

A Qualitative Study on Stewardship Relationships in Family Businesses in Türkiye¹

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Türkiye'deki Aile İşletmelerinde Vekilharçlık İlişkileri Üzerine Nitel Bir Araştırma	A Qualitative Study on Stewardship Relationships in Family Businesses in Türkiye
<p>Öz</p> <p>Bu çalışma, Türkiye'deki küçük ve orta ölçekli aile işletmelerindeki vekilharçlık ilişkilerinin temel dinamiklerini ve bunları üreten bağlamsal unsurları, nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden olgubilim yaklaşımıyla açıklamayı amaçlamıştır. Veriler yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yoluyla toplanmıştır. Araştırmanın örneklemini, Türkiye'nin Antalya ilindeki 14 aile işletmesinden 18'i aile üyesi yönetici ve 17'si aile dışı emektar çalışan olmak üzere 35 katılımcı oluşturmuştur. Tematik analiz kullanılarak 6 ana tema ve 18 alt tema belirlenmiştir. Sonuçlar önceki araştırmalarla tutarlı olmakla birlikte, aynı zamanda Türkiye'deki aile işletmelerine özgü bir vekilharç profiline de güçlü bir şekilde işaret etmektedir.</p>	<p>Abstract</p> <p>This study aimed to explain the basic dynamics of stewardship relationships in small and medium-sized family businesses in Türkiye and the contextual features that produce them by taking a phenomenological approach, one of the qualitative research methods. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. The study sample comprised 35 participants from 14 family businesses in Antalya, Türkiye, including 18 family member managers and 17 non-family senior employees. Using thematic analysis, 6 main themes and 18 sub-themes were identified. While the results are consistent with previous research, they also strongly point to a steward profile specific to family businesses in Türkiye.</p>
<p>Anahtar Kelimeler: Vekilharçlık Kuramı, Aile İşletmeleri, Nitel Yöntem, Olgubilim</p>	<p>Keywords: Stewardship Theory, Family Businesses, Qualitative Method, Phenomenology</p>

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1. Introduction

Family businesses are unique organizations where family relations with deep emotions and business activities that are expected to be performed based on rational economic relations coexist (Eddleston and Morgan, 2014). Their distinctive features form a rich context for advancing existing theories or stimulating new theoretical debates on macro and micro organizational phenomena. Gagne et al. (2014: 643) characterize family businesses as a fertile field with “rich fruits of intellectual harvest awaiting scholars.”

Theories of agency and stewardship are two critical theories that provide a framework for researchers to explain the unique dynamics, behaviors, and relationship patterns of family businesses (Madison et al., 2016). In particular, the human and social elements included in the stewardship theory can explain many behavioral phenomena, especially informal relationships in family businesses (Chrisman, 2019).

Stewardship theory emerged in the 1990s as an alternative to agency theory, which is based on the economic/rational individual assumption. Objecting to agency theory's self-interested and unreliable individual profile, stewardship theory adopts the “humanistic” individual assumption that prioritizes the organization's interests (Davis et al., 1997). The steward profile described by this assumption is a reliable manager or employee who is loyal to the organization or the principal (boss). The stewardship relationship is a long-term, fragile, and trusting relationship between the principal and steward. It is a resource that minimizes agency costs and gives the business a strategic advantage. Family businesses provide a more suitable environment for the emergence of stewardship behavior than other businesses (Neubaum et al., 2017; Azizi et al., 2022), given that they constitute a natural habitat for emotions underlying the stewardship relationship, such as trust and loyalty (Carlock & Ward, 2001; Sundaramurthy, 2008; Eddleston & Morgan, 2014). Stewardship behaviors/relationships have various psychological and situational antecedents, including national culture. How they occur is the central question that lies at the core of stewardship theory (Davis et al., 1997).

Accordingly, the present study aims to explain the nature, fundamental dynamics, and context-specific aspects of stewardship relationships between family managers and non-family employees in family businesses. It addresses the following three research questions:

- What are the characteristics of a family business steward?
- What are the dynamics of the stewardship relationship within family businesses?
- What are the contextual determinants of stewardship relationships in family businesses?

The answers to these questions are anticipated to fill an essential gap in the literature. Following Corbetta and Salvato's (2004) assertion that stewardship theory can provide a vital perspective for explaining relationships in family businesses, the number of family business studies on stewardship theory has increased. However, these studies mainly focus on identifying the strategic advantages stewardship provides businesses while offering limited explanations of the phenomenon. In addition, the proposition of stewardship theory as an alternative to agency theory has inevitably led to constant comparison of the two theories. While the debate continues regarding which theory is better for family businesses, it remains open for researchers to determine the foundations and antecedents of stewardship relationships in family businesses (Hernandez, 2008, 2012; Kuppelwieser, 2011; Chrisman,

2019; Cunha et al., 2020). Indeed, very few empirical studies have investigated the dynamics and antecedents of stewardship behavior (Davis et al., 2010; Neubaum et al., 2017).

Furthermore, as Davis et al. (1997) point out, culture has a significant impact on the dynamics of stewardship relationships. Therefore, exploring contextual aspects may contribute to the emerging family business literature. Türkiye's family culture is known for its strong emphasis on trust and paternalistic relationships (Aycan, 2001), which makes it a unique context for stewardship relationships. However, despite this, there is a lack of research on stewardship relationships in Türkiye, particularly in the context of family businesses. This highlights the importance of conducting further research in this area.

This study adopted a phenomenological approach, one of the qualitative research designs, to provide detailed and holistic information on the stewardship phenomenon. The primary data collected from in-depth interviews with family member managers and stewards was analyzed to find answers to the research questions. Although many researchers have argued that qualitative research is necessary to understand family business dynamics better, only a few studies have adopted this design (Fletcher et al., 2016; Hamilton et al., 2017; De Massis et al., 2012). There is thus a need for a rich data set regarding the perceptions, behavioral tendencies, characteristics, and individual histories of the parties in stewardship relationships. The research is also important in this respect.

This paper has three parts. The first explains stewardship theory and discusses the literature on stewardship in family businesses. The second part presents the research process and findings. The themes revealing the dynamics of stewardship relationships in family businesses are explained. The findings are discussed in light of the literature, highlighting the context-specific findings. The paper concludes by discussing the study's contributions to the family business and management literature and offering suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Stewardship Theory

Since the 1990s, stewardship theory has provided a valuable perspective to researchers for explaining family business dynamics, especially in recent years (Corbetta and Salvato, 2004; Eddleston and Kellermanns, 2007; Le Breton-Miller and Miller, 2009; Neubaum et al., 2017). It has become an alternative to agency theory, which has strongly influenced management and organizational studies since the 1970s. Stewardship theory replaces the principal-agent relationship, which is structured on individualism and opportunistic behaviors, with the principal-steward relationship, shaped by trust and altruistic behaviors.

Stewardship theory is built on the assumption of the servant-agent, who prioritizes the principal's interests and the organization of which they are a member rather than their own interests. Agency theory's assumption of a manipulative and materialistic economic individual is replaced in stewardship theory by the idea of a selfless humanistic individual (Argyris, 1973) characterized by values. Stewards define themselves in terms of the organization and remain loyal to it even if it means sacrificing their own interests (Davis et al., 2000). Stewards value compatibility, so they compromise when they face a conflict of interest with the principal. In this sense, a steward's behavior can be described as "pro-social" or, more specifically, "pro-organizational" (Davis et al., 1997: 25). Although this behavior contradicts the expectations of classical economic theory, it is rational in itself. That is, stewards believe they can meet their

personal needs by serving the organization of which they are a member because their interests align with the organization's success and the interests of its owner (the principal).

The underlying question of stewardship theory concerns the conditions under which the stewardship relationship will emerge (Schillemans, 2013: 544). Davis et al. (1997) theoretically classify the factors that make stewardship behavior into two main categories, psychological and situational, and it seems that subsequent studies have adopted this distinction (Vallejo, 2009; Davis et al., 2010; Hernandez, 2012; Madison et al. 2016; Neubaum et al., 2017).

Four psychological factors underlie the stewardship relationship: motivation, identification, commitment, and use of power. First, stewards are intrinsically motivated and seek spiritual fulfillment and "self-actualization" (Maslow, 1970). Second, they define themselves with the business they work for and, therefore, see the business's success as their own success. Third, stewards also embrace the goals and values of the business as their own, making them high in "value commitment" (Davis et al., 1997, p. 30). Fourth, stewards use "personal power," derived from their competence and character, rather than coercive "institutional power," which comes from position and enables them to develop more organic, trusting relationships with colleagues.

Two situational factors also help explain stewardship behavior: management philosophy and culture. Regarding the former, according to Davis et al. (1997: 37), positive and supportive behaviors of business owners towards managers and employees support stewardship relationships. Instead of "control-oriented" management, which argues that employees should not be trusted and constantly controlled, they should prefer "involvement-oriented" management, based on trusting and empowering employees (Lawler, 1986, 1992). Hernandez (2012) defines this type of management as "stewardship management."

Regarding culture, Davis et al. (1997) also consider this to be an important situational condition explaining stewardship behavior. More specifically, they argue that "collectivist" and "low power distance" cultures (Hofstede, 1980) more effectively foster stewardship relationships. Theoretically, collectivist cultures reduce selfish behavior, while low power distance cultures foster a closer relationship between principals and stewards. However, some studies have reached conclusions that are inconsistent with this argument. For example, Lee and O'Neill (2003) reported that Japanese managers have a high tendency toward stewardship, which they explain in terms of Japan's high power distance culture. As a result of their culture, Japanese employees tend not to seek power and position because they are satisfied with the role assigned to them by the hierarchy. Hence, they are less likely to conflict with or hold negative feelings towards their superiors, which is characteristic of a steward's attitude and behavior.

2.2. Stewardship Theory and Family Businesses

Although stewardship theory has only recently been introduced into the family business literature, it has gained an important place (Waldkirch & Nordqvist, 2016). An important turning point was Corbetta and Salvato's (2004) study, which presented stewardship theory as a solid alternative to agency theory for family business research. Madison et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis showing that 37 out of 107 articles on family business management published between 2000 and 2014 focused on stewardship theory.

From their analysis of 221 businesses in the United States and Australia, Neubaum et al. (2017) found that there is a more robust stewardship climate in family businesses than in

other businesses. Several studies have offered explanations for the relationship between stewardship and family businesses. According to Miller and Le-Breton Miller (2006: 74), family businesses are emotionally intense contexts. On the other hand, Clark and Mills (2011) suggest that family businesses are rich contexts for stewardship theory because they combine business relationships shaped by exchange norms and communal relationships established without profit-seeking intentions. Similarly, Dodd and Dyck (2015: 313-314) suggest that family businesses are based on social and emotional values, which provide a suitable environment for stewardship relationships.

While many researchers have used stewardship theory to interpret relationships between family members (Vallejo-Martos & Puentes-Poyatos, 2014; Pearson & Marler, 2010; Ward, 2016; Davis, 2010; Blumentritt, 2007; Bubolz, 2001), the theory is also effective in understanding non-family employee behaviors. Although non-family employees lack blood ties with the family, they exist within the family's culture and values (Vallejo, 2009). Indeed, family members may establish close bonds with some employees and see them as part of the family (Eddleston et al., 2012; Miller et al., 2008). According to many researchers, the nature of the relationship established between family and other employees is effective in developing the steward behavior of non-family employees (Chrisman, 2019; Corbetta and Salvato, 2004; Medina-Craven et al., 2021). According to Pearson and Marler (2010: 1120), for example, when family members approach other employees with positive feelings, it triggers a reciprocal response in employees and fosters a sense of trust in and commitment to the family, thereby resulting in stewardship behavior, or "reciprocal stewardship." Another approach to explain steward behaviors in non-family employees is Barsade's (2002) "emotional contagion" approach. Similarly, Davis (2010) and Vallejo-Martos and Puentes-Poyatos (2014) argue that the strong commitment and sacrifice of family members to the business stimulates an "affective response" (Zahra et al., 2008: 1038) among other employees, resulting in a stewardship relationship with the family. The family, therefore, plays a vital role in creating a stewardship climate within the business.

From a functional perspective, family businesses can gain a significant advantage from reduced opportunistic behaviors and monitoring costs thanks to stewardship behaviors and relationships. Family businesses that establish stewardship relationships with their employees can allocate their monitoring and control budgets to developing the business (Hoopes and Miller, 2006; Chrisman et al., 2004; Corbetta and Salvato, 2004). In this sense, stewardship theory suggests a new strategy for family businesses to gain a long-term competitive advantage (Chrisman et al., 2019). This is supported by research indicating that stewardship relationships help family businesses financially outperform other types of businesses (Zahra et al., 2008; Eddleston et al., 2012; Hoffmann et al., 2016; Alves, Gama & Augusto, 2020).

Although family businesses are seen as a natural context for stewardship relationships, it is unrealistic to expect that they will emerge in every family business (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2006: 74), although why this happens remains an unsolved puzzle (Henssen et al., 2014: 9). Some clues may come from the long-term nature of relationships within the business and the role of culture.

In light of the discussions above, we can say that research designs are needed to explain the context that produces stewardship relationships specific to family businesses. As a peripheral country, Türkiye provides a rich context for the many small and medium-sized family businesses that are heavily influenced by local culture. Findings from this local context

can contribute to expanding the international literature, which is limited to debates as to whether stewardship theory offers the best practice for family businesses (Madison et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2008; Vallejo, 2009; Neubaum et al., 2017).

It has been observed that there is a lack of comprehensive research on relationships within family-owned businesses in Türkiye. A search was conducted to see the frequency of discussions regarding agency/stewardship relationships in family businesses and to explore the basis for these relationships. The search examined postgraduate theses on family businesses registered at the YÖK (Turkish Council of Higher Education) thesis center, proceedings books of Family Business Congresses held every two years since 2004, and family business articles published in journals scanned in Web of Science and TR Index using the keyword "family business." Two hundred fifty-five postgraduate thesis studies on family businesses were accessed from the YÖK database. It was found that these theses, which focus on institutionalization, strategic management, gender, conflict and crisis, leadership, culture, and sustainability in family businesses, make a limited and indirect contribution to explaining the relationships specific to family businesses. A few studies discussed the relationship between family members and non-family senior managers. These relationships, shaped by a centralist clan culture (Ayyıldız, 2008), have been defined as relationships that mainly involve conflict (Hatipoğlu, 2006) and are damaged due to nepotism (Ongar, 2011).

The papers presented at the Family Business Congresses held nine times as of 2023 are also similar to theses regarding research topics. Issues such as sustainability, strategic management, institutionalization, and gender are studied frequently, and the influence of a strong functionalist orientation is observed. In a limited number of studies on intra-business relations, researchers have discussed the phenomena of nepotism and conflict and presented suggestions for solutions. (Torun and Ercan, 2006; Ak, 2006). Additionally, two conceptual studies have been found discussing the importance of agency theory for family businesses (Ataay, 2006; Dil and Eren Gümüştekin, 2008). These studies present international literature from a functionalist perspective. Finally, two conceptual studies examined Türkiye's family businesses and social culture (Erben, 2004; Ataay, 2010). According to these studies, paternalism, which is intensely observed in Türkiye, causes human resources practices in family businesses to follow a centralized course. According to the authors, human resources practices accepted in the West do not yield results in family businesses in Türkiye, so culture-specific practices are needed. Additionally, the authors point out the lack of empirical research on this subject.

Studies on family businesses in the journals scanned in the Web of Science and TR Index are similar regarding research topics. They focus on performance, growth, institutionalization, and entrepreneurship rather than explaining the context of Turkish family businesses (Unnu and Kesken, 2014; Çetin, 2020; Kozan et al., 2012; Sabah et al., 2014). It can be inferred from the findings that there is a scarcity of research studies that explain the behavior and relationships unique to family businesses in Türkiye. Hence, there is a need for further research to illuminate the Turkish context.

3. Method

Qualitative research is a type of research that provides a comprehensive examination of phenomena in their context. The collected data is analyzed and explained in detail (Creswell, 2009). According to the qualitative research approach, social reality is relative, and each social phenomenon can only be explained in its context by revealing its unique dimensions (Punch, 2011). Therefore, qualitative research is precious in examining family businesses, which are unique contexts (Dawson and Hjorth, 2011). Researchers argue that the micro-foundations of the structures, behaviors, and relationships specific to family businesses can only be understood through qualitative research methods (Fletcher et al., 2016; Gagné et al., 2014; De Massis and Kotlar, 2015; Hamilton et al., 2017). Phenomenology, one of the qualitative research designs, is a suitable research design for phenomena that need to be explained in-depth (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011: 74). In phenomenology, the researcher interprets the experiences expressed by the individual to reveal the meaning, nature, and how the phenomenon occurs. Hamilton et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of phenomenological research and in-depth interviews in family business research. They stated that the interview method would effectively reveal the participants' true feelings. Considering that stewardship relationships in family businesses can best be explained through the experiences of the individuals who are the parties to these relationships, the phenomenological approach was adopted in this study. In this way, the phenomenon of stewardship (Madison et al., 2016), which so far has been discussed primarily based on theoretical and secondary data, will be discussed through the perceptions of the steward (senior employee) and the principal (family member/members).

The research sample consisted of 18 family members who are the top managers in 14 family businesses (from various sectors, such as trading, tourism, construction, automotive, and agriculture) operating in Alanya and/or Antalya, Türkiye, for at least two generations; and 17 senior employees with stewardship characteristics who have been working in the business for at least two generations of the owner family and were willing to share their experiences. The participants were reached using snowball sampling (Goodman, 1961), one of the purposive sampling methods.

In a preliminary interview with the family member managers, they were asked about their most loyal, reliable, and valuable employees (both for the business and the family) who have been working in the business for at least two generations of the family. To determine an accurate profile of the steward, they were informed about the detailed characteristics of stewards in the literature (such as keeping the interests of the business and family above their own, being altruistic, and having high affective commitment). The characteristics of any senior employees that the manager said fit this description were discussed in detail with the manager.

Once it was determined that the business had any employees who matched the description of a steward, separate in-depth interviews were conducted with the family members and the senior employee(s) who agreed to participate in the research. Reaching the businesses through snowball sampling also helped to establish trust. Detailed information about the participants is presented in Table 1. As the table shows, only one or two senior employees, who were incidentally all males, in each business matched the definition of a steward.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Businesses and the Participants

Business No	Location	Industry	Number of Employees	Participants	Years of employment of senior employee(s)	The positions of senior employee(s)
1	Alanya	Tourism	70	2 family members (2nd and 3rd generations) and 1 senior employee	30	Maintenance
2	Antalya	Automotives	170	1 family member (2nd generation) and 1 senior employee	24	Driver
3	Antalya	Plastics	12	1 family member (2nd generation) and 1 senior employee	20	Worker
4	Alanya	Tourism	200	1 senior employee (family members refused to participate)	30	Chef
5	Alanya	Automotives, Tourism, Food, Construction	100	1 family member (1st generation) and 1 senior employee	23	Sales Manager
6	Alanya	Agriculture and Jewelry	20	2 family members (2nd and 3rd generations) and 2 senior employees	41/22	Gardener/ Salesman
7	Alanya	Tourism	180	2 family members (1st and 2nd generations) and 1 senior employee	30	Accounting Manager
8	Alanya	Tourism	10	1 family member (1st generation) and 1 senior employee	25	Apart-Hotel Manager
9	Alanya	Tourism	25	2 family members (1st and 2nd generations) and 1 senior employee	20	Accounting/Purchasing
10	Alanya	Tourism	20	1 family member (2nd generation) and 2 senior employees	33/28	Assistant Manager / Restaurant Chief
11	Alanya	Glass Manufacturing	70	1 family member (1st generation) and 1 senior employee	33	Driver

12	Antalya	Automotives	25	1 family member (2nd generation) and 1 senior employee	22	Tire Salesman
13	Antalya	Construction	50	1 family member (1st generation) and 2 senior employees	28/20	Clammer / CNC Operator
14	Antalya	Oil	14	2 family members (2nd and 3rd generations) and 1 senior employee	27	Salesman

Data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Family members were asked about their evaluations and memories of the senior employee(s)/steward(s) and their relationships with them, why these employees are essential to the family, and what distinguishes them from other employees. Senior employees were asked about their perceptions and experiences of the family manager and their family, their relationships with them, and why they had worked in the company for so long. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at each family business. The family members were interviewed in their offices, while the non-family senior employees/stewards were interviewed in their working or resting areas. The interviews lasted an average of 45-60 minutes. The data collection took approximately six months (November 2020 – March 2021).

The audio recordings and interview notes were transcribed verbatim on a computer for data analysis. Then, the researcher carefully read all the data multiple times, taking a neutral perspective to identify the parts irrelevant to the research questions. Following that, the remaining data were subjected to thematic analysis. The statements of the family member managers and non-family senior employees, representing the two sides of the stewardship relationship, were evaluated separately. Similar statements were collected to create the codes. Sub-themes and main themes were defined by examining the codes in detail to identify their common points and group them accordingly. Creswell's (2009) analysis process for qualitative research and Moustakas' (1994) for phenomenological research were applied to data analysis. During this process, the researcher carefully analyzes the raw data to identify the codes and themes indicated by the data. This is done through an inductive approach. The process is cyclical and flexible, meaning the researcher constantly checks the previous step, reviews the data multiple times in light of theoretical knowledge, and goes back to the field when necessary. The themes and their meanings that emerge at the end of this process are then reviewed in the context of existing literature and given their final form.

The research was carried out with necessary precautions to ensure that it was credible, transferable, consistent, and confirmable (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured in-depth interviews, preliminary interviews, and observation notes were used to diversify the data. The researcher spent significant time in the field to gather detailed information and had close contact with the participants in their environments to establish trust. During the data transcription, evaluation, and analysis, the nature of the data was preserved. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the findings were tabulated and presented with expressions directly from the data. The researcher tried to keep his beliefs and prejudices in the background and handle the data as it was in the data collection and analysis process.

4. Findings

The themes of the stewardship relationships between the family members (the principals) and the senior employees (stewards) will be explained in three groups:

- 1- Steward characteristics (according to family members' perceptions)
- 2- Steward characteristics (according to senior employees' perceptions)
- 3- Dimensions of the stewardship relationship (according to the perceptions of both parties)

Based on the family members' perceptions, the main themes regarding the characteristics of the senior employees/stewards were trust in steward and identification. The sub-themes of these main themes were business-specific competence, personal trustworthiness, faithfulness (vefa), organizational memory, serving the family, psychological ownership, and mediation (Table 2).

The main themes based on the views of the senior employees about themselves were virtue and psychological ownership. The sub-themes were honesty and integrity, contentedness, altruism, protectiveness, affective commitment, and respectability (Table 3).

Based on the perceptions of both parties, the main themes regarding stewardship relationships were long-term relationship and paternalism. The sub-themes were length of acquaintance, being family, power distance, patronage, and loyalty (Table 4). The themes were based on both the participants' views and the literature. The following sections explain the themes and sub-themes supported by verbatim examples.³

Table 2: Characteristics of stewards based on family members' perceptions

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Contents
Trust in Steward	Business-specific competence	Having a general command of the business style and business processes; able to take charge at any point of the business, regardless of a specific job description
	Personal trustworthiness	Honesty, morality, sincerity, respect for trust
	Faithfulness (Vefa)	Repaying the kindness and the closeness shown; not abandoning the family and the business in their difficult days; standing by their side; fidelity
Identification	Organizational memory	Witnessing the history of the business; having family and business background information and acting as a source of information for others
	Serving the family	Beyond workplace duties and responsibilities, fulfilling duties unrelated to work assigned by family members during or outside working hours; supporting family members when needed
	Psychological ownership	Dedicating themselves to work; protecting the business as their own; working beyond what is expected for the good of the business
	Mediation	Providing communication between other employees and family members on important issues; conveying the employees' problems and demands to family members; mediating over problems between family members

³ Due to page limitations, only a limited number of examples are included.

Table 3: Characteristics of stewards based on senior employees’ perceptions

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Contents
Virtue	Honesty and integrity	Not lying; sincerity, not deceiving the boss
	Contentedness	Not having an interest in too much money; being content with what they earn; not making any financial demands from the boss
	Altruism	Enduring an intense work tempo and financial difficulties; continuing to work during the business’s difficult times despite difficult conditions
Psychological ownership	Protectiveness	Looking after the interests of the family and the business; protecting the company’s resources from potential damage, and malicious or negligent employees
	Affective commitment	Feeling an emotional attachment and belonging to the family and the business; embracing the business; remaining in the business voluntarily
	Respectability	Personal dignity from being a member or servant of the business and family

Table 4: Dimensions of stewardship relationships based on the perceptions of both parties

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Contents
Long-term relationship	Length of acquaintance	Duration of the acquaintance between the parties
	Being family	Family members accepting stewards as part or an extension of their family
Paternalism	Power distance	Mutual maintenance of the hierarchy between the parties
	Patronage	Financial and moral protection and support from the family of the stewards and their families
	Loyalty	Stewards’ sincere commitment to the family and the business, which difficult conditions cannot erode; standing by the family; protecting them and their interests in every situation; not betraying them

4.1. Steward characteristics according to the family members’ perceptions

4.1.1. Trust in steward

4.1.1.1. Business-specific competence

The senior employees/stewards have a competency that is only valuable in the businesses they are members of. This competency comes from the fact that they have worked there for many years, learned all the features of the business very well, established close relationships with other employees and family members (learned how to “*stay on the right side*” (business no 7, steward)), and can respond flexibly to managements’ changing demands. They are the “*wildcard*” (business no 5, first-generation family member; business no 9, second-generation family member) for the family.

“They have no specific job descriptions, extremely flexible ... Goes to the bank, goes to get a license plate, does this or that, etcetera. He is someone who can do anything you can think of.” (business no 2, second-generation family member).

“He easily understands what I say to him. Handles the paperwork about land registry etcetera ... What I would have to explain for three hours to anyone else, he gets it after with three words ... He does everything ... He doesn’t care about the hour. For example, I can call him at 1 a.m. about work.” (business no 9, first-generation family member).

4.1.1.2. Personal trustworthiness

Senior employees' honesty is so unquestionable for family members that they can entrust their business and financial resources to them without any hesitation. Moreover, this reliability is not only regarding the business but also regarding their relations with the boss's family outside work: *"I entrust my family to him!" (business no 9, first-generation family member)*. Personal trustworthiness includes honesty, morality, sincerity, and respect for trust.

"He is personally very trustworthy ... My father gives him his credit card during the holidays, he can buy whatever he wants, but he only takes what he needs ... There is so much trust" (business no 3, second-generation family member).

"We have full confidence, we have entrusted the factory to them ... When necessary, you entrust two million Turkish liras to the man. This is trust." (business no 13, first-generation family member).

4.1.1.3. Faithfulness (Vefa)

"Vefa" is a concept specific to Turkish culture, associated with morality and Islamic values, and means *"to pay the debt, not to go back on one's word, not to forget the good deeds, to love those who do good for life"* (Altıntaş, 2020, p. 163). Although *vefa* lacks an exact equivalent in the international literature, as it involves reciprocity, we can say that it is very similar to the concept of *"faithfulness"* or *"fidelity"*. These two terms are considered the opposite of opportunism, which is also mentioned in classical agency theory (Mitnick, 1975; Lamothe & Lamothe, 2012). According to most family members, these senior employees/stewards are *"very faithful"*. They always appreciate and remember the kindness shown to them and continue to stand by the boss and his family, even when things go bad.

"When my grandfather passed away ... He stopped working and stayed with my grandfather in the hospital for 10 days ... He told us that you go, I will stay." (business no 1, third-generation family member).

"He is not like other employees. For example, tourism had a bad season a few years ago, in 2014 or 2015, there were times when we could not pay salaries for 3-4 months. He has no complaints in such matters. If he had money in his pocket, he would give us as well." (business no 9, first-generation family member).

"When we went bankrupt, everyone left, but he was always with us ... I know that he had not been paid for 4-5 months, but he continued to work with us. So we trust him very much, he is a trustworthy person." (business no 3, second-generation family member).

4.1.2. Identification

4.1.2.1. Organizational memory

Organizational memory is the sum of knowledge and experience from the past, contributing to business continuity and efficiency. It is kept in an accessible place to be used when necessary (Limon, 2016). The interviews revealed that stewards are an important source of organizational memory due to their long service in the business.

"He knows all kinds of history of this place ... He was here when it was built ... For example, when I ask what is here, he says there is a wastewater pipe here. So he knows everything. From the floor to the ceiling, he knows what is where." (business no 1, third-generation family member).

"He knows for sure when we ask him what we did that time ... In a way, he is the memory of this business. Where the files of that date or the business cards of that time are ... He knows almost everything about the years he has been here ... Any information from which serviceman came during the renovation to where the promissory notes are." (business no 2, second-generation family member).

4.1.2.2. Serving the Family

Serving the family emerged as a context-specific sub-theme not identified elsewhere in the literature. Family members' statements revealed that stewards offer their labor to the boss and his family both inside and outside the business.

"He goes and works for us everywhere ... It doesn't matter if it is business related or not." (business no 5, first-generation family member).

"He is like a 24/7 backup... He is the first person that comes to my mind under any circumstance ... If I am stuck on the road with my car, I call him; if I cannot find my key, I call him ... For example, I can ask him to bring me my passport from my drawer at home" (business no 2, second-generation family member).

"Day and night, 24 hours a day ... For example, my uncle's guests come and he picks them up from the airport at two in the morning. When I was in university in Istanbul, Gazipasa Airport was not open, so I used to fly to Antalya. He would pick me up, too. I would call him and say, Brother⁴, I'm coming at this hour. He would come" (business no 9, second-generation family member).

4.1.2.3. Psychological ownership

Family members frequently stated that stewards have an intense sense of ownership towards the business.

"He warns us when he sees the slightest problem, he sees himself as family ... For example, we hired a new driver the other day, and he came to me and said, check the clock, it is not normal to drive that long!" (business no 2, second-generation family member).

"The man worked as if it was his business ... He was hardworking ... He adopted the job as his own. I can say that he adopted it even more than me ... On the other hand, just look at any other employee... They are whiny ... In this sense ... He was very different." (business no 12, second-generation family member).

"He is the first person to come to the hotel in the morning. He performs the morning prayer, leaves the house, and comes here at half past 6 or half past 5. Normally, he has no such responsibility. I mean, it's okay if he comes at 8:30 or 9:00 ... Maybe he's here more than he is at home ... He says he has to come ... It is like addiction." (business no 1, third-generation family member).

4.1.2.4. Mediation

Interviews with the managing family members revealed that stewards play a *mediating* role that strengthens communication between family members and other employees and even between different family members. Family members say stewards *"act as a bridge"* between them and other employees.

"If employees have a problem, they go to him first. He acts as a bridge there ... The staff both fear and respect him a lot. But he also protects their rights and their dignity to the end." (business no 8, first-generation family member).

"He has no managerial task officially, but he looks after the workers around him, let's say like a sergeant ... When they have a problem, he informs us and we take care of it. Even if he doesn't like it very much (laughs)." (business no 13, first-generation family member).

"Sometimes my nephews argue with each other, and he (steward) finds a way to smooth things over between them." (business no 9, first-generation family member).

⁴ Brother is a term of endearment in Turkish culture between people of similar ages.

4.2. Steward characteristics according to senior employees' perceptions

4.2.1. Virtue

4.2.1.1. Honesty and Integrity

While “*honesty*” means not to stray from reality, not to deviate from the truth, and not to lie, “*integrity*” is defined as behaving under certain values and principles (Becker, 1998, p. 158). The stewards in the present study stated that they “*work honestly*”, “*do not cheat*” and, following the morality of society and themselves, avoid dishonest behaviors that will harm the business or the bosses. In this way, they gain the trust of their bosses.

“..I do not cheat. If you’re honest, you work for 35 years. But it won’t work if you cheat. If you lie, one day it will be exposed.” (business no 1, senior employee).

“Why do they trust me? Can I say frankness and honesty ... The best thing is honesty and doing your job properly.” (business no 11, senior employee).

“Trust and honesty are very important ... For example, ... (my boss) comes in the morning and leaves at 6 p.m. We are on duty until morning. We must not follow the devil ... He used to forget the key to the safe sometimes. I’d put it in my locker right away, and take it to him first thing in the morning.” (business no 14, senior employee).

4.2.1.2. Contentedness

When describing themselves, the senior employees/stewards often (and proudly, according to the researcher’s observation) stated that they are “*not materialistic*”, “*do not value money*”, and consider that “*money is secondary*”. This is in line with Davis et al.’s (1997) steward profile as a person who does not prioritize money.

“I don’t hunger after possessions like everyone else. Of course, everyone cares about material things, but ... I know how to make do with it ... I don’t get jealous because I couldn’t eat in a nice place. I do not have financial problems, thank God. After all, you have to be thankful.” (business no 9, senior employee).

“I don’t have much to do with money. I am not a materialist. Getting along, having good dialogue ... These are important to me. Respect, love, human values. Money is secondary to me.” (business no 13, senior employee).

“Money is not important, what matters is humanity ... I don’t like money, believe me.” (business no 14, senior employee).

“I have never worked for money ... I have not ever asked for a higher salary. I have accepted whatever raise they gave me ... I have never asked for more.” (business no 6, senior employee).

4.2.1.3. Altruism

Altruism can be defined as empathy for others, working for their welfare, and deprioritizing one’s well-being (Hernandez, 2012, p. 175). The senior employees who participated in the research do not object to low salaries, tolerate an intense work pace that affects their family life when their bosses or the business need it and agree not to receive a salary during difficult times. This altruism is so intense that it can be described as self-sacrifice.

“We couldn’t get any salary for 6-7 months. I somehow managed. It was difficult, but I did not let it affect my job or come between me and my superiors. What I experienced, how I felt ... No words were heard from my mouth. But it was difficult, I experienced it inside me.” (business no 13, senior employee).

“Work is busy ... My son was little, maybe two years old. At that time, I was very busy. I come late at night, and the child is sleeping; I go to work early in the morning, and the child is sleeping. Maybe I didn’t see the kid for 10 days or so ... Sometimes you can’t go home for 3 days.” (business no 11, senior employee).

“There was a crisis in Türkiye in 2001 ... We had very bad days. We made sacrifices, we said let’s get through the troubles together. We continued in solidarity.” (business no 5, senior employee).

“We’ve seen weddings, we’ve seen death, we’ve seen restraint orders. I mean, we’ve seen everything together ... I’m not one of those people who say ‘Damn it!’ when the salary is delayed for 10 or 15 days. I can stand the trouble. I can also help to solve the problem ... When there is a problem, one should not leave but make some sacrifices.” (business no 9, senior employee).

4.2.2. Psychological Ownership

4.2.2.1. Protectiveness

According to Davis et al. (2010, p. 1093), a good steward in a family business “*is a caretaker of a family’s assets, who desires to pass a healthier and stronger business to future generations*”. This psychological ownership ensures the preservation and improvement of business (Hall, 1966; Van Dyne & Pierce, 2004). Similarly, in the present study, the senior employees often use the phrase “*like our own*” when describing how they protect the business and the family.

“I always say it. No outsider can get to my bosses. As long as I work here ... Whatever the cost. I don’t let anyone talk behind their backs or their children’s.” (business no 1, senior employee).

“If there is an employee with harmful behaviors, I will not forgive this, I will inform the boss. There was one, for example, a cashier. He used to steal money from customer’s credit cards and transfer it to his own account. When I discovered it, I immediately informed the bosses and we fired him. I protect here like my own business.” (business no 12, senior employee).

“I embrace this restaurant as my own or even more. I only hire people I know. I don’t let everyone who comes to our door in. After all, this place belongs to us.” (business no 4, senior employee).

“I don’t tolerate lazy colleagues ... This place is like my own. For example if someone was a little mean to the customer, I would warn him. Why aren’t you behaving well?” (business no 14, senior employee).

4.2.2.2. Affective Commitment

Affective commitment refers to the emotional closeness and sense of belonging that an employee feels towards his/her company (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Many senior employees who participated in this research stated that they see the business as a peaceful home, a family environment, and a place where their emotional ties have been strengthened over the years. That is, their affective commitment is not only focused on the business; they also develop a deep commitment to their boss and the family.

“I never thought of going anywhere else ... We are like family ... So why would you go away from family and start with another stranger? ... We are like a part of this place ... I see this place as a part of me.” (business no 6, senior employee).

“Maybe if I changed my job, I would have the chance to get two times the salary I get here ... Everything in life is not measured by money ... We also had a lot of emotional ties. For example, my wedding was here, in the small hote l... My children were born here ... I lost a child here ... I am emotionally attached.” (business no 7, senior employee).

“Here, think of us as a family ... Can a person break away from his family? No. It’s a fact.” (business no 11, senior employee).

“The boss has become my father. They have become my parents (his eyes are full of tears). For example, be it him or the others (the boss’s sons), he is my son, he grew up under my hand ... I am very happy, believe me.” (business no 14, senior employee).

4.2.2.3. Respectability

The senior employees/stewards stated that they are proud of their businesses, and working there makes them valuable and respected. The reason is not just because of the businesses' prestige but also their owners. The fact that the bosses are well known, loved, and respected in society ensures that the stewards also get a share of it. Observing that they are respected as their boss’s “*man*” or “*right hand*”, the employees are more attached to the business and their boss.

“Working here is something to be proud of. The boss is a respected, popular person. Of course, I see value as his man and employee. It’s a well-known company.” (business no 13, senior employee).

"They are the owners of a big company after all. People they spend time with are in high positions ... When I tell people that I am an employee of ... (gives the name of his boss), even their attitudes towards me change. My bosses introduced me to a lot of very high-quality people. It is an advantage." (business no 9, senior employee).

"Thanks to my company, I have a reputation here and out there. As an employee, due to the company's reputation in the city... We have our boss's name behind us" (business no 5, senior employee).

4.3. The stewardship relationship based on the perceptions of both parties

4.3.1. Long-term relationship

4.3.1.1. Length of acquaintance

The senior employees/stewards and the family member managers representing both sides of the stewardship relationship have known each other for years. Some senior employees started to work in the business when they were children.

"Brother, I have been working here for 40 years. I started in the '80s. I left primary school and started ... I've been here for 40 years, except for my 18 months of military service. We were field neighbors with them ... Our place was small; it was not enough, so I started to work here as a housekeeper." (business no 6, senior employee).

"When my grandfather was younger ... When he was 25 years old or something like that... They brought him (the steward) to my grandfather and said he's all yours ... Like an early apprenticeship." (business no 1, third-generation family member).

"I started in the summer of 1996 and worked until 2018. Until the summer of 2018. Except for 18 months of military service. I started at the age of 16. My father also worked there. My father worked for 23 years. My brother worked for 12 years because they had a close relationship there ... My brother was also working at that time. There was a need for an employee like me, so we started when we were kids. You could say as a child." (business no 12, senior employee).

4.3.1.2. Being Family

The close workplace relationship between family members and senior employees/stewards continues outside. Family members often say that the steward is "like a son", "like a brother", or "like an uncle" to them. Stewards also think they are seen as part of the family by the boss and other family members. Many stated that their relationship with their boss is "not like a boss-employee relationship, but like a relationship between brothers".

"We have some code words within the family and now they (the stewards) understand them too." (business no 2, second-generation family member).

"He has become like a member of the family now ... We even feed his daughter's rabbit in the shop." (business no 3, second-generation family member).

"I mean, it's really a family business ... He became a member of the family too ... My wife loves him too." (business no 8, first-generation family member).

"We have become like a family. They all call me brother or uncle." (business no 2, senior employee).

"We see each other as brothers. May Allah be pleased with them, they take me instead of their brother, I take them instead of mine ... Their children grew up in our arms." (business no 6, senior employee).

4.3.2. Paternalism

4.3.2.1. Power distance

Power distance, first introduced by Hofstede (1980), means consenting to an unequal power distribution. It is an antecedent of paternalistic relations (Öner, 2012). The present study revealed that the relationships between the bosses and their families and the senior employees/stewards include a clear hierarchy despite all the closeness and affection of the parties. Although the parties do not directly emphasize this hierarchy, they seem to have agreed on its necessity. The spontaneous display of respect for the boss and his family, which they do not directly demand from the steward, is one element that makes the steward valuable.

"He knows where his position is. Even though I'm so close, he keeps it ... A specific distance ... He knows his place ... Both to my son and to me ... Too much intimacy can also bring harm." (business no 7, first-generation family member).

"I'm still ... Look, I'm 50 years old. I've been here for 35 years ... We are very close with the boss ... But never at workplace ... He is the boss ... The boundaries are clear." (org. no.1, senior employee).

We are close, but there is a certain line." (business no 3, senior employee).

4.3.2.2. Patronage

The paternalistic relationship between the boss and the senior employee/steward is also strengthened by the financial and moral generosity shown by the boss. He supports the steward financially when he has a problem, covers his children's education costs, and is there for him at weddings, funerals, or when one of his family is sick. He also acts as an "older brother" or "father" to him and even goes to "ask for the bride's hand"⁵ for him when necessary.

"His (the steward's) children at home, and his whole life concern me as well. That's how much I get involved. I have trusted that child, have taken him with me, for so many years ... I should be involved in everything, whether his marriage or his children. When he gets married, I hold his wedding! We are the ones who held the wedding and brought his bride. We went to speak to her family." (business no 1, second-generation family member).

"I also arrange their weddings ... Well, we have a certain wage policy; but illness, weddings, death ... In such cases, money is not an issue." (business no 11, first-generation family member).

"He always stood behind me. Sometimes, when I was pressed for money, he gave me extra money on top of my salary. God bless him a thousand times" (business no 14, senior employee).

"When I have a problem ... You know, when I have a funeral, or I mean, I have a wedding. It makes me so happy that they stand behind me." (business no 9, senior employee).

4.3.2.3. Loyalty

Loyalty refers to the intense attachment felt towards a subject and the sum of voluntary behaviors that underlie this attachment. The focus may be a person, group, organization, business, purpose, or idea (Haughey, 1993; Coughlan, 2005). In this research, observation notes and participant statements obtained from the interviews indicate that the loyalty of the senior employees/stewards is to the boss and his family rather than the business. This loyalty can thus be seen as a response to the positive attitudes and patronage of the boss and his family, following the nature of paternalism. Of course, it should be noted that this unique loyalty has a context-specific nature and intensity.

"His loyalty makes him valuable ... I would claim he wouldn't ask why if I said you have to die." (business no 8, first-generation family member).

"My agha (boss) ... if he wants my life, I'll give my life." (business no 4, senior employee).

"Whatever he needs, I'll do. I am at his disposal." (business no 8, senior employee).

5. Discussion

Based on the perceptions of family members and stewards, the findings presented here reveal several dimensions and context-specific aspects of stewardship relationships in family businesses in Türkiye. The data were subjected to thematic analysis, and the research questions were answered through the identified themes and sub-themes. While the findings overlap at some points with the findings of previous studies, they also strongly point to a steward profile specific to family businesses in Türkiye.

⁵ This is a traditional ceremony in Turkish culture in which the groom travels with his parents with flowers and chocolates on a fixed day to the parents' home of the prospective bride. The groom's father or another elderly or respected male family member then asks the bride's father for his daughter's hand in marriage.

The two main themes that stand out in the statements of the family member managers, who represent the principal side of the principal-steward relationship, are trust in the steward and identification. Trust is accepted as a critical antecedent of stewardship behavior in family businesses (Davis et al., 2010; Neubaum et al., 2017). The characteristics of family businesses establish a natural context for close and trusting relationships (Cruz et al., 2010; Corbetta and Salvato, 2004; Eddleston and Morgan, 2014). The theme of trust in steward explains the closeness of senior employees to family members and the fact that they are seen as “*an extension of the family*”. Although one might think that the sub-themes of business-specific competence, personal trustworthiness, and faithfulness are typical in the trust literature, they certainly have unique characteristics specific to family businesses and Turkish culture. As discussed later, paternalism, high power distance, in-group/out-group formations, Islamic beliefs, and historical and sociological structures like squirearchy extensively impact stewardship relationships in Turkish family businesses.

Competence is an essential dimension of trust between the superior and the subordinate. It includes faultless fulfillment of defined duties and responsibilities, problem-solving, taking the initiative, and having professional knowledge (Erdem & Özen-Aytemur, 2014). In the present study, on the other hand, which focuses on family businesses, the competence expected from stewards has a business-specific nature and includes a certain level of flexibility. It includes mastering all business processes and relationship dynamics without being tied to a specific job description. In other words, the steward has a specialization particular to the business rather than a profession or a narrowly defined job. Even if they have a specific job title, stewards voluntarily take responsibility and solve problems throughout the business. The families’ confidence in stewards increases as they internalize and fulfill various critical duties.

The fact that stewards handle many jobs within the business and are close to the family naturally expands their authority. One needs to have a strong sense of morality not to abuse this power. Therefore, it is unsurprising that personal trustworthiness is an important dimension of trust in the research. Family members often stated that they entrusted business and family resources to the stewards without any doubt, and they especially emphasized that honesty is the strongest characteristic of the stewards.

Another important characteristic that builds up trust in a steward is faithfulness. Family members and senior employees have repeatedly stated that they made mutual sacrifices for each other. It is understood that this situation, which strongly reflects the emotional and human aspects of the stewardship relationship, is related to Türkiye’s paternalistic culture. A strong faithfulness develops as a response to the family’s protection, care, and patronage behaviors towards the employee.

In the literature, identification, another main theme that emerged from family members’ evaluations of senior employees, is discussed as a psychological factor of steward behaviors (Davis et al., 1997, p. 29). Empirical studies indicate that employee identification significantly benefits family businesses through stewardship behaviors (Vallejo, 2009; Medina-Craven et al., 2020). However, the limited number of studies on identification in the context of family businesses mostly focus on managing family members (Carmon et al., 2010; Reay, 2009; Shepherd and Haynie, 2009; Sundaramurthy and Kreiner, 2008; Ferrari, 2020). The present study’s findings show that, in family businesses, a non-family steward’s identification develops through deep and intricate relationships with the family and has multiple foci, such

as the business, the boss, and other family members. Accordingly, an important dimension of identification is organizational memory, in that stewards become the organization's memory over time, witnessing the history of the business and the family. This situation is possibly specific to family businesses. The theme of serving the family further strengthens the argument for a unique identification model for family businesses. Stewards voluntarily (at least mostly) assist family members in their personal affairs (repair work at home, picking up children from school, etc.) in addition to their workplace duties, indicating that their identification is not only with the business but also with the family. Although previous studies indicate that extra-role behaviors can be an antecedent of stewardship (Gomez-Mejia & Wiseman, 2007), serving the family clearly goes beyond extra-role behaviors. The senior employees' selfless efforts can thus be considered the cost of being included in the in-group formed by the boss and other family members.

Another sub-theme of identification is psychological ownership, which means that stewards feel like a part of the managing family, namely the in-group, and exhibit a strong ownership mindset. They see and protect the business as their own. This identification is quite functional for other employees and the family. The mediation role of stewards, who act as a bridge between family members and other employees and the family, provides comfort in maintaining interpersonal relations.

The second part of the findings concerns the stewards' perceptions of themselves. The significant overlap between these findings and the family members' perceptions of the stewards' characteristics strengthened the consistency of the study's results. The stewards associated gaining the family's trust with honesty, integrity, contentedness, and altruism. These characteristics, which were grouped under the theme of virtue, are defined by the stewards as moral behaviors, such as not disappointing family member managers, not deceiving them, knowing how to be content, not being greedy, enduring difficult conditions, and being patient. Religious and cultural values strongly influence the morality of stewards: *"We do our job out of fear of God!"* (business no 5, senior employee). This behavior of the contented steward, who does not make any financial demands from the boss, does not negotiate a raise and is content with what is given, is explained by a habit of gratitude shaped by social and religious values as well as an obligation to the boss: *"The boss pays (in return for his labor). I do not have a financial problem, thank goodness"; "Money is not everything ... Thank God we have no problems"* (business no 3, senior employee).

The findings revealed that the stewards' psychological ownership behaviors pointed out by family members are also expressed by the stewards and with a richer content. Through anecdotes, the senior employees/stewards repeatedly reveal their deep commitment to the business and the family (affective commitment), embrace and protect the business as their own (protectiveness), and find it valuable to be a part of the family and the business (respectability). Various researchers have discussed psychological ownership (Pierce et al., 2001) in the literature. Our results support those of previous studies. For example, Sieger et al. (2013) point out that it can prevent opportunistic behaviors and turn the employee into a steward. Henssen et al. (2014) showed that psychological ownership is a precursor to stewardship behavior for non-family employees in family businesses. Finally, according to Bernhard and O'Driscoll (2011), the structure of small family businesses, which allows close superior-subordinate relations, helps non-family employees to develop strong psychological ownership.

Based on previous studies (Mayer & Schoorman, 1992; Davis et al., 2010; Zahra et al., 2008; Vallejo-Martos and Puentes-Poyatos, 2014), one can say that family businesses are highly conducive environments for commitment. Our findings, which revealed the strong affective commitment of stewards to the business and family, contain interesting details that show the authenticity of the identification phenomenon in family businesses (and in Turkish culture): *“Maybe if I were born again ... if I had known these people, I would still prefer to work with them. Whatever business they do! (business no 14, senior employee)”*.

The sense of ownership also provides stewards with an identity that finds a response in their social lives. In particular, if the bosses are from a well-known family in the city, it also raises the social status of the stewards outside the business. Carmon et al. (2010, p. 211) also found that employees who feel a sense of belonging to the business and the family in family businesses acquire an identity they are proud of.

In light of these evaluations, we can say that the stories of the senior employees/stewards are very much in line with what the family members think of them. Stewards who have gained the family's trust over the years and have access to the inner circle develop a reliable, loyal, and altruistic profile. They are strongly attached to the business and the family, act as the memory and caretaker of the business, and provide a role model for other employees. Contextual aspects (cultural, social, traditional, and religious values) enrich the content of these stewardship characteristics and illuminate the motives behind the behaviors of both family members and stewards.

According to the perceptions of family member managers and senior employees/stewards, the steward relationship is long-term, reciprocal, and paternalistic. In the literature, stewardship relationships are also defined as harmonious relationships spread over a long period of time, unlike short-term cooperations based on interest (Davis et al., 1997; Hernandez, 2012, p. 175).

In the present study, participant family members have known their stewards for at least two generations. It seems they *“almost”* become a member of the family over the years: *“He has been with us for a long time! ... Of course, we trusted him over time. When you plant a tree, can you eat the fruit right away? You water, you look, you prune”* (business no 1, second-generation family member). The acquaintances begin mostly in social networks. The boss and the steward are from the same town, or a common acquaintance speaks well of the prospective steward. Previous research indicates that selecting employees from a known, common social environment reduces opportunistic behaviors and agency costs (Granovetter, 1985; Shapiro, 1987, 2005; Wiseman et al., 2012). For family businesses, which are more vulnerable to agency risks, it is critical that employees are reliable (Chrisman, 2019). Especially for small family businesses, the social environment of the family or employees is an important resource for finding the right employee (Wilkinson, 1999; Carroll et al., 1999).

Family businesses are unique social systems consisting of family members and non-family employees (Barnett and Kellermanns, 2006). It consists of an in-group that includes family members, non-family managers/employees close to them, and an out-group of other employees. Research conducted by Haugh and McKee (2003) on small family businesses reveals that in-group inclusion requires strong commitment, honesty, trust, and loyalty. Being included in the in-group creates a privileged perception of being *“let into the family”* (Carmon et al., 2010, p. 212) or becoming a *“perceived insider”* (Stamper & Masterson, 2002). Madison et al. (2014) state that this perception is closely related to stewardship and that an employee

who feels like family will work in line with the interests of the family and the organization. The present study's findings are thus compatible with the literature, given that both sides of the relationship claim that stewards are seen as a part of an “*extension*” of the family.

One of the most original findings of the study is that stewardship relationships are clearly paternalistic in certain cultures. The relationship between family member managers and stewards is characterized by paternalism (Dyer, 1986; Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008), which emerges in collectivist societies with high power distance, such as Türkiye, and especially in family businesses (Dyer, 1986; Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008). It is based on power distance, patronage, and loyalty. Hence, the stewards describe their bosses as “*good fathers*.” When a voluntary paternalistic relationship is established between a boss and an employee, the employee tends to accept the boss’s authority sincerely, which fosters stewardship behaviors (Lee & O’Neill, 2003). The most important motivation for the stewards interviewed for our study to voluntarily participate in this relationship is that the boss protects and supports them and their families. In other words, the boss is a patron. Stewards respond with loyalty to the boss’s patronage. Loyalty, often associated with family businesses (Bee & Neubaum, 2014), is a typical feature of the stewards in our study. This loyalty, which some senior employees describe as “*being at the disposal of their boss*” and “*giving their lives for him*,” may have cultural and historical roots. In Türkiye’s Antalya region, where business-owning families used to own large farms, older family members are still referred to as an “*agha*.” This can be considered a weak reflection of the squirearchy (Köymen, 2009), which has played an important role historically and represents a strong authority over Anatolian villagers. The identity of agha attributed to bosses in family businesses thus shapes the attitudes and behaviors of the parties and, hence, the stewardship relationships.

The relationships between the stewards and the family members are long-standing, historical, and reciprocal and have been tested many times. According to Hernandez (2008) and Blau (1968), the stewardship relationship is a social exchange relationship. According to social exchange theory, interaction occurs through the exchange of things with and without material value. Therefore, unlike economic exchange, which agency theory is based on, non-material things, such as love, acceptance, and protection, are also mediums of social exchange. Hence, we revealed a deep-rooted social exchange relationship built over the years between family members and stewards. The findings indicate that this relationship is more intense and special than those established with other employees. For family member managers, these senior employees/stewards are very valuable, “*very different*”: “*I can say that he is a gift from God*” (business no 8, first-generation family member). This supports Davis et al. (1997b) and Chrisman (2019), who point out that stewardship and agency relationships can coexist within the same organization. Especially in collectivist societies, family member managers or “*fathers*” in family businesses tend to favor certain non-family employees who are close to them (Aycan, 2001, p. 5; Khatri and Tsang, 2003). In the study, high-quality relationships between family member managers and certain senior employees are an important determinant of stewardship behaviors.

6. Conclusion

This qualitative study investigated the dynamics and context-specific features of stewardship relationships between family member managers and non-family employees in Türkiye. The findings show that these relationships are based on trust, have paternalistic characteristics, develop over time, and deepen depending on mutual attitudes and behaviors.

The stewards/senior employees, one of the parties to this relationship, have identified with the family and the organization over the years, making them a substantial part of their social identity. The stewards seem practically accepted as family members because of their personal trustworthiness, business-specific competencies, and ownership mindset.

The study's findings help us comprehend stewardship relationships between family and non-family employees in family businesses within a cultural context. Unlike the limited number of empirical studies in the literature, the present study considered stewardship relationships through the views of both sides, which made it possible to achieve more valuable results. Although some studies have addressed the reciprocity of the stewardship relationship (e.g., Pearson & Marler, 2010), there have been limited explanations for how the relationship developed. This made it more important to draw on the perceptions of both parties in the relationship. Indeed, the consistency of the narratives about the history and the anecdotes of the relationship told by the two parties contributed to the validity and reliability of our study's findings.

The themes identified in this study coincide with others in the stewardship theory literature. In addition, the rich data set allowed some context-specific explanations. Sub-themes such as "*faithfulness*" and "*servicing the family*" exemplify findings associated with the particular socio-cultural context. Furthermore, contrary to the prevailing view in the literature, power distance, a sub-dimension of paternalism, appears to support the stewardship relationship rather than hinder it. The stewards' behavior of protecting the family and the business in return for the boss's patronage points to a stewardship model that carries cultural traces and is specific to family businesses.

In recent years, researchers have focused on non-family employees in family businesses. Stewardship theory provides a framework for illuminating the issues of how these employees can integrate with the business and make the greatest contribution (Tabor et al., 2018). However, most studies only focus on upper-management employees (Blumentritt et al., 2007; James et al., 2017; Sciascia & Mazzola, 2008; Yopie & Itan, 2016), which limits the theory's explanatory power regarding behaviors and relationships in small and medium-sized family businesses. Thus, the present study contributed to the literature by shedding light on a steward profile specific to small and medium-sized family businesses.

Stewardship relationships in family businesses offer much potential for future research. First, our study showed that stewardship relationships continue so long as the parties fulfill some explicit and implicit obligations with no clearly defined sanctions. Therefore, it would be interesting to consider this relationship as a particular type of psychological contract⁶ (Jose, 2008).

Second, it is easier in small and medium-sized family businesses to establish close informal relationships between non-family senior employees and family member managers because of the frequency of interactions. However, organizations adopt a more vertical structure and narrow job descriptions as they grow, which may hinder flexible and informal relationships. Hence, another exciting research question concerns how such developments affect stewardship relationships between family and non-family employees. Assuming that family culture's influence on the business will weaken, in-group dynamics and stewardship relationships are expected to take new forms. In their study, Üsdiken et al. (2015) revealed

⁶ A psychological contract is an "*unwritten agreement of mutual expectations*" (Jose, 2008: 4).

that senior managers and family members in large family holdings in Türkiye form an "inner circle" structure, which can serve as a valuable starting point.

Third, it may be important to research how the relationship between stewards and families will change when the new generation of managers takes over. Succession in family businesses can harm relationships within the organization (Miller et al., 2003). So, can the established relationship with the father be maintained with his children?

Lastly, stewardship relationships can be understood from various perspectives when taking a critical approach. For example, stewards' virtuous behaviors, such as self-sacrifice and contentment, may be attributed to the hegemonic effect of religious and cultural values. Alternatively, a researcher from a different paradigm may point to the consent and domination produced by informal relationship networks.

This study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the research only focuses on small and medium-sized family businesses. Stewardship relationships in larger corporate family businesses may offer different examples. Secondly, although the researcher tried to gain the participants' trust, hierarchically below the bosses, stewards may have hesitated to express their negative thoughts. Thirdly, some participants felt anxious while using a voice recorder during the interviews. Lastly, this research was conducted with the interpretive paradigm. However, approaching stewardship relationships in small and medium-sized family businesses with different research paradigms, such as the critical paradigm, may lead to further implications.

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