



## A founder's heritage: the development of organizational identity

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The purpose of this paper is to understand how a former family firm strategically makes use of the founder's legacy to preserve its organizational identity. Following a single case study approach, it draws on rich empirical material from semi-structured interviews and extensive archival data. We show how central organizational activities are affected by a founder's heritage long after the formal exit has taken place, illustrating the central, enduring, and distinctive elements of organizational identity a founder has. Regardless of ownership forms, the family company founder's legacy is used to legitimize new owners and maintain the organization's identity. However, centripetal moves complicate the preservation of the organizational identity, whereas a high focus on value leveraging in another ownership form opens up for centrifugal approaches which strengthen the entrepreneurial dimension of organizational identity.

**Keywords:** entrepreneurial founder heritage; organizational identity; case study; Sweden

L'objectif de cet article est de contribuer à l'élargissement des connaissances sur la manière dont une ancienne entreprise familiale utilise stratégiquement l'héritage du fondateur pour préserver son identité organisationnelle. En analysant une étude de cas, il utilise une riche matière empirique issue d'entretiens semi-structurés et d'un grand nombre de données d'archives. Nous montrons comment des activités organisationnelles centrales sont influencées par l'héritage du fondateur, longtemps après le départ formel de celui-ci, et ainsi, soulignons les caractéristiques centrales, persistantes et particulières de l'identité organisationnelle que possède le fondateur d'une entreprise familiale. Indépendamment des différents types de possession, l'héritage du fondateur d'une entreprise familiale est utilisé pour légitimer les nouveaux propriétaires et conserver l'identité de l'organisation. Cependant, les mouvements centripètes compliquent la conservation de l'identité organisationnelle, bien qu'un focus important sur la valeur, mettant à profit une autre forme de propriété, s'ouvre à des approches centrifuges qui renforcent la dimension entrepreneuriale de l'identité organisationnelle.

**Mots clés:** héritage entrepreneurial du fondateur; identité organisationnelle; étude de cas; Suède

### 1. Introduction

There is one dimension which is at times forgotten in research even though it has fundamental relevance not the least in family firms, that is, ownership (Dyer 2003; Pedersen and Thomsen 2003; Thomsen and Pedersen 2000). The involvement of owners in the business substantially distinguishes family from nonfamily firms (for example, Tagiuri

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and Davis 1996; Brundin, Samuelsson, and Melin 2014). The influence and impact of this dimension becomes particularly relevant with regard to organizational identity (Zellweger, Eddleston, and Kellermanns 2010). Organizational identity is often defined as what organizational members consider to be central, enduring, and distinctive to the organization (Albert and Whetten 1985).

However, extant research on organizational identity has not paid specific attention to owners which has led to concerns over whether organizational identity may just be something that the top management is concerned with (Gioia 1998; Scott and Lane 2000). Some research has noted the importance of founders and owners in organizational identity (Alvesson and Empson 2008) but this idea has not been discussed further. Although, sooner or later, the founder needs to think about options for the business' continuation (Ljungkvist and Andersén 2016) which can cause several problems (Akhter, Sieger, and Chirico 2016), especially if no family successor is available (Wennberg et al. 2011). As such, an interesting question arises: what happens to the organizational identity when the founder sells the business?

In this article, the focus lies on the founder as an individual who is influenced and gains meaning from being the owner of a business (Hall 2003). Therefore, it addresses the consequences of a change of ownership for organizational identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) address the change in collective status, for example, change of ownership, as something that brings the organizational identity onto the agenda. Indeed, change and continuity are topics discussed at length in the literature, but without conclusive results (confer Chreim 2005; Corley et al. 2006). Further, the topic is at least as important for family firms as nonfamily firms due to the central role the owners have (Pedersen and Thomsen 2003).

To our knowledge, no one has yet looked into the development of organizational identity after a founder has sold his/her ownership stake. Therefore, we argue that this becomes relevant to any exit where a family owner leaves the ownership circle.

Taken the previous into consideration, the purpose of this paper is to understand how a former family firm strategically makes use of the founder's legacy to preserve its organizational identity. Theoretically, it contributes to the literature on founder heritage and legacy by showing how reference to a living founder makes the founder a label/identity referent of the organizational identity which can signal both continuity and discontinuity. This research also extends the reasoning on organizational identity in that it brings ownership types as central actors to the stage. Both foreign-listed and venture capital (VC) firm owners use the founder's legacy to uphold continuity and maintain organizational identity. However, the former use it for highlighting personal trust and responsibility, and the latter for opening up flexibility and entrepreneurial initiatives. The paper is structured as follows. First, a discussion on the existing literature on frames of reference is given. Second, the method is communicated. Third, the empirical illustrations are provided. Thereafter, the main discussion regarding how organizational identity relates to continuity and discontinuity as well as centripetal and centrifugal moves is presented. Finally, conclusions and scope for future research are offered.

## **2. Frame of reference**

The essence of this study regards a theoretical framework which connects ownership, organizational identity, and a founder's heritage. As such, the following sections take a closer look into the existing literature as frames of reference for this empirical case study.

### **2.1. Ownership and organizational identity**

Hall and Koiranen (2007) describe ownership as having a ‘multifaceted nature,’ highly relevant for family businesses and Gersick et al. (1997) reserve one circle for ownership in their three-circle model. Further still, Hall and Koiranen (2007) criticize the idea that ownership has often been viewed from a legal/economic angle within the family business literature, and define three dimensions of ownership including psychological, socio-symbolic, and the legal/economic. Nordqvist (2005) introduces the concept of socio-symbolic ownership which consists of social interactions and symbolic aspects linked to a particular context where actors make interpretations of it.

Dittmar (1991) also argues that even functional meanings of possession/ownership can have related symbolic meanings. She posits that ‘a highly significant dimension of material objects is that they serve a symbolic expression of who we are’ (167) and emphasizes that symbolic meaning is culturally and contextually-bound, probably more so when considering family businesses (Stewart 2003). These ideas have led to increasing discussions on the meaning of ownership within the family business literature. Hall (2003), following the strategizing process in family businesses, discovers an identity paradox which refers to a simultaneous need for belonging and the separation of family members in the family institution. Moreover, she found that the business can be seen as an extension of the family which gives meaning to both the individuals and the business in expressing their self-identity and allowing for continuity. Koiranen (2007, 124) describes family ownership as collective and relational, and that ‘[c]o-ownership is a possessive relationship where the owning subject is a collective, such as a couple, a team, or a family.’ He argues that due to cultural socialization, the next generation of a business-owning family will be raised with a sense of being a family business and have an owner identity.

### **2.2. Founder heritage**

Delahaye et al. (2009, 39) remark, ‘telling the past of an organization is a powerful means of communicating or challenging its identity.’ Thus, organizational founders play a crucial role in determining the direction of the organization. For instance, Erçek and Günçavdı (2016) show how the founder of a Turkish business group left lasting imprints on the organization even after his death, in line with findings regarding founder centrality in family firms (Kelly, Athanassiou, and Crittenden 2000). Nevertheless, Nelson argues that the term founder is not self-evident as ‘the role of founder is self-designated or other-designated’ (2003, 709). In that regard, she argues that the meaning of founder is socially-constructed in accordance with Berger and Luckmann (1966). Similarly, she continues that ‘[f]ounders, as firm creators, are the initial architects of the organization’s structure and strategy’ (Nelson 2003, 707) and can have a persistent influence on the organization they started. She posits that the role as a founder finishes upon the actual foundation, although the founder may continue to influence the organization. Therefore, Nelson postulates that a founder’s influence may continue through one of several mechanisms such as: the focal point, imprinting, psychological commitment, ownership control, structural authority, or tenure (710). These mechanisms are not mutually exclusive but context-dependent, and will be discussed in the empirical section.

From the imprinting literature, we know that the context of foundation is reflected in organizational elements and persists over time (Marquis and Tilcsik 2013; Stinchcombe 1965; Nelson 2003; Ogbonna and Harris 2001) even for entrepreneurs (Jaskiewicz, Combs, and Rau 2015; Johnson 2007; Mathias, Williams, and Smith 2015). In a recent

literature review, Simsek, Fox, and Heavey (2015) found three different types of imprints on organizations – the environment, individuals/groups, and organizations – and describe the different processes by which imprints are anchored and used in organizations. Nevertheless, these authors recognize that imprints may not last forever and may even vanish.

Harris and Ogbonna (1999) find that founders leave strategic heritage to their successors which can be either positive or negative (Ogbonna and Harris 2001). This often takes the form of a strategic vision (Harris and Ogbonna 1999; Ogbonna and Harris 2001) and can be found in, for example, value statements (Blombäck, Brunninge, and Melander 2013). In line with Delahaye et al. (2009), Fauchart and Gruber (2011) suggest that founders imprint their identity on the organization they start. Accordingly, Fauchart and Gruber (2011) draw on social identity theory, that is, that founders express themselves in and with the entrepreneurial venture, which gives them meaning; that is, ownership becomes an expression of the founders' social identity (Hall 2003).

### **2.3. Organizational identity and a founder's legacy**

An organizational identity is said to both distinguish it from and ascertain its similarities with other organizations. Nevertheless, the construction and processes of organizational identity are often lengthy (Corley and Gioia 2004). Lately, research has suggested that it is also important to study the endurance of organizational identity (Anteby and Molnár 2012).

Organizational identity, its formation, changes, and endurance are still not well understood. Since the seminal work of Albert and Whetten (1985), most researchers follow their definition of organizational identity (confer Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, and Corley 2013; He and Brown 2013; Ravasi and Canato 2013); that is, what organizational members claim to be central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization (the CED-criteria). Nevertheless, some researchers have discussed these criteria, criticizing, amongst others things, the enduring character of identity. For instance, Corley et al. (2006) suggest that 'enduring' refers to the ability to change the identity of an organization.

Albert and Whetten (1985) believe that change happens very slowly or due to disruptions in organizational life. They also emphasize that a loss of an identity-sustaining element will be threatening. Here, they see a parallel to the grief and mourning of individuals, suggesting that similar things might happen in organizations when a factory is closed or a subsidiary is sold. This interpretation has been discussed widely (Brunninge 2005). However, Corley et al. (2006) argue that the discussion about whether identity can change or not is not helpful. It seems difficult to determine what is changing if identity is perceived as stable. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that an identity has a time-dimension and it can be assumed that change will be seen in a diffuse light. Gioia et al. (2013, 132) summarize Albert and Whetten's discussion as follows '...the terms that these authors used – 'enduring' and 'sameness' – suggested identity as something durable, permanent, unchanging and stable over long periods of time.'

Whetten (2006, 220) argues that all CED-criteria have to be considered relevant by organizational members:

The concept of organizational identity is specified as the central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from other organizations. I refer to these as organizational identity claims or referents, signifying an organization's self-determined (and 'self'-defining) unique social space and reflected in its unique pattern of binding commitments.

Whetten argues that identity claims or referents become categorical imperatives in decisions that may alter the collective understanding of an organization in order to prevent it acting out of character (Whetten 2006, 221). Ravasi and Canato (2010) follow Whetten and argue that a certain organizational feature, in their case technology, can become an identity referent. They state that the feature needs to be perceived as central, enduring, and distinctive (CED) by organizational members in line with Whetten (2006). Furthermore, Whetten postulates that identity claims are positive attributes which distinguish organizations and are manifest, for instance, in values, policies, procedures, and programs. Whetten goes on to argue that there are legitimate identity claims which are distinguishing organizational features (221). These claims or referents help construct the organizational identity.

In line with arguments on founder centrality (Kelly, Athanassiou, and Crittenden 2000; Nelson 2003), claims made in relation to the founder can be considered as identity-relevant. Thus, when an organization relates to its founder, it constructs its organizational identity and continuity or discontinuity (Brunninge 2009). In this regard, the founder becomes identity referent (Whetten 2006; Ravasi and Canato 2010), functioning as a label with associated meanings (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000) and strategic purposes (Chreim 2005).

Organization identity and strategy concerning the founder's legacy can also be understood by the dichotomies of centripetal and centrifugal moves (Czarniawska 1999; Sheremata 2000). The centripetal forces are directed inward, signifying increased control, coherence, conformity, and centralization, which in turn support standardization (Czarniawska 1999; Melewar and Saunders 1998). The centrifugal forces are directed outward, implying an enrichment of new ideas, a local understanding of market details, and the interplay of customer relationships (confer Chreim 2005; Czarniawska 1999; Melewar and Saunders 1998).

### **3. Methods**

Ravasi and Canato (2013) find that organizational identity studies may use similar labels but not refer to the same things; that is, the focus on what and how to study may significantly differ. For instance, they argue that empirical studies which focus on organizational identity are a recent (2002–2011) phenomenon which, amongst other things, promotes an interpretative approach to studying organizational identity as a social construct (Ravasi and Canato 2013). As the focus is on organizational identity, it is possible to study the activities and behavior of organizational members which are often represented in the verbal and textual form. Corley et al. (2006) explain that organizational identity provides a self-referential point that gives meaning to the collective members of the organization. Those meanings can be open, accepted, and believed. Further, as Corley et al. (2006) argue, organizational identity is context-dependent and can assimilate with or differentiate itself from others. There are indications that organizational identity influences how members of organizations interpret issues, roles, responses to problems, or feelings about outcomes (Golden-Biddle and Rao 1997).

A case study approach (Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 1989) is used to understand the heritage of a founder and how it is used for strategic purposes. Such an approach is particularly suitable for gaining an in-depth understanding of complex processes over time (Pettigrew 1997). An interpretive approach (Nordqvist, Hall, and Melin 2009) is therefore a suitable means for this endeavor. Specifically, the case study follows a firm and its founder over time using interviews in combination with archival data to gain a contextual

understanding of its development (Pettigrew 1992). In doing so, this allows for the interpretation of the implications for the organization when the founder sells it from an organizational identity perspective.

### **3.1. Case selection and data collection**

This case<sup>1</sup> has two dimensions: the company and its founder. Until a certain point in time, both develop in parallel, but after the sale and the resignation of the founder, the paths diverge, even though the continuous meeting point exists. In this paper, the focus is on the founder's legacy and how it is used to preserve the organizational identity, which concerns both the founder and the company. Apart from representing the type of firms addressed in this research, the company was also selected as it provided good data access critical for case studies. Specifically, the company offered the opportunity of collecting archival data as well as interviewing several different central actors. The empirical description and analysis concern three separate ownership constellations; (1) owned by a founder-led family business, (2) owned by a listed international company, and (3) owned by a VC. However, Hypermarket, which acquired Svensson's Mailorder in 1988, is not included in the study. As Svensson's was then no longer part of the core business and the founder remained in the company, first as CEO and later as chairman of the board, this ownership period did not leave any enduring imprints on the business. Moreover, the data access from this period is very limited, including potential respondents. Yet, as the staff and management during the later ownership periods kept referring back to founder, the longitudinal study of the strategic use of the founder's heritage is motivated.

Nevertheless, there is indeed a risk that the interviewees present their retrospective sense-making of the events rather than the actual motives that lay behind them. To deal with possible retrospective biases (Cater and Schwab 2008; Golden 1992), the present study is founded on archival data from the time of the actual decisions. In this way, the authors' interviews are compared with contemporary interviews in business magazines and statements made in annual reports, as well as personal notes. The selected case regards a Swedish entrepreneur who started his business – Svensson's Mailorder – in 1947 and sold it in 1988. Further, the founder has an autobiography which we draw upon as an additional source for cross-checking our material (Mathias and Smith 2016). We conducted several interviews with the founder and other current or past organizational members. Empirically, different sources of data are drawn upon which can be categorized on different levels. Each level has contributed to the overall understanding of the investigated phenomenon, helping to contextualize the data (Pettigrew 1987). As the purpose of the study centers on the implications for the organization after the founder's sale, the firm level is specifically in focus. However, field-level data provide a contextual understanding of founders' legacy and strategy for owners within companies in the trading sector, thus providing insights into general industrial conditions. The field-level data consist of 14 pages of interviews from business magazines, statements from 20 annual reports, 58 press clips and personal notes, and 10 interviews.

A considerable part of the collected data comprises semi-structured interviews with the founder, key people, and staff who have a longitudinal understanding of founder's relationship with the company. These firm-level interviews were conducted individually, but to clarify central perceptions, they were later complemented with a group interview (Frey and Fontana 1991) comprising three respondents. The firm-level interviews comprise 16 interviews and emphasize leadership and ownership issues, as well as the role the founder played – and still plays – in the organization. Moreover, the questions concern

distinct preferences, commitments, organizational specific attributes, procedures and priorities, as well as moments and features regarded as decisive (Whetten 2006). A substantial amount of archival data, which includes the company's own archive as well as public libraries, were also collected. These were complemented with the mentioned field-level data. Following Leonard-Barton's (1990) methodology for reporting longitudinal case studies, Table 1 presents data sources and the timeline for data collection.

### **3.2. Data analysis**

As case selection per se includes analytical elements as certain features or dimensions, case study research differentiates itself from traditional analysis by following certain steps which are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Eisenhardt 1989). This study followed four analytical steps. First, the case company was purposely selected (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007) to illustrate how the organizational identity was manifested and used by different kinds of owners. Second, the case was divided into three chronological ownership-based phases to understand the organizational identity and how it was used, namely: by the founding family firm, by the foreign-listed firm, and by the VC company. Accordingly, the empirical section follows this structure, thereby highlighting ownership changes as well as the processual changes of organizational identity. Third, inspired by Clark et al.'s (2010) methodological approach, a considerable number of quotes with organizational identity implications were aggregated, representing significant features as well as an important share of the collected data. A few of these quotes were collected from a parallel study in the same research project, however, clearly relating to organizational identity. To clarify essential elements of organizational identity, the quotes and additional data were categorized in line with Albert and Whettens' (1985) and Whetten's (2006) three dimensions (see Tables 3–5) which were used as the primary analytical tool. Furthermore, to make the features of organizational identity comprehensible, the aggregated quotes were abstracted into summative themes. Fourth, the tabulated data and the summative themes were compared and analyzed by the conceptual considerations suggested by Albert and Whettens (1985) and Whetten (2006) to investigate the changes of organizational identity and its implications. Further, the theoretical dichotomies of centripetal and centrifugal (Czarniawska 1999; Sheremata 2000), as well as continuity and discontinuity (Brunninge 2009) were used to analyze the empirical material from a strategy perspective. Thus, differences in referring to the founder, as well as contextual implications between the three chronological ownership phases could be identified and analyzed.

## **4. Empirical illustrations**

In March 2016, the founder Sven Svensson of Svensson's Mailorder died at 87 years old. In Sweden, he was a renowned entrepreneur who, at the age of 13, was expelled from grammar school but found two jobs before arriving home that day. He started working in a print shop that had mail-order companies as customers and became interested in how these companies formulated their advertising. After a while, he started to proofread and thereby regularly visited the mail-order companies, developing personal relationships with key people in the advertising industry. Like many others in his region, he started a small mail-order company (Ljungkvist 2014; Ljungkvist and Boers 2016) in 1947, known as Svensson's Mailorder, in the basement of a defunct dairy distributor. The company consequently expanded, and in 1952, the company's first mail-order catalog was launched. By 1969, Svensson's Mailorder had exceeded 10 million EUR in turnover

Table 1. Data sources and timeline for data collection.

Data sources				
Archival data				
Multiple pages of interviews in business magazines	Annual reports	Press clips and personal notes	Authors' interviews	
Field-level data				
Key people in the Swedish trade industry concerning organizational identity	Covering 10 Swedish trade companies $N = 20$	Press clips concerning organizational identity $N = 58$ (1987–2017)	Key people in the Swedish trade industry concerning organizational identity $N = 10$ (2007, 2015–2017)	
Firm-level data				
Key people in Svensson's Mailorder	Svensson's Mailorder $N = 11$	Press clips concerning the Svensson's Mailorder organizational identity, (1998–2015) Personal correspondence Notes from staff journal (1979–2016)	Interviews with key people in Svensson's Mailorder (2008–2017) Group interview with retired staff from Svensson's Mailorder $N = 15$ $N = 1$	

Table 2. Change of ownership.

When	What
1947	Svensson's Mailorder founded
1988	Svensson's Mailorder goes public
1988	Hypermarket acquires Svensson's Mailorder
1995	Svensson's Mailorder is re-introduced into the stock market
1997	Bluedog acquires Svensson's Mailorder
2013	Bluedog sells Svensson's Mailorder to PE-Nordic

which grew to an estimated annual turnover of 200 million EUR in 2014 with approximately 620 employees. Svensson's Mailorder currently has its headquarters in the south-west of Sweden and is active in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark.

#### 4.1. Change of ownership and organizational identity

Although Svensson's Mailorder was introduced onto the stock market in 1988, and the majority owner Sven sold his shares to Hypermarket in 1988, people both within and outside the company still associated the founder with the company. Hypermarket is a big grocery retailing company which at that time acquired several other businesses, which were not necessarily in the same line, in order to create a huge conglomerate. From this, the company later changed hands multiple times. This is indicated in Table 2 which offers a timeframe of the ownership structure. The change of ownership is relevant to organizational identity as it concerns the *raison d'être* of the organization and its members.

The founder, Svensson, did not have any particular plans regarding the future of the company and explains in a research interview from 2008, how he arrived at selling it to Hypermarket: 'I was about to turn 60 [...] and we had introduced the company to the stock market. All of a sudden, [...] I had to sit in an office, attend meetings, and had interviews with newspapers...' He recalls what he told his wife at the time: 'Fred sold his company [a local competitor] ... bloody [heck], I will sell mine too.' He continues: 'Two weeks later I had a press-conference in Stockholm and told the newspapers why I sold the company.'

'I was called by Svensson's founder Sven Svensson who asked if Hypermarket was interested in buying Svensson's,' recalls the former CEO of Hypermarket. 'It was a quick deal since the Board said yes to this.' It should, however, be noted that the founder stayed on formally for several years within the company, first as CEO and later as member of the board of directors.

In the middle of the 1990s, Hypermarket changed its strategy and reintroduced Svensson's Mailorder (hereafter Svensson's) onto the stock market. In 1997, the French fashion mail order company Bluedog acquired Svensson's from Hypermarket which was still the majority shareholder. Bluedog itself was part of a French conglomerate with roots – amongst others – in fashion and luxury goods. Svensson's became the responsible company for distributing and selling Bluedog's products on the Nordic market.

Bluedog's parent company was listed on the Paris stock exchange and its French owners put a greater focus on hierarchical and efficiency-oriented management. After a reorganization of the conglomerate, Svensson's and Bluedog were no longer perceived as core activities and were put up 'for sale' in 2012. Rumors about potential buyers, domestically and internationally, were published in Swedish and international

Table 3. Organizational identity as a family-owned and founder-led company.

Organizational identity (CED-criteria)	Representative quotes	Summative themes
Centrality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– I started with two empty hands, but with determination and valuable support from the people around me, it has gone fantastically. (founder)</li> <li>– It was not until 1955 that we got a few employees. Before then, my wife and I took care of everything. We bought, packed, advertised, responded to letters, and delivered. (founder)</li> <li>– Using professional photo models were unthinkable at the beginning. We did it ourselves. (founder)</li> <li>– When I started there was no limit on how much one could work. I was incredibly ambitious, hated all costs, and was very economic. (founder)</li> <li>– People grow with the task if they are given responsibility and trust. (founder)</li> <li>– It was a familiar and entrepreneurial atmosphere. It was a tight gang that worked together (employee)</li> <li>– It is very much a teamwork to run a mail-order company. It is important to gather capable members in the team. (founder)</li> <li>– You can easily believe that the automation and computerization have meant that the personal contact with the customer has deteriorated. For us, the aim is the opposite; we shall increase the possibility of personal service. (founder)</li> <li>– I regret the decision to set up a management group. We built up an overly large organization last year. Now we return to a lean management. (founder)</li> <li>– No sale of shares, which means that the family members combined have less than 50% of the company's shares, is allowed without a written consent of all members of the consortium [the owning family]. (letter from the lawyer)</li> <li>– If a family member dies, the ownership structure is disturbed and the company is at risk. (founder)</li> <li>– As you can see, you and Siv [the founder's wife] have a clear voting majority, no matter who dies first. (letter from the lawyer)</li> <li>– As you may recall, a new marriage contract and a new will was written in October 1977. The aim was then that the majority of the shares would remain with you [the founder] or Siv [the founder's wife] if anything happened to either of you. (letter from the lawyer)</li> <li>– We have no one who wants to take over ownership responsibility. (founder motivating his sale)</li> </ul>	<p>Norms of responsibility and trust</p> <p>Focus on teamwork and customer</p> <p>Concerns about the family members by company resources</p>

*(continued)*

Table 3. (Continued)

Organizational identity (CED-criteria)	Representative quotes	Summative themes
Enduring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Sven never came late. He was always on time. (employee)</li> <li>– I had really only one need, and it was to have it better. I had probably also some talent, and because coincidence was on my side, I also had the chance to develop my ideas. You cannot ask for more than that. (founder)</li> <li>– We constantly strive to enhance and strengthen the personal contact with and service to our millions of customers. (founder)</li> <li>– The best motivation a person can have is to improve their situation. (founder)</li> <li>– Athletes probably have the same feeling. They never really get fully satisfied with their results. (founder)</li> <li>– With today’s wages, it is not worth being frugal. But, I still turn the paper over and also write on its reverse. (founder)</li> <li>– We have not publicly introduced Svensson’s Mailorder only to make the family rich, but the company will prosper on an IPO. (founder)</li> <li>– Hypermarket as the long-term owner will be good for the employees as well as for the company’s further development. (founder)</li> <li>– Their [the buyers’] commitment is long term and we will soon have achieved some synergies. (founder)</li> </ul>	<p>The founder’s will to constantly improve Future concerns for the company’s survival</p>
Distinguishing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Excuse me, but I have to give my employees a hug. (founder)</li> <li>– I didn’t work for Sven, you worked with him. (employee)</li> <li>– At the company, he gladly joked that it worked better when he wasn’t in place. (reporter)</li> <li>– Sven was so personal, he remembered every single human being. He had an incredible memory. (employee)</li> <li>– During Christmas, Sven personally gave a sum of money and chocolate to every employee. He was out in the warehouse. (employee)</li> <li>– He [Sven] had a genuine interest in his employees. He had time to talk, he asked questions and listened. (employee)</li> <li>– Sven was a warm and good person, really folksy. (employee)</li> <li>– Sven has a unique presence in the company he leads. (employee)</li> <li>– His frugality and generosity were remarkable. Sven cut out coupons for coffee and soup while he supported the soccer team with millions.</li> <li>– Through our staff policy, we achieved higher</li> </ul>	<p>Personal relationships between founder and employees First mover approach, internal as well external matters</p>

(continued)

Table 3. (Continued)

Organizational identity (CED-criteria)	Representative quotes	Summative themes
	<p>sales and lower sick leave than our competitors (founder)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– By starting the Swedish Mail-order Association, we cleaned the industry from unscrupulous actors (founder)</li> <li>– Concerning data processing and phone orders, we were among the first. Already in 1978, we could immediately see if the product was available (retired employee)</li> <li>– Inspired by other countries, we were first with many products/services [on the national market]. For example, we started selling plants by mail order.</li> </ul>	

newspapers. Ultimately, the parent company chose a Swedish private-equity (PE) company, PE-Nordic as the buyer.

One of the investors, and current chairman of the board of directors, who acquired Svensson's from Bluedog, Halvar Andersson, said in 2014, 'the goal is to have an agile and open company culture.' In this context, he also thanked the founder Sven Svensson for the culture of 'entrepreneurship', 'cohesion,' and 'loyalty' he created which the current management is partially trying to return to and enforce.

#### ***4.2. Aggregation of empirical data based on three dimensions of organizational identity***

To comprehend an aggregated understanding of the organizational identity change, the central findings are presented in three tables based on representative selected quotes from archival and interview data. [Table 3](#) concerns the company as family-owned, [Table 4](#) as owned by the French conglomerate, and [Table 5](#) as owned by the VC firm. The quotes are categorized according to Albert and Whetten's (1985) dimensions. Further, by applying Clark et al.'s (2010) recognized method, specific organizational identity characteristics have been abstracted into summative themes, and thereby clarified.

### **5. Discussion**

We have identified the founder as the connecting link giving continuity to the organization (confer [Table 2](#)) with his latent presence but also continued to influence through different mechanisms (Nelson 2003). This led to the central role of the founder for organizational identity (confer Albert and Whetten 1985). The empirical findings demonstrate how different owners can strategically use the founder's legacy to preserve its organizational identity when he or she upholds a relationship with it. When the ownership consisted of foreign-listed conglomerates, the founder used to manifest an ongoing relationship between them, thereby signaling responsibility and continuity. However, centripetal moves complicate the preservation of organizational identity. The ownership consisting of VC companies is influenced by their high focus on value leveraging, which opens up for centrifugal approaches. Thus, to support entrepreneurial initiatives, references highlighting the founder as a change inducer and a first mover are used.

Table 4. Organizational identity as a foreign-listed owned company.

Organizational identity (CED-criteria)	Representative quotes	Summative themes
Central	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Sven was always available, but it was a culture that he never interfered in the decision-making. Even the French owners kept this relationship. (CEO)</li> <li>– After he [Sven] had left the company, he showed dignity by not publicly commenting on what happened in it. (business colleague)</li> <li>– Many children and schools could apply for money from his foundation to do things. Sven could manage what he had. (reporter)</li> <li>– As we were owned by a listed company, the reporting work was extensive. (employee)</li> <li>– The French owners brought a highly industrial focus, quite inflexible. (current chairman)</li> <li>– The data department was centralized to France. (employee)</li> <li>– The focus under the French ownership was efficiency and logistics, not so much on brands. (current chairman)</li> <li>– To understand our business, we have to consolidate all records and definitions as our French owner. (CEO)</li> <li>– We benchmarked frequently with other European units within the business group. (manager)</li> <li>– Owing to our competence of distance trading and the headquarters' previous experience of the Russian market, we present a very competitive offer which will be hard to match. (CEO)</li> </ul>	<p>Keeping the founder relationship for a representative purpose                      Centralization and reporting                      A control-based growth</p>
Enduring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– ... so they inform me [Sven] about everything but the results...because they are in charge of it. So, I feel a little noticed, flattered, and happy.</li> <li>– Sometimes, I am there and thank [myself for being] the retired. I am there when something special happens. At the 60th anniversary I was the 'secret guest.' (founder)</li> <li>– When I go here, I can feel little cocky, it feels as if I [...] planned how every brick would be in this jail. (founder)</li> <li>– The management tried to change the street name [where the company is located] to Sven Svensson's street, but it wasn't easy. (employee)</li> <li>– We shall be the best in class and can't afford mistakes, we will continue to develop fashion. (CEO)</li> </ul>	<p>Strengthen identity by inviting and relating to the founder                      Customer focus by ratings                      The norm of expansion</p>

(continued)

Table 4. (Continued)

Organizational identity (CED-criteria)	Representative quotes	Summative themes
Distinctive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Pretty recently, the customers were allowed to rate and comment on our online store and services. The management was little bit nervous in the beginning. (marketing manager)</li> <li>– We have to take the initiative, move fast, and implement. (CEO)</li> <li>– By launching in Russia, we grow beyond the domestic market. This is a new market with lot of opportunities. (CEO)</li> <li>– As we have a steady stream of customers, we can open a concept store for our external brands. (manager)</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Other observers notice that the Svensson's spirit corresponds and originates from the founder Sven Svensson as it describes his character very well. (reporter)</li> <li>– Sven was first to develop electronic customer communication which we have continued to develop. (CEO)</li> <li>– Just a while ago, Svensson's online services were largely integrated with Facebook. With this, we are first in Scandinavia. (marketing manager)</li> <li>– Our Facebook presence drives customer relationship and channeling traffic to our online store. (reporter)</li> <li>– Strategically, we are developing toward a lifestyle company. Customers will be able to choose from our wide product line from home. (CEO)</li> <li>– The Swedish subsidiary Svensson's has developed its brand to include products and services. For instance, charter trip arrangements were launched as Svenssons's Tours. (reporter)</li> <li>– Our marketing became more aggressive, inspired by the French. For example, 'If you don't buy, we will be disappointed.' (employee)</li> <li>– Our investment in the Russian market is an aggressive move. Potentially, there are over 140 million customers in this huge market. (CEO)</li> </ul>	<p>New forms of personalized electronic customer relationships Brand extension and aggressive marketing</p>

Table 5. Organizational identity as a venture capital owned firm.

Organizational identity (CED-criteria)	Representative quotes	Summative themes
Central	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Nowadays, it’s not so hierarchical. (employee)</li> <li>– The current CEO emphasizes value creation. (chairman)</li> <li>– The new owners allow us to take risks again. We got rid of the [paper] catalog. (manager)</li> <li>– We have pushed the change rate further, it has become our [the firm’s] DNA. (chairman)</li> <li>– It is like turning around a super tank that has sailed on the same course for decades. (manager)</li> <li>– By our new brands, we have grown hugely and our warehouse needs to be renewed. (employee)</li> <li>– Our business is changing from mail-order to e-commerce. It is a massive and generational change for the company. (employee)</li> <li>– We are aware of our brand now, and we have to build it. (manager)</li> <li>– As we got new owners, and as we needed to change our systems, we started with event-driven marketing, which is an ongoing trend interesting many companies. (manager)</li> <li>– The company has started event-triggered marketing, and the customers seem to like it. (reporter)</li> </ul>	<p>Shift in focus Identity adaption to an e-commercialized brand platform</p>
Enduring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– And then I have ..., since 1988, since that happened, have been a ‘permanent guest’ down there at Svensson’s Mailorder. (founder)</li> <li>– Sven didn’t advise us, but he was a wise man and a role-model. (chairman)</li> <li>– He [the founder] felt for the young people and became involved in the high school entrepreneurship education and sports for youth [with the VC company’s ownership]. (employee)</li> <li>– I think how indulged I have become of everyone; I’m almost embarrassed, said Sven. I replied [the reporter] that he himself has spoiled so many people, associations, and organizations. Yes, but I enjoyed it [Sven]. (reporter)</li> </ul>	<p>Founder as anchor and role model Founder as reference point for continuity as well as change</p>

*(continued)*

Table 5. (Continued)

Organizational identity (CED-criteria)	Representative quotes	Summative themes
Distinctive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– When Sven left Svensson’s Mailorder, it had been a floating period. Of course, because it’s a strong manager having the control, full control of the company. [...] when we bought Svensson’s Mailorder, it was a company which was [under] control; it was not a mess. It was an extremely prosperous company and there were a lot of things to do, and we did it. (chairman)</li> <li>– The commercial focus remains how to deal with it. (manager)</li> <li>– Our new building is built to attract employees, [and] affect[s] how people meet each other. (chairman)</li> <li>– The approach is still there, it’s a friendly culture that takes care of older employees [pensioners]. (chairman)</li> <li>– Sven trusted the employees and their abilities and he showed the importance of change. He created a familiar feeling which still is present. (chairman)</li>   <li>– The so-called Svensson’s-spirit which is described as ‘non-hostile,’ ‘non-snobbish,’ and ‘bland.’ One female employee reports: ‘Of course, people glance at another, and notice when someone wears Svensson’s clothes.’ (reporter)</li> <li>– All managers have dirt under the nails. (CEO)</li> <li>– We focus much on innovation, it is quite unique for a trading company. Such companies have often problems of formalizing creative work. (innovation developer)</li> <li>– The media war is crucial, you have to invest in marketing as the change rate is faster. (manager)</li> <li>– The positive attitude toward change remains since Sven’s time. We [...] have been] getting the flexibility back since the mail-order time. (chairman)</li> <li>– When we met, Sven always talked about the customer and the respect he had for him or her. (CEO)</li> <li>– During Sven’s time, it was a good</li> </ul>	<p>Values of simplicity and hard work Praising the founder’s entrepreneurial customer focus</p>

(continued)

Table 5. (Continued)

Organizational identity (CED-criteria)	Representative quotes	Summative themes
	<p>environment for new ideas and a high focus on customers. Today, we center on our new brand platform. (chairman)</p> <p>– In many ways, Svensson’s has returned to the founder’s governance; it’s more freedom and a higher focus on value creation. (chairman)</p>	

By extracting the empirical findings into summative themes (see Tables 3–5), we are consequently able to develop a better understanding regarding how the former family firm strategically makes use of the founder’s legacy to preserve its organizational identity. As a family-owned and founder-led company, and according to Albert and Whettens’ (1985) CED-criteria, the summative themes reveal how *central* organizational identity elements were established. Implications as ‘norms of responsibility and trust’ and ‘focus on teamwork and [the] customer’ (Table 3) are highlighted as crucial for the company’s long-term existence. Concerning *enduring*, two aspects crystallize: ‘the founder’s will to constantly improve’ and ‘future concerns for the company’s survival.’ These themes express the founder’s outspoken wishes for continuity and the owning family’s lasting role in the company. Furthermore, the identity as a family-owned firm was *distinguishing* (Whetten 2006) by the genuine and ‘personal relationships between founder and employees,’ appearing in every level of the company, and in being a first mover in products as well as business systems. As relationships and first mover approaches are particular, they also appear as unique, and thereby distinguishing (Whetten 2006).

When the French listed company acquired the firm, the empirical material indicates that the new owners tried to strengthen their legitimacy by connecting to the founder’s legacy. By ‘keeping the founder relationship for representative purpose’ and ‘inviting and relating to the founder,’ the company could appear as a serious and like-minded inheritor, relating to *centrality* as well as *enduring* (Table 4). However, the strong focus on ‘efficiency and reporting’ (to the headquarters) and ‘control-based growth,’ appear to break from the personal and entrepreneurial identity established by the founder. Centering on control and cost efficiency is a commonly used strategy for larger listed corporations (Leonard-Barton 1992; Wright et al. 2000), which can also be regarded as a centripetal move. The emphasis on coherence, measurability, and centralization favor standardization which is a typical element in centripetal moves (Melewar and Saunders 1998); also meaning a depersonalization of the organization (Czarniawska 1999). Nevertheless, *enduring* themes such as ‘customer focus by ratings’ and ‘the norm of expansion’ still clearly relate to the founding family firm. However, the higher focus on uniformed internationalization and a reporting system also relate to centripetal moves of conformity and integration (Sheremata 2000). The abstracted themes of ‘personalized electronic customer relationships’ and ‘brand extension’ transmit uniqueness and *distinctiveness*, where the former appeals to the founder’s personal relationships with employees and customers.

When owned by the VC company, the summative themes demonstrate a change in strategy to utilize and preserve the organizational identity. The ‘shift in focus’ from traditional mail-order to an e-commerce driven brand platform is clearly perceived as decisive

for the company (of *centrality*), which also claims an adaption of identity (Table 5). Interestingly, the management actively utilizes the ‘founder as reference point for continuity as well as change’ (confer Brunninge 2009). In this way, the management highlights the ‘founder as anchor and role model’ for values such as responsibility and trust. However, by referring to the founder as a change inducer, business transformation likely appears as a natural and – over time – *enduring* behavior (Albert and Whetten 1985). As the time frame of ownership is normally outspoken for VC companies (Bacon et al. 2013), their high focus on increasing value often supports entrepreneurial activities for enabling business opportunities (Wright et al. 2001). This is in line with centrifugal moves (Melawar and Saunders 1998; Czarniaska 1999). Furthermore, by recurrently ‘praising the founder’s entrepreneurial customer focus,’ the management upholds the unique solutions that once *distinguished* the company, which also promote flexibility and new strategically-supported entrepreneurial initiatives. Thus, the management pushes for centrifugal strategic moves (c.f. Melewar and Saunders 1998; c.f. Czarniawska 1999).

### 5.1. Identity claims

The founder becomes an identity referent, and represents positive attributes which distinguish the organization and are manifested in, for instance, values, policies, procedures, and programs (confer Whetten 2006). In this regard, the reference to the founder and the ascribed values form a legitimate identity claim, shared by organizational members as a *distinguishing* organizational feature.

Looking at the three criteria of central, enduring, and distinctive during the three described owner constellations, it becomes evident that the meaning and function of the founder as identity referent changes. In part, this can be explained by the different roles the founder played in these constellations. When the founder sold the business and, after he officially left the company, his role changed from being active to passive, where others attached and ascribed meaning to him (see Table 4).

By appearing as secret guest at anniversaries or by signing and distributing his autobiography at the company, the founder was used to manifest the continued relationship, thereby legitimizing the new owners and preserving the organizational identity of trust and responsibility. However, the founder did not regret this and rather felt ‘flattered.’ From the managements’ perspectives, the reference to the founder helps in establishing both continuity and discontinuity within the organization (Brunninge 2009).

All owners appear (confer Table 2) to relate to the founder in order to establish continuity. The founder himself supported this process with his occasional but continued presence and participation at different events. However, related to the centripetal strategy of centralization and the higher focus on efficiency and control (c.f. Melewar and Saunders 1998; Czarniawska 1999), the listed owner’s moves appear as a discontinuity from the founder’s management.

The implicit message during the VC company’s ownership was that the founder’s values of flexibility and entrepreneurship had been lost, but were coming back. Thus, the management consequently described it as a discontinuity (c.f. Brunninge 2009). By relating to probably the most value-creating period in the company’s history, the management opens up for centrifugal moves (c.f. Melewar and Saunders 1998; Czarniawska 1999), supporting the VC Company’s outspoken ambition of value creation and marketing change. Thereby, attributes such as higher customer adaption, change, and creative initiatives are promoted.

Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) have argued that organizational identity claims are not per se stable, but rather adaptively unstable. They argue that stability might only exist on the surface in labels that remain unchanged, but the associated meanings of labels change. Here, the label in question is the founder and the values ascribed to him. Chreim (2005) notes that managers may use similar labels but alter the associated meaning by selectively using examples from the past, present, and future. Thus, managers can have a purposeful strategy to retain labels but change the associated meanings (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000; Chreim 2005; Brunninge 2009).

## **6. Conclusions**

### ***6.1. Theoretical implications***

Regardless of ownership forms, for instance, foreign-listed companies or VC firms, the family founder's legacy is used to legitimize new owners and maintain the organization's identity in different ways. This study suggests that during foreign-listed conglomerates' ownership, the founder is used to manifest an ongoing relationship, claiming continuity and responsibility. Yet, the centripetal strategies that normally follow this ownership type (c.f. Wright et al. 2000) make the personal and founder-oriented identity harder to uphold. Ownership consisting of VC firms tends to generate the opposite strategic approach. The high focus on leveraging company value (Wright et al. 2001; Zahra 1995) opens up for centrifugal approaches. By referring to the founder as a change inducer and first mover, entrepreneurial initiatives which can enable changes and increase business value are supported. Thereby, the entrepreneurial dimension of organizational identity is strengthened.

This study lifts the founder perspective as an important and relevant perspective for understanding the processes of continuity and discontinuity in organizational identity. The founder perspective is separated from an owner-perspective which offers further valuable insights. The study specifically contributes by suggesting that a founder can be used as an identity referent (confer Whetten 2006). Identity referents are important for the study of identity claims.

### ***6.2. Practical implications***

Ultimately, these findings are of practical relevance for all firms who undergo a transition or succession process as they demonstrate that the founder, prior owner, or manager can still be of value to the organization. Thus, the organization can choose to preserve the relationship with the founder and materialize selected elements of his or her heritage that supports the organization's strategy (confer Ogbonna and Harris 2001). The founder is an asset and resource for the organization, and can be used as a strategic tool by successors to construct continuity and discontinuity. Founders may see this as an opportunity to stay in touch with the organization and serve it further which can provide meaning to them (Kets De Vries 2003).

### ***6.3. Limitations and future studies***

As the present investigation is a case study, the presented findings consist of indications. For general conclusions, the investigated aspects need to be studied on a larger scale. Further, this study has been conducted in a Swedish context which can affect perceptions of what is regarded as distinguishing or of centrality. Another weakness is that the first acquirer of the case company was not possible to follow up, which caused a break in the

timeline. However, as later owners consistently referred to the founder, a continuity was apparent.

Future studies could develop the founder perspective in other contexts. Particular questions include: Can any founder be an identity referent? What would be the case if there are several founders? How long is the presence of a founder relevant? Do founders influence organizational identity differently in different types of organizations, for example, public vs. private, or family vs. nonfamily? How are centripetal and centrifugal forces working with regard to continuity and discontinuity of organizational identity?

## Note

1. For reasons of confidentiality, all people and company names have been anonymized.

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