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Nurturing offspring's affective commitment through informal family governance mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Informal family governance mechanisms are the self-enforcing interactions and symbols used by a business family to nurture family relationships and manage expectations. While previous research points to the positive influence of identity and career alignment on the engagement and commitment of next-generation members towards their family enterprise, it has remained unclear how this alignment develops. This exploratory study of a European business family, founded in 1826, points to informal family governance mechanisms and ownership alignment —a previously neglected phenomenon— to bind the identity and career alignment, thereby nurturing the affective commitment of offspring towards the family business. In addition to the theoretical contributions to the family governance and affective commitment literatures, this study builds usable knowledge for business families and their advisors.

1. Introduction

This study investigates how business families use informal family governance mechanisms to instill and nurture affective commitment to the family business(es) within offspring in the pre-entry stage of succession. Business families are families that "have founded and continue to control at least one established and successful family business, plan to continue to have family members involved in business venturing, and regard the management of long-term family wealth rather than of any one business as the focal objective" (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2018, p. 528). This transgenerational intent and family wealth objective (Habbershon & Pistrui, 2002), which embodies continued pursuit of financial and nonfinancial goals, requires that business families organize themselves in order to maintain long-term and committed family ownership positions spanning generations. Despite the fact that business families have been recognized as core drivers of economic growth and enduring entrepreneurial activity (Habbershon & Pistrui, 2002; Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2018; Steier, Chrisman, & Chua, 2015), frequently establishing and transforming firms, or even changing from one industry to another, mainstream governance research and theory has not addressed this important issue. Indeed, the focal unit of analysis in this literature has been the business, not the *business family*.

To attain their objective of sustaining committed family ownership positions crossing generations, business families necessitate family governance (Suess, 2014; Suess-Reyes, 2017) to organize themselves. Family governance comprises mechanisms of stewarding the business family in the long run, with the primary aim of enhancing and/or safeguarding a well-functioning business family, and sound relationships between the business family and the business(es) it owns (e.g., Suess, 2014). While previous research has mainly focused on more *formal* mechanisms of family governance, such as family meetings, councils, and constitutions (e.g., Arteaga & Menéndez-Requejo, 2017), the topic of *informal* family governance mechanisms is widely understudied. This is surprising as commitment of family members towards their family enterprise, we argue, is rarely organized through formal contracts or arrangements, but is, in functioning business families, rather instilled and nurtured through social mechanisms, i.e., social processes between important others and individuals that influence the individual to think and act in a certain way (Hedström & Swedberg, 1996; Merton & Merton, 1968). Hence, in this study, by unravelling the informal mechanisms of family governance that guide behavior, we aim to address this important gap in the literature. As a working definition,

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we define informal *family* governance mechanisms as "relational, interactive and self-enforcing mechanisms used by a business family to help nurture more or less complex family relationships and manage expectations."

As the main objective of business families is the continuance of transgenerational family wealth by family members who continue to engage in successful business venturing building on the former generation's legacy (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2018), successful intrafamily succession is of great importance. Research has identified affective commitment —"emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organization" (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67)— of child-successors as an important predictor of their performance in the successor role, and above all, of their continued pursuit of the business family's financial and nonfinancial goals (McMullen & Warnick, 2015; Sharma & Irving, 2005). However, we know little about how affective commitment to the family business(es) can be developed within the next generation (McMullen & Warnick, 2015). Given that business-owning families that pay insufficient attention to *family* governance are known to risk to lose the family's commitment to the business (Gersick & Feliu, 2014; Suess-Reyes, 2017), we address this issue by examining how business families/parents use informal family governance mechanisms to instill and nurture affective commitment to the family business(es) within offspring in the pre-entry stage of succession.

To answer this question, we conduct an in-depth case study of a north-western European business family (established in 1826) in its fourth generation of family ownership that aims to transfer the businesses to the fifth generation. For this single case study, data from twenty-four interviews with twenty-one family members involved as owners, partners and offspring, individually and in groups, are used. Symbolic interactionism is used as an interpretive lens, as it "seeks to understand the behaviors of individuals through the creation of meaning that comes through interactions with others" (James, Jennings, & Breitkreuz, 2012, p. 96; Jennings, Breitkreuz, & James, 2014). This theory from family sciences is particularly helpful to advance understanding of meaning and interaction within the business family (James et al., 2012) in which informal family governance mechanisms and affective commitment reside.

This study contributes by uncovering and theorizing *symbolic* and *interactive* informal family governance mechanisms that nurture affective commitment to the family business(es) within offspring in the pre-entry stage of succession, thereby responding to calls to heighten our understanding of informal governance mechanisms in general (Chrisman, Chua, Le Breton-Miller, Miller, & Steier, 2018) and family governance in particular (e.g., Suess-Reyes, 2017; Suess, 2014). Moreover, by taking the business family as the unit of analysis, we advance the scientific debate in the governance and symbolic interactionism literatures. Business families often consist of multiple families that jointly run a portfolio of businesses, and appropriate family governance is required to attain continuity in long-term family wealth creation (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2018). Our study shows that to achieve this goal, business families use symbolic and interactive governance mechanisms, hence reinforcing the importance of symbolic interactionism in business families. We also theorize from our case findings a new antecedent of successor affective commitment —*ownership alignment*— complementing and binding identity alignment and career alignment, thereby expanding Sharma and Irving (2005) and Dawson, Sharma, Irving, Marcus, and Chirico (2015) insights on affectively committed successors. Additionally, by revealing informal family governance mechanisms that foster affective commitment, we also contribute to the affective commitment literature and its call to examine underlying mechanisms that may explain in more detail affective commitment's activation and development (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Family governance

Family governance refers to the mechanisms of stewarding the business family in the long run, with the primary aim of enhancing and/or safeguarding a well-functioning business family, and sound relationships between the business family and the business(es) it owns (e.g., Suess, 2014). Family governance mechanisms are relational by nature and stimulate dialogue, transparency and trust (Lambrechts, Voordeckers, Roijakkers, & Vanhaverbeke, 2017; Suess-Reyes, 2017). Moreover, family governance strengthens the family members' identification with the family and the business, and fosters the intergenerational orientation of family members (Suess-Reyes, 2017). Sound parenting lies at the core of the family governance process, as it involves the early transmission of family values, attitudes, and beliefs (Martin, 2001). Open and transparent communication is integral to such parenting. As Martin (2001, p. 92) argues, "a viable family governance process cannot survive in an atmosphere of ignorance and distrust."

Business families can use a variety of family governance mechanisms depending on the complexity of the family, the business and the issue at hand. For example, nuclear families may start to meet and discuss family- and business-related issues at family gatherings and meetings, whereas more complex, multigeneration business families grow towards the use of more institutionalized mechanisms such as family councils, committees and foundations (Habbershon & Astrachan, 1997; Martin, 2001; Suess-Reyes, 2017). Family governance mechanisms are not legally binding but may become morally binding over time and therefore be even more effective to guide behaviour than legally binding documents. These mechanisms are trust-based institutions and documents that help families to discuss and/or document family influence in the business (Habbershon & Astrachan, 1997; Martin, 2001; Suess, 2014). Some research suggests that formalized mechanisms such as family constitutions and family councils may create a strong and unified business owning family, potentially enabling strong financial performance (e.g., Arteaga & Menéndez-Requejo, 2017). However, the applicability of these formal mechanisms in all aspects of the families' governance process has been questioned (McMullen & Warnick, 2015). For example, by writing down arrangements in the early stages of a succession process, these formal mechanisms could incite calculative or normative behaviour among the next generation, possibly deterring affectively committed successors and jeopardizing the family's cohesiveness in the future (Ghoshal & Moran, 1996; Sharma & Irving, 2005). Prior research has also suggested that in family businesses, long-term family relationships can foster mutual trust and shared values, which may reduce the need for formal governance (Corbetta & Salvato, 2004; Jaskiewicz & Klein, 2007; Pieper, Klein, & Jaskiewicz, 2008). In business families, a dual governance structure of formal and informal mechanisms seems to be more suitable because of the duality of its financial and nonfinancial goals (Calabrò & Mussolino, 2013; Poppo & Zenger, 2002). However, which *informal* governance mechanisms families use to nurture social-behavioral phenomena such as affective commitment and family cohesion remains largely unknown (e.g., Pieper, 2007). This is surprising given the importance of these phenomena for business families to attain their goals. The lack of academic attention to informal governance mechanisms may be because these mechanisms are less easy to study due to their implicit nature (Anderson et al., 2006; Calabrò & Mussolino, 2013). In the *business* governance literature, scholars talk about informal governance mechanisms, but they do so using general expressions that say little about the underlying constitutive mechanisms. Examples of broad terms used are "relational norms and trust" (Anderson et al., 2006; Calabrò & Mussolino, 2013, p. 363), "pressures for conformance, accommodation, or adaptation to the norms and values of society and/or the interest of salient stakeholders" (Chrisman et al., 2018, p. 172), informal self-enforcing agreements built on "trust relations (direct experience) or reputation (indirect experience)" (Dyer & Singh, 1998, p.

669) and "close social interactions" (Mustakallio, Autio, & Zahra, 2002, p. 206).

In family governance, informal family governance mechanisms could be valuable, as business families may find formal procedures and written ground rules too controlling and restraining, particularly in the development of affective commitment among their offspring (McMullen & Warnick, 2015). Empirical evidence of informal governance mechanisms in this area is limited. The little research that does exist suggests that families enhance family cohesion by using a variety of mechanisms such as having fun together, celebrating milestones and accomplishments, family name, history and photographs (Pieper, 2007). In addition, parents seem to use verbal messages to positively influence offspring's entrepreneurial intent (Bloemen-Bekx, Voordeckers, Remery, & Schippers, 2019). Furthermore, informal mechanisms such as interviews can be used to involve the next generation in an informal manner in major decisions in the family business (Meier & Schier, 2016). When business families with an intergenerational intent fail to use effective mechanisms, loss of commitment among family members and loss of continued transgenerational wealth creation in the family business(es) may be the result (Gersick & Feliu, 2014). However, when business families use appropriate mechanisms to build interpersonal, trusting family relationships, the desire to contribute to the family business in the future may be enhanced (Mustakallio et al., 2002; Pieper & Astrachan, 2008). Given the discussion thus far, it appears that there is a need to generate a deeper understanding of informal family governance mechanisms, enabling us to "see beyond the surface-level" (Anderson et al., 2006, p. 103) descriptions we now encounter in both research and practice. In this study, we investigate how a fourth-generation business family uses informal family governance mechanisms in the context of affective commitment development within offspring in the pre-entry stage of succession. We expect these informal mechanisms to play an important role and to be observable in this particular context, which enables us to study the phenomenon, in situ, as it unfolds.

2.2. Affective commitment

Commitment can be defined as a force, a frame of mind or psychological state, that drives an individual towards a course of action and is projected onto one or more targets (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). As a specific form of commitment, affective commitment focusses on the emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in, for example, the family business (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Research has identified ownership as an important predictor of affective commitment (Memili, Zellweger, & Fang, 2013), and affective commitment, in turn, has been positively associated with a range of firm outcomes. For example, affective commitment appears to be a predictor of higher identification, involvement and loyalty to the business among workers in family businesses than among those working in nonfamily businesses (Vallejo & Langa, 2010). In addition, affective commitment to the organization seems to stimulate product development through knowledge internalization (Chirico & Bau, 2014), higher strategic flexibility (Déniz-Déniz, Cabrera-Suárez, & Martín-Santana, 2018) and stronger internal and external goal setting (Zahra, Hayton, Neubaum, Dibrell, & Craig, 2008). Less attention has been paid to the development of affective commitment in other contexts, such as the early stages of succession in the family. This lack of attention is surprising, as having affectively committed successors in the family is an important condition for intergenerational succession (Daspit, Holt, Chrisman, & Long, 2016; De Massis, Chua, & Chrisman, 2008; Parker, 2016). Given that the attitudes of offspring towards their family business are initiated at an early stage and often begin to take shape as they first move towards a career (Ward, 1987), business families could start nurturing affective commitment at an early stage (Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2005; Houshmand, Seidel, & Ma, 2017; Stavrou & Swiercz, 1998).

Sharma and Irving (2005) distinguish among four types of commitment —affective ("want to contribute"), normative ("ought to contribute"), calculative ("have to contribute") and imperative ("need to contribute")— and argue that all four can drive next-generation family members to join the family business. Offspring who choose to pursue a career in their family business due to normative, calculative or imperative commitment are often driven by extrinsic factors such as feelings of obligation and dependency, cost avoidance and loss of investment. McMullen and Warnick (2015) theorize that parents who encourage extrinsic motivation over intrinsic motivation may hinder their offspring's development. Although normatively committed successors can be effective leaders, affectively committed successors are more intrinsically motivated to contribute to the family business (Dawson, Irving, Sharma, Chirico, & Marcus, 2014). Affective commitment is based on "a strong belief in and the acceptance of the organization's goals, combined with a desire to contribute to these goals, and the confidence in one's ability to do so" (Sharma & Irving, 2005, p. 19). Hence, affective commitment is seen as the most desirable form of commitment. Affectively committed offspring are considered to be attractive succession candidates who "go the extra mile" and show leadership to contribute to family business goals, growth and entrepreneurship (Dawson et al., 2014; Eddleston & Kidwell, 2012). Moreover, offspring who are affectively committed to the business are more likely to pursue a career in the family business because family norms, values and attitudes are already internalized (Handler, 1994; Meyer & Allen, 1991). Sharma and Irving (2005) propose that identity and career alignment are important antecedents of affective commitment. *Identity alignment* is "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 23). Because work and family lives are often intertwined, business families, including their offspring, are prone to deriving their sense of self from the business; this also encourages a feeling of belonging to the family and to the business (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Identification with and involvement in the family business can lead to a desire to contribute (Dawson et al., 2015; James et al., 2012; McMullen & Warnick, 2015; Schröder, Schmitt-Rodermund, & Arnaud, 2011). At a certain stage in the identity alignment process, when individuals evaluate their career opportunities, they may move towards career alignment. *Career alignment* is the alignment between the offspring's career interests and the career opportunities offered by the family business. Children from business families are frequently exposed to the business through family discussions and part-time jobs in the family business and therefore learn at a young age about the work in the business (Houshmand et al., 2017; Murphy & Lambrechts, 2015; Schröder & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2013; Stavrou & Swiercz, 1998). This exposure gives these children close insight into the career opportunities that the business can offer them. In addition, working in the business and with family members can give offspring a feeling of being effective and capable of working with loved ones (Deci & Ryan, 2002). However, the literature to date (e.g., Dawson et al., 2015; Sharma & Irving, 2005) remains unclear how identity and career alignment are developed. Although the development of affective commitment may be a good thing, ethical questions may arise regarding the extent to which parental influence is appropriate. As succession often depends on autonomous motivation of successors, business families are advised to support their children in making independent decisions about their potential future role in the business (McMullen & Warnick, 2015; Schröder & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2013). When doing so, parents preferably adopt a nurturing parenting role and encourage the individual development of offspring at a young age. If not, parents may jeopardize the parent-child relationship and make the child turn away from the business (McMullen & Warnick, 2015). Only when offspring's individual needs are met "it seems ethical for the parent to also assume the role of founder and turn attention to grooming the child as his or her successor" (McMullen & Warnick, 2015, p. 1403). In addition, Kaye (1996, p. 348) argues that a business owner's strong wish to continue the business within the family can have a negative impact on the family and its members: "These owners use their business to retard the normal development of their children and themselves." Encouraging affective commitment may prevent potential negative effects in the succession process, such as offspring's feelings of obligation or entitlement, which can extend into working relations (Eddleston & Kidwell, 2012; Lubatkin, Durand, & Ling, 2007). However, finding a balance in stimulating the individual interests and needs of their children and in aligning them with the interests of both the family and the business remains a challenging dilemma. Recently, scholars addressed this dilemma by using the classic roots and wings paradox (Garcia, Sharma, De Massis, Wright, & Scholes, 2018). Deep roots without wings prevent children from finding their talents and career interests, while shallow roots and strong wings will allow them to fly away from the business. These scholars propose that parental behaviors such as instrumental assistance, career-related modeling, verbal encouragement and emotional support positively influence affective commitment among the next generation. In this paper, we argue that informal governance mechanisms may be used by business families to nurture affective commitment in the early succession stage and suggest that symbolic interactionism may help us to explore and describe these mechanisms in detail.

2.3. Symbolic interactionism

Symbolic interactionism builds on the ideas of Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969), among others, and was introduced to the family business literature by James et al. (2012) and Jennings et al. (2014). The core idea is that people act towards things based on the meaning those things have for them, and these meanings emanate from interpersonal interaction and are modified through interpretation (Blumer, 1969). In daily interaction, such meanings are created and recreated through interpretive and ongoing processes between an individual and others (Hall & Nordqvist, 2008; Mead, 1934). These processes of "giving meaning" to symbols and interactions largely depend on the individual's context, life experiences and values. Group life, such as in families, enables the process of giving meaning between members. Blumer (1969, p. 82) states, "Group action takes the form of a fitting together of individual lines of action. Each individual aligns his action to the action of others ascertaining what they are doing or what they intent to do – that is by getting the meaning of their acts. […] As such he forms and aligns his own action on the basis of such interpretation of the acts of others." Most prior family business studies based on symbolic interactionism use it implicitly (Jennings et al., 2014) and focus on family values and norms (Bertrand & Schoar, 2006; Lansberg, 1983) and family/self-identity (Milton, 2008; Sharma & Manikutty, 2005; Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). Only a few studies have used the symbolic interactional lens explicitly (Carr & Sequeira, 2007; Hall & Nordqvist, 2008). In particular, Carr and Sequeira (2007) combine symbolic interactionism with the theory of planned behavior and show that growing up in a business family strongly affects offspring's choice for an entrepreneurial career. From a symbolic interactionism perspective, the authors argue that business families are likely to use prior business exposure —a type of intergenerational influence— as a socialization source affecting the choice behavior of their children. Hall and Nordqvist (2008) add that arenas are needed to enable communication and interaction among individuals. Because family governance studies often have implicit theoretical foundations and draw on a limited pool of theories, that is, social capital theory, principal-agent theory and stewardship theory (Suess, 2014), we introduce symbolic interactionism as a novel theoretical perspective in this area. We argue that the concepts of symbols and interactions in symbolic interactionism will help us to reveal and theorize (the use of) informal family governance mechanisms in the context of affective commitment development. In particular, we expect that symbolic interactionism will offer us a lens to see how meaning is given to the fact that one is part of a long-lasting business family, how identity and career interests are being affected by this given meaning, and how informal family governance mechanisms align identities and careers with the family business.

3. Method

Our research question led us to adopt an abductive, qualitative approach using an exploratory, single-case study. Abduction is a discovery-oriented research process that combines inductive and deductive steps (Agar, 2010; Locke, 2011). Abduction starts "from an empirical basis, just like induction, but does not reject theoretical preconceptions and is in that respect closer to deduction" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 4). Qualitative research is well suited for exploring the nature of a social phenomenon (Morgan & Smircich, 1980), studying a phenomenon in-depth within its context, and addressing delicate and complex issues on a microlevel (Siggelkow, 2007; Van Maanen, 2011). A single-case study is often used when "an investigator has the opportunity to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific observation" (Meier & Schier, 2016, p. 260; Yin, 1994, p. 40). Single-case studies are a suitable research strategy for the purposes of exploring rich data and generating and refining theory (Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007; Stake, 1995); their aim is not statistical generalization but rather contributing to scientific development through "the force of example" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 12). Hence, a single-case study enables us to make a conceptual leap in our understanding of how a business family uses informal family governance mechanisms to nurture affective commitment to the family business among its offspring, thereby filling an important gap in the literature. A conceptual leap is grounded in abductive reasoning as part of an ongoing process that includes both "seeing" and "articulating" (Klag & Langley, 2013). It involves a process of bridging the gap between empirical data and theory, in which conceptual insight of the phenomenon is expected to emerge from the data (Klag & Langley, 2013). The theoretical concepts and assumptions of symbolic interactionism are taken as a theoretical lens that helps us to make the conceptual leap by conducting a deeper examination of how certain accounts, patterns, structures and interactions appear to shape the phenomenon (Jennings et al., 2014).

3.1. Sampling

We were allowed to talk to all[1] family members of a fourth-generation family business on the topic of nurturing affective commitment to the family business. Access was made possible through the network of a university-based family business center in north-western Europe. For reasons of confidentiality, we have changed the identification details of the family, its members and the business. Throughout this article, we use "the Smith family" and "the Smith family business" as pseudonyms for the family name and family business name, respectively. The Smith family is active in the high-tech machinery industry.

We chose this business family because it offered high potential for learning in terms of developing a better understanding of our research question. The developmental model of ownership transitions (Gersick, Lansberg, Desjardins, & Dunn, 1999) informed our theoretical approach to the sample. Although all three systems —family, ownership and business— are interconnected, family ownership helped us to think about the necessary complexity of the family structure, the transition stage and number of family members involved in the business. We choose a cousin consortium in the transition from the fourth to fifth generation as we expected that the dynamics in and the complexity of this business family would offer us high potential to reveal knowledge about the phenomenon under study. By including the perspectives of all family members of this cousin consortium, we aim to gain a fuller understanding of informal family governance mechanisms (Stake, 1995). In this study, the complexity of the family allowed us to include multiple family members as "knowledgeable agents." These family members

[1] We talked to all members of the family within the scope of this study. This implies that we have not included two children who are too young and one partner who is not the mother of one of the children in this study.

helped us understand "what they are trying to do" and they explained to us quite knowledgeably what their thoughts, emotions, intentions and actions are (Gehman et al., 2018, p. 291). As such, these family members were capable of providing us with rich insights that helped us to contextualize the phenomenon under investigation.

For the purposes of clarity, we now provide information on some defining features of the Smith family, resulting from our comprehensive and rigorous data collection and analysis effort, which is detailed later in the text. The Smith family is a fourth-generation business family situated in north-western Europe and consists of two branches, each with three families. Branch A has three traditional nuclear families, each with three children, whereas branch B has three families with more alternative family structures with two older children and two younger children. Due to these differences, the two branches are presented separately in the findings chapter. The families of branch A and B live in the same area, approximately 20 km from the main family business. Table 1 presents detailed information on the family members.

The family business started in 1826 and has been reinvented several times over the course of history. The core values of the business family are innovation and stewardship. The family sees it as its duty to continuously innovate so that their legacy is worthwhile passing on. They are always in search of new technologies and inventions and consequently new businesses are incorporated in their portfolio of businesses. When the research took place (June 2016-June 2017), the family business encompassed nine manufacturing and service businesses that provide technical solutions. The two main businesses build innovative and high-tech machineries in Europe. The group employs approximately 1100 people across the world and has an annual turnover of approximately 200 million euros. Ownership is divided equally among the six fourth-generation members of the two family branches. The business governance structure consists of an executive and a supervisory board. The executive board is composed of three family owners —two from branch A and one from branch B— and three internal, nonfamily managers. The supervisory board is composed of three external nonfamily members. One owner from branch A is responsible for running the originally founded company, representing the family's heritage. The other two owners from branch B are not regularly active in the business. All owners have included in their wills that their children will inherit the full package of their shares. No additional decisions have yet been made regarding the 'how' and 'when' of the transfer of shares during the lives of the owners. The members of the supervisory and executive board, the other owners and the children are aware that in due time, the members of the next generation will become the owners of the family business. The executive board has explicitly stated its wish for family continuity in ownership. However, as the next generation consist of thirteen members (eight girls and five boys) ranging from four to twenty-one years old, it is not necessary for the continuity of the family business that all children take up management positions in the future. The family has no formal policy as to who and how many members of the family can be involved in the business. The informal policy is that everyone who is able and willing to contribute to the businesses is welcome. Children are expected to aim at the highest qualification possible. This does not necessarily imply a university degree.

The family governance structure consists of a formal family constitution and a more informal next-generation program. When the family owners drew up the family constitution in 2010, they stipulated that in 2016, they would start the preparation of the next generation for their future role as owners. Since spring of 2016, offspring from both branches of the Smith family over the age of 16 have met together twice a year in a next-generation program. Beforehand the owners did not involve their children in the family business. The program is managed by two female owners of branch A and B, of which one resides in the executive board (branch A, family b). The main reasons for the program are (1) to reduce the complexity of the next succession, (2) to prevent the risk of estrangement between members of the fifth generation, and (3) to balance the level of information for all next-generation members. The executive board sets the theme of the program, but its content is developed by the fifth-generation members themselves and contains three components: transmitting business information (e.g., presentations by CFO and Sales director, visit to subsidiaries and clients), encouraging

Table 1
Details on the Smith Family.

	Age	Gender (female/male)	Marital status	Generation	Occupation/study
Branch A, family a					
Female owner	49	f	Married	4th	Shareholder, director of the founding business
Partner	56	m	Married		Entrepreneur (not in family business)
Child	21	f		5th	University student
Child	19	m		5th	University student
Child	17	f		5th	Secondary school student
Branch A, family b					
Female owner	48	f	Married	4th	Shareholder, member executive board, corporate affairs
Partner	50	m	Married		Forester
Child	19	m		5th	University student
Child	18	m		5th	Secondary school student
Child	14	f		5th	Secondary school student
Branch A, family c					
Male owner	46	m	Married	4th	Shareholder, chairman executive board
Partner	47	f	Married		Artist
Child	16	f		5th	Secondary school student
Child	14	m		5th	Secondary school student
Child	12	m		5th	Secondary school student
Branch B, family a					
Female owner	47	f	Not married	4th	Shareholder, Entrepreneur own business
Partner	60	f	Not married		Artist, not included
Branch B, family b					
Male owner	45	m	Divorced	4th	Shareholder, member executive board, director of sales
Child	6	f		5th	Primary school pupil (not included: too young)
Branch B, family c					
Male owner	42	m	Divorced	4th	Shareholder
Ex-partner	40	f	Divorced		Tutor
Partner	34	f			No occupation (not included)
Child	18	f	Daughter from first marriage	5th	Secondary school student
Child	16	f	Daughter from first marriage	5th	Secondary school student
Child	4	f	Daughter from second relation	5th	Primary school pupil (not included: too young)

teamwork (e.g., assignments led by communication professionals), and having fun with other members of the next generation (e.g., laser gaming and cooking). The execution of the program has an informal character; however, the next generation is expected to attend every meeting.

3.2. Data collection

In this study, a three-stage interview technique was used as part of a methodology of triangulation. Data were collected through web queries, timelines, individual and group interviews and reflections (Polkinghorne, 2005). We used a discovery-oriented, interpretive approach, with the first author representing the "insider" perspective and the other authors representing the "outsider" perspective (Locke, 2011). The insider conducted the interviews, whereas the outsiders retained a more distant (and, thus, more objective) view that facilitated describing the phenomena at a theoretical level (Bartunek & Louis, 1996). In preparation for the first interview, the website of the family business was studied to gather information on the business and the family. In this way, the researchers familiarized themselves with the company and family history, their business portfolio and the market segments. In the first stage of the interview process, an interview was held with the contact person, a family member active in the business. This interview lasted about two hours. The aim of this interview was to become acquainted with the family member, provide a good environment for further collaboration, offer information on the research design and complete the web query with details about the business and the family. The "rules of the game", such as agreements regarding participation, exit and anonymity, were also discussed, as was the planning and location of the second interview. Considerable time was spent to discuss ethical dilemmas (Boddy, 2014). Although the research principles of ensuring freely given informed consent and the right to withdraw from the research apply to both adults and children, special considerations need to be taken when doing research with children (Morrow, 2008). We discussed questions such as "Are the children able to discuss the topic?", "How can the children's vulnerability be protected?" and "How can the children freely share their thoughts?" As a result, we agreed on individual interviews, on the identification of children's quotes on a family level, and, for reasons of traceability of the family, on disclosing the geographical location of the family: north-western Europe. The second stage of the interview process was held with all individual family members —one-by-one— from June 2016 to June 2017. The objective of these interviews was to gain in-depth information on several topics. We interviewed everyone individually to avoid compliance and stimulate independent thinking. The interviews with each of the members of the next generation lasted approximately one hour and were structured around a list of broad topics such as study, family, career, future and the family business. The individual interviews with the owners took approximately one and a half hours and were structured around a list of topics concerning their experiences leading to entry into the family business, the children, involvement of the children in the business and the future event of succession. The individual interviews with the life partners were similar but slightly adapted to their role. After each interview, the researcher took notes to reflect on the interview data. For all family members —owners, partners and children— the narrative inquiry technique of life storytelling was used to explore the above-mentioned topics (Miller, 2000). In the interviews with the owners, we reflected on the most important events in their lives, which experiences let to a role in the family business, and, in hindsight, how these events and experiences have affected their life. Life stories are human-centered and provide a holistic view into an individuals' thinking thereby offering valuable insights for research (Miller, 2000). Because young adults are still in the process of building their identity, talking about past events and relating them to present and future events is meaningful but more difficult than for older persons (Van Schalkwyk, 2010). To aid the process of life storytelling, timelines were drawn to collect rich data. The third stage of the interview process consisted of a group interview with the children and a group interview with the parents. In these interviews, similar and additional clarifying questions were asked. The purpose of these group interviews was to understand how the group made sense of the topics and to observe the interaction among the group members. All group interviews lasted between one and one and a half hours. All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim. In total, we conducted 24 interviews and analyzed 559 transcribed pages of text.

3.3. Data analysis

Our qualitative data were collected from multiple sources and are extensive, requiring analysis in a systematic and transparent way (De Massis & Kotlar, 2014). Within-case analysis and pattern matching techniques were used to understand and interpret the empirical material (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Eisenhardt, 1989). The analyses of the data were conducted on the microlevel to capture the meaning of individuals. As we adopted a multisource perspective including individual sources —owner-parents, partner-parents and children— and group sources (parental and children groups), we gained a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Bozer, Levin, & Santora, 2017). This microfocus allowed us to study the subtle processes of people and activities isolated in a specific setting and time (Jepperson & Meyer, 2011).

While interpreting the empirical data, we aimed to make a conceptual leap in understanding the phenomenon under study (Klag & Langley, 2013). Symbolic interactionism is hereby used as an interpretative lens to aid our sensemaking. Symbolic interactionism focuses on the discovery of symbolic objects, situations and events. In addition, symbolic interactionism allows to investigate "in vivo" the words, phrases, labels and/or terms offered by the members of the business family to create a common understanding of how informal family governance mechanisms are used to nurture affective commitment among offspring in the pre-succession stage (Jennings et al., 2014; Nag et al., 2007). To make this conceptual leap, we first wrote individual case reports of the interviews with the owners, (ex-)partners and children of the six families. To make the vast data as accessible as possible, we followed the approach of De Massis and Kotlar (2014) and used the QDA Miner software program to prepare the material for further analysis. Inspired by Nag et al. (2007); Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) and Murphy and Lambrechts (2015), we looked for first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregated dimensions using the symbolic interactionism lens. In order to identify first-order concepts, we read and analyzed the individual case reports of the owners. In this step, we focused on symbolic events, situations and objects as well as specific words, phrases, terms and labels and coded them accordingly in QDA Miner. Next, we clustered and analyzed each code by asking ourselves how each aspect could help families to nurture affective commitment. For example, when analyzing symbolic situations, we noticed emerging concepts related to the family, the past and the future of the family business, and working in the family business. The same clustering process was used to analyze data from the partners and the children. Concepts that emerged from the fourth and fifth generation were analyzed to identify similarities and differences across generations. Data from the partners were used to uncover nuances. Seven second-order themes emerged that lead us to the insight that a variety of symbolic situations helped the family to share a meaning of belongingness and heritage with their offspring. Fig. 1 presents our data structure and makes our coding system transparent.

This approach allowed us to identify informal governance mechanisms and demonstrated that "when a mechanism-based explanation opens the black box, it discloses its structure. It turns the black box into a transparent box and makes visible how the participating entities and their properties, activities and relations produce the effect of interest" (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010, p. 51). The findings that follow have been

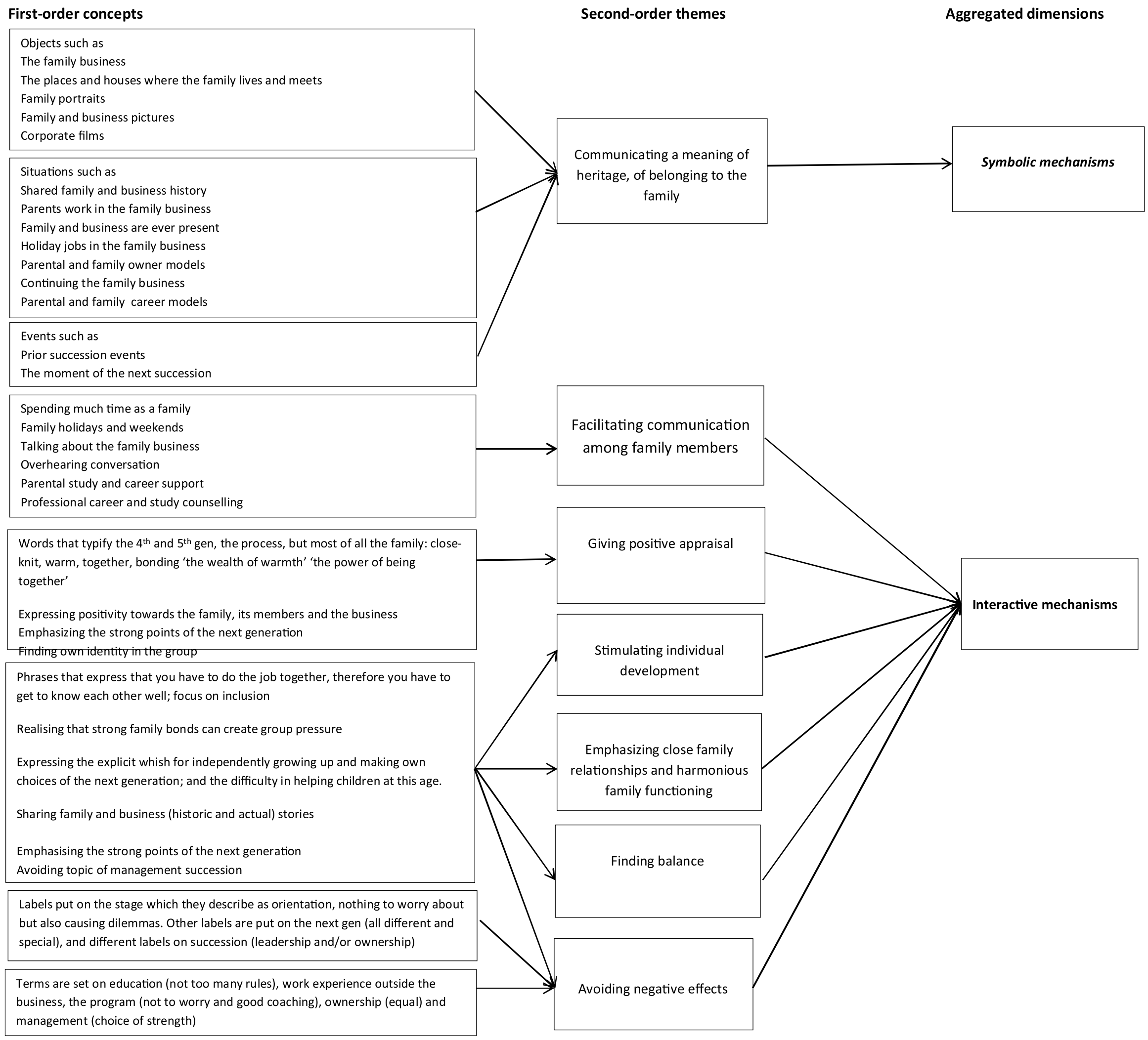

Fig. 1. Data structure.

discussed with and confirmed by the business family.

4. Findings

In this section, we first present our findings regarding informal family governance mechanisms used by the business family to develop affective commitment to the family business(es) within offspring in the pre-entry stage of succession. Using the tenets of symbolic interactionism, we discuss how two mechanisms, namely symbols and interactions, are used to nurture affective commitment. Symbolic mechanisms refer to shared meanings for objects, situations or events that represent something important. Interactive mechanisms refer to the words, phrases, labels and terms that individuals use to connect with important others. After discussing the two mechanisms, we develop and visualize a three-stage framework of affective commitment development and link informal family governance mechanisms to each of the stages.

4.1. Informal family governance mechanisms

Our study reveals that the Smith family uses a variety of informal family governance mechanisms to nurture affective commitment to the business among its offspring. These informal mechanisms present themselves in different settings, although mainly in the family context because the family business remains at a physical distance. However, because the family businesses have been part of the family for four generations, they have become an intrinsic part of family life for all family members. Family members can be identified by means of Table 1. Children can only be identified at the family level as agreed with the business family and as indicated in the method section.

4.1.1. Symbolic mechanisms

4.1.1.1. Branch A. Several symbolic mechanisms were found in branch A of the Smith family. Objects and situations that encourage identification with the family firm are the places and houses where the families meet, the family as a unit, the family business, the portrait of the great-great-grandfather and the current generation working in the family business as a working unit. The children consider the way parents, aunts and uncles work together as a great example of the strength of the family, of what they can accomplish together. During holidays, the parents involve their children in the family businesses. The parents invite the fifth generation to come and work in the different divisions of the family businesses during a few weeks in the school holidays. In branch A, the children at the age of 15–18 take this opportunity to get to learn the businesses and earn some money. In this setting, the children can observe their parents at work and become familiar with the business. The family owners report that the family's businesses are flourishing, and their working relationships are harmonious. As such, the parents, aunts and uncles represent attractive and powerful role models stimulating career alignment (see also further in the text). The children report that the family business is a natural aspect of their lives. To quote a fifth-generation child (family a), *"Well, the family business is part of our DNA because so many family members and employees with families work in the business."* The children mention the top floor of the main building where the current generation is working, family meetings, family stories, festive meetings at the business and a new corporate film as symbols that connect them to the family business. According to a fifth-generation child (family a),

> *Then you are at one of these open house days and you see that film. With old pictures of my great-great-grandfather, that he started the business, you can see the business grow in that film. I feel strongly about that. I get these little jabs of pleasure.*

All of these symbolic mechanisms contribute to a sense of pride in the achievements of the family and in being part of this successful family. To quote a fifth-generation child (family c),

> *It is an honor to work in the business. My grandfather worked in it; now my dad, uncles and aunts do too, and it appears exciting to me to do that with my generation—to move the business a generation further together.*

The identification is strengthened in the social context by employees, suppliers and clients the children meet at home or on special business occasions. When working in the business during the holidays, the children have a chance to observe their aunts and uncles performing their career tasks and their roles. The harmonious way in which the fourth generation works together makes working in the business an attractive aspiration. Indeed, the children perceive their parents and the other family members as powerful role models. As one fifth-generation child (family b) said, *"A sense of pride of how the fourth generation performs—I have a lot of respect for that. Then you think, this is what I want later on. I really look up to them."* In addition, working in the family business provides the children with the opportunity to work together with their cousins, and this appears to be an interesting experience and a positive example for the future. Hence, working in the business enables the children to observe their parents and family in their work environment and to experience coworking with cousins and nieces, which might stimulate career alignment.

4.1.1.2. Branch B. In branch B of the Smith family, the situation is quite different. Although this branch also consists of three families, their family structures are less traditional than those of branch A. Of the three families, one family has no children (family a), one family has a young child who is not included in this study because of very young age (family b), and one family has three children of which two are included and one is excluded in this study because of very young age (family c). Consequently, there are fewer children and they also differ in age. As the father of family c is divorced, the children see their father irregularly at home. Nevertheless, identity alignment is stimulated by regular family meetings at their grandparents' and other family homes. The children report that family ties are important and that they feel connected to the family and its businesses. To quote a fifth-generation child (family c), *"Yes, well, I know that we have a business, because I grew up with my family and my family is continuously involved with fun things in the business."*

Although the children know little about the family businesses, they still feel part of the family and want to contribute to the family business. Indeed, the owner-father (family c) does not often tell stories about the family, the business or their intertwined history, nor does he involve his children actively in the business or offer them holiday jobs. To quote a fifth-generation child (family c), *"When I was small, I visited the plant but not consciously with a perspective of possibly working there. I also did not know that it was possible to have holiday jobs in the family business."* As the owner-father (family c) has no executive position in the business, family role models appear to have more of an impact than the parental role model. The ex-partner, who is not involved in the family or the business, sees the power of family role models. According to the ex-partner (family c),

> *I think if she studies law, like her aunt, who is a fine example, that is something she would enjoy. She likes that family members have their place in the family business and that they work so well together, not much fuss. They have great examples in the family.*

Although fewer symbolic mechanisms are used in this branch, identity and career alignment still appear to be stimulated. To quote a fifth-generation child (family c),

> *Well, it is just the idea of a family business that appeals to me, just that it is close to you, your grandparents started it, that it still exists, and of course you want to pass it on to your children.*

To summarize, a large variety of symbolic mechanisms—places where the family meets, the symbolic strength of the family, family and business films, pictures and portraits, family and parental career models, holiday jobs and the continuity of family business—are used in this business family to communicate a meaning of heritage and a sense of belonging to the family. Although the symbolic mechanisms are less visible in branch B, they still seem to add to the development of affective commitment among the next generation.

4.1.2. Interactive mechanisms

4.1.2.1. Branch A. Branch A of the Smith family, consisting of three nuclear families, acts as a close family; the nieces and nephews are friends, live near one another, and spend a large amount of time together at home, at school and on holidays. The parents provide ample opportunities for their children to meet and interact and encourage their children to undertake activities together. In the family context, the parents discuss business matters over the phone and with other family members and guests such as international customers. In addition, the parents actively support their children in their school careers and offer them study and career counselling at professional agencies to help them identify their talents and preferred areas of study. In daily interactions, the parents in branch A encourage identity alignment with the family business by using positive words when they speak about the family, its members and the business. The words that are used refer to the children's potential, their strong points and finding their identity in the group. This approach is particularly difficult in a *"family clan"*, to quote a partner (family c), in which group pressure and competition may influence choices. According to a fourth-generation owner-mother (family b), *"What I clearly aim to pass on to my kids is that you can stay part of the group even if you do not work in the business."* Phrases are used to express strong points regarding the next generation and close family relationships despite or due to differences in personalities and values. The parents communicate family values to create a strong, harmonious family because it is considered the basis for the survival of the family business. To some extent, all parents of the nuclear families involve their children in the business by sharing stories about daily business life and historic events. As a fifth-generation child (family b) reports, *"My mother tells stories about new product developments which I really like to hear."*

Regarding career alignment, the parents tend to evade the topic of working in the family business and stimulate their children to make their own choices based on their abilities and interests. The parents tell their children to finish their studies and acquire outside work experience first. This approach is an example of one of the (un)written rules and conditions that are randomly communicated to the children. Words are used to stress the impact of family involvement in the family business. Parents talk about giving their children the opportunity to understand the business better, by learning about different levels of work and being respectful towards people regardless of their function. Although family and the family business are important, the parents stress that every family member is responsible for his/her own actions and has a duty to maximize his/her talents. This emphasis is necessary to help the children make their own decisions. The parents are noncommittal when talking about family business career opportunities, and if they do, they stress that it is a question of what you can add to the business and not a question of entitlement. To quote a fourth-generation owner-father (family c),

> *For this generation, it is not a given at all that they will work in the family business. It is great if they want to, it is even greater if they have the ability to do so, and it is fantastic if there is a spot in which they can work with passion. It is really hard to bring all three conditions together.*

The children in branch A report that, from an early age on, they overhear phone calls at home and in the car and discussions between family members at family gatherings and festivities. The children use words of pride when referring to the fourth generation and are vague about their career choices. The phrases the children use reflect their wish to contribute to the family business and to belong to the family. The children feel connected and mention the success of the business, the tradition and the continuation of the business. The children feel pride in the harmonious working relationships of the fourth generation and look forward to doing the same. However, the children do not talk about these concepts with their parents; they know that they must find their own interests and talents and finish their studies first. The children are also aware of some conditions and informal rules about possible entry; however, they do not know the details of these rules. To quote a fifth-generation child (family a), *"There is a rule that you have to work for three years outside the business. I think that's a rule."* Furthermore, the children stress that the business is always there, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. Despite this positive image, the children realize that being an owner and/or a manager in the family business is hard work and is not an easy job. The children label the family business an innovative business in which there is ample opportunity to develop their talents. The children explore different study and career options and acknowledge that their parents want them to find their own talents and interests.

4.1.2.2. Branch B. Although branch B also consists of three families, their structures, their relationships and the number and ages of the children are different from those in branch A. Consequently, the family members do not meet as often as in branch A and have less opportunity to interact. However, the family relationships within branch B and between branch B and A are reported to be strong and harmonious to such an extent that the family members of branch B feel part of the business family. Although fewer in number, we found interactive mechanisms that encourage affective commitment. All family members of branch B use the same (positive) words and phrases as the family members in branch A when talking about talents, close family relations and individual development and choice making. The two owner-fathers (family b and c) support their children's independent study and career choices and emphasize their wish for their children to make individual choices about their future careers. Nevertheless, they would like to see their children involved in the businesses in the future. According to the fourth-generation owner-father (family c),

> *I would be very happy if they would join the family business. They are both very different and could certainly contribute to the business. But I don't want to force them. I don't want them to get the idea that they must join the business. I also did not influence their study choice.*

The other owner-father (family b) agrees, "*If working in the business would appeal to her or she thinks she might add value to the business, then I would be very happy. There is no need to feel obligated.*" As the owner-father (family c) is not actively involved in daily business, the family business is not often discussed at the kitchen table or at family meetings in branch B. The owner-father (family c) talks about the power of the term "family business" as a sort of natural bond to the business when you are a member of this family. To quote the fourth-generation owner-father (family c),

> *It is also in the word 'family business' itself. When you know that you are an heir to a family business, and you know that your father or mother works there, you automatically feel connected, I think. Anyway, I did. At a really young age, I felt connected to the family business. Maybe just the word, I don't know.*

All the family members in branch B find it important to connect the next-generation members of the two branches and to prepare them for their future role as owners. To quote a fourth-generation female owner (family a) who confirms that it is important to establish a good connection between the next generation of the two branches, *"We want to bring them together, to get to know each other better."* The children (family c) indeed report that they rarely discuss the business with their father but do feel connected to the family business. To quote a fifth-generation child (family c), *"Sometimes he tells us that the business is doing well and talks about plans of new business contacts in a certain country. Small things."* The children further acknowledge their father's support for their independent choice of study and career and do not feel pressured to work in the family business in the future. The children are hesitant about a career in the family business but want to contribute. As one fifth-generation child (family c) notes, "*Yes, I would enjoy playing a role in the family business, not a big role, but I would like to do my part, to contribute like the others.*" Hence, identity and career alignment are stimulated, although fewer interactive mechanisms are used than in branch A.

To summarize, this business family creates several arenas that enable family members to meet and interact. In these arenas, family interaction is aimed at expressing positivity, emphasizing strong points of family members and creating close and harmonious relationships. Words, phrases, terms and labels are used to stress the need to develop identity, talents and feelings of responsibility among the offspring. Although the next generation meet each other at family meetings, the level of interaction between branch A and B is rather limited. This leads to a need for the current owners to bring the next-generation owners together to create a common base of understanding. Concluding, symbols and interactions are used as informal family governance mechanisms to instill and nurture affective commitment to the family and the family business among the next generation of the Smith family. Despite the complexity of the family and the similarities and differences between the branches, the fifth-generation family members identify with the family and the family business and show a desire to be involved in the family business in the future. Although the fourth generation could start talking about careers in the family business, they feel that it is timelier to prepare their children for their future role as owners and to postpone the discussion about career alignment.

4.2. Informal family governance mechanisms within different stages of the affective commitment development process

Our analysis sheds light on the process of affective commitment development and shows that the fourth-generation family members are reluctant to discuss career alignment at this early stage, but feel a need to start preparing the next generation for their future roles as owners. Our case findings reveal a new antecedent of successor affective commitment —*ownership alignment*— complementing and binding identity alignment and career alignment, thereby nurturing the affective commitment of offspring towards the family business(es). Hence, we propose ownership alignment as an additional stage in the process of affective commitment development, thereby expanding Sharma and Irving (2005)'s and Dawson et al. (2015)'s insights on affectively committed successors. Members of the business family involve the children in the business, even at an early age. Although the approach in each branch differs in intensity and nature, the children report that they identify with the business and feel involved. Having aligned the children's identity to the family business, advancing to the next stage of career alignment would be logical. However, both branches report that it is too early to talk about career alignment. Because most of the children are in grade school or in the early stages of university, the parents encourage them to aim for a broad orientation in their studies and careers. According to all the parents, talking about a career in the family business would hinder the children's personal development. In the group discussion, a fourth-generation owner-father (branch A, family c) said,

> *We don't talk about that explicitly. The answer is no; I say, 'Finish your studies first, do that work.' No one has graduated yet, and no one has skills that allow him or her to work in the business without an education.*

However, in their role as business owners, the parents feel a need to share information with their children without inducing a feeling of pressure on the children. In a quite natural way, the Smith family members felt that they had to introduce an extra step in the process to avoid preliminary discussions about career alignment. We label this intermediate step "ownership alignment." More specifically, in Fig. 2, we propose a framework of affective commitment development among offspring in the pre-entry stage of succession. In this framework, the stages do not stop at a certain age but can continue. Hence, the arrows.

In the Smith family, the owners have enacted this extra step by starting a next-generation program, as introduced earlier in our section on sampling. The program enables the family to share information in an informal manner and to interact in a more open way about the business with the members of the next generation. It therefore functions as an arena, which enables family members to meet and interact. As not all children in the different branches receive the same amount or type of business information from their parents, the program allows the family to develop a common knowledge base about the different businesses and adjusts next-generation members' perceptions about the business. To quote a fourth-generation owner-mother (branch A, family a), *"My children have a rather strange idea about it, I think: relaxed, cozy, friendly, nice coffee. They think that I drink coffee with the others all the time. Yes, they absorb the romantic part of it."* More importantly, the program is intended to bind the children from branch A and branch B as they all become shareholders and must make important decisions together in the future. According to a fourth-generation owner-mother (branch A, family b), *"I think that the next-gen program is to bind the nieces from one branch to the nieces and nephews from the other branch, even if they are at the same school and say 'hi' to each other, that's it."* The next-generation program allows the parents to introduce the business to the children by stressing ownership and postponing the topic of management succession. The program prepares the children for their future roles as owners of the family business because they will all inherit their parents' shares. The current owners report that in their own succession period, they knew each other well and had no need for programs to align themselves with the business. As the family has grown and the next-generation members are not a closely-knit group, the owners saw a need to establish a next-generation program. To quote a fourth-generation owner-mother (branch A, family b),

> *Well, I think times have changed. What is important to me is that whatever you do content-wise, as long as the connection between each other is there, it is fine, because then you can do everything. The rest you can learn. Now we are one generation further; how do we keep this connection? In branch A, that is quite easy. But how do we involve branch B?*

The next-generation program seems to enable the owners to bring their children together and install a collective sense of "we" in the next-generation ownership group. The owners also report that the next-generation program is a deliberate action initiated by them as owners and that they have not included their partners but informed them about this strategic decision. The current owners see it as their task to prepare the next generation for events such as death or disease, that may accelerate the process of succession. According to a fourth-generation owner (branch B, family b), *"Being an owner is quite a responsibility. If you have voting rights, then you have to have an opinion on the matter. People will look at you and will ask what you think of it."* Owners report that since the start of the program in 2016, and because succession in ownership and management are clearly separated, they are able to talk more freely with the children about the business at home. To quote a fourth-generation owner-mother (branch A, family b), *"For me, it was clear that I was sending dual messages to my kids. I was really timid about the business just to keep it small. Now I can talk about the business with them in a serious way."* The children are pleased with the program and realize that it is necessary because the family and the business have grown significantly since the last succession. To quote a fifth-generation child (branch B, family c),

> *I only realized that I will become an owner when my father told me about these next-generation meetings. At this meeting, we were together with all my cousins, so that we got to know each other better. Then, I realized that it is not about who is becoming the next leader of the business, but it is about the cohesion in our group of cousins. I think it is a great idea to organize these meetings because I do not know my cousins that well.*

As depicted in Table 2, the extra stage of ownership alignment appears to be vital for a natural flow of the process of affective commitment development. Table 2 gives an overview of the informal family governance mechanisms that nurture affective commitment among offspring in the pre-entry stage of succession, linking symbolic and interactive mechanisms to identity, ownership and career alignment. The process starts with identity alignment; from early on, several mechanisms are used to nurture identification with and involvement in the family business. Then, when the next generation is in adolescence

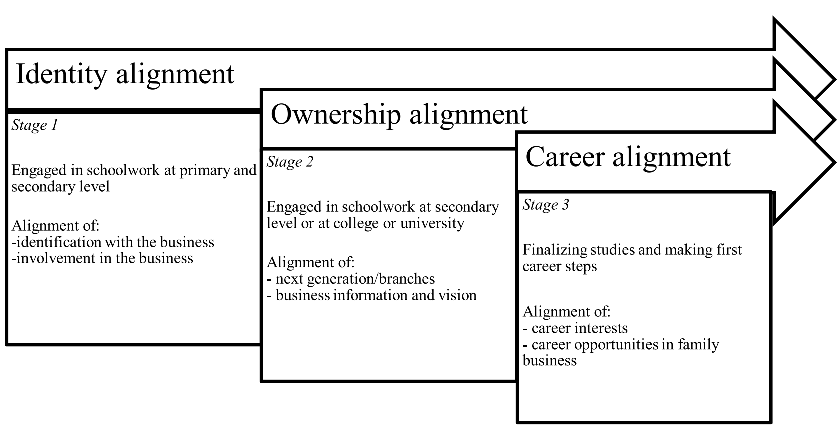

Fig. 2. A framework of affective commitment development in the pre-entry stage of succession.

Table 2
Informal family governance mechanisms that nurture the affective commitment of offspring towards the family business.

	Informal family governance mechanisms that nurture affective commitment in pre-entry stage of the succession process		
	Identity alignment	**Ownership alignment**	**Career alignment**
Symbolic mechanisms	Objects The family business The family Family homes and retreats Family portraits Business pictures and milestones Corporate films Situations Holiday jobs in the family business Events Prior succession events Festive family and business events	Situations Continuing the family business Parental and family owner role models	Situations Parental career role models Family career role models
Interactive mechanisms	Enabling interaction arenas Spending much time together as a family Family weekends, holidays Words typifying: Positivity towards the family, its members and the business The strong points of next generation Finding own identity in the group Phrases expressing: Close family relationships Sharing business stories 'History telling' Term defining: The power of the word *'family business'*	Enabling interaction arenas Next generation program Words typifying: Getting to know the business better Learn about different levels of work Being respectful towards people Phrases expressing: Sharing business vision and information Bonding next generation Terms put on: Preparing the next generation as future owners Label put on: Succession (ownership and/or leadership)	Enabling interaction arenas Parental career and study support Professional career and study choice counselling Words typifying: The impact of family involvement in family business Phrases expressing: Maximizing talents and feeling responsible The explicit whish for individual choices of next generation Label put on: Family business as an innovative business with ample possibilities to develop talents Terms defining: Finishing education Outside work experience Opportunities in the business

and young adulthood, more information about the business needs to be shared, the future of the business needs to be discussed and family ties need to be strengthened to prepare the next generation for their future role as owners. Indeed, the current owners realize that although it is not the intention of the program, the program also enables the children to explore the career opportunities that the business might offer them. A discussion reveals the sensitivity of this topic.

> *I think it is twofold. We certainly don't want everyone to work here or that it is an obligation, but we would really love to continue the business as a family business instead of having no one of the family working in it. I think that has an absolute added value for the business* (fourth-generation owner, branch B, family b). *But this program is not developed to encourage that* (fourth-generation owner-mother, branch A, family a). *No, not at all* (fourth-generation owner-mother, branch A, family b).

The parents seem to agree that when the children are finishing studies and taking their first steps in the career market it is timelier to move to the last stage, career alignment. Although this process appears to be linear, the parents do not expect that everyone will transition from feeling involved in the family firm to being an owner and a manager. However, postponing the discussion about career alignment for too long may cause problems. Indeed, one owner's partner argues for an explicit rule stating that the children must have outside work experience before being able to enter the family business. This rule will force the children to make deliberate choices and not to choose "the easy way into the family business" (partner, branch A, family a). The owners want to avoid such rules and argue that this step is still far away. The topic leads to intense discussions:

> *For me, it still is in the future* (fourth-generation owner, branch B, family b). *No, now you can talk about it as if it were a case* (partner, branch A, family a). *You are right* (fourth-generation owner, branch B, family b). *Within four years' time, then it will be a problem, because then it is reality. Now you can discuss it freely, later on you cannot* (partner, branch A, family a).

In conclusion, our results show that this business family uses informal (symbolic and interactive) mechanisms to nurture affective commitment in three stages, that is identity, ownership and career alignment. The additional stage of ownership alignment seems particularly necessary to share information about the family businesses, to adjust perceptions, to transfer values and norms which are essential for being a future owner and to install a collective sense of "we" in the next-generation ownership group. The next-generation program functions as an arena where the fourth and the fifth generation can meet and interact and seems to take up the role of an overarching informal family institution to align the two family branches.

5. Discussion

5.1. Contributions

This research based on an in-depth investigation of a long-lived business family has helped us to make several important contributions. First, we were able to unveil the previously obscure process long-lived business families use during the pre-entry stages of their offspring's life (before career decisions have been made) to develop their affective commitment towards their family enterprise. In this case, we found extensive evidence of the use of informal family governance mechanisms to attract and engage the next-generation family members in business. This finding contributes to the literature on governance in family firms, as the understanding of informal governance mechanisms in general (e.g., Chrisman et al., 2018), and family governance in particular have largely remained obscure, thus far (e.g., Suess, 2014).

Second, since the seventies, researchers have observed the importance of early age socialization of family members to improve the longevity of family firms (e.g., Longenecker & Schoen, 1978). Recent studies point to the influence of parental behaviors on next generations' engagement in these firms (Garcia et al., 2018; McMullen & Warnick, 2015). However, the how question, or more specifically, how parental behavior or processes are used to accomplish this longevity goal has remained unclear. This research suggests business families with an ambition to build and manage their wealth and maintain committed ownership positions over generations use the informal family governance mechanisms of visible symbols and daily interactions with their school going offspring to embed the pride for their legacy and a desire to contribute towards its growth in the future. Thus, our research reinforces the importance of symbolic interactionism in family firms (Jennings et al., 2014; Mead, 1934).

Third, empirical studies on next-generation commitment in family firms have found identity and career alignment to positively influence the affective or desire-based commitment of these family members (Dawson et al., 2015). However, it remained unclear how these two forms of alignment were developed. This study adds an important dimension to this understanding as we find that *ownership alignment* (Fig. 2, Table 2)–a variable not previously uncovered–helps to bind identity and career alignment of next-generation family members, thereby expanding Dawson et al. (2015)'s and Sharma and Irving (2005)'s insights on affectively committed successors. In this case, we found that these three forms of alignment do not develop by chance but rather *through* enabling informal family governance mechanisms.

Fourth, by focusing on the *business family* as our unit of analysis, a core engine of economic and social welfare, we respond to a need for a better understanding of the unique way business families attain their goals of transgenerational intent and family wealth (Habbershon & Pistrui, 2002; Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2018). Similar to Jaskiewicz, Combs, and Rau (2015) and Suess-Reyes (2017), our study suggests that achieving this longevity goal requires the use of sound governance. In this study, we emphasize the importance of informal family governance mechanisms, a largely neglected topic in mainstream governance theory and research.

Fifth, the mainstream literature on organizational commitment gives few precise answers as to how affective commitment is formed (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). The attention has mainly been on examining correlations between affective commitment and potential antecedents "without identifying underlying mechanisms" involved in the development of affective commitment (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001, p. 315). We contribute to this literature by revealing the informal family governance mechanisms through which business families can nurture affective commitment within their offspring. These informal mechanisms activate a mindset of desire; children want to become involved in the family business(es) and contribute to the family's goals. Thus far, the mainstream literature on (affective) commitment has mainly focused on the organizational workplace context, ignoring the business family as a unit of analysis. However, long-lived business families with kinship-based relationships do provide an ideal context in which to study affective (or other forms of) commitment development as these families hold on to ownership positions over extended periods of time and are often actively involved in running the business.

5.2. Suggestions for future research

This research has uncovered several promising avenues for future research. Clearly, there is a need for empirical validation of the findings from this exploratory study. Moreover, it would be interesting to compare the nature and extent of usage of symbols and interactions by business families with different ambitions regarding the future of their enterprise. Our findings could be further refined in studies including more cases, other generational families (e.g., 1st, 2nd, 3rd and older generations) and other ownership structures (e.g., owner-founders and sibling consortia). For example, such studies may show that first-generation families use less (symbolic) or other (interactive) family governance mechanisms. In this way, informal governance mechanisms might be further conceptualized and incorporated into the family governance literature.

It would also be informative to cover whether families from different cultures, regions or spiritual orientations use similar or different channels for next-generation engagement. As such, we might better understand the differences among families within and among societies and, hence, better understand the heterogeneity of families in business (Jaskiewicz & Dyer, 2017). Indeed, the Smith family is residing in north-western Europe. Families in this part of the world are characterized by relatively weak kin ties, few traditional family values, and high individual self-expression (Alesina & Giuliano, 2010; Hofstede, 1983; Inglehart et al., 2014; Mönkediek & Bras, 2018). As such, parents generally stimulate their children to develop their own identity, talents and interests, and find their own way in life. This cultural context may have affected our findings.

Future research may also find it rewarding to further explore and finetune the three-stage framework of affective commitment development in relation to the meaning of time, the mapping of activities over time and the actors relating to time (Sharma, Salvato, & Reay, 2014). For example, it would be interesting to know how the rhythm, order and duration of the three stages of identity, ownership and career alignment may affect the development of affective commitment in the context of succession, as we do not have precise answers on when the succession process actually starts and when business families move from one stage to the other in both the succession and the affective commitment development process.

The next-generation program, theorized as an overarching informal family institution to align two family branches, creating ownership alignment, may also point to a very interesting link with the literature on corporate strategy and multi-business organizations, i.e., organizations with multiple business units (Greve, 2003). In multi-business organizations, alignment between business units is driven by competence, governance and flexibility and requires sound coordination between the corporate level and the business unit level (Foss & Christensen, 1996; Reynolds & Yetton, 2015). The literature on corporate coherence (Teece, Rumelt, Dosi, & Winter, 1994) shows that coordination and learning as well as the generation and exploitation of diversity create coherent organizations. To heighten our understanding of both worlds, future research may find it particularly interesting to examine whether business families with multiple family branches align their branches in similar or different ways as compared to how multi-business organizations align their business units.

Our findings related to the next-generation program also suggest that participating in an overarching informal family institution contributes to a collective sense of "we" in the next-generation ownership group. Future research may want to explore further if participating in such an institution affects one's self-definition on a deep identity level in the direction of the collective "we" (instead of "I"). A self-concept in terms of "we" has been found to be strongly associated with affective commitment (Johnson & Chang, 2006), and may help explain when individual family members will think and act in service of the whole ownership group.

Our study also links with the emerging literature on imprinting in family business and entrepreneurship (e.g., Jaskiewicz et al., 2015; Pieper, Smith, Kudlats, & Astrachan, 2015) as nurturing affective commitment among offspring by parents through the use of informal family governance mechanisms can be conceived as a form of imprinting that has not yet been described. Pieper et al. (2015)'s research on long-lived multifamily firms—businesses with at least two unrelated founding families—has found that these firms employ simple rules to manage complexity imprinted by founders with distinct characteristics (discrete competences and responsibilities, and open discussions) and passed on to current generations. Accordingly, future research could investigate more closely the characteristics of parents (and children) that may stimulate or hinder the development of affective commitment among offspring through informal family governance and explore how informal family governance mechanisms themselves are passed on from generation to generation.

Finally, we were requested not to reveal information from the children at the individual level of analysis, which may be seen as a limitation of this study. However, this is not uncommon when doing research with children and young people about their social context. Research designs involving children as research participants require careful consideration and discussion of the ethical dilemmas with the parents or guardians to protect the vulnerability of these children in the present or future (Boddy, 2014; Morrow, 2008), always.

5.3. Implications for practice

The findings of our exploratory study are of practical relevance for business families with an intergenerational intent (McMullen & Warnick, 2015; Meier & Schier, 2016; Schröder & Schmitt-Rodermund, 2013; Von Schlippe & Groth, 2006). Our study may help business families and their advisors enlarge their family governance "toolbox". Particularly, the identified informal family mechanisms may help them establish interpersonal, trusting relationships and open communication among family members, which enhance the desire to contribute to the family business in the future (Mustakallio et al., 2002; Pieper & Astrachan, 2008). Additionally, the overview of the informal governance mechanisms within the different stages of the affective commitment development process (identity, ownership and career alignment) may help business families to identify mechanisms that are appropriate for a certain stage in the process. Furthermore, our findings of the additional stage of ownership alignment may inspire family business owners and their advisers to look differently at the development of affective commitment in the succession process. Creating an overarching informal family institution, such as a next-generation program, may help business families to create a collective identity within ownership groups consisting of several branches. The implications of our study for practice are important because they may help business families to find a better balance in providing "roots and wings" for their children during the pre-entry stage of succession. As informal mechanisms are often "unconsciously" used in daily encounters, business families should be aware of their powerful role and are advised to carefully reflect on their role and their use in the different stages of the affective commitment process.

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