

# In Their Own Words: A Call for Increased Use of Organizational Narratives in Family Business Research

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*Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.*

—Rudyard Kipling

The role words and narratives play in understanding rich relationships critical to family business cannot be overstated. This truth was highlighted by a recent landmark case resulting in the awarding of \$572 million dollars to the state of Oklahoma based on opioid marketing in a case against a firm Oklahoma Attorney General Mike Hunter often disparagingly referred to as “a family company.” Unfortunately, however, the Attorney General was mistakenly referencing SC Johnson and their famous tagline rather than Johnson & Johnson—the corporation involved in the case. In response to this misstep CEO and chairman of SC Johnson H. Fisk Johnson threatened litigation until the Attorney General promised to refrain from this incorrect name association in the future (Kopecki, 2019).

In addition to the attention to careless use of words surrounding his well-known family firm, H. Fisk Johnson provided an illuminating family business narrative when he released a full-page ad explicitly outlining the issues associated with cavalier use of their name. In part, he notes,

So, why do we care so much that our name has been incorrectly associated with the opioid crisis? Because it is about our name. Goodwill takes a lot of hard work to earn but takes very little to lose. Thousands and thousands of SC Johnson people have worked hard for 133 years to earn your goodwill, and it can be lost quickly by a politician propagating incorrect statements. (Johnson, 2019)

This story is an object lesson in the importance family businesses place on words, as well as how they find it critical to proactively project their own words to make clear their feelings on the issues and values at the heart of their organizations.

Given this backdrop, it is perhaps not surprising that family business scholars have used narratives and organizational texts to glean insights surrounding unique perspectives associated with family firms. While the study of words and language is not new to scholars of family business, the use of narratives (i.e., spoken or written accounts of events; stories) has never before been as important and visible as in modern times, and as shown in our opening vignette surrounding SC Johnson. We show our age when we note that over a decade ago we were honored to be awarded the best article in *Family Business Review (FBR)*—along with our colleagues Keith Brigham, Tom Lumpkin, and Chris Broberg—for our (2009) work exploring family versus nonfamily differences in entrepreneurial orientation language. Since then, we have worked collaboratively and separately on a number of works that embrace the importance of family business narratives.

We have recently become even more cognizant of the many research opportunities that have emerged that might be better or further explored utilizing narratives. Indeed, we find it interesting that the two most recent editorials in *FBR* have touched on this issue. Nordqvist and Gardner (2020) recently discussed how literature can be a source of inspiration and information regarding family business phenomena, while Suddaby and Jaskiewicz (2020), in their discussion of traditions, noted the importance of rhetorical history. In each of these cases, the importance of narratives is central to their arguments.

While a number of excellent works have shared our perspective on the value narratives might hold for

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family business research (e.g., Dawson & Hjorth, 2012; Hamilton et al., 2017), the volume of articles that take advantage of narratives seems light relative to the potential—particularly in the modern digital age where the written (e.g., memos, reports, storylines) and the spoken (e.g., videos, phone conversations) word is recorded and archived so prevalently. Consequently, our goals in this editorial are to selectively review some previous works utilizing narratives in family business research and offer some thoughts for future research. Underlying these two general goals resides the recognition that the family business field is uniquely situated to benefit from narrative research because family businesses (1) are commonly built on entrepreneurial and family-based “success” stories that guide values and behaviors; (2) place increased emphasis on noneconomic factors (e.g., reputation), which tend to be less tangible and measurable than economic factors; (3) are commonly privately held firms, making access to data more difficult to gather and interpret; and (4) are often guided by a family collective, which tends to be more discursive in their decision-making and governance processes.

## Approaches to Narrative Research

A variety of approaches utilize narratives in family business research; methods range from mechanistic word count approaches to a dialogic style that acts as a collaboration between research and subject. Likewise, data sources can be primary or secondary and vary greatly; usable information can come from field notes, interview transcripts, memos, speeches, letters, formal organizational documents, personal observations, pictures, videos, and other sources. Each combination of method and source provides unique opportunities to address fundamental research questions, develop new theory, and/or test important hypotheses. As such, we are not advocating any particular approach, but rather acknowledging the many opportunities that exist and promoting this type of work due to its unique application to family business research.

There are two basic ways narratives are utilized in the extant literature. The first way utilizes narratives as a source of information, often using the data gleaned from the narrative to explore research questions or test hypotheses in a quantitative way. One key technique in family business research, which follows this first method of narrative analysis, has been described as the “bag of words” approach, where scholars carefully select

words—utilizing generic or specially-created lists of keywords—to reflect critical constructs of interest. This approach generally leverages an empirical software such as Atlas.ti, NVivo, LIWC, DICTION, or CAT Scanner (Short, McKenny, & Reid, 2018). For example, our previously mentioned *FBR* article utilized word list software counts reflecting the five entrepreneurial orientation dimensions of autonomy, competitive aggressiveness, innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk taking (Short et al., 2009). In that study, we discovered that family firms used less language related to the dimensions of autonomy, proactiveness, and risk taking when compared with nonfamily firms. The central idea of this approach is that the proliferation or absence of words used in a narrative will be indicative of relative importance or emphasis. This word list approach has also been utilized to examine organizational ambidexterity (Allison et al., 2014; Moss et al., 2014), long-term orientation (Brigham et al., 2014), virtue orientation (Payne et al., 2011), market orientation (Zachary et al., 2011), corporate social reporting (Campopiano & De Massis, 2015), and family involvement signals (Chandler et al., 2019).

In addition to the bag-of-words content analytic approach, manual content analysis is readily used in family business research as well. A manual process allows the researcher to assess the meaning, perceptions, and beliefs of author of the narrative to provide information that more readily accounts for the meaning behind the words being used. For instance, McKenny et al. (2012) used press releases and website information from Australia’s top 100 private family businesses to uncover inductive themes reflecting espoused normative and utilitarian goals. A comparable approach was used in the context of a German machine tool industry to derive categories of espoused family firm values including universal responsibility, benevolence, family tradition, cohesion and solidarity, power and innovation, and embeddedness (Rau et al., 2019).

The other key approach to study narratives in family business is through more traditional qualitative analysis, where scholars inductively analyze and interpret a narrative to better describe, understand, or develop theoretical frameworks. For family business research, case studies utilizing interviews are the most prevalent form of qualitative study (Floris et al., 2020). Case studies are a very practical way—relative to other qualitative methods such as ethnographies—to inductively generate theory, improve existing theory, or develop constructs

about family businesses; this is primarily because the case method allows the researcher to gather data on past events and track developments over time, which is often across generations. For instance, Bika, Rosa, and Karakas (2019) utilized interview transcripts of deceased family-owners as secondary sources of information, along with interviews from living family members, in their single-firm case study of socialization processes. Likewise, Bertschi-Michel et al. (2020) followed five family-owned businesses that had completed a succession process within the past 5 years; these authors primarily utilized the minutes of succession planning meetings—along with other temporally adjacent documents such as e-mails—to inform their inductive study.

Scholars also use narratives to provide a grounded theory approach to understanding key aspects of family business. Such studies tend to leverage the value of storytelling where narratives may be subject to multiple interpretations (Fletcher, 2007). For example, Barbera et al. (2018) use interviews from the Kiolbassa family spanning three generations to glean insights about how both stable and fluid elements impact the dynamics of family storytelling. Another example is Dawson and Hjorth's (2012) use of the autobiography of Tommaso Berger to interpretively explore complex themes such as the fear of losing identity and social standing while navigating the succession process.

In summary, narratives can be useful for scholars searching for ways to creatively measure certain challenging constructs of interest or as a means of developing new theory. Table 1 provides a selective review and summary of key approaches and narratives that have been used to provide insights into family businesses. For a recent and more comprehensive review of the literature, we refer you to the book chapter by Floris et al. (2020); this systematic review identified and discussed 28 narrative family business studies published in leading journals.

### **Future Research Possibilities Incorporating Family Business Narratives**

While considerable research has effectively utilized narratives in the past, there are a multitude of additional possibilities in family business research. In this section, we highlight several possibilities, focusing on some key

theoretical and phenomenological perspectives; these are summarized in Table 2. Our hope is that this brief discussion will stimulate new ideas, perspectives, and methods that will move the field forward.

Research in social contagion offers a potentially valuable perspective to explain how emotions and beliefs travel through informational cues that lead others to adopt certain thoughts and behaviors (Angst et al., 2010). According to this perspective, when there is ambiguity surrounding certain beliefs and behaviors, individuals will look toward influential others to prime behavior. Family business scholars could leverage this perspective to understand if key family communications (such as a speech advocating membership in a particular club or to engage in a specific family business practice) might lead other families to adopt certain practices. Entrepreneurship scholars have used media data coupled with National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB) data and found that optimism presented in print media is correlated with NFIB's optimism survey (Anglin, McKenny, & Short, 2018). An adaptation of this approach to family business scholarship might look to see how media mentions of business practices lead to their widespread adoption, or if and how family business innovations lead to broader adoption among other firms in the general population.

In a similar vein, narrative economics provides another perspective with potential to explain how stories might "go viral" and even serve as drivers for major economic events (Shiller, 2019). This perspective might hold great value for family business scholars hoping to examine how and why viral comments might impact family businesses both inside and outside of the firm. For example, the hit show *Duck Dynasty*, which featured the Robertson family, once boasted over 10 million viewers and was the most viewed nonfiction cable series in history. After an interview with *GQ* magazine, where family patriarch Phil Robertson revealed his criticism of homosexuality as sinful (Magary, 2013), the contents of the interview went viral producing a number of polarizing positions on Robertson's stance. While the outcry formally led to a suspension from the network—later mitigated after a strong show of support from his followers—the show never recovered in terms of viewership and popularity (Van Der Merwe, 2019). Given the near daily coverage of tweets and other social media posts from celebrities, examining how and why such statements by key representatives of family

**Table 1.** Selected Family Business Research Utilizing Organizational Narratives.

| Narrative approach                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Illustrative article leveraging organizational narratives in family business research | Narrative usage                                                                                                                                      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Inductively coded data from documents and interviews to distil core concepts on mediating emotions during succession                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Bertschi-Michel et al. (2020)                                                         | Minutes of family business succession meetings, along with interviews and other supplemental documents (e.g., e-mails)                               |
| Numerous coders examined categories in the communication of family firm image                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Gils et al. (2019)                                                                    | Dutch family firm websites                                                                                                                           |
| Inductively derived six categories of espoused family firm values (universal responsibility, benevolence, family tradition, cohesion and solidarity, power and innovation, and embeddedness)                                                                                                                                  | Rau et al. (2019)                                                                     | “About Us” and other website sections, mission statement or profiles, and/or company value statements from firms in the German machine tool industry |
| “Family involvement signals” were measured using a newly created inductively and deductively derived word list                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Chandler et al. (2019)                                                                | Initial public offering (IPO) prospectuses gathered from U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission’s (SEC’s) Edgar database                            |
| Family storytelling is examined through a symbolic interactionist perspective using narratives spanning three generations of a single-family business                                                                                                                                                                         | Barbera et al. (2018)                                                                 | Interviews of the Kiobassa family in conjunction with the Successful Transgenerational Entrepreneurship Practices (STEP) Project case studies        |
| Word lists capturing six dimensions of organizational virtue orientation (integrity, empathy, warmth, courage, conscientiousness, zeal)                                                                                                                                                                                       | Evert et al. (2018)                                                                   | Text of IPO prospectuses and post-IPO 10-K filings                                                                                                   |
| Several archival and content analytic approaches were combined to measure the dimensions of family visibility, transgenerational sustainability, and family self-enhancement                                                                                                                                                  | Anglin et al. (2017)                                                                  | Information culled from a variety of sources including “About Us” pages, shareholder letters, and firm websites                                      |
| Reporting of different corporate social responsibility reports (e.g., code of ethics; sustainability report) when comparing family firms and nonfamily firms. Authors also discussed specific topics that emerged from content analysis such as a focus on “values and general interest” and “environmental and green issues” | Campopiano and De Massis (2015)                                                       | Data from corporate websites reflecting differing types of corporate social responsibility reports (e.g., code of ethics)                            |
| Word lists capturing three long-term orientation dimensions (continuity, futurity, perseverance)                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Brigham et al. (2014).                                                                | Shareholder letters from the S&P 600 Growth index and the S&P 500 index                                                                              |
| An interpretive perspective is used to explore autobiographical accounts                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Dawson and Hjorth (2012)                                                              | Autobiography of Tommaso Berger                                                                                                                      |
| Inductive themes reflecting espoused normative and utilitarian goals                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | McKenny et al. (2012)                                                                 | Press releases/posted news articles and “About Us” sections of corporate websites of Australia’s top 100 private family businesses                   |
| Word lists capturing six dimensions of organizational virtue orientation (integrity, empathy, warmth, courage, conscientiousness, zeal)                                                                                                                                                                                       | Payne et al. (2011)                                                                   | Shareholder letters from S&P 500 firms                                                                                                               |

(continued)

**Table 1. (continued)**

| Narrative approach                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Illustrative article leveraging organizational narratives in family business research | Narrative usage                                                                                                                                |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Word lists capturing five market orientation dimensions (customer orientation, competitor orientation, interfunctional orientation, long-term focus, profitability)                                                                   | Zachary et al. (2011)                                                                 | Shareholder letters from S&P 500 firms                                                                                                         |
| Word lists capturing entrepreneurial orientation dimensions (autonomy, competitive aggressiveness, innovativeness, proactiveness, risk taking)                                                                                        | Short et al. (2009)                                                                   | Shareholder letters from S&P 500 firms                                                                                                         |
| An entrepreneurial story is reinterpreted with the goal of pondering how a recounted story might alter meaning when crafted for an entrepreneurship audience although the reader brings his or her own interpretation to such stories | Fletcher (2007)                                                                       | Mustang Marvel “toy” story narrative                                                                                                           |
| Examination of oral transcripts helped to outline the professionalization of management in large Chinese family businesses                                                                                                            | Tsui-Auch (2004)                                                                      | Oral history transcripts of personal interviews with Chinese business owners                                                                   |
| Managers’ potential capacity was coded                                                                                                                                                                                                | King et al. (2001)                                                                    | Interviews from the president, vice-presidents, general managers, functional managers, and first-line managers of a successful uniform company |

businesses (or business families) might be supported and/or sanctioned by constituents seems to be a fertile area for future research.

Scholars have used social role theory to explore how certain individuals may be either rewarded or sanctioned based on their adherence to roles based on their observable physical traits (often studied as gender or race). For example, crowdfunding has been utilized to examine how differences in gender, race, and sexual orientation might mitigate otherwise narcissistic language in crowdfunding pitches (Anglin, Wolfe, et al., 2018). Family business scholars could build on this research stream by investigating if and in what ways stakeholders react differently to statements from spokespersons with different observable traits or characteristics (e.g., gender, race). For instance, a researcher might use an experimental design to show a videoed speech from a CEO, controlling for whether or not this CEO represents a family firm, to determine stakeholder responses. Likewise, scholars could examine the connections between the characteristics of family business leaders, the narratives they produce, and the results of those narratives (e.g., Evert et al., 2018).

Recently scholars have argued that CEOs of family firms who reveal their religious backgrounds may benefit from signaling moral capital (Maung et al., 2020). This sentiment could be furthered by using narratives to look at specific statements and the content used by family firms to articulate specific core beliefs and values. For example, the Green family of Hobby Lobby are well known for their adamancy in dispelling and protecting their beliefs as a company based on Biblical values (Angelo, 2019). In a similar manner, the Cathy family and, by association, Chick-fil-A have been criticized for years for alleged bias against the LGBTQ community and recently chose to defund organizations with alleged anti-LGBTQ ties (Thorbecke, 2019). Understanding the specifics surrounding how family firm words and associated actions reflect their deeply held moral and religious values represents fertile ground for future research. Even more important, perhaps, is understanding the processes through which such language influences decisions and behaviors of family members, employees, and key stakeholder groups.

When family firms engage in managerial missteps, they may find themselves in an unenviable position of

**Table 2.** Future Theoretically Based Research Questions Incorporating Organizational Narratives.

| Potential organizational narrative   | Theory or theoretical perspective        | Example research questions                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Press releases                       | Social contagion                         | Do the statements of influential family firms influence the actions or behaviors of other firms?                                                                                                       |
| Twitter feed data                    | Narrative theory/<br>narrative economics | How do family members' expressed thoughts positively or negatively influence the performance of the firm? How do social media influence family versus nonfamily employees' perspectives and behaviors? |
| Shareholder letters                  | Social role theory                       | Do family firm stakeholders react differently to statements depending on CEO attributes (e.g., gender or race)?                                                                                        |
| Website data                         | Signaling moral capital                  | Does expression of specific religious affiliations and associated doctrines impact firm reputation and recruitment? Do family firms benefit or not from signaling strong moral beliefs or values?      |
| Press releases                       | Research on effective apologies          | What qualities of apologies after critical organizational incidents are more or less likely to mitigate the impacts of organizational missteps?                                                        |
| Personal interviews                  | Socioemotional wealth (SEW)              | How do family firm members differentially use language and stories to project their socioemotional wealth orientations?                                                                                |
| Speeches                             | Framing theory                           | How are speeches from family business leaders framed differently than nonfamily firms? Does the discourse and response differ to influence outcomes?                                                   |
| IPO prospectuses/<br>10-K statements | Institutional theory                     | How and to what extent does communication of certain family-based beliefs or espoused behaviors diffuse across and change institutions?                                                                |
| Memos/e-mails                        | Sensemaking and sensegiving              | Does the narrative change over time to reflect altered or different ideas or directions? How and why do storylines change over time? How does succession influence these changes?                      |

needing to craft an effective apology that saves face for both the organization as well as impacted family members. For example, the Kushner family apologized for mentioning Jared Kushner at an investment conferencing fearing such name dropping might be viewed as an attempt to lure investors (Alesci & Disis, 2017). More recently, Germany's Volkswagen apologized for posting a racist video surrounding their new Golf 8 on Instagram (Ziady, 2020). Scholars have previously examined how corporate apologies are linked to stock market performance; generally, they find that the impact varies on the level of responsibility the firm takes and suggest that firms should apologize carefully when responsible, but should refrain otherwise (Racine et al., 2020). This line of inquiry holds great promise for family business scholars who might examine how different types of apologies impact family wealth, firm performance, and family and/or firm reputation.

As a final idea for future research, we believe that there are multiple opportunities to use family business narratives to make methodological contributions to the

family business literature. Scholars have noted the value of personal stories as narratives that provide insights to various global communities (Sutton et al., 2015). Given the broad international community of scholars using content analysis, one promising area of research would examine variance in how different families might differentially use language to express their beliefs, such as with socioemotional wealth (Brigham & Payne, 2019). Additionally, family business researchers might look at the importance of institutional or country context in language use. Finally, scholars might look at differences in language as a reflection of political perspective (cf. Sterling et al., 2020) and seek to understand how political leanings impact firm actions and outcomes (cf. Combs et al., 2020).

## Conclusion

When crafting a contribution to the family business literature, scholars can often draw inspiration from defense attorneys seeking to effectively and efficiently make

arguments about the validity as well as practical relevance of their cases (Short, 2012). Narratives provide a strong defense of practicality for family business scholars as such texts often allow the ability to harvest the very words of family business managers, family members, or other relevant individuals engaged in family enterprise. A variety of narratives hold potential for incorporating the voice of family into family business research. It is our hope that this editorial will encourage others to appreciate previous work in this area while inspiring future contributions in this fecund field of research.

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