

# From Family Director Pathos to Board Ethos: Managing Multiple Role Identity Struggles in the Boardroom of Family Firms

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**ABSTRACT** The literature indicates that the board of directors exists to provide resources and strategic direction (service task) and monitor top managers (control task), often tending to over-generalize board tasks. Using a unique sample of 36 elite family firm directors having served on 615 boards with an aggregate 1447 years' experience, and integrating interview and secondary data with observations, we capture how the multiple role identity struggles experienced by family directors are managed in the board. Our data indicate that effective boards resolve multiple role identity struggles (i.e., family director 'pathos') through the mechanisms that boardroom structural forces trigger and the resulting bridge and buffer tasks enacted (i.e., board 'ethos'), going beyond the traditional service and control tasks.

**Keywords:** board of directors, behavioural governance theory, multiple role identities, qualitative study, family firms, purpose

## INTRODUCTION

Research centres on the prevailing notion that boards of directors exist to perform service and control tasks (Forbes and Milliken, 1999), implicitly assuming that these two tasks are universally executed by all boards. In this paper, we argue that the situation is more complex and variegated than previously thought (Huse, 2018). Scholars following a behavioural governance approach have begun to recognize the importance of the behaviour of organizational elites, seeing governance as going beyond the mere pursuit

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and control of individual actions (Westphal and Zajac, 2013), conceiving 'elite conduct as occurring not in a social vacuum, but rather in a socially situated context and by individuals whose interpretation of the context is itself socially constructed or constituted' (Westphal and Zajac, 2013, p. 608).

In parallel, a growing body of research stresses that individuals carry multiple, often overlapping, and blurring role identities (Ashforth, 2000). A key challenge for individuals and the groups in which they operate is to manage their multiple role identities (MRIs) (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008). Research stresses that the MRIs of individuals are important predictors of behaviour (Ramarajan, 2014), acknowledging that this is also true for boards of directors (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Hillman et al., 2008; Withers et al., 2012). In this vein, research adopting a behavioural approach has examined identity tensions in boards (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997), considering the role of management and directors (Garg and Eisenhardt, 2017) and other characteristics linked to identity tensions, such as demographic aspects (Westphal and Milton, 2000), functional background (Tuggle et al., 2010), and leadership positions (McDonald and Westphal, 2011).

However, while the behavioural approach to governance recognizes the importance of understanding directors' MRIs as shapers of board behaviour (Van Ees et al., 2009; Westphal and Zajac, 2013), much less attention has been paid to directors' MRI struggles (i.e., when directors hold multiple role identities with divergent meanings and expectations), how such struggles emerge (i.e., become visible in directors' decision-making approaches), and how they are managed (i.e., how MRI struggles are brought to convergence). This is a pressing issue for at least two reasons. First, because boards of directors are considered the highest authority of firms (He and Huang, 2011) whose effectiveness depends on how directors' multiple identities are understood and managed (Hillman et al., 2008). Second, as MRI struggles can cause distress and anxiety (Burke and Stets, 2009), understanding how these are managed is important in order to offer concrete suggestions to individuals on how to nurture the creation of an ecology of identities and avoid the negative effects of identity struggles (Ramarajan, 2014).

Mainstream role identity theory suggests two perspectives (internal and external) to explain MRI conflict management. The internal perspective suggests that individuals manage MRI struggles thanks to their inner hierarchical control system, which will lead to a change in their behaviour so that MRI struggles are controlled by becoming either separated or aligned. The external perspective indicates that individuals' interactions with the social structure to which they belong will favour the management of MRI struggles (Burke, 2003; Burke and Stets, 2023). However, how directors' MRI struggles can be managed in concrete terms remains unclear, and attempts to understand board behaviours tend to be rare due to the difficulty in gaining access to the so-called 'control room'. Recently, scholars have returned to the topic, revealing that directors view themselves as strategic partners of executives, but concluding that 'researchers should continue to develop theory and find empirical ways to capture the internal dynamics of the board room' (Boivie et al., 2021, p. 1688). Similarly, Cheng et al. (2021) find that board effectiveness is correlated with internal board operations, but also acknowledge that more data are needed on 'patterns of director interactions during board meetings' (Cheng et al., 2021, p. 6416).

To solve this puzzle, we propose a focus on family firm boards. Family firms are the most ubiquitous form of business organization in any world economy (La Porta et al., 1999; Pieper et al., 2021), their boards typically include family directors holding salient MRIs (Bammens et al., 2011), and are deemed a remarkable case in the context of managing such MRIs (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). Thus, family firm boards provide an interesting setting to further our understanding of corporate governance adeptness in general, and the board dynamics and processes that may be relevant in other organizational settings where decision-makers have multiple and potentially divergent identities. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to advance our theoretical and practical understanding of *how family directors' struggles emerge and are managed in the board of family firms*.

Our findings, based on interviews with 36 elite family firm directors having served on 615 boards with an aggregate 1447 years' experience, secondary data and 510 hours of direct observations of board meetings, show that both the internal and external perspectives of the management of MRI struggles are necessary.

This paper contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, highlighting the bridging and buffering tasks performed to manage MRIs during board meetings, our findings shift the focus from traditional service and control tasks to the often-disregarded dynamics of MRIs within boards of directors. As such, we contribute to behavioural governance and role identity theory, showing the specific mechanisms with which individual role identities and behaviours are manifested and managed in 'organizational elites' (Westphal and Zajac, 2013, p. 610).

Second, while the literature on boards of directors has mainly focused on aspects of composition, and more recently on functioning (e.g., Arzubiaga et al., 2018; Finkelstein et al., 2009), our study unveils the presence of structural forces, internal to the boardroom, that play a key role in enabling the bridging and buffering tasks, thereby adding a third component, beyond composition and functioning, to understand board behaviours and outcomes.

Third, family firms provide extremely fertile ground for analysing MRI management, and we contribute to the family firm literature by responding to the call for a more grounded understanding of how family directors experience and manage MRIs (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008), and what family firm boards actually do (Bammens et al., 2011; Sherlock and Marshall, 2019). Overall, our research fundamentally advances knowledge in the field of management studies by revealing the board functioning mechanisms for MRI management.

## **THEORY**

### **What Do Boards Do?**

Board effectiveness is a general term used to refer to the board's ability to perform its tasks and continue working together as a group (Forbes and Milliken, 1999, p. 492). Scholars agree that the control and service tasks are the most relevant that a board performs

(Forbes and Milliken, 1999), the former informed by the agency perspective, the latter mainly by the resource dependence view.

Agency theory, grounded in economics and finance, stresses the importance of directors' control tasks (Fama and Jensen, 1983a, 1983b; Hillman and Dalziel, 2003). Research drawing on agency theory suggests that the board's control activity is important to mitigate conflicting interests and agency problems (Lubatkin et al., 2007).

Resource dependence theory instead provides a basis for analysing the content of the board's service task, namely offering strategic advice, complementary knowledge, and experience to top management (Hillman and Dalziel, 2003). Scholars applying this approach stress that directors can bring relevant resources to the board that may be important to fill knowledge and skill gaps (Westphal, 1999), and facilitate relationship management with external stakeholders (e.g., Hillman et al., 2000). Some interesting studies have deviated from these theories by adopting a political perspective, stressing the 'consensus-building' function of boards where a compromise between a set of divergent interests is sought (Ravasi and Zattoni, 2006), or a stakeholder view, emphasizing that different types of stakeholders (e.g., owners, managers, customers, suppliers) may have different expectations of board functions (Huse and Rindova, 2001).

Studies resting on these theories in most cases fail to document what boards do with regard to directors' MRIs, more precisely, how MRI struggles emerge and are managed in boards. The management of MRI struggles within the board could represent, at least theoretically, a distinct form of board task. Therefore, we adopt two theoretical lenses to frame our understanding and address our research question, namely role identity theory and behavioural governance.

### **Role Identity Theory and Behavioural Governance**

Role identities are defined as 'the different social structural positions individuals hold' such as, for example, parent, spouse, and worker (Burke and Stets, 2009, p. 112).<sup>[1]</sup> A growing body of research consistently shows that individuals understand themselves through an internalized structure of role identities (Turner, 1990), influencing their behaviours and decisions, pointing to the central question: who am I? (Ashforth, 2000; Rogers et al., 2017). A core tenet of role identity theory is that it does not make sense to consider role identities in isolation. Rather, most role identities exist within a context of multiple counter-role identities with which everyone must constantly deal (Burke, 1980). Thus, a key element of role identity theory is that each person has multiple identities, one for each position held (Ashforth, 2000; Burke and Stets, 2009; Hogg et al., 1995). Depending on the context, these identities can be more or less salient (Ashforth et al., 2008), and more or less convergent (Burke, 2003).

We define role identity salience as the probability that a role identity is activated in a certain situation (Stryker, 1980). Based on role identity theory, individuals organize their MRIs in a hierarchic manner with more salient identities placed higher in the hierarchy (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Salient role identities are more central to self-meaning (compared to those at lower levels in the hierarchy), typically involve high commitment, responsibilities, and demands, and are based on relatively long-term ties that are often

affectively intense (Thoits, 2003). Problems arise when multiple salient role identities have divergent meanings and expected behaviours but are simultaneously evoked by the situation. In such cases, maintaining multiple salient role identities in parallel will cause role conflict and psychological distress (Biddle, 1986; Burke, 1991; Kreiner et al., 2006). Thus, the struggle is not inherent in simply having multiple role identities, but in how these play out in interactions and decision-making.<sup>[2]</sup>

In this vein, the literature emphasizes the challenges of concurrent and salient role identities, such as work-family balance (e.g., Gatrell et al., 2021; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Williams and Alliger, 1994), where dual roles (e.g., worker and mother) often dictate conflicting demands, leading to tensions that affect decision-makers and those around them. This literature agrees on the importance of managing MRI struggles, suggesting, for instance, that individuals should manage them by prioritizing the alignment of their identities (e.g., Balmer and Greyser, 2002; McCall and Simmons, 1978), and finding an optimal level of identity multiplicity (Biddle, 1986; Pratt and Foreman, 2000). How MRI divergences are resolved can be explained, at least theoretically, with two possible approaches (Burke, 2003).

The first, more internal, considers how MRIs function within the individual according to the hierarchical control system. When MRIs require divergent but equally salient meanings, the individual will experience distress because the verification of one identity increases the discrepancy of the other (s). The individual will then act to change the situation so that contrasting MRIs are controlled (Burke, 2003). This change must occur so that MRIs become either separated or aligned (Burke, 2003; Heise, 1979; Smith-Lovin and Heise, 1988). Separation occurs by changing the identity standards of at least one of the identities so that an action that affects one will leave the other unaffected. Instead, alignment occurs when the individual is able to change the identity standards associated with the conflicting MRIs to make them more aligned (Burke, 2003).

The second, more external, approach to explain how MRI divergences are resolved is considering how the individual interacts and is linked with the social structure to which she/he belongs; this approach indicates that a condition for MRI struggles is having multiple identities in intersecting groups (Burke, 2003). In the context of our study (i.e., family firm board of directors), directors belong to intersecting groups, and based on role identity theory, the only insight we derive is that the multiple identity standards involved should shift meanings whereby the more salient or committed identity shifts the least (Burke, 2003; Burke and Stets, 2023).

To investigate the issue more thoroughly, behavioural governance theory is a valuable complement to explore how the social structure (the board) affects and is affected by the individual (the director), since boards of directors should be seen as social entities whose functioning and tasks can be better clarified by considering directors as members of a *socially situated* and *socially constituted* context (i.e., in our study, family firm board of directors). The term *socially situated* stresses that the individual's behaviour is embedded in a set of relationships that render individual agency contingent on the social context (Westphal, 1999; Westphal and Zajac, 2013). This implies acknowledging that the board exists and functions as a result of a set of explicit and implicit norms that enable directors to meet and interact, aiming to foster the decision-making process. The term *socially constituted* instead emphasizes how an individual's socialization and cumulative personal experience shape what the individual conceives as

situationally possible, defining his/her board behaviours (e.g., Little, 2012; Westphal and Zajac, 2013). Seeing the board of directors as a socially constituted context also means that what directors consider and act upon derives from a reasoned process based on their MRIs (Hillman et al., 2008). Behavioural governance theory therefore allows recognizing that the board of directors is a social entity in which the subjects act and react by virtue of their identification with certain role identities, but also a social environment with operating rules that contribute to regulating the group's behaviours and actions in the decision-making process.

These notions have in part been applied to boards of directors (e.g., Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Hillman et al., 2008; Withers et al., 2012). For instance, Golden-Biddle and Rao (1997) explain that identities affect the board through identification and action whereby board members act coherently with the role expectations ascribed. Hillman et al. (2008) theorize that directors can have multiple identities that affect their monitoring and resource provision activities. These studies recognize the importance of directors' multiple identities, but do not explain how multiple role identities that struggle against each other are managed in the upper echelons (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). This constitutes a significant limitation given that directors often embody MRIs or 'wear many hats'.

### Research on MRI in Family Firms

A socially situated and socially constituted context where directors 'wear many hats' is certainly that of family firm boards. The entire family firm literature is based on the assumption that, within this form of business organization, multiple identities exist. In this vein, Tagiuri and Davis (1996) and Gersick et al. (1997) specify that the most salient role identities derive from the family, business, and ownership positions held by a family firm decision-maker. While the existence of MRIs has been implicitly assumed as a foundational characteristic of family firms, scholars in the last decades have made this assumption more explicit by focusing on the consequences of decision-makers' MRIs. In this vein, empirical evidence has highlighted that decision-makers' identities intersecting the family, ownership, and business roles actually shape their decision-making approach, ultimately affecting entrepreneurial orientation and performance (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2011), strategic (Miller et al., 2011) and entrepreneurial (Kotlar and Sieger, 2019) behaviours, and start-up success (Brannon et al., 2013). In addition, the coexistence of MRIs in family firm decision-makers is not always harmonious, and can be associated with role ambiguity, incongruent expectations, and psychological challenges (Knapp et al., 2013; Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008). This leads to a critical governance dilemma for family firms: do family firms have specific rituals or routines to help individuals manage their MRI struggles? (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008).

Studies at the intersection of role identity theory and governance have considered identity issues within family firm boards of directors mainly using secondary data and an external point of observation. For example, we know that family firms (more than lone-founder firms) have a tendency toward interlocking with other family firms (Cannella Jr et al., 2015), and appointing outside directors with previous experience (Cannella Jr

et al., 2015; Dibrell et al., 2019). Shepherd and Haynie (2009) contributed to the debate by emphasizing that family firms represent ‘an extreme case in the context of managing multiple identities’ (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009, p. 1252), and the convenience of using role identity theory to explain family firm behaviours as the ‘intersection of the family and business owner identities is shared and activated simultaneously on an ongoing basis’ (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009, p. 1252).

Yet, evidence of how MRIs emerge and are managed within the boards of these organizations is lacking. Thus, family firms are both an empirical context and a theory-building opportunity. Taking Burke’s (2003) stance, a condition for multiple (salient) identity activation is having multiple identities in intersecting groups. In particular, family directors hold MRIs in different intersecting groups (i.e., the family, ownership, and business), implying intense social ties that make these roles simultaneously salient (Stryker and Serpe, 1982). At the same time, they have different logics, with the ownership and business groups associated with mostly financial goals, and the family group with non-financial goals (Kotlar and De Massis, 2013). Thus, the family, ownership, and business roles of family directors are the most likely to be activated and to conflict in the context of our study. A situation that is theoretically resolved with shifts in meanings, with the more salient or committed identity shifting the least. How can this happen? Theory does not give us much information apart from the intuition that ‘identities meet and interact when people meet and interact’ (Burke and Stets, 2023, p. 200). We next present the inductive journey we undertook to shed light on this important topic.

## METHODS

### Data Collection

This study aims at theory elaboration (Gioia et al., 2013) through analysing informant meanings and understanding the observed events (Langley and Abdallah, 2011). With this objective in mind, we adopted an inductive approach to illuminate how the multiple identities of directors in family firms emerge and are managed in boards. Our findings derive from multiple data sources, exploiting the synergies of triangulation (Jick, 1979) until reaching theoretical saturation (Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Glaser and Strauss, 2017). In-depth semi-structured interviews with experienced family and non-family members of Italian family business boards are our principal data source, while archival data (from the same Italian boards) complemented the interviews, and direct observations (in a global perspective) served to corroborate the emerging findings.

*Semi-structured interviews.* In total, we interviewed 36 directors, following different rounds of data gathering to ensure the validity and robustness of our design and findings (see Supplement Table S2a for the data collection details). Our interviews were conducted in Italy, a country with a high number of family firms that form the backbone of the economy. As Aganin and Volpin (2005) show, no country more than Italy epitomizes family capitalism. Therefore, Italy is a very interesting milieu in which to explore and comprehend family firm boards of directors (Melis, 2000), enabling us to ascertain the dynamics and qualities

that lead to a better understanding of family firm governance generally. To confirm that our informants' perceptions presented a consistent depiction, we dedicated considerable time to building a relationship of trust with them (carefully explaining the research project, and when possible, organizing informal preliminary talks), assuring complete anonymity to decrease the risk of distortion or dissimulation (Gioia et al., 2013). We selected experienced directors so that their insights on board tasks would be based on reflections matured over time (Schön, 1983). The directors had to meet several criteria to qualify as interviewees, among which at least 5 years' experience on the board of at least one family firm. Two further criteria were:

1. The directors had to sit on the board of at least one family firm, defined here as any business, large or small, public or privately-owned, whose ownership is controlled by a single family, and where two or more members of the same family significantly influence the business through their kinship ties, management and/or governance roles, or ownership rights (Tagiuri and Davis, 1996).
2. The directors had to sit on the board of an Italian-owned company that adopts the 'traditional' governance system<sup>[3]</sup> to circumvent problems associated with different legal requirements and practices on the use and tasks of boards (Stiles, 2001; Stiles and Taylor, 2001).

When identifying informants, we sought to consider the perspectives of those directly concerned (family directors) and those of non-family directors. The latter, although not holders of the MRIs under study here, personally participated as main actors together with the family directors in the board dynamics and were in fact crucial to corroborating what the family directors explained. We identified our informants using two complementary strategies: introduction by AIdAF (the Italian branch of the worldwide Family Business Network – FBN); and identification through personal contacts and snowball sampling. These approaches are detailed in Supplement S1a. Consistent with key recommendations for interviewing elite informants (Solarino and Aguinis, 2021) and encouraging these directors to openly share their perspectives, we always mentioned AIdAF's endorsement, explained our research project in detail, and guaranteed anonymity. The directors interviewed have experience on boards of family firms with different types of family involvement across a range of sectors, private and public, and of various sizes. The informants' wide experience (serving on 615 boards with an aggregate 1447 years' experience) allowed us to analyse their views in considerable depth. In total, we interviewed 15 non-family and 21 family directors. Our selection criteria allowed us to explore different views and capture the subtle and often confidential aspects informing MRIs, generally aired only behind closed doors (see Supplement S2a for details on the data collection and S2b for interview questions). As is common in inductive studies (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), the questions changed as our emerging theory developed, and we increasingly focused the interviews on themes related to the role identities of directors (i.e., various types of family directors) and the different patterns of MRI management at the board level.

*Archival data.* Following Miles and Huberman (1994), we supplemented the interview transcripts with summary sheets on each informant containing data on their background and the firms on whose boards they served. We carried out a detailed analysis of the informants' online profiles, CVs, company websites, corporate governance



documents, and annual reports using an unobtrusive approach that provided important background information. As the interviews proceeded, we integrated the summary sheets with notes on key issues and patterns arising in the interviews. These archival data were essential to triangulating the informants' interview data with longitudinal, precise, and detailed information on their roles and careers, the features of the boards and the firms in which they have and are working. The secondary data also allowed us to mitigate possible retrospective bias in the interviews with the directors (Patvardhan et al., 2015). The research design aimed to meet Guba and Lincoln's (1994) criteria for validity in qualitative research. For example, we safeguarded credibility by using the prolonged engagement technique, and transferability through our sampling method. We ensured dependability and confirmability through a detailed research plan including an audit trail of the transcripts and research process. We also engaged in numerous discussions over time, interacting throughout the triangulation to ensure a critical review of the process and the primary researcher's role in the data collection (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

*Observation.* The authors' direct involvement in consulting projects within family firm boards provided further access to additional data, which played a crucial role especially thanks to one of the authors who is the founding partner of an internationally renowned family firm consulting group and has spent more than 35 years serving on various family firm boards, counselling family firms on their board organization and improving board functioning. The consultant-scholar observed approximately 510 hours of board of directors' meetings in family firms from all over the world, translating, when possible, this experience into observation notes. The evidence gained from these observations not only served to corroborate our data from other sources, but also helped to better see how MRIs emerge and are managed in family firm boardrooms, mitigating the risk of partial perspectives.

## Data Analysis

To analyse the rich data collected, we adopted an inductive and iterative (Corbin and Strauss, 2015; Miles et al., 2014), as well as a bottom-up coding approach (i.e., from data to concepts) following the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013).

We started with developing first-order concepts deriving directly from our informants' words to capture their view of their MRIs, how they emerge and are managed in the board. Moving on to axial and selective coding allowed us to further reduce the data to more general categories (second-order themes).

At this point, we tried to act as 'knowledgeable agents' (Gioia et al., 2013), constantly comparing the emerging themes with prior literature (Jaskiewicz et al., 2015). We identified several concepts that did not seem to have 'adequate theoretical referents in the existing literature' (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 20), for instance, 'sailing in bewilderment', 'navigating in a haze', or 'steering with clarity'. Consistent with the Gioia methodology, we approached the data with the aim of 'capturing variability and trying to understand why that variability exists' (Gehman et al., 2018, p. 295). Comparing the data and prior literature (Corley and Gioia, 2004) led us to a first 'eureka' moment when we discovered that we could apply to

our informants a three-fold categorization (family operator, family supervisor, and family investor) previously used to classify family firms (Davis, 2008; Nordqvist et al., 2014). A second ‘eureka’ moment came when we noticed that informants discussed MRI struggles differently based on the categories to which they belonged, allowing us to identify theoretically interesting patterns (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). Indeed, here variance was not excluded, in Corley’s words, ‘interpretivists have a rather different way of thinking about variance; we’re much less interested in controlling variance and more interested in capturing variability and trying to understand why that variability exists’ (Gehman et al., 2018, p. 295). In particular, as we gathered and started analysing the data, we found that three different types of directors and patterns emerged. Distinguishing the emergent patterns also allowed us to combine the second-order themes into aggregate dimensions (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). To ensure accuracy in category coding, we recruited an independent reviewer, blind to the purpose of the research, to code some data (Myers, 2009). We provided the independent coder with representative examples for the key categories, the rationale for each representative placement, and requested coding 50 randomly-chosen excerpts. The independent coder assigned 45 of the excerpts to the same category we did, a 90 per cent level of agreement, constituting a reasonable verification of the accuracy of the coding process (Isabella, 1990).

This coding approach provided the basis for the data structure illustrated in Figure 1 that we used to develop an empirically grounded understanding of directors’ MRIs and their management in the board.

While our focus was on family directors, non-family directors served to corroborate their statements, and importantly, describe board functioning. Each director has prevalent experience (in terms of years spent in each board) as a specific type of family director<sup>[4]</sup> or non-family director<sup>[5]</sup> (see Supplement Table S1b for the classification of directors).

## FINDINGS

Figure 2 presents the model that emerged from the data. We found that different types of family directors experience different intensities of what we call MRI struggles that become factually visible in their decision-making approach – i.e., sailing in bewilderment, navigating in a haze, and steering with clarity. Once the family director enters the boardroom, structural forces at the board level set the ground for MRI struggle management thanks to the bridge and buffer task (right side of the figure where the letters A to F indicate how each task is performed). The outcome of this process is the directors’ collective commitment to the firm’s purpose when the MRI struggles have been managed. All the concepts in Figure 1 (data structure) derive from our qualitative inquiry, while the first part of the emerging model (left side of Figure 2, grey part) (i.e., categorization of family director type) resulted from coding the data in line with the literature.

### Different Family Director Types

As mentioned above, iterating between our data and the family firm literature led us to the categorization of family director types inspired by the family firm taxonomy of Davis (2008) and Nordqvist et al. (2014). The literature identifies three different types of family

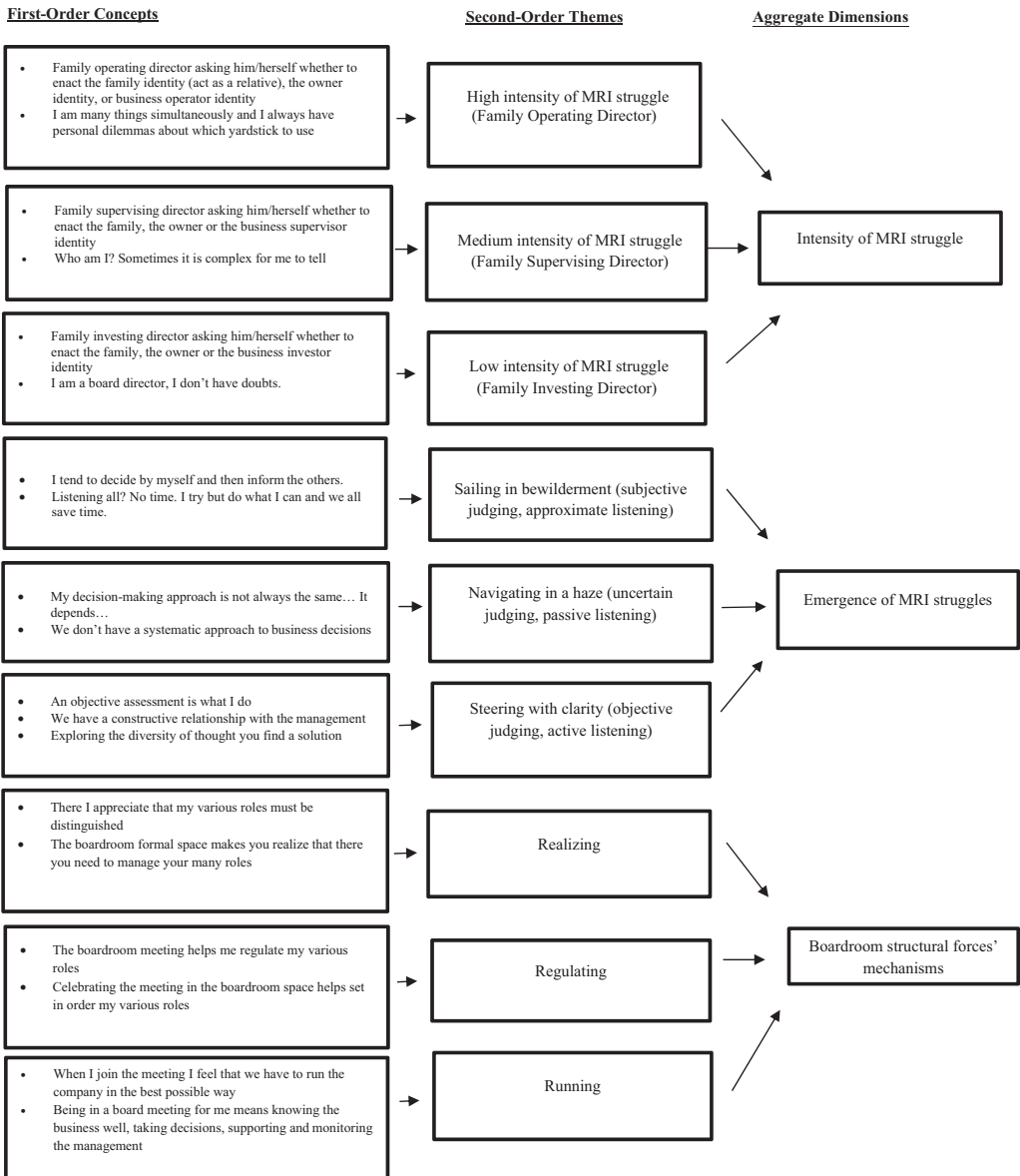


Figure 1. Illustration of the data structure

firms according to the meaning that the owning family attributes to its involvement in the business. More than a year into the project, we discovered that our data mapped onto the categorization in a fairly straightforward way. In particular, we derived the following descriptions of family director types.

*A family operating director* is a family member, firm owner and manager who is highly committed to running the day-to-day operations and works in a board mainly composed of family members.

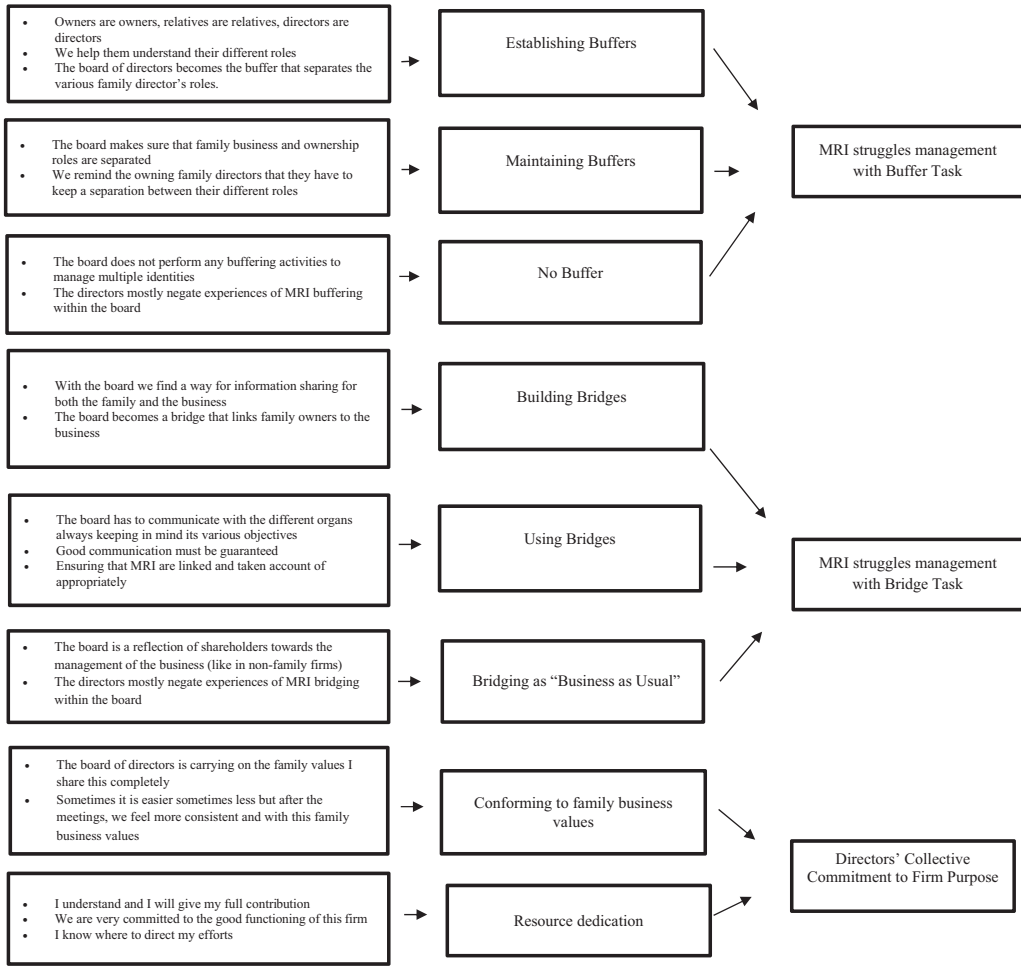


Figure 1. (Continued)

A *family supervising director* is a member of the family, firm owner but not strongly involved in daily management; this type of director is mainly focused on supervising the largely external management in a board that includes family and non-family members.

A *family investing director* is a member of the family and firm owner acting as an investor rather than managing the firm daily in a board where the director is often the only family representative.

Table I lists the three family director types and the descriptive criteria we used for coding. Each type is an amalgam of three salient family, ownership, and business role identities. What is interesting is that these director types safeguard the owners' interests<sup>[6]</sup> by attributing different meanings to their role as directors, facing different situations with regard to family presence and to the impact of familial authority and legitimacy norms within the board.

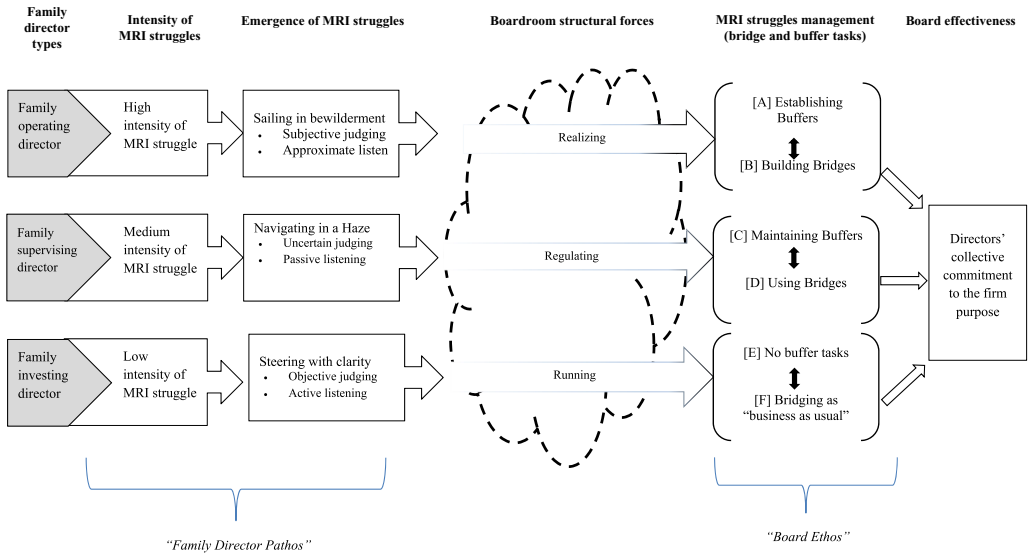


Figure 2. Multiple identity struggles management in the family firm board of directors

Note: Arrows denote main relationships between the themes.

### MRI Struggles and Family Director ‘Pathos’

*Intensity of MRI struggles.* As we continued our coding, we discovered that each family director type experienced different intensities of MRI struggles (and associated patterns). MRI struggles occurred when family directors attributed meanings to one of their salient roles that were incongruent with the meanings attributed to their other salient roles. The intensity of these struggles differed according to director type, with family operating directors experiencing the highest intensity of struggles. Table II provides examples, and additional illustrations can be found in Table III at the end of the section.

Why does this happen? The explanation is mainly situational in the sense that family operating directors most often work in the family firm in their simultaneous family, ownership, and business roles, and the board is mainly composed of other family operating directors (see Table I). In particular, as all three roles are concentrated within the family firm, the impact of familial norms on business and ownership is extensive, and as the family logics are based on different values to the business and ownership logics, the risks that these diverge are higher. Family operating directors reported more intense MRI struggles in the sense that they came to the fore more often and more pervasively. Family supervising directors limit themselves to acting as supervisors (not operators), typically participating in the board with few other family supervising directors (and a discrete number of non-family directors), and therefore the impact of familial norms is still present but more moderated, as is the intensity/likelihood of experiencing MRI struggles. Finally, family investing directors participate in the board with no or very few other family directors, playing the role of investors with no or very limited impact of familial norms, and as their business identities that are less tied to the family firm, they experience low intensity MRI struggles.

Table I. Coding for each family director type

<i>Director type</i>	<i>Illustrative quotes</i>	<i>Situation</i>	<i>Intensity of MRI struggles</i>
Family operating director	'We are very operational, board meetings are expected to be moments of work, of management. We are not a big company: we are a medium-sized Italian company and, therefore, we are very focused on business activities (...) we allow ourselves a lot of dialectical freedom. There are, for example, many updates on operational, commercial, financial aspects. For us the board is used to focus on the various moments of our work in progress' (O).	The board is mainly composed of family members with a high impact of familial authority and legitimacy norms	High
Family supervising director	'We supervise the work of the subordinate management, the CEO making his report, then the board approving the budget, five-year plan, and supervising all extraordinary management. The CEO can propose frontline management but the board would approve and after approving, the manager would be brought to the board, show up, talk a little bit and then be approved'. (HS)	The board includes family and non-family members with a medium impact of familial authority and legitimacy norms	Medium
Family investing director	'Well, I think my role as a family director does not vary much from that of directors in boards of non-family businesses ... (because) the board has to keep the company going, that is in the sense ... I represent the shareholders ... we have invested in this and the problem of family members is a problem that reflects on the company but it should not in my opinion be brought to the board ... It has to be the board that governs the company in the best possible way'. (L)	The board is mainly composed of non-family members with a low impact of familial authority and legitimacy norms	Low

As Table II shows, MRI struggles make it difficult for directors to have a clear and ordered view of what they really want to do for the general good of the family firm. To describe this, we borrow the term *pathos* from ancient Greek, introducing the concept of *family director pathos* to indicate suffering, referring to sorrowfulness due to MRI struggles that are also reflected in their decision-making approach.

*Emergence of MRI struggles.* Emergence of MRI struggles refers to how these struggles became factually visible in the decision-making approach in the firm in general, and in preparing for the board meeting in particular. In our data, family director pathos (i.e., MRI struggles) is in fact expressed in the family directors' overall approach to decision-making in the family firm. As depicted in Figure 2, we identify three types of individual

Table II. Representative data for different intensities of MRI struggles

<i>Director type</i>	<i>Illustrations</i>
Family operator director ( <i>high</i> intensity of MRI struggles)	<p>‘You know ... a lot of times as his sister I feel sorry for him on the one hand because I would have liked it, all in all, that my brother had been (the leader) but in fact he is not. I think (as a shareholder) that it is right that those who have the merits and leadership characteristics emerged. So, I am sorry for him (as a sister), but I know it is a question of justice (as an owner) ... it is always very stressful. (...) This leads to personal dilemmas about what is right and wrong to do and with respect to which yardstick to use. There can be confusion and disturbance about the roles we cover ... it is very difficult ... it is always like trying to keep the rudder as they say ... the bar in the center. Doing this is energy-intensive, not easy’. (MG)</p> <p>‘I always leave family, ownership, and management dynamics altogether, it is complex and complicated’. (BII)</p> <p>‘On my multiple roles, it is difficult to say, probably it is an advantage, probably not. Personally, I am in a particular position, I’ve been working with my brother side by side since 1962’. (N)</p>
Family supervisor director ( <i>medium</i> intensity of MRI struggles)	<p>‘I think that speaking as a shareholder is not the same as speaking as a business person, one must know when one speaks for one role and when for another, you know it is not always easy but it is something absolutely to do ... it means not creating capital confusion, not creating income confusion, it means distinguishing your company from your family with a diaphragm that is rational’. (P)</p> <p>‘I see them sometimes confusing, family, ownership, and management roles which can make things complex’. (VI)</p> <p>‘My roles, personal stories, should be separated from the business but sometimes they aren’t’. (N)</p>
Family investor director ( <i>low</i> intensity of MRI struggles)	<p>‘I am a board director, I do not have doubts’. (A)</p> <p>Well ... as a director I do not experience tensions for my family role, I mean, it’s not the place right? ... we try to avoid bringing the family into the board, we try to stay simply focused on our business. (L)</p>

expressions of MRI struggles: *sailing in bewilderment*, *navigating in a haze*, and *steering with clarity*.

Sailing in bewilderment. Family operating directors expressed their MRI struggles in their overall decision-making approach mainly with what we label sailing in bewilderment, and two types of such expression: subjective judgement and approximate listening. The former refers to family operating directors often tending to approach discussions with a subjective judgement where greater weight is given to personal assessments and interpretations than to objective data. For example:

‘Considering the needs of family and business ... for me absolute certainties do not exist, thinking with my own head, sometimes I believe I have made the right decisions and I realize in retrospect that I have not’ (N)

Table III. Representative quotes and archival entries underlying the second-order themes

<i>Second-order codes</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Sailing in bewilderment (subjective judging, approximate listening)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often they seem to fail either to listen or to provide information and the situation becomes confused (PG)</li> <li>• The owner manager does not really share the data with us, he acts based on his own view and it is difficult for me to propose solutions, he can be ... a bit subjective in his approach (II)</li> <li>• The family directors do not really listen I see them struggle to focus on important things (Y)</li> </ul>
Navigating in a haze (uncertain judging, passive listening)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The CEO has infinitely thought about a situation; he has thought of a solution and discussed it several times but we never reach the end (D)</li> <li>• The father says three-four things; the children listen; they do not comment much (AM)</li> <li>• They only expect consensus opinions without discussing (VI)</li> <li>• 'When it comes to key decisions it is clear that there is a step backwards (from the others) and more of a passive listening position'. (SC)</li> </ul>
Steering with clarity (objective judging, active listening)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Know the business well and work with the right mix of long-term orientation and pressure (maximization of current results) (M)</li> <li>• Well, we are there to give an objective assessment of the company's performance of risks and opportunities (L)</li> </ul>
Realizing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When working in the boardroom, our heads are much more responsive in the search of balance (between MRIs). We use these moments to focus (O)</li> <li>• Being in the boardroom helps you realize that there you have to have clear ideas about yourself why am I there, what do I want, how? (MG)</li> </ul>
Regulating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I have mixed ideas and priorities ... you know to represent my family and be a good business supervisor, but every time I step into the board meeting it becomes easier for me to start trying to find order in my thoughts (T)</li> <li>• Celebrating the meeting in the boardroom predisposes me to set my various roles in order (HS)</li> </ul>
Running	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When in board meetings I behave like a board member (M)</li> <li>• In the boardroom, I am a director and decisions are made on the basis of common business intent (A)</li> </ul>
Establishing buffers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is when the board of directors can become (...) a buffer that allows us to separate roles: Owners are owners, directors are directors, and the CEO is the CEO (N)</li> <li>• The director interviewed has gained extensive experience mainly as a family operating director (archival data) and in his interview consistently refers to the importance of establishing ways to manage multiple identities (Authors' notes on summary sheet/ secondary data)</li> </ul>



Table III. (Continued)

<i>Second-order codes</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Maintaining buffers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In board meetings we [the board] <i>make sure</i> that the owning family interests are not the [only] priority and that the owning family does not confuse its identity with that of the firm (J)</li> <li>• It can happen that tension and awkwardness emerge especially in the owning family, involving directors from either different or the same generation. When this happens, the board has to intervene <i>to make sure</i> that the business is not affected by these issues and that the owning family maintains a certain degree of cohesion (Z).</li> <li>• The director interviewed has gained extensive experience mainly as a family supervising director (archival data) and in his interview consistently refers to the importance of making sure that a buffer exists and works between the family, business, and ownership identities (Authors' notes on summary sheet/secondary data)</li> <li>• On these [multiple role identity] themes, we do not find them, they do not arrive at the table, these are kept out (IV)</li> <li>• The management of family issues does not occur during board meetings. It is carried out outside the board and can be successful only if performed by people who are really independent and authoritative (X)</li> <li>• The mentality, attitude, and behaviour of family members are core to the effectiveness of board meetings. You can be the best in class but have a really difficult personality that destroys the group. This is why [in boards] people should be open to discussion, listen to each other, and accept that no one is perfect, facilitating coordination. This is when the board of directors can <i>become a bridge</i> that links family owners to the business (N)</li> <li>• When most board members are owner-managers, my role as an outsider is <i>to help them</i> communicate (Y)</li> <li>• Boards are useful to handle cases where owning families are not that cohesive ... all family shareholders start to ask questions, they want <i>to be assured</i> that their interests and positions are well represented and considered (J)</li> <li>• Our board works well when good communication <i>is guaranteed</i> and all directors exchange information, communicate and come to the meetings after having carefully read the material subject of the discussion. Otherwise it is a rubber-stamping body where people sleep (S)</li> <li>• [...] In other cases, I was hired to represent a family branch with a minority stake. That was a firm where family members were no longer active in the operational management but were still involved in the board. My function consisted <i>in acting as a guarantor</i> by trying not only to represent the family branch but also by facilitating communication and discussion between them and the other shareholders (II)</li> </ul>
No buffer	
Building bridges	
Using bridges	

(Continues)

Table III. (Continued)

<i>Second-order codes</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Bridging as 'business as usual'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For me, a good board of directors has to first of all know the business dynamics and communicate in a constructive way with the management of the company (M)</li> <li>• I see my job as an activity aimed at bringing to light issues related to transparency and establish a rapport between the firm and the external parties (IV)</li> <li>• The director interviewed has gained extensive experience mainly as a family investing (archival data). The entire interview contains references to the idea of the board as the place where strategies are defined and assessed and where the TMT is monitored (Authors' notes on summary sheet/secondary data)</li> </ul>
Conforming to family business values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I feel loyal to this family firm [...] we care about each other and feeling respected by, and safe with, other members, as we know there are strong values at the root of this family firm (HS)</li> <li>• The board of directors is carrying on the family values I share this completely and with pleasure and hope this will continue for a long time (SC)</li> </ul>
Resource dedication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'I understood what motivates this family firm's existence... It's very important and I will give my full contribution'. (PG)</li> <li>• If this (the informant refers to the dedication to activities related to the bridge and buffer tasks) had not happened our company would probably not have been able to cope today, it is thanks to this that we have been able to govern. (MG)</li> <li>• One of the main concerns for our board is to be able to get along, to be cohesive as a business but also as a family, to be united and directed toward the same goals. (G)</li> </ul>

‘I tend to judge things and take decisions by myself not involving others, then naturally I transmit all the proposed decisions etc. etc. to those in charge but just so as not to waste time’ (Q)

The second type is approximate listening, which refers to cases where family operating directors tend to care little about others’ decision-making contributions. For example:

‘When it comes to decision-making we don’t seem to listen much’ (B)

‘Always listening to others? No time. I try but I do what I can and we all save time’ (Q)

*Navigating in a haze.* Another type of individual expression of identity struggles refers to navigating in a haze, characterizing family supervising directors whose expressions of moderate role identity struggles emerge in their overall decision-making approach in two specific ways: uncertain judgement and passive listening. Uncertain judgement refers to forms of assessment of matters that are not systematically anchored to any explicit assessment criteria. Uncertain judgement differs from subjective judgement in that individuals are not necessarily guided by their personal views but lack a clear and methodical approach to decision-making (more examples in Table III). Family supervising directors described it as:

‘Our decision-making doesn’t really follow a specific process (e.g., market analysis etc.), some things are done because “it should work” but it shouldn’t be like this’ (SC)

‘We lack a clear approach to discussions, often we would need more documentation’ (HS)

Passive listening in our context refers to family supervising directors acquiring information but being relatively disengaged and passively involved in the discussions. Passive listening differs from approximate listening in that in the latter case, there is a lack of interest in the contributions of others, whereas in the former case, attention is paid to what others say but without proactive discussions. A family supervising director stated:

‘We tend passively listen and I feel that we risk not to fully express our added value’ (HS)

Uncertain judgement and passive listening amplified family supervising directors’ indecisiveness and deprived them of a clear direction to their decision-making approach.

*Steering with clarity.* Family investing directors’ low role overlap is expressed in their approach to decision-making that we label steering with clarity. As family investing directors are mainly focused on business matters, overlaps with other identities were not as salient. For example:

‘Well, we are there to give an objective assessment of the company’s performance of risks and opportunities’ (L)

Family investing directors referred to these cases emphasizing that their role implies focusing on business matters, providing objective judgement and active listening before taking decisions:

‘Listening, exploring the diversity of thought you find a solution’ (A)

This leads family investing directors to clearly express an approach to decision-making aimed at steering the business, leading to professional judgement with little interference of the owning family roles:

‘I am a member of the board, our priorities are that we all serve the business, to stay focused on the economy of this enterprise and on its objectives’ (J)

Our informants recurrently explained that when they take part in board meetings, family director pathos necessarily goes through powerful structural forces that set off three essential mechanisms to accommodate group behaviour within the boardroom, as described next.

### **Boardroom Structural Forces**

Boardroom structural forces are essential to setting the stage for managing MRI struggles. As our informants (both family and non-family directors) consistently explained, it is when family directors step into the boardroom that they gain greater awareness of their MRI struggles, and importantly, the need to manage them. Thus, thanks to the boardroom structural forces, the MRI struggles expressed by family directors in their overall approach to decision-making start to be managed.

*What they are.* Boardroom structural forces, are represented by the dotted cloud in [Figure 2](#) and to use our informants’ words, are the physical and mental boardroom spaces that ‘make meetings more formal’ (C) and set the ground for group behaviours. These forces include procedural and functioning criteria for meetings, board physical boundaries, and the attachment of symbolic meanings to the boardroom.

Board procedural and functioning criteria define the steps and procedures that must be performed in the meeting (e.g., board meetings accompanied by a written agenda and minutes), implying that board meetings are more formal than other gatherings, thereby defining a specific mental space. Board physical boundaries instead refer to all the physical features that make the boardroom such: most are designed and organized specifically for board meetings and explicit signals are present. For example:

‘The boardroom is on the second floor, it is separated from the rest of the firm by two heavy and large sliding doors in mahogany. In the middle is a large round table, and in front of you, a stunning view of the lake’. (Observation note 0118)

The board procedural and functioning criteria and physical boundaries in turn lead family directors to attach symbolic meanings to the boardroom, rendering it a formal social environment facilitating the management of MRIs. These meanings are recurrent in our data, implying that the boardroom is seen as the pinnacle, the apex of the firm's decision-making:

'[...] every time I work in the boardroom I get excited as if I was wearing our national soccer team jersey and we were getting ready to kick-off after singing the national anthem'. (PG)

'It is like when you are in church, during mass'. (IV)

'I feel honoured to have access to that room'. (HS)

'(...) to take responsibility for entering the board of directors'. (SC)

Our data reveal that with these structural forces, board meetings can be structured to favour directors' role awareness and separation. Family firm directors appear to respond to these forces by seeing themselves differently in the boardroom than in other circumstances. They attend board meetings in their usual style and even attire, but once they enter the boardroom, it seems easier for them to psychologically separate the family identity from the business and ownership identities:

'In the boards where I am a director? We try not to behave like relatives and try to be as professional as possible'. (HS)

Thus, board meetings, thanks to the aforementioned structural forces, provide a forum where role identity struggles can be managed, and heated discussions moderated:

'I think that the board is a necessary place where family and business roles can be separated'. (P)

Taken together, boardroom structural forces induce board members to collegially manage MRIs as if these forces prompted directors to behave in similar ways. This was a recurrent theme in our data, both when our informants referred to the constituents of board effectiveness and in our observations. Interestingly, when our informants referred to their experiences of ineffective board meetings (i.e., not being able to manage MRIs), these structural forces were somehow absent or not fully applied. As we describe next, boardroom structural forces contribute to MRI management by setting the stage for group behaviours within the board (see [Figure 1](#)).

*How they work (structural forces' mechanisms)*. Based on the various degrees of intensity of MRI struggles experienced by family directors, there are three different ways (i.e., mechanisms) through which the boardroom structural forces set the ground for group behaviour and enable MRI management: realizing (i.e., helping family operating directors realize that MRI struggles exist and need to be managed), regulating (i.e., helping family

supervising directors bring order to their MRI struggles), and running (i.e., supporting family investing directors in the administration of their investments).

In the first case, family directors sailing in bewilderment work side-by-side with other family members, and having so many different business, family, and ownership issues in mind, the role overlap is so wide that they often do not even see it, as it dominates everything. For example:

‘Working every day side-by-side with my mother sometimes we don’t even realize how high the superimposition of family and business roles is’. (E)

Thus, individually, they often do not even realize that they need to distinguish between their MRIs, their judgement tends to be more subjective, and their listening more approximate. The boardroom structural forces are formal physical and mental spaces that help family directors realize that MRI struggles exist and need to be managed. We label this mechanism *realizing*. For example:

‘The moment I enter, see that the table and documents are ready, see the position of the parties in that specific moment, it is there that I appreciate that my various roles must be distinguished’. (E)

‘Being in the boardroom helps you realize that there you have to have clear ideas about yourself, why am I there, what do I want, how?’. (MG)

In the second case, family directors navigating in haze do not run the daily operations, and see the firm as something to supervise, appointed mainly to safeguard the interests of the owning family. The level of intensity of MRI struggles is medium and reflected in different instances that contribute to their uncertain judgement and passive listening, as they are often distracted by the need to safeguard the interests of the owning family, focusing on how to present them at the board meeting. For example:

‘I have mixed ideas and priorities ... you know to represent my family and be a good business supervisor, but every time I step into the board meeting it becomes easier for me to start trying to find order in my thoughts’. (T)

In these cases, the boardroom structural forces place family directors in the condition of seeking to bring order to the different MRI struggles they know they have and need to manage. We label this mechanism *regulating*. For example:

‘Celebrating the meeting in the boardroom predisposes me to set my various roles in order’. (HS)

‘The formal space of the boardroom induces me to regulate my priorities in the many roles I cover’. (SC)

In the third case, family directors see the firm as an investment and steer with clarity, with low role overlap, tending to objective judgement and active listening. In this case,

the boardroom structural forces do nothing but favour the administration of the family investment. We label this mechanism *running*. For example:

‘In the boardroom, I am a director and decisions are made on the basis of common business intent’. (A)

‘When I join the board of directors I am there for matters concerning the company ... we have to run the company in the best possible way’. (L)

Thus, once the family director enters the boardroom, one of the first things that happens is that the boardroom structural forces unleash mechanisms that are propaedeutic to managing the MRI struggles. We identified two main ways in which MRI struggles can be managed – the bridge and buffer tasks – as explained next.

### **MRI Struggles’ Management Activities (Bridge and Buffer Tasks): Board ‘Ethos’**

In the corporate governance literature, the term ‘board task’ generally refers to board functions or the activities that boards perform (see Forbes and Milliken, 1999). We identify two new tasks, *bridge* and *buffer*, which represent activities in board meetings aimed at managing family directors’ MRI struggles. The buffer task refers to encouraging directors to set identity boundaries (e.g., distinguishing concerns arising from being a family member from those emerging from their role in the business), and think objectively about the MRIs that might coexist. Buffering efforts are targeted at increasing awareness of the directors’ multiple identities and encouraging their objective distinction, a concept that is consistent with the idea of MRI separation.

The bridge task refers to piecing together and reconciling the salient MRI struggles through increasing communication and dialogue to externalize the various preoccupations related to each identity, and negotiating a solution that takes all the role identities into account. Bridging efforts in the boardroom are targeted at ensuring that *all* the relevant role identities are duly considered in the decision-making process. A concept that resonates with the idea of MRI alignment.

These two tasks emerge from, and are a consequence of, the concurrent presence of multiple family-, ownership-, and business-related role identities. While prior studies consider the board’s service role monolithically, our data show that the service role is much more complex and variegated than previously understood.

The bridge and buffer tasks are illustrated in the following observation note:

In a large family company that I recently began advising, the family chair of the company’s board has faced a difficult strategic and interpersonal situation. The company is owned equally by the chair and his brother. The brothers resigned from their executive roles (as CEO and CFO respectively) when the company was thrown into a very difficult period due to an event in their industry. They wisely hired a non-family CEO who has been doing an excellent job helping the company recover. The complication for the board chair (now 63) is that he has sons working in the family company who are also performing well, and the chair had wanted one or more of them to lead the company. If the company gives the non-family

CEO a long-term employment contract (desired by the CEO and supported by the independents on the board) the chairman's sons would need to wait years to lead the company. The chair's brother maintained a neutral position. The other board members felt that the non-family CEO was needed for some time to reorganize the company and transform the company's portfolio.

During my meetings with the family chairman, I appreciated that he was deeply torn about what to do. As a father he wanted to select one of his sons for future leadership; as a board chairman and owner, he knew he should consider what is in the best interest of the company and the owners, which on balance favoured keeping the non-family CEO.

The board members did careful analysis of the qualifications of the CEO and sons of the chairman for the job of CEO. They also spent considerable time discussing the issue with the board chair, getting him to understand how his role as a father was confusing his obligations as a board chair and owner of the company. [This is an example of the buffering role]. The independent board members then helped the board chair fashion useful and attractive roles for two of his sons (in a new venture by the company) that kept the CEO in place. In this case, the director who knew the chair best kept the other directors informed and they worked as a team to help the father-chair come to a decision. The board members got to know the sons of the chair and tried to demonstrate to them that they were supportive and respectful of the family and wanted to help the company make a decision that was in the interests of the owners. This was a team effort. [This is an example of the bridging role].

Borrowing the word *ethos* from ancient Greek, which echoes the nature, attitudes, and habits characterizing a person or group, we introduce the concept of *board ethos* to reflect the buffer and bridge tasks performed. Hereafter, we define the bridge and buffer board tasks and illustrate those we identify as [A], [B], [C], [D], [E], [F] in Figure 2. In particular, we discovered distinct patterns through which boards, depending on family director type, shape the distinctive bridge and buffer tasks to manage MRI struggles in the board.

*Establishing buffers [A] and building bridges [B]*. Establishing buffers and building bridges is especially relevant for boards with family operating directors. *Establishing buffers* is described as defining identity boundaries, raising awareness among family directors that they have concurrent, and to some extent competing, role identities as owners, family members, and managers, and objectifying thinking. To illustrate:

'It's one thing to decide for the shareholders' sake, but it's another thing to decide for the business' sake ... it happens sometimes that a family CEO takes decisions, how can I say? ... pro domo sua [for his or his family's benefit] ... and not for the good of the business. The task of the board is to get people who cover more than one role to understand this and separate things'. (U)



In these circumstances, the clarification of identity boundaries helps family directors think objectively about their multiple roles, and thus distinguish and separate their various roles to better serve the business.

*Building bridges* refers to the initiation of activities during board meetings that enable coordinating and communicating among different identities – the family, business, and ownership. This allows the board to have discussions that, while keeping the focus on business matters, enable sharing perspectives by acknowledging and respecting the family and owner's identities, needs, goals, and perspectives. Building bridges implies that family directors change – at least partially – their identity standards so that MRI alignment is obtained, but as the priority in this context is to better serve the business, the business identity shifts less than the family and ownership identities. For example:

‘When most board members are owner-managers, my role as an outsider is to help them communicate and align considering the business needs’. (Y)

‘This is why [in boards] people should be open to discussion, listen to each other, and accept that no one is perfect (...) the board of directors can become a bridge that links family owners to the business’. (N)

Boards with family operating directors are largely composed of individuals who are both family owners and managers (Davis, 2008; Gersick and Feliu, 2014), with few, if any, non-family directors (Corbetta and Tomaselli, 1996). Here high intensity MRI struggles lead to family directors expressing *bewilderment*, managed with activities [A] and [B]. Thus, in addition to the traditional service and control tasks, the board typically performs activities aimed at *establishing* buffers and *building* bridges.

*Maintaining buffers [C] and using bridges [D]*. Interviewees described the purpose of the bridge and buffer tasks in boards with family supervising directors as *maintaining buffers* and *using bridges*.

Maintaining buffers is described as directors' efforts in board discussions to maintain awareness of the MRIs. This implies preserving the already-defined separation of family-, ownership-, and business-related role identities, and maintaining discipline with regard to the rights and responsibilities of each role. In these contexts, the owning family is not involved in day-to-day management, so family supervising directors are mainly appointed to safeguard the interests of the owning family and monitor management decisions. Thus, the buffer task for family supervisor directors implies the continued use of MRI management capabilities to resolve MRI struggles by preserving their separation. As one director stated:

‘Roles have to be kept clearly separated. The board has to remain vigilant about clearly separating ownership roles from business and family roles, since the confusion of such roles only causes damage that is difficult to repair. For example, the business is not the wallet from which the family draws money’ (VI)

*Using bridges* is described as ensuring that the activities initiated (i.e., building bridges) are actually implemented. This implies granting the use of existing bridges to connect

the family supervising directors' MRIs. In this way, when MRI struggles emerge, they change their behaviours to favour a shift in their identity standards to better align the MRIs. Here again, when the shifts in identity standards favour the better alignment of MRIs, the business identity shifts less than the others. The following provides a vivid picture:

'I see the board as our firm's brain. Like the brain, it makes decisions that depend on, and in turn affect, the firm's various organs. As with the human body, the firm's brain has to communicate with the different organs and guarantee the firm's continuity by always keeping in mind its various objectives'. (I)

'Our board works well when good communication is guaranteed and all directors exchange information on the various aspects, communicate and come to the meetings after having carefully read the material subject of the discussion. Otherwise it is a rubber-stamping body where people sleep'. (S)

Boards with family supervising directors still include one or more family members, especially in leadership positions (CEO and/or chairman). Here, while multiple salient identities still emerge, the extent of family director role overlap and the intensity of role identity struggles are usually moderate, expressed by family directors with what we label *navigating in a haze*, typically managed by the board with activities [C] and [D]. We can therefore conclude that in boards with family supervising directors, in addition to the typical service and control tasks, the board performs activities aimed at *maintaining* buffers and *using* bridges.

*No buffer tasks [E], bridging as 'business as usual' [F]*. In boards with family investing directors, the family retains ownership control but regards the firm as an investment. The level of family involvement in the business and the board is minimal (Davis, 2008; Gersick and Feliu, 2014), as is the extent of the directors' role identity overlap and intensity of MRI struggles. According to our informants, neither the board collectively nor directors individually engage in any significant buffer activity. When asked to describe the board's role with regard to family issues, directors with experience in these boards reported that if the buffer task was performed at all, it occurred outside of board meetings. For instance:

'On these [multiple role identity] themes, we do not find them, they do not arrive at the table, these are kept out'. (IV)

In boards with family investing directors, bridging activities are mainly aimed at aligning the business and ownership identities facilitating communication with all relevant stakeholders, guaranteeing transparency, and ensuring that shareholders' interests are protected, a concept we label *bridging as 'business as usual'*.

### **Directors' Collective Commitment to the Firm's Purpose**

As shown in Figure 2, the three patterns lead to a final outcome when the MRI struggles are managed in the board, namely the collective commitment of board members to the

firm's purpose, understood as 'the reason for which a business is created and exists, its meaning and direction' (Hollensbe et al., 2014, p. 1228). This concept is the direct outcome of MRI management (bridge and buffer tasks), and can be seen as a conceptual dimension of the broader concept of board effectiveness. The buffer and bridge tasks lead board members to communicate their satisfaction and express feelings of appreciation and loyalty to the family firm values and ultimate goals. We label this concept *conforming to family firm values*. For example:

'The board of directors is carrying on the family values, I share this completely and with pleasure'. (SC)

We also observed that the activities associated with the buffer and bridge tasks engendered acts of resource dedication where directors stated their willingness to invest mental and physical energy in accomplishing the family firm purpose: We label this concept *resource dedication*. As Figure 1 shows, both conforming to *family firm values* and *resource dedication* are subdimensions of the general *directors' collective commitment to the family firm purpose* concept.

In sum, when performed, the bridge and buffer tasks allow creating and maintaining coherence within and between the three main identities – the family, business, and ownership groups – resulting in a common mindset and psychological state among board members in terms of their feelings of loyalty to the family firm and their desire to invest mental and physical energy in helping achieve the family firm's *raison d'être*. As one of our informants stated:

'One of the main concerns for our board is to be able to get along, to be cohesive as a business but also as a family, to be united and directed toward the same goals. Each of us is very committed to this and we invest a lot of energy'. (G)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

While MRI management tactics have been identified in the work-family balance literature (e.g., Hirschi et al., 2019), which has substantially grown in recent years (see Gatrell et al., 2013), scholars have urged qualitative research to understand specific rituals and routines put in place by boards of directors to manage MRI struggles (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008).

Considering the relevance of MRI struggles in organizations (Ramarajan, 2014), and drawing on the family firm context, in this study we have attempted to address an important and hitherto unanswered question: *How do family directors' MRI struggles emerge and how are they managed in the boards of family firms?*

Our grounded model shows that MRI struggles are solved thanks to the mechanisms that boardroom structural forces trigger and to the resulting bridge and buffer tasks enacted. These tasks are different compared to the traditional service and control tasks and lead to directors' collective commitment to the firms' purpose which we see as a dimension of the broader concept of board effectiveness. In addition, our data show that the different types of involvement of the owning family in the board determine different ways of performing the bridge and buffer tasks.

Finally, we found that the shift from family director pathos to board ethos is possible thanks to specific boardroom structural forces. For family directors, boardroom structural forces represent the physical and mental spaces that help them see board meetings as more formal and set the ground for group behaviours (MRI struggles' management).

As such, this research contributes to the governance literature. Numerous studies assume that boards of directors mainly perform the service and control tasks (Forbes and Milliken, 1999). Some focus on the tasks of family firm boards (e.g., Van Den Heuvel et al., 2006), but under the main assumption that board members largely focus on high-level strategic matters rather than lower-level issues, such as managing MRI struggles (e.g., Bammens et al., 2011). Leveraging insights from behavioural governance theory, our research illustrates that the blurred and overlapping boundaries between role identities in the family firm boardroom can increase decision-making complexity, requiring performing the bridge and buffer tasks. Our evidence further emphasizes the importance of using integrative and complementary perspectives in analysing board functionality (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997), incentivizing new studies that take into account the microfoundational aspect of directors' MRIs and the lower-level processes needed to manage these (De Massis and Foss, 2018). This suggests a promising path for future research on the tasks that boards perform in different types of firms (e.g., with other influential block holders, such as a government or non-profit organizations).

We introduce the notion of *boardroom structural forces*, an additional (and unexpected) contribution that we bring to the governance literature and behavioural governance theory. This important finding adds – we hope – a new element to the board of directors' literature (e.g., Finkelstein et al., 2009; Huse, 2018) by showing that board effectiveness is not just a matter of composition or functioning, but also a matter of how the meeting is prepared. If we metaphorically see the board as a dining table, the theory deriving from our study indicates that looking at the diners (i.e., those serving on the board as captured by board composition in the governance literature) and their interactions and activities (i.e., the processes and dynamics among board members as captured by board functioning in the governance literature) is not enough to understand board behaviour and its outcomes, since the dining table itself (in terms of placemats, place settings, dining style, and customs, as captured by our emerging notion of board structural forces) also plays an important role. In this sense, some theoretical intuitions exist, namely that setting procedural and functioning criteria for board meetings (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021) and board physical boundaries (McNulty and Stewart, 2015) can be important elements of board effectiveness. Sundaramurthy and Kreiner (2008) argue that MRIs can be managed by drawing cognitive and physical boundaries that reinforce mental distinctions among the most salient roles. We give empirical and theoretical substance to these theoretical intuitions by describing the boardroom structural forces and showing that they activate three distinct mechanisms (i.e., realizing, regulating, running) that are instrumental to family directors' mental preparation/predisposition for MRI struggles' management, thus setting the ground for group behaviours within the board.

Hence, the identification of boardroom structural forces and how they work contributes to opening the black box of boards (Zattoni and Pugliese, 2019) and considering board internal dynamics (Boivie et al., 2021; Tuggle et al., 2021). As such, our findings encourage scholars to go beyond examining board composition and functioning, adding

a third important component to the board literature that induces considering board behaviours in a new and unprecedented way to current extrapolations.

Our findings also contribute to role identity theory. We know much about the consequences of MRIs (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Burke and Stets, 2009) on individual (e.g., Mathias and Williams, 2017) and organizational behaviours (e.g., Barnett et al., 2009), with a good deal of research on multiple identity struggles at the organizational level (e.g., Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Pratt and Foreman, 2000), and some consensus that managing multiple identities may be one of the most crucial issues in modern organizations (Knapp et al., 2013). Bringing to bear earlier intuitions that directors' role identities predict their behaviours (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Hillman et al., 2008; Withers et al., 2012), our inductive study reveals how to move from *family director pathos* (e.g., situations where role identity struggles exist and can cause significant stress) to *board ethos* (e.g., situations where the board performs tasks aimed at fruitfully managing MRI struggles). Thus, our research offers a better understanding of MRI emergence and possible ways of managing MRIs among board directors. In particular, our findings indicate that the family firm board of directors, through boardroom structural forces and board identity management activities (establishing buffers, building bridges, maintaining buffers, and using bridges) can nurture the creation of an ecology of identities and avoid the negative effects of identity struggles. Consistent with the external perspective, we reveal three different mechanisms (realizing, regulating, running) that, depending on the intensity of MRI struggles, explain how boardroom structural forces (i.e., physical and mental spaces) set the ground to manage MRI struggles. Consistent with the internal perspective, we identify two novel board tasks, which we label the buffer and bridge tasks, that respectively explain how MRI separation occurs and how MRI alignment takes place. While a general assumption in role identity theory is that MRI struggles are managed so that they become either separated or aligned (Burke, 2003), our work suggests that a crucial contribution of boards is to make these two results equally possible. This should lead us to reflect more on the complementarity of the internal and external perspectives, and on the possibility that MRI, even when in conflict, can be managed without having to choose between separating or aligning.

Finally, our findings contribute to the family business literature. While the presence of MRIs with varying degrees of overlap in family firms has been a key assumption since the inception of the family business literature (Tagiuri and Davis, 1996), very few studies empirically focus on family firm MRIs (e.g., Knapp et al., 2013), and even fewer have gathered primary data on the internal dynamics of family firm boards of directors (see Bammens et al., 2011; Sherlock and Marshall, 2019). We contribute to this literature by identifying solutions that family firms could adopt to 'capitalize on the strengths' of MRIs without compromising their important distinction (Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008, p. 430). In addition, we shed light on important internal dynamics that are not easy to access and thus often overlooked both in the general governance and family business literatures (e.g., Boivie et al., 2021). Finally, we develop the initial categorization of family operator, supervisor, and investor firms by identifying three types of family directors and illustrating the different trajectories they experience in terms of MRI struggles and their management.

Our findings also have numerous practical implications. They suggest that the board bridge and buffer tasks, and the various ways through which these are performed (see letters A, B, C, D, E, and F in [Figure 2](#)), should be considered when hiring directors and assembling, orienting, and managing a board. This can apply both in cases where the same director has MRIs and where more directors have multiple and different identities. A core element of our research design is that it was aimed at drawing a picture of boards that effectively manage directors' MRIs. Thus, the results describe the process followed by boards of directors when actively used (i.e., not only on paper but truly functioning boards) and when aimed at effective processes. In this sense, a practical contribution of our study is revealing how MRI struggles emerge and the activities that enable their management, which firms may consciously manipulate to improve board effectiveness. By exploiting our findings, we believe that family firm owners could benefit from making these tasks more explicit in their search for qualified board members. Board meeting agendas should be designed to elicit such tasks, and those interested in serving as family firm board members would do well to be aware of the dynamics highlighted in our study.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has some limitations that point to future research avenues. We explored the management of MRI struggles in family firm boards, and thus that the origin of such struggles is peculiar to family firms. This represents a boundary condition for our theoretical framework. Future research could explore if our findings apply to other situations that are more typical in boards with non-family directors. For example, boardroom structural forces and the bridge and buffer tasks may be important to manage MRI struggles experienced by directors in non-family firms in the health sector, who as directors represent the shareholders' interests and must create economic value (often without maximizing the quality and access to health services), but as citizens desire good health services for all.

Moreover, while we have considered the most prevalent form of governance (board of directors), family firms also employ other governance tools, such as advisory boards, executive boards, and family councils, which may have a bearing on MRI struggles' management performed by family members. Limiting our study to the board of directors was a deliberate choice that will allow the reader to see how MRI struggles emerge and are managed exactly in the place and time when the family director is called to officially enact her/his identity(ies), i.e., the board, the highest authority for firms (Finkelstein et al., 2009). In our research design, we ensured that informants felt free to openly talk during the interviews, consistently consulting the criteria for validity in qualitative research (see Guba and Lincoln, 1994), guaranteeing that any potentially strong influences from outside governance gatherings, if present, would have emerged in our interviews. Instead, such strong influences did not emerge. While our study explains how MRI struggles emerge and are managed within the board, we encourage future research to explore the emergence and management of MRIs in other governance gatherings. For example, it may be important to fully capture the functioning of informal executive discussions

that, although extremely challenging to observe, (Boivie et al., 2021), may reveal additional details potentially useful to addressing the broader question of governance effectiveness in family firms.

In addition, future empirical studies could investigate MRI struggles by adopting more complex lenses, such as the intrapersonal identity network approach (Ramarajan, 2014), and/or shedding light on the different levels of identity pertinent to directors' behaviours, such as the individual, relational, and collective level, explaining how their interactions can complement our understanding of board effectiveness (Withers et al., 2012). Although the relation between board tasks and financial outcomes is outside the scope of our study, a logical extension would be to investigate the effects of different board tasks within and across family firms on financial performance. However, we hope that our study has advanced current understanding of the critical influence of directors' multiple identities on board tasks, encouraging researchers to further examine this very exciting line of research.

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## NOTES

- [1] In this paper, we focus on role identities rather than social identities, defined as the individual's self-concept that 'derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group' (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). Role identities are of direct relevance here, and social identities (albeit interesting) less so, as they concern 'less intimate, more aspiration-based, or "demographic" associations (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets and Burke, 2000)' (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2011, p. 1054).
- [2] We thank Reviewer 3 for this suggestion.
- [3] The most widely adopted corporate governance system in Italy, also the default model, is called the traditional system mandating that shareholders elect a board of directors. According to Civil Code 2381, the board of directors has a strategic, fiduciary, and control role. The duties of Italian boards adopting a traditional system closely resemble those of Anglo-Saxon systems (Ferrarini et al., 2013).
- [4] Family operating, supervising, or investing director. Please see the Findings section for more details.
- [5] Non-family director in a board with family operating, supervising, or investing directors.
- [6] We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

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