings, and emotions that are involved in this project, which was built and developed by the parents.

Thus, based on the *conatus* concept, there is a potential theoretical-analytical contribution to the advancement and development of studies about succession in family businesses. So, it is about recognizing the importance of succession in this scenario as grounded not only in the continuity of a formal transition and a purely managerial and patrimonial nature, but, essentially, in the perpetuation of symbolic elements that involve the family project.

Bourdieu (2010) puts into perspective the possibilities of the heir's adherence or not to the family project and discusses the disagreements that can emerge when he is not identified with the project developed by family members. Denying the *conatus* can represent a much greater burden for the predecessor, because this denial is not simply reduced to the end of the organization, but can lead to the symbolic death of the values and traditions built and worshiped by the family. Thus, through the *conatus*, it would be possible to better understand the manifestation of the succession and the way it is addressed by the involved actors (parent/heir), highlighting the role of each of them in the reproduction of the family legacy (patrimonial and symbolic).

This approach is relevant, as it allows the exploration of a research gap on succession in family businesses. Indeed, there is an expressive number of national and international works that carry out dialogues between Pierre Bourdieu's theories and organizational studies (Everett, 2002; Misoczky, 2003; Sieweke, 2014; Simione & Matos, 2017) without, however, mentioning family businesses. Furthermore, it is also not possible to identify in Bourdieu's works any reference to these firms (Queiroz, 2008), although many of Bourdieu's theories present reflections about the family institution

(Bourdieu, 1996a). It demonstrates the potential of applying his theoretical-conceptual framework to understand the complexity of such organizations (James, Hadjielias, Guerrero, Cruz, & Basco, 2020; Kushins & Behounek, 2020).

Taking advantage of this observation, the discussion moves to the succession process of family-owned businesses. Among many interpretations given to the *conatus*, attention will fall on the material and immaterial legacy of this project. Thus, the questions that guide this paper are: What does influence a succession process? What is different about the succession of family businesses? Does the way the heirs signify *conatus* interfere with the reproduction of the family project? How does this reproduction work between parent and heir happen? To answer these questions, the aim of this article is to introduce some contributions from the concept of *conatus* to the research about succession in family businesses. It is expected to discuss alternatives for the application of the theoretical-conceptual framework developed by Bourdieu (2010), demonstrating how this conception can offer paths to understand particular aspects of the manifestation of succession processes in this type of organization.

Hence, the text is organized as follows. First, it seeks to discuss the particularities of succession processes, revealing some perspectives that highlight its symbolic side. Following, some concepts of Pierre Bourdieu are presented, in order to prepare the reader for the understanding of *conatus*. Finally, Bourdieu's theoretical approach is articulated to studies about family businesses, showing how the concept of *conatus* is able to assist to a more complex understanding of the succession process. Lastly, some conclusions from this theoretical article are presented, highlighting its contributions and pointing out possibilities for future studies.

## FAMILY BUSINESSES AND THEIR SUCCESSION PROCESSES

Family businesses are a particular type of organization. These organizations are characterized based on an origin relationship, which involves the business dimension and the family dimension (Holt et al., 2018). This relationship delimits a singular dynamic (Powel & Eddleston, 2017), in which economic and social elements are present in the organizational structure (Chrisman et al., 2012). Lima (1999) states that family and business relationships are continuously connected, giving rise to values, behaviors, feelings, and distinct forms of action. In view of this, "the expression 'family business' would be, itself, a paradox" (Queiroz, 2008, p. 9), structured

from agents who interact in a dialectical perspective, representing opposite perspectives — family and organization (Combs, Shanine, Burrows, Allen, & Pounds, 2020).

It is also important to highlight the role of succession as an organizational feature and a distinctive element of family businesses. In general, authors in the field have pointed out that succession is commonly regulated by aspects that configure a process composed by cumulative stages. These processes involve the creation of the family business itself, the definition of a succession planning, the establishment of criteria for the selection, socialization and preparation of potential successors, and the delimitation of governance mechanisms to enable the generational transition (Daspit et al., 2016; Teston & Filippim, 2016). However, Carr, Chrisman, Chua and Steier (2016) also suggest that the interaction between members of different generations is based on a broader set of values, feelings, and emotions, which impose challenges on the dynamics and the effectiveness of these processes.

By involving the transfer of management and ownership between different generations of a family (Carr et al., 2016), succession can be viewed as a socially constructed process (Borges & Lima, 2012), based on the junction of the organizational sphere with the family sphere (Litz, 2008). It is a continuous, dynamic process that begins with the successors' birth and involves different aspects of the family firm and the business family, such as managerial, family, cultural, social, and strategic factors (Lambrecht, 2005). In addition, the succession includes an ideological transfer, a change in the power structure that promotes the emergence of new games and relationships for the organization (Brockhaus, 2004; Tucker, 2011).

Sharma (2004) highlights that the succession involves three central perspectives, associated with the business's desire for survival, the commitment to keep the business within the family, and the possibility for the successor generation to continue the project instituted by the predecessor generation. On the one hand, family members aim at the survival of the family firm, seeking the organization growth and the insertion of new management practices, innovations, and strategies (Zellweger, Nason, & Nordqvist, 2012), as it is a source of resource provision. On the other hand, the family wants the firm to continue over time, because, besides the economic aspect, there is also an emotional connection to the organization (Litz, 2008). This relationship, covered at the same time with rational and symbolic aspects, leads to the desire to maintain the business within the family (De Massis, Chua, & Chrisman, 2008). This

control maintenance would involve the intention of the predecessor generation to transmit the family business to members of future generations, as well as the intention of the successor generation to integrate and accept roles in the business conduction, thus ensuring the continuity of the organization (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015).

From this perspective, succession in the family business takes on a managerial character, becoming the object of planning actions, with the gradual entry of heirs into the organization (Teston & Filippim, 2016). It is noted that when the predecessor transfers the business to the successor(s), it can be strategically repositioned, taking on new managerial approaches and expanding its action area. However, this process can happen unexpectedly and suddenly, due to death, accident, or illness, forcing the predecessor to move away from conducting business (Lodi, 1998). In this case, the organization may suffer from the lack of preparation and training of the successor(s), a fact that may contribute to the discontinuity of the firm. So, there is a need to take actions about succession planning and successor training for the challenge of ensuring family business survival (Teston & Filippim, 2016).

A person that deserves prominence in the succession process is the founder (De Massis, Sieger, Chua, & Vismara, 2016), as he is the one who shapes the organizational culture, through his own beliefs and values (Pereira, Vieira, Garcia, & Roscoe, 2013). Despite being a sovereign figure in family businesses, the founder may have to leave management at any time due to his own human conditions, or even death. It does not necessarily imply the end of the business, since there is a possibility of continuing the firm's activities under the responsibility of new managers. However, death represents a critical event in the organization's history, as it results both in changes in the symbolic universe and in changes in work relationships. It is possible to say that the founder's death represents for the members of the organization a break with the old order, accompanied by a certain fear and anguish. These agents will move from a situation of comfort to a new condition, characterized by uncertainties and instability, since it will possibly be necessary an organizational restructuring, with the relocation of employees, in order to assume new roles and responsibilities (Lourenço & Ferreira, 2012).

Just as the founder represents one of the key elements in the succession, the heir is also essential in this process, since the interaction between both can generate numerous types of implications and interferences on the management and conduction of the activities of the family business (Blumentritt, 2016). Nevertheless, the successor's entry into the organization does not always

easily happen, as taking on the family project may not be the heir's desire (Parker, 2016). Successors may find themselves in the dilemma of taking over the family business or pursuing a professional career outside the business, breaking away from the family firm (Flores & Grisci, 2012; Richards et al., 2019). Thus, one of the fundamental elements in the succession process is to analyze whether and how the possible heirs identify themselves with the family project and have the desire to perpetuate it for the next generations (Gagné et al., 2019). It is necessary for the successor to be emotionally involved with the sense to continue the organization (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015). Therefore, it is valid for the founder to make an effort to educate the heirs, while also respecting their personal desires, in order to prepare them to take over the business in the future.

Based on this, it is essential to understand family businesses, especially the succession process, through a comprehensive prism, which makes it possible to involve elements beyond the financial, economic, administrative sphere, but which, above all, offers support to understand their symbolic aspects, the parental structure, and the relationships between the agents (Lescura, Brito, Borges, & Cappelle, 2012).

In fact, this field of studies has pointed out to conducting research that values succession based on subjective aspects. These research topics include the role of predecessors in symbolically delimiting the referred process (De Massis et al., 2016; Dou, Su, Shengxiao, & Holt, 2020), the intention of successors to be part of the family business (Gagné et al., 2019; Parker, 2016) and the way they assimilate and re-signify the generational transition (Blumentritt, 2016; Richards et al., 2019). There is also the involvement and influence of the family on succession (Chrisman et al., 2012; Powel & Eddleston, 2017) and the cultural and emotional factors that limit the effectiveness of these processes (De Massis et al., 2008), among other possibilities. Thus, succession should not be understood only from a strategic business perspective, but also from a subjective logic, typical of the family environment (Chrisman et al., 2012; Lescura et al., 2012; Queiroz, 2008), a movement that can make an important contribution to the broader debate on research about family businesses. Hence, in this paper, one of the elements to be explored refers to the family instance and intergenerational relations, in order to situate the role of the family as one of the central elements, not only for the organizational dynamics, but also for the whole succession, which includes the meanings attributed by the heirs to the family *conatus*.



## THE CONCEPT OF CONATUS

The concept of *conatus* was presented by Pierre Bourdieu in one of his articles — *The Contradictions of Heritage* — originally published in 1993, in the work *La Misère du Monde* (Bourdieu, 1993). For a better understanding of the idea of *conatus*, it is necessary to go through, even if briefly, other concepts explored in the work of the sociologist..

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical construct is based on the concepts of field and *habitus*. These are concepts that must be separately understood, although it is important to understand how they are articulated. The field is treated by Bourdieu (1996b; 2004) as a relatively autonomous social structure with its own rules of operation that only make sense for that specific context, because the logics that dynamize the *corpus* and the institutions of the different fields are very different. Therefore, as a microcosm, the field is relatively autonomous, since it has its own laws. However, as a macrocosm, it is submitted to social laws, which means that the field is not completely exempt from external factors.

Bourdieu (1996b; 2009) deals with different types of capital, understanding that they are the subject of disputes among social agents who act in the fields. For Bourdieu (2004), each field has specific forms of capital. In this sense, it is understood that there are different types of capital (social, cultural, symbolic), since the legitimacy of individuals in society does not occur only through financial possessions, that is, economic capital. There are other forms of legitimation that are socially valued, such as knowledge and social relationships, but which, however, are not based on material elements.

The notion of *habitus* complements the dynamic structuralism, treated by Bourdieu. The *habitus* constitutes a system of unconscious dispositions that is the result of the inculcation of objective structures and tends to reproduce practices adjusted to those structures (Bourdieu, 2007a). In other words, *habitus* can be understood as a socialized body throughout history that incorporated the structures of the world or a particular sector of that world, for example, a given field. Thus, at the same time that the *habitus* can be understood as a structured structure, it also operates as a structuring structure, reproducing what was incorporated by the agent (Bourdieu, 1996b; 2007b; 2009). These unconscious dispositions operate in acts of practical knowledge, conventional incentives of the agents, and direct strategies without rational calculation or an explicit position of purpose. *Habitus* is intrinsic to the agent, rooted in its subjective structure and can be externalized, objectified, through lifestyle, choices, routine practices, in the way of visualizing and interpreting reality (Bourdieu, 1996b; 2007b).

Among the agents that constitute a field, there is the exercise of symbolic power. It is a type of invisible power, an almost magical power, which allows obtaining the equivalent of what would be obtained by physical or economic force. It is a form of power that is only exercised when there is a complicity between those who exercise it and those who are submitted to such power. Thus, symbolic power is “capable of producing real effects without spending energy” (Bourdieu, 2009, p. 15), and the natural imposition of this dominant point of view occurs through a process called symbolic violence.

For symbolic violence to be exercised, it is necessary a previous work, almost invisible. In this process, agents feel the imposition, the obligation to have to pay a certain obedience without, however, contesting the obedience matter; that is, they subject themselves to the dominated in a naturalized way. The relationships are presented in a very appropriate way, because one cannot think of any other operational way, since that way was the only one presented to the subject. Therefore, symbolic violence is only established in the complicity of those who suffer it, including domestic relations (Bourdieu, 1996b).

In line with the previous idea, Bourdieu (1996b) states that one of the elements of symbolic violence is the transfiguration of domination relationships into affective relationships, or rather, the transformation of power into charisma, a kind of affective enchantment from the submissive by the dominator. This relationship of love, affection, is clearly present between agents linked by the generational aspect. It takes to the reflection that power exercised by the father/mother toward the child is configured by symbolic violence, in which the agent, socialized since childhood to accept the orders established by his/her responsible(s), admits the impositions to which is submitted. Even disagreeing with these impositions, those submitted often accept them naturally, given the existence of an affective bond.

Bourdieu (2007b) also comments that it is illusory to believe that symbolic violence can be overcome only through conscience and will. Symbolic violence is effectively expressed because its essence is imbued with affection and admiration, especially in cases where family relationships exist. These relationships are often confused with acts of respect, affection, love, which makes it possible to subdue the dominated to the dominant in a naturalized way (Bourdieu, 2007b).

The author recalls that the world is socially constructed and that, in this construction process, hierarchies are created and reproduced, as well as family structures, resulting in expressively symbolic violence (Schubert, 2018). *Doxa* contributes to the reproduction of institutions, structures, and hierarchies, once it is associated with unconscious

relational experiences and predispositions that are inherited. These are shared and unquestionable opinions and perceptions, closely linked to the field and the *habitus* that have become natural and self-evident among agents. Those who are subjected to *doxa* do not question its legitimacy, nor the legitimacy of those who exercise it (Deer, 2018).

Another important concept in understanding *conatus* is the family spirit, treated by Bourdieu (1996b). The family has a spirit of collectivity, which produces a specific view of the world, the result of a culture that has been developed and is transmitted among generations. The values that are worshiped within a family are considered sacred by its members who always seek, in some way, to keep them alive through a perpetuation work (Bourdieu, 1996b). For Bourdieu (1996b), the family appears as a *nonos*, a tacit vision that everyone has. This is because the family spirit is inculcated through a socialization work that takes place since childhood. This process helps in the construction of the agents' *habitus*, which will later influence their ways of thinking, acting, expressing, etc.

The family can be understood as a product of a long work, a work of symbolic and practical nature, which aims to establish behaviors and feelings, in a lasting way, to each of the members of its structure, aimed at ensuring their integration and perpetuation throughout history. This family work transforms "the obligation to love into a loving disposition" (Bourdieu, 1996b, p. 130) and enables the creation of the family spirit, which produces practices of generosity, gifts, devotion, kindness.

The family presents itself as an instrument of accumulation and transfer of different types of capital. For Bourdieu, "it is the main 'subject' of reproduction strategies," (Bourdieu, 1996b, p. 131), and this becomes clear, objectively, through the transmission of the family name. Reproduction occurs through a pedagogical action, resulting from a pedagogical authority which purpose is to establish communication with conditions to produce establishment and perpetuation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2010). It is interesting to analyze that the father imposes, in a declared way, a power toward his son in the process of transmitting the name. However, this power is not necessarily the result of his will, but a cultural tradition, understanding that the act of nominal transmission imposes the idea of being part of a united body, of a family that influences the decisions and behaviors of its members.

Bourdieu (1996b) also highlights the importance of preserving material heritage, such as the house, as a symbolic element of family perpetuation. Bourdieu (1996b) points out that extended families can be strongly integrated not only by:

... affinity of *habitus*, but also by the solidarity of interests, that is, both by the capital and for capital, economic capital, of course, but also symbolic capital (the name) and, above all, perhaps, the social capital (which we know to be the condition and effect of a successful management of the collective capital of the members of the domestic unit). In corporations, for example, family has a considerable role, not only in the transmission, but also in the management of the economic patrimony, especially through business connections that are also frequently family connections (Bourdieu, 1996b, p. 133).

It can be said that the family has a different logic from the economic, the calculating logic. Bourdieu (1996b) points out that the domestic economy distances itself from all economic relations, as it has a dynamic based on love. However, it does not mean that the family cannot be corrupted by calculating logic. The author comments that the patrimony, at the same time that unites the members of the family to guarantee its perpetuation, can incite the competition among them, even causing the separation between the heirs. In this sense, solidarity, love, complicity, trust, affection among members can be eroded by the "worm of calculation" (Bourdieu, 1996b, p. 175). So, to maintain its balance, the family must fight so that the logic of love prevails over all the others, because it is through this logic that the institution will reach its main objective: the union of its members and the continuity of its legacy.

In the midst of family issues, *conatus* emerges, an important concept in understanding the perpetuation of the family legacy. According to Fuller (2018), "although *conatus* does not appear frequently in Bourdieu's *corpus*, it conforms to his more general theorization" (Fuller, 2018, p. 221). This term has been explored by many philosophers, such as Espinosa, Descartes, and Leibniz, giving it different meanings. Bourdieu, on the other hand, recalling his work on marriage strategies, rescues the concept of *conatus* as "family drive" (Fuller, 2018, p. 225) as a project instituted by the family and that must be perpetuated for future generations.

However, it is worth mentioning that *conatus* is not simply a project of physical, material, and objective nature, such as a patrimony or an organization. In understanding the term, Bourdieu (2010) aggregates the values, beliefs, feelings, which are involved in this work built by the parents. The importance of succession in this scenario is based not only on the continuity of a material structure, but, essentially, on the perpetuation of symbolic elements that involve the family project. Inherit, for Bourdieu (2010), corresponds to perpetuate the *conatus*, accepting to be a docile instrument of this reproduction project.

Thus, Bourdieu (2010) discusses the succession phenomenon, specifically addressing the relationship between parents and children in the process of perpetuation of lineage and inheritance. The transfer of a heritage, of a legacy, usually occurs in a turbulent and even conflicting way, as it involves material and immaterial aspects, including affections, rivalries, and all forms of feeling.

Parents are central to this process, because succession is nothing more than the continuity of what was built by the parents. However, for perpetuation to occur, many times, the heir needs to distinguish himself from them, overcome them and, in a certain way, deny them: “such an operation does not occur without problems, both for the parent who wants and does not want this murderous operation, as for the son (or daughter) who is facing a tearing mission” (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 231). Thus, succession can be understood as the transposition of a dream, of a life project built by the parent, which places in his future heir the responsibility of perpetuating the *conatus*:

The father is the place and the instrument of a ‘project’ (or better, of a *conatus*) that is inscribed in its inherited dispositions (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 588). The point is that these dispositions are unconsciously transmitted as ‘a whole way of being.’ To inherit them is to perpetuate them. In this case, the son is caught up in the ‘dilemma’ of satisfying his father’s inheritance expectation while defining his own ‘being in the world’: preserving his father’s genealogical ‘project’ or defining his own. It is not surprising that the potential for conflict is always present; especially when the son does not identify himself with his father’s desire and refuses to be ‘inherited by inheritance’ (Fuller, 2018, p. 225).

Bourdieu (1996b) points out that the family is a body animated by the desire to perpetuate the *conatus*. In order to continue their social being with all their powers and privileges, the family creates “reproduction strategies, fertility strategies, marriage strategies, inheritance strategies, economic strategies, and, finally, educational strategies” (Bourdieu, 1996b, p. 36). In this context, the family spirit creates a kind of transcendent will that manifests itself in a collectively way, leading its members to act as part of a united body (Bourdieu, 1996b). Thus, there is an attempt for integration among relatives, in order to enable the established values of that structure to be transmitted from generation to generation.

In the succession process, the heirs are the substitutes for their parents and are charged with carrying out a “more or less unachievable” ideal (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 232). Bourdieu (2010) also reports that it is very common to find cases in which parents project their deepest desires on their children, demanding impossible achievements from them or that do

not always match their expectations. “This is one of the main sources of contradictions and suffering; many people continuously suffer due to the mismatch between their achievements and the experiences of their parents, which they are neither able to satisfy nor repudiate” (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 233). This way, succession is understood as a delicate process, as the anxieties of parents and children are at stake, generating conflicts, anguish, frustrations.

The heir called a loser is one who distorts the family project imposed on him. In the Bourdiesian perspective, when the heir does not perpetuate the family legacy, he or she is symbolically killing the project built by the parents. In this sense, denying the *conatus* comprises, in the most dramatic sense, abdicating a mission, which materializes in the rejection of the inheritance. Therefore, the family presents itself as the main responsible for the suffering of its members, since the greatest malaise experienced in this space is often developed inside it (Bourdieu, 2010).

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF CONATUS TO THE ANALYSIS OF SUCCESSION PROCESSES

In this section, we seek to understand how the concept of *conatus* can assist in research on succession in family businesses. It is, therefore, about rescuing central concepts from the theoretical framework presented by Bourdieu, especially the idea of *doxa*, symbolic violence, reproduction, and family spirit. Such concepts are closely linked to the idea of *conatus* and, consequently, to the understanding of the referred process in family businesses.

As previously seen, the social space is constituted by different fields that are dynamized by the agents that fight for the appropriation of the different capitals. Indeed, family businesses, being a particular type of organization, are immersed in various fields. Two of them have a relevant influence on their functioning — the economic field and the family field (Queiroz, 2008). The integration between these two fields, with their different laws and rules, delimits the management of these companies in a peculiar way, printing and reinforcing the whole dynamics of the relationship between family and business (Chrisman et al., 2012; Powell & Eddleston, 2017).

However, the family business itself can be considered as a field. According to Thiry-Cherques (2006), the freedom to demarcate the field is given by Bourdieu’s own example, who worked with a huge variety of fields segmented according to their own logic and specific interests (scientific, literary, power, religious, legal, civil construction, regional economy, painting, higher education, political, economic, journalism, intellectual production, cultural production,



political science, marketing, haute couture, comics, art, physics, among others).

Bourdieu (2005), in his article *The economic field*, clarifies that, when the researcher enters the “black box that constitutes the firm” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 41), it is possible to find a structure, the field of the firm, which has its own operating rules, power relations, and capital disputes. Complementing this idea, in the work *Les usages sociaux de la science: pour une sociologie clinique du champ scientifique*, Bourdieu (2004), when analyzing a research institution, the INRA — Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (in Paris), considers it as a field, given its particular logic and relative autonomy.

In addition, it should be noted that family businesses are involved in the field of power, since these firms are spaces characterized by disputes and rivalries, both financial and sentimental. Thus, it appears that the dynamization of family businesses occurs through the dispute for different types of capital (Bourdieu, 1996b; 2009). The agents, to gain legitimacy in the space in which they are inserted, play in the search for obtaining economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Recognizing that, in family businesses, agents compete for other forms of capital (besides to economic), makes it possible to carry out a more detailed analysis of these businesses, covering social, emotional, and symbolic aspects (Daspit et al., 2016).

In the investigation of family businesses, *habitus* presents itself as an essential element to understand the process of incorporation of beliefs, histories, codes, and culture by agents that, certainly, will have implications for the succession process. As the family and business spheres are intertwined, there is no precise segregation between the values cultivated in the family and those cultivated in the organization (Lima, 1999; Queiroz, 2008). Thus, through *habitus*, it becomes possible to understand the socialization of agents, the process of inculcating certain values that will even enable to guarantee the generational perpetuation of a family firm. Bourdieu (2007a) points out that the guiding principle for the vocational choice of many agents is *habitus*. *Habitus* tends to “produce practices and, in this way, careers objectively adjusted to the objective structures” (Bourdieu, 2007a, p. 202). Like this, for Bourdieu (2007b), one never knows who makes the strict choice, whether the agent or the institution.

The *habitus* facilitates the involvement of agents with different fields. When the agent creates a link with a field, it emerges what Bourdieu (1996b; 2007b) calls *ilusão*, that is, the sense of the game. In family businesses, the *ilusão* is established by individuals when they get involved with the business and struggle for its perpetuation over generations. In these businesses, the involvement is more intense than

in other firms because organizational values are mixed with family values (Chrisman et al., 2012; De Massis et al., 2015).

The pedagogical action, expressed by violence, is manifested in a subtle, invisible way, and with complicity among the involved agents, as this form of power expression is common in family relationships. It is common in many family structures to practice the obedience from the youngest in relation to the older ones, from the successors to the predecessors (De Massis et al., 2016; Kubiček & Machek, 2020). In these cases, obedience is hardly contested, since this relationship is legitimized by society and is seen in a naturalized way by agents. People who are connected by the parental relationship are involved by affection, love, liking, admiration, that is, essential elements to avoid making any kind of domination explicit.

The family spirit, treated by Bourdieu (1996b), ensures that the family institution operates as a united body, moved by practices of solidarity and cordiality. This united body seeks to perpetuate itself in order to keep alive the values cultivated in the family over generations. There is, in this particular aspect, an interesting approximation with what is currently discussed in the field of studies about family businesses around the role and the influence of family values on the business. The presence of the family in the business is what often fuels the desire for business continuity (Combs et al., 2020). Thus, according to Bourdieu (1996b), the material heritage is, somehow, an element of symbolic representation of family perpetuation.

In the associations between Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical approaches and the logic of family businesses, *conatus* emerges as a potential concept for a better understanding of the succession processes that occur in these companies. Such an association makes it possible to understand the succession from a more complex perspective, especially from the heir's point of view. In this case, the feeling of belonging to the project and the feeling of being obliged to perpetuate the family legacy are inculcated since childhood by the parents, through educational practices (Bourdieu, 2010).

Symbolic violence happens through a pedagogical action carried out by a pedagogical authority that, due to its legitimacy, performs an “inculcation work that must last long enough to produce permanent information; that is, the *habitus* as a product of interiorization” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2010, p. 53). This pedagogical work of reproduction can be demonstrated by parental relationships and in the education process, which not only transmits family values, but also has the purpose of arousing the heir's interest on the organization when there is a firm linked to the family name. The pedagogical action carried out by the pedagogical authority (parent) can happen from early



childhood, in order to create a feeling of belonging to the family legacy.

Corroborating that, [Blumentritt \(2016\)](#) and [Parker \(2016\)](#) point out that, in family companies, it is common for parents to integrate their children since their childhood into the business's day-to-day activities. Thus, in the successor's socialization process, it is natural that the daily life of the organization becomes part of its imaginary, enabling a transmission of the values constructed and cultivated by the entrepreneurial family. It is in these initial contacts of the successor with the organization that a sense of identification and the need to perpetuate the *conatus* are built. Accordingly, [Kets de Vries \(1993\)](#) points out that, at several times, the business influences the identity of family members, who see it as a reflection of themselves.

Therefore, in the field of family business, a *doxa* is created, which according to [Deer \(2018\)](#), legitimizes those who exercise it and cannot be questioned by those submitted to it. So, taking over the family business is a rule placed to the heir before the moment of succession. In this sense, in succession studies, the heir's point of view must be analyzed with special attention, since he must be seen as a fundamental part for a successful transition and for the continuity of the organization ([Parker, 2016](#)). If, on the one hand, it is relevant to assess issues that involve the successor's technical and managerial skills ([Teston & Filippim, 2016](#)), on the other hand, it is equally essential to investigate the meaning that the heir attributes to the family project, that is, what is the importance given by him to the material and symbolic perpetuation of this *conatus*.

Regarding the disagreements arising from the succession, it is noted that they can occur between the provisions of the heir and the obligations imposed to him/her. In this process, it is essential that the heir really feels identified with the project instituted by the family ([Blumentritt, 2016](#)). Otherwise, there may be contradictions related to the commitment of the future successor that, many times, only takes over the family business due to the lack of other working options or due to parents' demands ([Parker, 2016](#)). The succession plan must be linked to the commitment of predecessors and successors to the family business, as well as to the ability to pass it on to future generations ([Gilding, Gregory, & Cosson, 2015](#); [Umans, Lybaert, Steijvers, & Voordeckers, 2020](#)).

[Blumentritt \(2016\)](#) points out that successors are generally pressured to choose the same career developed by their parents. This can be translated by the relentless search for family perpetuation ([Carr et al., 2016](#); [Jaskiewicz et al., 2015](#)). [Rossato and Cavedon \(2004\)](#) report that because the successors start to work at a very young age and stay together for a long time with their parents, it reflects a feeling of following what they were designed to, as if it were a mission.

However, at the same time that these heirs take pleasure in what they do and are identified with the business, they go through a certain frustration, because they had no choice but to perpetuate the family business.

[Machado \(2003\)](#) explains that, in an attempt to continue the family project, the individual often starts to renounce his own values, relegating his freedom and personal desires, to integrate himself and be well accepted in a certain group. In such cases, the successors will continue with a project because they feel obliged to maintain a legacy built over the years, which is certainly imbued with feelings and a generational tradition. The denial of own values can start from childhood, according to [Bourdieu \(2007b\)](#), since socialization occurs through a permanent transaction, "in which the child admits renunciations and sacrifices in exchange for recognition, consideration, or admiration" ([Bourdieu, 2007b, p. 203](#)).

Another verified situation is when the founder assumes that his figure is irreplaceable ([Pereira et al., 2013](#)). In this case, the predecessor may unconsciously belittle his son, trying to discredit him of his ability to perpetuate the family business with the expected competence. Thus, a great expectation can be created, making the successor insecure and powerless to continue a project that was carefully conceived and built ([Kets de Vries, 1993](#)).

There is a high expectation from managers that their companies will continue to be managed by relatives, more specifically by their direct descendants. In this sense, it is up to the founder to awaken in the future heir the interest in continuing the family business ([Cadieux, 2007](#); [De Massis et al., 2016](#)). In this perspective, [Lambrecht \(2005\)](#) points out that one of the problems related to family businesses corresponds to the choice and preparation of family members as successors for the organization. This choice is usually predetermined by the family, and such individuals assigned to the position are encouraged since childhood to be inserted in the logic of family businesses, representing roles granted to them, which may or may not fit in with their own personal and professional choices.

[Teston and Filippim \(2016\)](#) emphasize that the family firm's founders are concerned with the professional vocation of the successor. So, many successful founders invest in programs to prepare the heir to continue the business, involving undergraduate courses, vocational guidance activities, psychological counseling, among others. These actions can represent a way of inculcating in the heirs the need for perpetuation of the family business. Faced with so many investments, the future successor often finds no other way out than to take on the project built by family members.

From the Bourdieu's point of view, these actions would correspond to a form of symbolic violence, as domination is usually covered with affectivity, generosity, feelings common to the family space. Bourdieu (1996b) clarifies that, especially in the relationship between generations, it is common to recognize debt in relation to the author of the generous act. In this sense, even if he does not present the desire to continue the family business, the heir realizes that the succession would correspond to a gratitude act to the investments and affection granted by his parents.

On the other hand, it is evident that, nowadays, it is more common for children to choose a different path from the one followed by their parents (Parker, 2016). However, it turns out that denying a family project is still a complex issue, because when the heir takes a different path, he symbolically kills the parental project in its origin (Bourdieu, 2010).

Given the presented elements, we sought to point out the importance of *conatus* in the succession of family businesses. A key element in this process is to understand what is the meaning attributed by the heirs to this family project. It is also important to understand how the pedagogical work was carried out with the successors and whether this work was able to instill in the agents the feeling of belonging to the *conatus*. It may seem, at first, that the act of preparing the heir regarding his administrative skills is the central element in ensuring a peaceful and successful succession. However, in this article, it is intended to argue that the succession of these organizations involves different aspects from those present in non-family companies. And, perhaps, the root of this distinction lies in the *conatus* and in the meaning for heirs. When assuming the peculiarity of the succession, the need for sociological studies about these processes is revealed, once the family is a central element in this discussion.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this theoretical article was to introduce some contributions from the concept of *conatus* to research about succession in family businesses. For that, conceptual perspectives pertinent to the theoretical-analytical framework developed by Bourdieu (2010), were discussed, demonstrating how this conception can offer paths to understand particular aspects of the succession processes in this type of organization.

Pierre Bourdieu, throughout his academic career, has developed numerous works, whose contribution reaches different fields of knowledge, such as education, fashion, communication, politics, culture, art, literature.

This paper sought to explore the potential of the author's theoretical contribution to the study of succession in family businesses, from the rescue of the notion of *conatus*. It advocates for the necessary investigation of family businesses, in a broader view, and about succession processes, in a more specific way, through alternative approaches to those usually explored in the field. Therefore, it is a matter of effectively recognizing and valuing the finding that the management of these projects — and the succession processes linked to them — contemplates economic and strategic issues, but also affective, emotional, and symbolic aspects. It covers business and family aspects.

The application of the concept of *conatus* in succession studies involves exploring the particular dynamics present in the interaction between family and business during these processes, but is not restricted to it. From an empirical point of view, there are several topics to be considered and which can be largely and deeply influenced by the nuances and particularities of *conatus*, which reinforces the relevance of the problematization of this Bourdieusian theoretical-conceptual framework in the context of family organizations.

Among these issues, there are the choice of successors, their socialization (which can happen in a very interesting perspective of primary and secondary socialization in the family organizational environment), and the construction of the legitimacy of these successors in the organization. There is also the complexity of the interaction between members of predecessor generations and successor generations in the strategic and managerial conduction of the business, the construction of their autonomy and their leadership position (with space for the introduction of innovations and entrepreneurial actions in the firm). Finally, we see the interpretation and performance in face of the culture of the family firm, the complexity of the gender relations within and between business family generations, and the succession planning and governance among the aspects that can be studied from the proposed perspective.

The above-mentioned topics form a set of issues that converge to the configuration of an agenda for future research about different possibilities of *conatus* manifestation in succession processes. These questions allow us to observe the potential that the notion of *conatus* assumes for unveiling multiple perspectives of analysis about the succession and for the emergence of a different view at the environment and the logic of its performance and about the organizations where it occurs.

Another study suggestion involves the empirical application of the articulations presented in this theoretical article, observing the meanings attributed to

*conatus* by members of different generations in family businesses in a variety of contexts, sectors, sizes, countries, and regions. Furthermore, following the path proposed by Queiroz (2008) and the considerations made here, it is suggested that future works explore other concepts treated by Bourdieu, investigating how the concepts of field, *habitus*, symbolic violence, and *doxa* can assist in understanding the dubious, complex, and conflicting nature of family businesses.

Given this context, from the theoretical point of view, the concept of *conatus*, positioned within the broader theoretical-analytical framework worked by Bourdieu, offers alternatives for understanding and explaining succession in family businesses in a more consistent way, providing specific basis that can

contribute to the elucidation of perspectives that are little explored in the literature. To discuss the succession processes through Bourdieu's contributions, considering the 'dilemmas' faced by the successor, is important, as the longevity of family businesses constantly comes up against the initiative for perpetuation, the desire or not to conduct the project (*conatus*) for the next generations of the entrepreneurial family. Therefore, it is justified the relevance of bringing sociological and/or anthropological discussions to organizational studies that include parental relations in a broader way and that involve the dynamics of the interaction between family and organization, in a more specific way, then assisting researchers in understanding this complex phenomenon that is the succession in family business.

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