

NEPOTISM: IS IT REALLY AS BAD AS IMAGINED? EXPLORING ITS POSSIBLE IMPACTS ON SOCIOEMOTIONAL WEALTH IN HUNGARIAN FAMILY BUSINESSES

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This research paper investigates the conceptual leadership phenomena of nepotism in a family business context. By identifying the antecedents of nepotism, namely machiavellianism and paternalism, the authors attempt to establish a solid context for examining its impact in family business succession. With applying the morally different concepts of reciprocal- and entitled nepotism an empirical attempt is demonstrated to capture the impact of nepotism on socioemotional wealth (SEW) in family businesses (FBs). Using a qualitative, interpretivist approach, two Hungarian FBs where the CEO title has been inherited are analysed through semi-structured interviews with three stakeholders: the predecessor, the successor, and a non-family employee. The findings suggest that reciprocal nepotism can strengthen SEW by fostering emotional bonds, organizational identity, and succession continuity. These insights contribute to the discourse on ethical succession planning and sustainable entrepreneurship in FBs. This research paper aims to provide deeper empirical insights, integrating stakeholder quotations, and positioning the findings within contemporary debates on family business succession and governance.

DOI
[https://doi.org/
10.18690/um.fov.3.2026.16](https://doi.org/10.18690/um.fov.3.2026.16)

ISBN
978-961-299-124-1

Keywords:
reciprocal nepotism,
socioemotional wealth,
family business,
succession planning,
qualitative research



University of Maribor Press

1 Introduction

Family businesses constitute a dominant organizational form worldwide and play a particularly significant role in transition economies such as Hungary, where an estimated 60-80% of firms can be classified as family-owned or family-controlled enterprises (Csákné Filep, 2012a; Huszák et al., 2021). Despite their economic importance, family businesses face a critical vulnerability during generational succession. Empirical evidence suggests that nearly two-thirds of family firms fail to survive the transition from the first to the second generation (Ward, 1987) While succession failure is often attributed to inadequate strategic or financial planning, research increasingly highlights emotional, relational, and identity-based factors as primary sources of tension. As Heidrich et al. (2018) conceptualise successor readiness across three main dimensions: human capital, socio-emotional wealth transfer and successor potential.

One particularly controversial phenomenon in this context is nepotism. In mainstream management literature, nepotism is typically framed as an unethical practice that undermines meritocracy and organizational performance (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2007; Cialdini, 1996; Kets de Vries, 1996), also has negative effect on society (Weber, 1958). In family businesses, however, nepotism is not only widespread but often institutionally expected. The appointment of family members to leadership roles may serve functions related to trust, identity preservation, and dynastic continuity (Le Breton-Miller & Miller, 2006; Finelli, 2011). This raises an important question: Is nepotism inherently harmful in family businesses? Is it really as bad for the organization as naturally assumed? Or can it contribute positively to socioemotional outcomes during succession?

This paper addresses this question by examining nepotism through the lens of **socioemotional wealth (SEW)** and by distinguishing between **entitlement-based nepotism** and **reciprocal nepotism** (Jaskiewicz et al., 2009). By integrating qualitative evidence from Hungarian family businesses undergoing intra-family succession, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of nepotism as a context-dependent governance mechanism. This approach is in line with earlier family business studies that stress the need for a process and context focused understanding of organizational phenomena.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Family Business Succession as a Socioemotional Process

Family businesses are commonly characterized by shared ownership structures, active family involvement in management, and the intra-family transfer of leadership roles (Kása et al., 2019). In such organizations, the influence of the owning family or families is evident not only in ownership but also across leadership, managerial, and operational domains (Mandl, 2008; Csákné, 2012b). A defining feature of family enterprises is familiness (Chrisman et al., 2005), which includes unique resources coming from family involvement and simultaneously involves both advantages and constraints. Family values and norms affect the organization at all levels, shaping decision-making processes, governance practices, and everyday operations.

Succession constitutes one of the most critical phases in the life cycle of a family business (Sharma et al., 1997), with significant implications for both its socioemotional wealth (SEW) (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007) and strategic orientation. Succession in family businesses represents more than a leadership transition; it is a deeply emotional process involving the reconfiguration of roles, identities, and power structures (Handler, 1994; Lansberg, 1999). Incumbent leaders often struggle with letting go of control, while successors face the pressure of meeting family expectations and preserving the founder's legacy. Prior research in Hungary confirms that unresolved emotional tensions and communication failures are among the primary causes of unsuccessful succession (Mosolygó-Kiss et al., 2022).

2.2 Nepotism in Family Businesses

The two theoretical leadership antecedent notions of nepotism are paternalism and machiavellianism. **Paternalistic leadership** seems to appear as an inherent phenomena of FBs, especially in the early stages of organizations' life cycle. Founders of family businesses often expected to become paternalistic by the very nature and culture of FBs. Paternalistic leadership appears as a hierarchical relationship where the leader guides the professional and personal lives of subordinates in a parent-like manner, expecting loyalty and deference in return. These leaders often aim to create a perceived family atmosphere at work. While not considered as democratic and partner based, paternalism considered to have three

different types with leadership layers, such as authoritarian, benevolent, and moral (Aycan, 2006).

A morally more questionable phenomena related to nepotism is **machiavellianism**, which considered as one dimension of the dark triad (machiavellianism-narcissism-psychopathy). Machiavellianism describes people who are manipulative and prone to exploit others, motivated by personal gain (Book et al., 2015; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). This latter phenomena is related to nepotism through the (ab)use of resources in FBs, such as social networks.

Nepotism refers to preferential treatment based on family ties rather than objective merit. While widely criticized also in non-family organizational contexts, nepotism is a common practice and structurally embedded in family firms (Cruz et al., 2011; Gersick et al., 1997; Jaskiewicz et al., 2009).

Jaskiewicz et al. (2009) distinguish between two morally different forms. On the one hand, **entitlement-based nepotism**, where family members receive positions or privileges based solely on kinship, often leading to competence deficits and organizational tension. On the other hand, **reciprocal nepotism**, where preferential treatment is accompanied by expectations of competence, commitment, and reciprocal contribution. This distinction allows nepotism to be examined not as a uniform negative phenomenon but as a relational and moral practice embedded in family logic.

2.3 Socioemotional Wealth and the FIBER Model

Socioemotional wealth refers to the non-financial value that family owners derive from their firms, including emotional attachment, identity, and the desire for dynastic continuity (Gómez-Mejía et al., 2007). Berrone et al. (2012) operationalized SEW through the **FIBER model**, which divides these values into five main categories:

- Family control and influence – the family’s role in strategic decision-making.
- Identification of family members with the firm – the degree to which family members identify with the business.

- Binding social ties – the strength of internal and external relational networks.
- Emotional attachment – the intensity of emotional bonds.
- Renewal of family bonds through dynastic succession – the aspiration for dynastic continuity and succession as value transmission.

The FIBER model provides a comprehensive framework for analysing how nepotism and succession interact to shape emotional and relational outcomes in family firms.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study employs a **qualitative, interpretivist case study approach**, suitable for exploring complex socioemotional phenomena and capturing multiple stakeholder perspectives. This approach is consistent with prior family business research that highlights the importance of process-oriented and context-sensitive analysis.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

The study examines two nationally operating, larger than micro-sized Hungarian family businesses (Table 1.) from different industry segments with undergoing intra-family succession. In both cases, the CEO position was transferred from the predecessor to a family successor. Both firms were founded in the early 1990s, with business roots extending across three generations. Interviewees representing different generations were comparable in age, occupied equivalent positions within their respective family businesses, and possessed similar levels of higher education. In both cases, succession occurred within the family; however, the cases illustrate distinct pathways through which successors entered the family business.

Data were collected through **semi-structured interviews** (approx. 60 minutes each) with three stakeholders: the predecessor, the successor, and a non-family employee per firm (Table 2.). This triangulation enabled the examination of nepotism and SEW beyond the family's internal narrative.

Table 1: Characteristics of case companies

| | Case 1. | Case 2. |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Company profile | Manufacturer and (importer) distributor of building materials | (Importer) Distributor and service provider of technological machinery for (mainly) wood industry |
| Firm size | SME | SME |
| Market | national | national |
| Year founded | 1992 | 2010* *the original company was founded cca. 30 years ago |
| Family ownership | 100% | 100% |
| Revenue (2024) | 1 619 million HUF | 754 million HUF |
| Number of employees (2024) | 9 | 5** ** There are more employees within the group. |
| Generations of the same profession | 3 | 3 |
| Generations actively involved | 2 | 2 |
| Number of adult children | 2 | 2 |
| Children involved | 1 | 1 |
| Management among generations | shared | shared |
| Ownership among generations | shared | shared |
| Decision making among generations | shared | shared |

Source: Prepared by the authors

Table 2: Characteristics of interviewees

| | Case 1. | Case 2. |
|-------------|--|---|
| Predecessor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – male over 65, CEO – founder of current company – related professional background – started his career as entrepreneur in related company before this FB | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – male over 65, CEO – founder of current company – related professional background – Started his career as entrepreneur in this FB |
| Successor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – male over 30, CEO – second son of predecessor – related professional background – started his career in this FB – joined the company in 2016 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – female over 30, CEO – second daughter of predecessor – not-related professional background – started her career as entrepreneur, not in FB – joined the company in 2016 |

| | Case 1. | Case 2. |
|---------------------|---|--|
| Non-Family Employee | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – male over 50, sales manager – work for more than 5 years at the FBs – related professional background and education | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – male over 50, head of service – work for more than 10 years at the FBs – related professional background and education |

Source: Prepared by the authors

3.3 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using **thematic analysis**, guided by the FIBER dimensions and the conceptual distinction between reciprocal and entitlement-based nepotism. Coding focused on emotional expressions, identity narratives, perceptions of fairness, and legitimacy of succession.

4 Findings

4.1 Nepotism as Reciprocal Commitment

In both cases, nepotism manifested primarily as **reciprocal nepotism**. Successors were expected to acquire formal education, external or internal work experience, and firm-specific knowledge; also they were expected to achieve gradual milestones before assuming leadership roles. Preferential treatment was legitimised through demonstrated competence and long-term commitment.

Predecessor Case 1.: “If I had seen that it wasn't working, I would never have insisted that someone from the family take over the company.”

Predecessor Case 2.: “We had external consultants. We always discussed our long-term strategic goals with them and made a plan that showed, that after a five-year preparation phase, we would gradually hand the task.”

4.2 Family Control and Trust

However, trust rooted in family ties facilitated gradual delegation, the transfer of control was emotionally challenging for predecessors and still there are some challenging issues in case of financial decisions in Case 2..

Predecessor Case 2.: “Two strong personalities, the two women (other Predecessor and the Successor), and there are all kinds of emotional tensions... But it hasn't been such a big problem yet.”

Nepotism functioned as a **trust mechanism**, reducing perceived succession risk and reinforcing family control.

Predecessor Case 1.: “I allow him (the Successor) to make mistakes ... I always let him, and even when he wasn't the managing director, I allowed him to carry out a well-thought-out plan or process.”

Predecessor Case 2.: “I didn't want to change her (the Successor) opinion completely. If I had done it slightly differently, would that matter at all?”

4.3 Identification and Emotional Attachment

Successors exhibited strong identification with the firm, often framing leadership as a moral obligation tied to family legacy.

Successor Case 1.: “I was actually born into this whole family business.” ... “(Now) 70% of my life revolves around this”

Successor Case 2.: “I thought of it (the FB) as cultural heritage. ... I think that this kind of tradition somehow permeates???? the entire company and the people who work here. So, for me, this is a tremendous value, and I think it will remain so.”

Furthermore, emotional attachment deepened alongside rising pressure and an expanding sense of responsibility during succession.

Successor Case 1.: “However, I also feel the pressure that what has been achieved so far is only the bare minimum.”

Successor Case 2.: “Since this (working in FB) is a dynamic that operates with greater emotional amplitude among family members, it is undoubtedly twice as stressful.”

4.4 Binding Social Ties and Organisational Legitimacy

Non-family employees initially accepted nepotistic succession as a natural way of FB generational transition, but ultimately expressed deeper approval when competence and transparency were evident. In the eyes of non-family employees intra-family succession represents the guarantee of business continuity.

Non-Family Employee Case 1.: “He has worked hard so far.” “Everything will continue, and the company will definitely remain in business.”

Non-Family Employee Case 2.: “We have known her since childhood. She knows the company well and wants to continue running it. She has lots of ideas.”

Reciprocal nepotism mitigated legitimacy loss by ensuring that family-based appointments were consistent with professional standards.

4.5 Dynastic Renewal and Identity Integration

Succession was interpreted as both continuity and renewal. While core values were preserved, and nurturing the legacy is a key priority for the next generation.

Successor Case 2.: “For us, it's a legacy thing, because my grandfather was involved in it, and I wouldn't be happy if it were lost. Actually, that was my motivation, because I thought that, on some level, it's in our blood, that it's a super-super good business and a very lovable thing.”

Successor Case 1.: “I really want to get the best out of myself mentally, not just to do my job, but to contribute to the company.”

Successors introduced modernization efforts, illustrating that dynastic succession does not exclude strategic change.

Successor Case 1.: “I definitely want to make some more changes in the next three to five years.”

Successor Case 2.: “If we don't modernise, digitalise, etc., etc., then we won't remain competitive in the market. So I have every opportunity to develop a lot and improve greatly.”

5 Discussion

Table 3: FIBER dimension in the examined in the examined companies

| Company | Role | F – Control | I – Identification | B – Binding Ties | E – Emotional Attachment | R – Renewal |
|---------|-------------|--|---|--|--|---|
| Case 1. | Predecessor | Strong control, cautious decision-making, focus on stability | The business as a life’s work, strong founder identity | Traditional partner relationships, international business networks | Strong attachment, letting go based on rationality | Cautious renewal, value preservation |
| Case 1. | Successor | Increasing operational control, more agile decision-making | Experience-based identification, determined mindset | Team- and HR-oriented ties, development of new relationships | High need for conformity, strong emotional involvement | Modernization, expansion |
| Case 2. | Predecessor | Retention of financial control, structured transfer | Multi-generational industry identity, professional legacy | Long-term supplier relationships, professional networks | Deep emotional attachment to the firm, perception as a life’s work | Deliberate renewal, value-based transfer |
| Case 2. | Successor | Expanding leadership role, strengthening operational control | Strong identification with a modern, branding-based narrative | Strong team relationships, modern internal culture | Performance pressure, affection-based motivation | Innovation, digitalization, scalability competence-based dynastic renewal |

Source: Prepared by the authors

The findings challenge the dominant narrative of nepotism as inherently problematic or even detrimental for the business. In line with SEW theory, nepotism – when reciprocal and competence-based – can serve as a mechanism for preserving emotional value, identity, and continuity. However, the emotional burden placed on successors highlights the fragile balance between privilege and pressure. While the answers of third party stakeholders confirmed the statement of Csizmadia et al. (2016) as intergenerational ownership transfer is considered the most natural mode of succession in family firms.

The study also confirms that SEW dimensions are **dynamic**, evolving throughout the succession process rather than remaining static assets (Table 3).

This research demonstrates that nepotism in family businesses should be understood as a morally differentiated and **context-dependent phenomenon**. Findings confirmed the presence of unique **family dynamics**, where family members deal with emotional ties, differing ambitions, while preserving relationships alongside business goals. Generational transition is accompanied by emotional, relational, and identity-related challenges. However, by integrating family preference with competence-based expectations, in case of **reciprocal nepotism** the risk of legitimacy loss can be reduced. Moreover, nepotism can facilitate access to highly committed family-based human capital and a loyal, cost-efficient workforce (Firfiray et al., 2018). As in the surveyed cases both successors were dedicated and personally motivated, attaining the necessary work experience and knowledge before taking the role of CEO. They were accepted by the organisation as well. In addition, the predecessors have objective expectations and clear requirements towards the applicant for the next leader, also have several-year-long plan in head with fixed milestones for the succession process. These attributes may endow family firms with a competitive advantage, suggesting that nepotistic practices can positively influence firm performance (Bellow, 2003; Ford & McLaughlin, 1986). Furthermore, outcomes of the study confirm the positive influence of intra-family succession on family socioemotional wealth.

However, it cannot be generalised for every case, as FBs and nepotistic decisions may differ. For instance, as previous literature shows, that hiring nepots with low formal qualifications runs greater risk for companies (Lee et al., 2003; Pérez-González, 2006). Nevertheless, the practice of granting preferential treatment to family members solely based on kinship rather than merit has long been the subject to critical inspection. Significant part of literature claims that nepotism may undermine the long-term sustainability and economic performance of family enterprises (Dyer, 2006; Schulze et al., 2001). While reciprocal nepotism can enhance socioemotional wealth during succession, entitlement-based expectations risk emotional strain and legitimacy loss (Firfiray et al., 2018; Jaskiewicz et al., 2009).

The findings contribute to ethical succession planning and expand SEW theory by integrating context dependent nepotism as a possible positive relational governance mechanism.

6 Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of nepotism as a leadership-related phenomenon within family business succession by demonstrating that its effects are neither uniformly negative nor inherently dysfunctional. By distinguishing between entitlement-based and reciprocal forms of nepotism and situating them within broader antecedents such as paternalism and machiavellian tendencies, the findings underscore the contextual and moral complexity of nepotistic practices. Drawing on qualitative evidence from two Hungarian family businesses undergoing intra-family leadership transfer, the analysis reveals that reciprocal, competence-based nepotism can reinforce key dimensions of socioemotional wealth, including emotional attachment, organizational identification, and continuity of succession. The inclusion of multiple stakeholder perspectives further highlights how legitimacy and governance outcomes are shaped by perceived fairness and professionalism. Overall, the study enriches ongoing debates on ethical succession and sustainable entrepreneurship in family businesses by offering empirically grounded insights into the socioemotional dynamics underpinning family-based leadership transitions.

6.1 Limitations

While the socioemotional wealth (SEW) framework has significantly advanced the understanding of non-financial goals in family firms, it has also attracted criticism regarding its conceptual clarity and empirical operationalization arguing that the concept is overly broad. FIBER scale of Berrone et al. (2012) have their own limitations. Concerns have been emerged by scholars in the recent academic discourse among others by Brigham and Payne (2019). Furthermore, Debicki et al. (2016) developed another scale (SEWi); also Hauck et al. (2016) modified FIBER scale to REI scale.

General concerns remain that the FIBER dimensions may vary in relevance depending on firm context, size, or generational stage (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2014). Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported survey data in SEW measurement raises questions about social desirability bias and the ability of respondents to accurately assess intangible socioemotional priorities. These general concerns can be applied as a limitation of this research paper as well.

Though limited in scope, this study is part of a longer-term research initiative. Its purpose is to establish key theoretical and empirical insights that will inform and support a more extensive exploration of the effect that different types of nepotisms have on the FIBER scale dimensions of SEW in FBs in subsequent phases.

Although it goes beyond the scope of the research topic, according to the findings of the interviews, an emerged topic and recommended further area of research could be the pressure on successors and achieving a healthy work-life balance while managing a family business with the pressure of maintaining and expanding family legacy.

6.2 Theoretical and Practical Implications

This paper aimed to give a deeper understanding of how reciprocal nepotism and its effects on SEW elements in family businesses are studied empirically through the lens of different stakeholder perspectives. On the one hand the main academic contribution of the research paper that it applies the FIBER scale empirically and explores reciprocal nepotism within the SEW framework. On the other hand, the practical implication is to provide actionable insights into ethical and effective succession planning in FBs as the research aimed to discover how reciprocal nepotism contributes to family firm sustainability and legacy.

Moreover, with the help of complex perspective by including the lens of non-family member employees, also empirical analysis could be made on how corporate context and type of nepotism affect the acceptability of nepotism and impact of it on employee performance and loyalty in family business settings. This new holistic approach can motivate other researcher for analysing the phenomena of nepotism in FBs in a more holistic way with contextual perspective.

6.3 Future Research Possibilities

This study should be interpreted in light of certain limitations. First, the present research constitutes **one component of a broader research project** that aims to examine and critically compare the **two distinct forms of nepotism (entitlement and reciprocal nepotism)**. Accordingly, the current analysis does not explore their potentially divergent mechanisms and outcomes.

As a result, the findings reflect an incomplete understanding of phenomena related to nepotism, lacking a comparison of the finer distinctions in the impact of entitlement-based and reciprocity-based nepotism practices on individual attitudes, behavior, or organizational outcomes. Future phases of the research project will address this limitation through a more refined conceptualization and empirical operationalization of nepotism, allowing for a comparative assessment of these two forms and their differing theoretical and practical implications.

Secondly, although this issue extends beyond the immediate scope of the study, the interview findings highlight the need for a deeper examination of succession processes and their associated socioemotional dynamics in family firms, as well as for extending the research timeframe to capture long-term outcomes. At the same time, successors experienced increased pressure to balance modernization efforts with the preservation of tradition, reflecting an emotional dynamic that consistent with broader research on socioemotional wealth and family business governance.

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