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# The Prospects for Family Business in Research Universities

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## ABSTRACT

Family business shows the promise of becoming a respected scholarly field in research universities. However, success is not a given. We inquire about its prospects, with reference to the sociology of science. A key requirement for success that has been met is identification with an important and distinctive domain of inquiry. This domain is at the intersection two phenomena - of kinship and business - but more attention has been paid to enterprise than to kinship. We suggest that this creates important windows for theoretical development, an important requirement for a core presence in research universities. We further suggest additional priorities, such as progress in journal and research quality, more developed links to pressing social issues such as international business, inclusion of family business issues in the credit curriculum, and faculty lines that create research continuity and legitimize research on family business.

**Keywords:** family business, sociology of science, theory development, faculty, disciplines and specialties

### **1. Family Business: Ready for Takeoff?**

#### *1.1 Developments in the infrastructure*

Our aim is to assess the challenges and opportunities for family business as a research field in research universities. We start with the current trajectory, which is highly encouraging. Research in the field is in a period of rapid growth (Astrachan, 2010, pp. 6, 12). This growth is seen in the trends in journal articles and in Academy of Management (AOM) papers on family business (please see Figure One).<sup>ii</sup> For the 25 year period 1985-2009, the number of articles on family business published in ProQuest's scholarly "Business" journals grew at an annual rate of 12.4%. This rate is higher than

the rate of growth in publications overall. For example, the highest overall growth rate in articles that Larsen and von Ins (2010) found for social sciences and humanities is 7%, for the shorter 1997 to 2006 period. Growth in AOM papers, unlike that of journal articles, necessarily reflects an increase in the proportion of attention to family business because the number of accepted submissions did not increase, whereas it did with journal articles. High growth in AOM papers is a more recent phenomenon than article growth, with an annual growth rate of 17.3% for the 14-year period 1986 to 2009.

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Please insert Figure One about here

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An institutional infrastructure has also been developing, not least with two new dedicated outlets for scholarship in the field. Elsevier's *Journal of Family Business Strategy* and Emerald's *Journal of Family Business Management* have added their pages to Sage's *Family Business Review*. Similarly, places to present research have expanded. Three conferences dedicated to family business are the Family Enterprise Research Conference (FERC), Family Firm Institute (FFI), and the International Family Enterprise Research Academy (IFERA). The United States Association for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (USASBE) has a Family Business "interest group", and the Entrepreneurship Division of the Academy of Management includes family business in its mandate. Two of these conferences - FERC, founded in 2005 and IFERA, founded in 2001 - are quite new.

These changes represent indicators of what Hambrick and Chen (2008: 35) called a "nascent field," by which they mean a nascent specialty within a discipline.<sup>iii</sup> They

noted the adoption of a common name, which we see in the case of all three “family business” journals, as another indicator. Further evidence of infrastructural development may be found in recent overviews, all of which explicitly refer to “family business” as a “field” without any need for justification (Chrisman, Kellermanns, Chan, & Liano, 2010; Heck et al., 2008; Schulze & Gedajlovic, 2010; and Sharma, 2004; 2010). Interestingly, three of these five reviews appear outside of dedicated family business journals.

## **2. Success is Uncertain**

### *2.1 Slower progress with top journal articles and doctorates*

Greater attention to a topic does not mean that the field is necessarily advancing towards a legitimate or enduring standing within the research universities. Figure One demonstrates that different institutional dimensions of scholarship within the field have varied in their growth rates. Family business scholarship overall, as measured by ProQuest Business articles and AOM papers, has increased impressively. However, Figure One also demonstrates that the growth of doctorates, and of articles in the most highly cited journals, lag the overall growth in scholarship.

The line marked by triangles depicts the relatively slow growth, 2.3% a year over the 25 years 1985-2009, of doctoral dissertations on family business. An optimistic interpretation of the overall pattern would be that family business research has grown faster than the growth in doctorates it has succeeded in attracting established scholars from related fields (Crane, 1969). A pessimistic interpretation would be that new scholars seldom believe that research in family business will help to advance their careers. More pessimistically, yet plausibly, some of their advisers may have discouraged their entry, associating the field with “all those lesser professions and

occupations that belong only at non-elite universities” (to quote a former President of the University of California: Kerr, 2001, p. 117).

The lower-most line in Figure One, which is marked by X's, tracks articles published in ten very highly cited journals. The growth in publication in peer-reviewed journals generally has not been followed by growth in publication in these major journals. The line refers to the journals - among the 27 that Web of Science classifies as business, economics, finance or management journals, with two year impact factors over 3.0 - for which we could find family business articles: *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Economic Geography*, *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, *Journal of Finance*, *Journal of Financial Economics*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, *Organization Science*, and *Strategic Management Journal*. The growth rate of family business studies among these journals was 5.5% (1986 to 2008). Of course, the number of openings in these specific journals is fixed or nearly fixed, with the result that rapid growth could only be achieved at the expense of other fields. Moreover, the not-yet-finished 2010 year looks promising, with five family business articles in these significant journals.

## *2.2 Topical interest as a foundation for a field*

Modestly growing impact in the top journals and slow growth among doctorates serve as an important caution, however. Widely shared interest in a phenomenon is one of the possible bases for the formation of academic fields. In some domains such as clinical health professions (Erickson, Daniels, Smith & Vega-Barachowitz, 2008), public relations (Lamme & Russell, 2010), and information technology (Chen, 2010), academics may emphasize a shared set of skills related to practice, especially in professional

schools. Despite the interest shown by the public or practitioners, this interest in and of itself does not translate directly into its inclusion in the enduring structure of research universities. Success as a topic for the business press, policy discussions, practitioner-oriented commentary or even total research volume does not in itself lead to the organization and recognition of a well-regarded academic field.

Topical interests alone cannot ensure the success of a field. Over time, scholarly disciplines may shift their emphasis on central topics of interest. They will most certainly find their claims contested by rival fields. Thus, even the older disciplines, which in business schools by now arguably include management, can be fairly stable in terms of organization but also changeable in their claims to subject matter or sources of continuity (Abbott, 2001, p. 144; Adams, 1988, p. 165). Subfields or specialties within them are especially “fluid” (Dogan, 1997, p. 429). “Admittance-seeking fields” such as business and society, ethics, international business, entrepreneurship, and strategic management, have achieved varying levels of acceptance over the past few decades (the phrase is Hambrick and Chen’s, 2008).

Scholars in established fields see the new ones as rivals for resources, sometimes pushing the latter into “less prestigious locations and organizational forms” (Fagerberg & Verspagen, 2009, p. 219; also Zald, 2002). For example, scholars may tolerate family business as an appropriate outreach activity but not as a topic for research. At the same time, scholars in established fields can play a useful role in pushing the new fields to create genuinely novel theory, or to establish the importance of the phenomenon they explore.

### **3. What Leads to Success for New Fields?**

### *3.1 Entry to the field by established scholars*

A growing academic field can arise through recently minted doctorates with relevant training or through established scholars shifting the focus of their work to the new area. Both types of scholars must consider some combination of theory, method, topic or application to be attractive and important. Scholars are also more likely to enter a field if the transition does not appear to be difficult (Becher & Trowler, 2001, pp. 96-99, 114-115; Crane, 1969). The topic of family business can seem at first glance to be easy; what could be hard about including “family” along with business?

Insofar as it appears easy to add family topics to business topics, this attraction poses both benefits and risks for family business developing as an enduring field. One benefit of the ease of entry to the family business field has been the addition of strong, established scholars. The interest shown by luminaries such as Howard Aldrich, Michael Hitt and Danny Miller has lent their reputations to the field, increasing the prospects that others will see work on this topic as valuable (Crane, 1969). Most importantly, established scholars bring research skills and awareness of prior research to their work on family business. They will, for example, be more likely to be able to detect and articulate insights that represent novel advances in overall theories of business organizations, because of their depth of knowledge of prior related findings.

Recognition by established scholars attracts other entrants (Crane, 1969). It also helps establish a requirement for any successful field: academic legitimacy. Nothing is more vital, “particularly in elite universities” (Abbott, 2001, p. 141). It is needed in fact in all universities, not just the elites, as the scholarly norms of research-intensive



universities diffuse through even research-scarce institutions (Axtell, 1998, Chap. 3; Stewart, 1995).

### *3.2 Roles of champions in the early development of a field*

Established scholars can all impart legitimacy, and some become advocates for the field. Committed advocates are needed as they are in many social movements (Hambrick & Chen, 2008). Such essential advocacy often has a dynamic quality as a field matures. In the early development of a field that is based on interest in a phenomenon, an energized and informal community of people with a common vision may band together. They often include practitioners, academic staff and faculty, all of whom who see the importance of a phenomenon when others do not. This was true of entrepreneurship earlier in its development and is true of family business today (Hoy, 2010; Sharma et al., 2007; Treviño-Rodríguez, 2010).

At this stage, the shared perception of the urgency and impact of the topical area is more important than differentiated professional roles. For example, many early entrepreneurship programs blurred the lines and roles between practicing entrepreneurs and faculty. Similarly, in women's studies, early programs often involved community advocates, only later branching into distinct scholarly work versus activism and practice oriented activities (Boxer, 2002; Howard, 1999). In the early combined phase, established scholars from other areas provided theory, perspective and research skills. Involved external advocacy groups provided authentic insight into the phenomenon itself, and made the case for the importance of the phenomenon in solving social issues of the day.

### *3.3 The need for an appropriate theoretical foundation*

Attraction into a new field based on interest in a phenomenon also entails risks. Academic fields can instead be organized around a shared theoretical framework, method of analysis, level of analysis, or bundles of these (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 71). A shared theoretical framework, rather than a topical interest, may prove a more enduring foundation for a field. Social science fields in the shadow of economics – which is to say, many other social sciences – may reasonably interpret the economists’ success as due to their theoretical consensus. Economic history was more disputatious than this would imply, but economists have enjoyed many benefits of widely shared concepts and principles that have been applied to many different phenomena, which include both business and family (Backhouse & Medema, 2009; Davis, 2008).

Family business research may also face a particular danger. Organizing around the phenomenon alone rather than theory development can enable the use and entrenchment of theories derived from concepts that are well established in business schools but that have little connection with family matters. Entering business school scholars will be well versed in the business literature and may presume that concepts derived from non-familial settings can “travel” (Stewart, 1998, Chap. 5) with little adaptation to family settings. As a result, theories might come to dominate family business scholarship without the distinctive features of the family context being well understood or used to deepen theoretical understanding. Family businesses may be simply used to confirm existing assumptions in standard approaches. Many of these approaches, such as agency theory, will be drawn from economics. Family business will make a greater scholarly contribution if it instead becomes a lens to develop richer theories of the business enterprise.

Another risk for fields that are based on phenomena is that the subject matter might prove to be short-lived, either as objects for study and understanding or for the interest that they hold. For example, one topical field that has been in decline in the U.S. is that of labor relations, a decline due in part to the weakening role of labor unions (Kaufman, 2008; Lansbury, 2009). We do not foresee family business facing this fate due to a diminishing presence of the actual phenomenon. Rather, the question will be the nature of scholarly interest that this phenomenon attracts. This in turn will be longer lasting the more fundamental and powerful are its theoretical conceptualizations and contributions. We consider this challenge in greater depth below.

#### **4. What Would Success Look Like?**

##### *4.1 Family business as a discipline, a specialty, or a research area*

Let us assume that family business will successfully mature as a scholarly area of study in major research universities. What would be the indicators of success? What could the field aspire to look like? Specifically, could it aspire to be the most comprehensive of fields, an academic discipline, or the least comprehensive, a research area, or something in between these options? The most comprehensive and enduring level of organized scholarship is the academic discipline. At first glance, it might appear an attractive aspiration for family business.

Although their boundaries are historically contingent and can be conceptually arbitrary (Campbell, 1969), disciplines once defined tend to be organizationally entrenched. Within the university, they oversee decision making about their branches of the academic labor market and over the university's departments, with their curricula, majors, and doctoral training. They also organize journals and conferences, and set

collective standards for research rigor. “Thirty or so” disciplines may be found in American universities, according to some analysts (Abbott, 2005, p. 265; also 2001, pp. 128-139; Dogan, 1997; Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 149). Economics, chemistry, sociology, biology and history exemplify disciplines in this sense, with each having many sub-disciplines or specialties within them.

At the other end of the spectrum of establishment are “research areas” or topics. These may have as many as 1,000 participants (Leahey & Reikowsky, 2008) but they “typically have fewer than 50 active participants” and often experience considerable flux in membership (Hargens, 2000, p. 849; for the example of women’s studies see Winkler, 2010). Family business governance, mergers and acquisitions, product development, transformational leadership and transactional memory exemplify topical research areas. Neither faculty lines nor the granting of tenure will typically be predicated purely on expertise in areas as narrow as these. Faculty lines and tenure can certainly be granted for scholars specializing in these topics, but the basis for the lines and the tenure will be more encompassing.

Tenure track faculty lines can be found at a level intermediate between research areas and disciplines. These are referred to as subfields of disciplines, sub-disciplines, or specialties. Specialties often have their “own journals and scientific societies” (Hargens, 2000, p. 848). They are also often formally recognized within umbrella disciplinary associations. For example, leading academic associations for management and psychology include organizational units known as “divisions” that embody specialty areas. Political science and sociology associations refer to their subfield units as “sections.” The American Psychological Association (APA) makes this approach

explicit: “APA’s 54 divisions are interest groups organized by members. Some represent subdisciplines of psychology (e.g., experimental, social, or clinical) while others focus on topical areas such as aging, ethnic-minorities, or trauma” (<http://www.apa.org>).<sup>iv</sup> The latter groups are phenomenon-based specialties, while “experimental” is a methods-based specialty, and social psychology gains continuity both through level of analysis and specific body of theory developed over time.

#### *4.2 Status as a specialty*

Specialties are more stable and formally organized than research areas (Abbott, 2005; Dogan, 1997; Gibbons et al., 1994, pp. 147-148). In fact, many of them meet the criteria set by Hambrick and Chen (2008, p. 34) for recognition in academe, namely that “a substantial number of major universities designate positions for its members, grant tenure to its members, seek peer tenure evaluations from its members, and allow its members to supervise graduate students.”

We lack data on the number of “major universities” for which this applies to family business. One proxy is recognition of family business by the members of the Association of American Universities, all of which are major research universities. According to their websites, as of Fall 2010 all 63 of the members currently offer organized activities in entrepreneurship (chairs, centers, majors, or at the very least courses; <http://www.aau.edu/>). Only 14, however, have any activities in family business, and these are often outreach-oriented. Therefore, the number of major research universities that currently accept family business sufficiently as to meet Hambrick and Chen’s criteria appears to be modest.

What would it take for family business to reach the level of acceptance of more established specialties, such as strategic management? The recent successes of strategic management and even entrepreneurship as academic fields demonstrate that family business need not necessarily aspire to be a discipline, with separate departments and labor market responsibility. However, the histories of those two fields do point to two important questions, one institutional and one intellectual. First, to reach its potential in research universities, does a specialty need to have a top-tier journal; that is, does its top journal have to be recognized as “A” level? Second, does a successful specialty need to mark off distinctive terrain (topical or otherwise), with clear boundaries from other fields? And if so, what sorts of boundaries are meaningful? These questions have been debated both in strategy (e.g., Meyer, 1991) and in entrepreneurship (e.g., Katz, 2008).

#### *4.3 Does family business need a top-tier journal?*

Hambrick and Chen (2008) and Katz (2008) believed that a top-tier journal is a prerequisite for an academic specialty to be fully legitimate. Certainly, both entrepreneurship and strategy have sought to attach their top journals to the halo of the top-tier general purpose or “repository” generalist journals (Stewart, 1995, p. 13). However, top tier journals are not needed for all successful scholarly specialties. If we examine the range of “divisions” or “sections” from various disciplines, we find that some of these have managed to support an active research community with solid, but not top-tier, specialty journals. For example, in marketing, consumer behavior is the only specialty that produces a journal, the *Journal of Consumer Research*, that is widely regarded as top-tier. The other top-tier marketing journals are general-purpose, and the other specialist journals, such as the *Journal of International Marketing* are not among

the few that win the highest accolades and labor market rewards (Mittal, Feick, & Murshed, 2008). Similar arrangements exist in other disciplines. For example, in political science only *Political Analysis*, a methods journal, reaches the citation level of the *American Political Science Review*.

In the management area, the repository journals represented most clearly by the *Academy of Management Journal* and *Academy of Management Review* are currently the unambiguously highest level journals; certainly they are the most highly cited. Nonetheless, certain management specialties, such as strategy, information technology, and human resources, enjoy at least one top-tier journal. These are the *Strategic Management Journal (SMJ)*, *MIS Quarterly*, and *Personnel Psychology*, although the rise of *SMJ* to this standing is recent and the standing of *MIS Quarterly* may be institution-specific. An important pattern in research universities is one where scholars are expected to publish in the very top generalist journals - with rigorous standards and broad impact - but to accompany that work with some writings in the top specialist journal in their field. The overall quality of a scholar's work in this pattern is much more credible the more the specialist journal itself has rigorous research standards.

The stature of family business journals will be a measure of the progress of the field, particularly given the expectations for specialty journals in management. If the family business journals are to continue to improve, so also must the quality of research that they publish (Sharma, 2010). In many new or specialized field journals, as with family business not many years ago, research often includes exploratory descriptive work or normative articles about practice, based less on rigorous scholarship than on the interest in and importance of the topic. Improvements have required both theory

development and higher quality empirical research, both of which necessitate suitable doctoral training and the attraction of highly capable researchers.

#### *4.4 Research style and quality: Data requirements*

One obstacle to advancing systematic research on family business that does not affect every field is limited access to data. There are two problems. First, large scale, systematic and sophisticated research on publicly held firms exists partly because the data that enable this type of research are available. However, most family firms are not publicly traded, with resultant difficulties in access to research data and sites (Murphy, 2005). Some progress has been made, notably the 1997 National Family Business Survey, a probability sample for privately held family firms (Heck, Hoy, Poutziouris, & Steier, 2008; Winter et al., 1998). Another endeavor, the STEP project, which collects data on “Successful Transgenerational Entrepreneurship Practices” (<http://www3.babson.edu/eship/step/>) is currently growing beyond 33 partner universities.

The second data access problem is that field access can be problematic for research using interviews, surveys and participant observation. “Gatekeepers of these firms are accustomed to privacy and may well be concerned that sensitive family matters might be publicized should they grant researchers up-close, long-term access to their domains” (Stewart & Hitt, 2010, p. 267). For this reason, the STEP project for example has been careful to restrict access to sensitive data about its collaborating family firms.

#### *4.5 Research style and quality: Differentiation from other fields*

A final challenge in perceived quality and impact of research raises the issue of differentiation from other areas. It is necessary, or helpful at least, to be able to draw



working boundaries between family business and other fields, such as anthropology, sociology, entrepreneurship, and family studies. When the questions of shared focus and of boundaries were debated in strategy, some scholars advocated very distinct boundaries and an “exclusive professionalization (Abbott, 1988)” (Stewart, 1995, p. 15). According to these scholars, the field should develop a body of knowledge unique to its members. Other scholars advocated instead a “pluralistic arena” united by focus on a specific phenomenon such as the behavior and concerns of top management (Meyer, 1991, p. 821). This debate occurs during both successful and unsuccessful efforts to create new academic fields, and merits careful thought.

Examining the organization of research within universities, we see that even at the level of the discipline there are enduring fields, such as economics, that have clear demarcations and distinct causal theory, and others, such as geography, that do not (Becher & Trowler, 2001, pp. 59-60). In a narrower example, a management department in a business school may contain one enduring area (human resource management) organized around the phenomenon of human resources practices and another (organization theory) unified around theory applied to multiple phenomena. Professional schools often embody such mixes of theory-centered and phenomenon-centered fields, in part because of their traditionally closer link to practice (Gulati, 2007; Khurana, 2007, p. 17; Porter & McKibbin, 1988, Chap. 7; Sharma et al., 2007).

More broadly, many observers perceive, the secular trend in research is towards what Dogan (1997, p. 438; Dogan & Pahre, 1990, p. 58) has called “fragmentation and recombination.” In this research approach, researchers in one specialty sometimes find they have more in common with researchers in a related specialty housed in another

disciplines than they do with those in other specialties in their own department and discipline (Becher& Trowler, 2001, p. 71; for this tendency in anthropology see Stocking, 1995; for political science, Garand, 2005). As described below, efforts for serious cross fertilization may have particular value for the emergence of family business research, in part because existing fields offer rich and important theory that can be used to deepen theories related to family business.

## **5. Does Family Business Offer an Attractive Domain?**

### *5.1 Distinctiveness of the family business field: Topical attention*

Rigidly demarcated boundaries are not needed to have a meaningful specialty or discipline; there are appropriate common themes across various disciplines. For example, anthropologists, social psychologists, sociologists, organization theorists, marketing researchers, and economists can all explore issues of trust during exchange processes. Scholars typically do so in ways that are similar to some other disciplines and unlike that of others. With the topic of family business, some disciplines attend much more to family related topics and some much more to business related topics. This is apparent from Stewart's (2008) study of the attention to eight business topics and eight familial topics by 14 scholarly fields. This study compared the "structure of topical attention", meaning the extent to which every other topic was considered given attention to any particular topic. One cluster of fields skewed towards the business domain (entrepreneurship, finance, marketing, and strategic management), and another towards the familial domain (anthropology, family and marital therapy, history, law, organizational behavior, and sociology). Family business was one of three fields that

displayed a balance in attention, along with economics and public administration and policy.

Family business was also one of the most differentiated fields, with no correlation above 0.5 with any other field (as measured by attention in article abstracts). By contrast, some fields were very similar to others in this regard. In particular, strategic management was very similar to marketing ( $r = 0.91$ ), anthropology to history ( $r = 0.87$ ) and also to family and marital therapy ( $r = 0.87$ ), which in turn was very similar to organizational behavior ( $r = 0.86$ ). This relative differentiation by family business augurs well for its development because a measure of *distinctiveness* is needed for a new area to thrive in research universities. There are two reasons for this.

### *5.2 The need for educational distinctiveness*

The first reason that distinctiveness is needed bears on the curriculum and is fairly obvious. If a field lacks distinctiveness, any claims on the resources of the university will be dismissed for their redundancy. For example, why should there be courses (or even focused material within general courses) for specialties like family business, entrepreneurship or women's studies, if all that these courses offer is a different context for the concepts already well explored in courses already on the books? The case must be made that the new courses deliver ideas, skills or both that are distinct and important. Otherwise there is no justification for spending university resources on adding these fields to the stable credit curriculum.

### *5.3 The need for research distinctiveness*

The second reason bears on research. As Hambrick and Chen (2008, p. 35) proposed, nascent fields must make credible "claims that important problems cannot be

solved by” existing fields. Distinct fields offer the best prospect of original discoveries and new knowledge. The research university is predicated on the value of discovery and novel ideas (Abbott, 2001, p. 145; Boyer, 1990, p. 18). Its unique role in society includes knowledge creation as well as knowledge dissemination. They are charged with developing new descriptive knowledge and knowledge about execution, but above all with generating and testing new causal theory. Therefore, a key challenge for emerging fields in research universities is whether they truly offer additions to all of these modes of scholarship. Moreover, any claims these fields make for new knowledge will be met with the question, “Why can’t these existing theories just be applied to the family businesses with no need for focused research?”

#### *5.4 Two ways that family business can create novel knowledge*

We see two ways that the field of family business offers the prospect of novel knowledge. First, research in this area offers an important context to test existing theories in new ways that can in turn advance those theories themselves. For example, theories about employment relationship processes in apparently non-family contexts may prove to depend on the level of family connections, which would then need to be included as moderating variables for general models. In another example, understanding the dynamics of family businesses may lead to distinct causal models of international differences in firm-level strategic time horizons (Lumpkin, Brigham, & Moss, 2010). Second, the family business context offers the potential to produce new basic theory. Predicting the potential for achieving such a contribution is difficult, but achievement in this area, especially in causal theory, is a standard criterion used by seasoned scholars in all areas, who have typically seen many areas seeking resources.

The challenge remains, then, of what is the distinctive domain for family business knowledge and expertise. As a descriptive and prescriptive definition, we concur with Sharma (2004) and Astrachan (2010, p. 6) that “family businesses sit at the intersection of commerce and family.” This particular nexus offers great opportunity for several reasons. This intersection has real-world significance, has not been preempted by other fields, and offers the potential for theoretical novelty. Few studies have delved deeply into *both* domains of kinship and business, nor are many scholars well prepared to do so (Sharma, 2010). As a result, family business has an opportunity to develop capabilities that are both valuable and rare.

Both domains represent fundamental institutions shaping vast stretches of human experience and social organization. Many important questions about the interactions between these realms remain unanswered, or even unasked, particularly in terms of broad theory. For one example, “no theoretical model exists that clarifies how one should expect the various influences of family, concentrated ownership and dynasty to interact” (Schulze & Gedajlovic, 2010, p. 197). For another example, research on entrepreneurial processes would gain much from understanding “in what ways, in what situations, do family business entrepreneurs profit from bridging the domains” of kinship and business? (Stewart & Hitt, 2010, p. 268). For a normative example, if family firms resist the logic of publicly held U.S. businesses, does this represent a useful antidote to the pathologies of the latter? Or do the typical downsides to family control outweigh any benefits?

## **6. “Family” as a Fuzzy and Ideological Construct**

### *6.1 “Family” as fuzzy*

“Family” is a fuzzy concept. We think we know what it means and in fact we do, in particular contexts, but it “covers a multitude of senses” (Pine, 1996, p. 223). No necessary and sufficient conditions universally define it, as to its structure or its function (Harrell, 1997, pp. 3-4; also Creed, 2000; Mitrani et al., 2009; this is also true of “marriage”: Holy, 1996, p. 50). This fuzziness places a higher obligation for researchers to be precise in their use of the word in specific studies. Nonetheless, keeping the name “family business” seems reasonable. For example, would we be better off following Aldrich and Cliff (2003) and speak instead of “households”? Probably not; households share equal definitional problems (Creed, 2000; Sanjek, 1996) but they lack an equal theoretical interest or salience. The question “why households?” lacks the resonance of “why kinship?” Further, kinship ties that are relevant to firms cut across households but not necessarily ties of kinship and marriage. Therefore, any particular “family business” is almost certain to be identifiable in terms of a grouping based on kinship and marriage, but it may include members of multiple households.

“Family” is what Wittgenstein, cited in Needham (1971, p. 5) in reference to “kinship”, called an “odd job word.” More formally, kinship is polythetic (Keesing, 1990), meaning loosely that boundaries between concepts are indistinct and no properties are necessary and sufficient for inclusion (a formal definition is in McKelvey, 1982, pp. 44-45). Fortunately, as Boyer (2003) argued, we ought not to be discouraged by this; after all, comparing polythetic categories is routine business for biologists (McKelvey, 1982). Nonetheless, we need to make a conscious effort not to expect monothetic, clearly designated boundaries between kinship related concepts.

## 6.2 “Family” as ideological

“Family” is not only fuzzy but also a “politically or ideologically ‘loaded’” term (Pine, 1996, p. 223; also Creed, 2000). Its ideological influence is exerted outside the family, in areas such as tax policy (Graetz & Shapiro, 2005) and inside it in the power relations of families and firms (Viazzo & Lynch, 2002). Family members who are female, young, affiliated with lesser branches, or critical of their family’s ideology (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1999; Greenhalgh, 1994) might be surprised to read that family firms are seen by some researchers as altruistic and ethically superior. As Peletz (2001, pp. 423, 435) observed, there is great variation in the “emotional tenor (feeling tones)” experienced in different kinship relationships.

Those in the vanguard of a new academic field can be tempted to advocate not only for the value of related scholarship but also for unconditional virtue in the focal phenomenon itself. However, we ought not assume that the involvement of “family” in business renders it consequently better – or worse. Further, we should not make normative generalizations that lack historical context. “A generation or so ago,” Whyte (1996, p. 2) observes, “it was widely accepted that the Chinese family system posed a major obstacle to economic development. In contrast, it is now often argued that the Chinese family is a veritable engine of growth.” Let us not forget why the former view held sway. In the foundational Confucian classic, the *Lun Yu* or Analects, Confucius says, “Among my people, those who we consider ‘upright’ are [like] this: fathers cover up for [the crimes of] their sons, and sons cover up for their fathers. ‘Uprightness’ is to be found in this” (Slingerland, 2003, p. 147).

In Confucius’ philosophy, family solidarity trumps other social welfare values. More recently, this view was debated in terms of “amoral familism,” which is the thesis

that civic cooperation and democratic institutions in Italy have been stunted by distrust of non-family members (Banfield, 1958; Cavalli, 2001). It also finds echoes in the 41 country study by Fogel that found that “countries with more extensive family control over their large corporate sectors tend to have worse social economic outcomes” (2006, p. 617). Our point here is not to beat up on family firms but to caution against abandoning objectivity for advocacy.

### *6.3 Working with multiple connotations*

The vagueness of “family” as a concept might not augur well for “family business” as a scholarly endeavor. Perhaps the term could be changed. Specialties sometimes do debate or change their names (Howard, 1999; Winkler, 2010). However, many fields have multiplex constructs at their core, and manage to thrive providing scholars take care in specific studies. Entrepreneurship is an example (Hoy, 2010). Moreover, the expression “family business” is widely used in practice as well as academia and is unlikely to be changed. Given this reality we need to be attentive to its possibly ethnocentric connotations and also to draw on established theories from fields such as kinship studies, to be aware of the nuances.

Moreover, we should not hope to seek an “essence” of family business, especially if that hope is based on a wish for clear delimitations of our specialty (cf. Chua, Chrisman, & Sharma, 1999). As Sharma has noted, “no set of distinct variables separating family and non-family firms has yet been revealed” (2004, p. 5). We can also actively resist letting the institutionalization of the “family business” construct, both in practice and academia, blind us to the heterogeneity of ties between kinship, itself a heterogeneous construct, and business. As Melin and Nordqvist (2007, p. 323) argued,



comparisons between “family” and “non-family” business can inappropriately presume “a homogeneous organizational category.”

We propose therefore that when we use the term “family business” we think of “business with significant kinship involvements” and leave as an empirical matter just exactly what these are. Looking closely at particular firms we see a wide range of involvements that are possible, many well beyond the boundaries of the firm (Anderson, Jack, & Drakopoulou, 2005; Steier, 2007). For example, the firm founded by Learned (1995) was capitalized by his parents’ best friends, a role that remained emotionally salient many years later when they received a (handsome) return on their money. This would not qualify the business as a “family” firm by any prevailing definition, yet its embeddedness in kinship was crucial. The ubiquitous dichotomy of “family firm” or “non-family firm” begs many questions about the nature and contexts of involvement.

A continuum of family involvement (Astrachan, Klein & Smyrnios, 2002) represents an improvement over dichotomies, but even a continuum assumes two end points of a singular construct, which we do not know to be valid. It also under-specifies conceptual possibilities by ignoring, for example, sex roles, quasi-kin ties, direct and indirect kinship ties beyond the firm, and variations in kinship systems themselves (Stewart, 2010b). Most phenomenon-based fields face related definitional issues in their development. Early success as a field typically requires careful attention to more nuanced definitions and measures of core issues in the actual execution of systematic research, while avoiding overly inward-looking disputations.

## **7. From Family to Kinship Theory**

### *7.1 Kinship theory as a resource*

In the study of family business, discussion of the family dimension has been overly naïve. As Winter and colleagues lamented (1998: 240), most research in the field has ignored “the structure and composition of the family” (also Stewart & Hitt, 2010). Admittedly, gaining access to expertise on kinship can be exasperating: it resides in anthropology, which can seem a business-unfriendly discipline prone to anti-scientific fashion (Boyer, 2003; Scheffler, 2010). Nonetheless anthropology remains the discipline that has developed the most fundamental theory on the topic (Rutherford, 2010; Stewart, 2003) and fundamental theory is a prerequisite for long-term scholarly development and hence for acceptance in elite research universities (Abbott, 2001, p. 145). Only by accessing theory from anthropology, and other fields such as sociology and psychology that study family dynamics can the field develop theory that avoids simply replicating dominant economic or rational choice models often used in business research.

Whatever else one might conclude about anthropological kinship theory, it has reflected on fundamental questions. For example, does kinship exist? Is it merely an idiom about social relations or perhaps an epiphenomenon on the deeper foundation of the economy? We have tipped our own hand: we do believe there is something irreducible to “kinship” (also Bloch & Sperber, 2002; Keesing, 1990; Steadman, Palmer, & Tilley, 1996). However, arguments to the contrary were not without their value because they highlighted the question of the relationships between kinship and other dimensions of social life (e.g. Needham, 1971; for a summary, Barnes, 2006). Years ago Fortes (1969, pp. 220-228) responded to claims of kinship as an epiphenomenon. He argued that “the kinship system, the economic system, and the religious system are

analytically distinct from one another and irreducible to one another, yet so closely interdependent that they cannot be understood in isolation from one another.”

### *7.2 Relationships between kinship and business*

Fortes’ functionalism, reflected in language like “the religious system” fell into disrepute; Schneider (1995, p. 194) was surely right that a relative neglect of kinship followed partly from a shift of interest from “structure” to “practice.” Fortes’ formulation is useful nonetheless, as it raises a central question for family business studies: what is the relationship between kinship and business activity? We could postulate that *in some contexts* the one is reducible to the other. For example, in the economy-to-kinship direction, “economic success can reinforce and even create family sentiments” (Creed, 2000, p. 338). The reverse can also obtain when economic practice is enacted through kinship ties for kinship purposes. At the least, kinship and business may be mutually constitutive. For example, dynastic families develop cultures and solidarity in part due to commercial success, just as commercial success may depend on familial networks and habits such as secrecy (de Lima, 2000; Holy, 1996, p. 114; Stewart, 2003). In addition, participants in business settings may draw on metaphors of kinship in economic activities in important ways only understandable with insight into the metaphor itself (Ram and Holliday, 1993).

### *7.3 Why kinship?*

Fortes’ particular formulation also attempted to answer another fundamental question for kinship-linked business: if there is an irreducible quality to kinship, what is it? His widely-cited reply was that the classifying work of “kinship concepts, institutions, and relations... is associated with rules of conduct whose efficacy comes, in

the last resort, from a general principle of kinship morality that is rooted in the familial domain and is assumed everywhere to be axiomatically binding. This is the rule of prescriptive altruism which I have referred to as the principle of kinship amity” (Fortes, 1969, p. 232). Corollaries of this notion have since been added; for example, that kinship morality refers to the deepest moral values of a culture (Bloch, 1971; Keesing, 1990) and that kinship ties uniquely have a long-term resilience (Bloch, 1973; Creed, 2000). As noted above, regarding variations in emotional tenor, these arguments do not imply that all empirically observed kinship ties share these qualities.

If there exists, with variation, a “quintessentially and inalienably binding” quality to kinship ties (Keesing, 1990, p. 160), why might this be? This question is relevant for family firms. It could help us understand the prevalence of kinship involvement and the reasons for actions that appear to be at odds with economic logic (Astrachan & Jaskiewicz, 2008; Chrisman et al., 2010). One set of answers to these questions draws on evolutionary psychology and adduces “evolved psychological dispositions” such as kin altruism (Bloch & Sperber, 2002, p. 728; Nicholson, 2008). Another adduces the “biologically based phenomenon” of attachment behavior (Freeman, 1973, p. 113; also Keesing, 1990) and neoteny (the prolongation of dependence on adults; Fraley, Brumbaugh, & Marks, 2005). “It is to attachment behavior and the primary bond,” Freeman (1973, pp. 115-116) argues, “that we can trace both the ‘axiom of amity’ and the fact that kinship is [not only] inescapably binding [but also a locus of] rivalries and latent hostilities... [and hence of] ambivalence.”

Freeman attributes ambivalence to the necessary imperfection of the primary bond, as perceived by the infant. Another explanation, found in Fortes (who also

recognized the ubiquity of tensions and ambivalence; 1969, pp. 237-238) is resistance to having to freely share, especially in contexts of rivalry for succession. Peletz (2001) develops this theme by noting that the very prescription of living up to a culture's deepest values generates ambivalence when people feel they are not living up to expectations. As he argued, "kinship is heavily freighted with moral entailments that are often burdensome or impossible to fulfill" (Peletz, 2001, p. 415). This source of ambivalence has been noted in the context of family firms (Astrachan & Jaskiewicz, 2008). Apparently, that which makes us most ambivalent, not just that which we endorse most freely, can also be a profound source of motivation.

These approaches to kinship offer important conceptual tools and ethnographic windows through which to examine the opportunities and pitfalls of kinship involvement in business. However, anthropological and related field studies on family business as such have been rare. Among those that exist the attention to the commercial aspects of their field settings has been modest (Stewart & Hitt, 2010). They do, on a more positive note, challenge us to examine our own culturally derived assumptions about the meaning and the social processes of kinship. They also offer windows into the kinship-business relationship that would not arise from using dominant models of business behavior in business school research, which increases the chances of genuinely novel theory or modifications of dominant theory.

## **8. Institutional Challenges and Opportunities: Assumptions, Student Interest, External Support**

### *8.1 Hidden assumptions*

Three institutional factors seem crucial to the way the intellectual challenges for family business can be addressed: Hidden assumptions, external support outside the academy, and cross-field linkages within the university. The first of these challenges, of hidden assumptions, is hard to avoid when the topic involves family matters. Naturally enough, folk concepts about the family are little affected by kinship theory. Although this disconnect between folk and academic concepts is understandable, it leaves with scholars the responsibility to think carefully about their own assumptions and value judgments. For example, family business topics are readily disparaged as “soft” and not amenable to proper scientific study. This perception may well be rooted in widespread biases in favor of commerce over kinship, public domains (e.g., commerce or government) over private domains (e.g., households and families), male over female, professionalism over amateurism and many other dualisms; these biases are discussed in Jones (2005) and Stewart and Hitt (2010). Within the academy, “hard knowledge domains are regarded more highly than soft ones” (Becher & Trowler, 2001, p. 81), and in these terms family is soft and commerce is hard. Certain specialties, particularly entrepreneurship and strategy – both of which are potential allies of family business – have until now been averse to studying the domestic or familial domain (Stewart, 2008).

### *8.2 Women’s studies as a useful comparison*

Ideology imported from the wider culture often affects or creates biases about research fields that may eventually be resolved in useful ways. Similar biases affected the development of women’s studies, which is a useful comparison for other reasons as well. Both fields involve kinship and marriage and hence also involve questions of gender or, as Scheffler (2010) would argue, of sex roles (e.g., Dhaliwal, 1998;

Greenhalgh, 1994). Both are specialties that have debated the pros and cons of whether and how to concentrate on real-time social issues versus seeking long term understanding or influence throughout the academy. Women's studies has had "a complex and unstable relationship to traditional disciplines," and struggled with the challenges of working outside these established organizations (Blee, 2002, p. 177). Challenges of scholarly development such as these have been extensively "self-scrutinized" in the women's studies literature (Winkler, 2010, p. 209).

Early debates in women's studies asked sensible questions of whether and how a focus on studying women could raise questions that had not already been tackled. Did studies of men in political science, sociology and business not amount to studies of human behavior, which would characterize both men and women? Ultimately, women's studies research contributed by adding descriptive research on ways in which women's activities are distinctive, and then by improving general theory in many fields because contrasting gender patterns revealed new insights into human behavior and culture. Exploration of this area also raised questions about perceptual filters that had invisibly affected much prior research (Blee, 2002; Howard, 1999). For example, scholars might have concentrated on finding reasons that strong sex roles in modern society were a good thing rather than probing what were the actual processes that created or sustained the roles. Work to establish women's studies as a separate area stimulated scholars within many disciplines to re-think gender role assumptions and to include data on women throughout the whole field. The full scholarly impact of these debates probably arrived when the majority of social sciences fields began to separately examine gender issues in their own areas (some, admittedly, more than others: Gumport, 2002, Chap. 5).

### *8.3 Potential to revise the business school image of the firm*

Family business research may similarly have the potential to have an impact by re-opening the study of contemporary ideologies of corporate forms. Business schools teach many models and processes, but the normative framework is rooted in economics and finance, and is based on a vision of the broadly held public firm as a single entity seeking a clear goal and maximizing shareholder wealth (Liang & Wang, 2004; Porter & McKibbin, 1988, p. 66). Students learn that even if many firms do not actually follow the best practices supporting this vision, the world would be better if all of them did. The market is seen as the best arbiter of most activities, except in special cases (Khurana, 2007, Chap. 8). Other institutions such as philanthropy, government and even higher education itself are urged to try to emulate the publicly held, non-familial, firm in order to be more effective.

In this business school worldview, family businesses tacitly become at best irrelevant and at worst cautionary examples of the baleful impact of not following the logic of market exchange. The market is idealized as the best way to organize transactions and behavior, rendering family businesses a misguided residual of the past. The language of for-profit exchange infuses non-commercial settings, as when students become only “customers” or research has value only if it directly creates products (March, 2003). If research on family businesses shows ways in which they offer sustainable alternative forms of commercial activity to the non-familial public firm, it offers a door to pondering the scope conditions for different ways to organization commercial activity.

### *8.4 Student interest in family business education*



Two other specific challenges relate to teaching. First, for-credit teaching in a research university should draw on rigorous and scientific studies. Therefore, continuing to develop more rigorous research on family business will make it more feasible to create credible courses in this area. A hopeful sign is that Poza (2010) and Sorenson, Yu and Brigham (2010) offer evidence of a topical convergence that may be inferred by the content of current family business textbooks. Of course, this convergence could reflect the “normative and mimetic mechanisms” of family business institutionalization, by which early concepts attain premature acceptance, observed by Melin and Nordqvist (2010), rather than an emerging consensus that is based in research.

The second challenge for nascent fields is that they must demonstrate student interest (Hambrick & Chen, 2008), a perceived link to major social issues, or both. If these fields are to gain faculty lines, the university leadership must believe that there are teaching needs to fill (Abbott, 2001, p. 141). For example, student interest was one key reason for the growth of women’s studies (Boxer, 2002; Gumport, 2002, p. 158). Sustainability may represent a similar contemporary area, where student demand is high, and contested social debates flag it as an important social issue, just as women’s studies also drew on debates in the wider society. New course offerings therefore respond to student career paths and interests as well as to external beliefs by opinion leaders, government officials, and donors.

If many students will end up working in family businesses, or express an interest in them, then courses related to that are more likely to be funded. However, it is not evident that business students see family businesses as crucial options in their career paths. It is also not evident that family businesses are seeking to recruit and hire students

with training specifically geared to the family business context. In this case, family business “know how” may then be more naturally offered in executive education or outreach programs, where they currently exist. An apparent demonstration of limited student demand is the sparse coverage of family business among the members of the Association of American Universities, noted above. A somewhat more promising indication of developing demand is the website from the Family Enterprise Research Conference offering links to family business syllabi from 28 universities (<http://johnmolson.concordia.ca/en/faculty-research/research-centres/family-enterprise-rsrch-conference/family-business-course-outlines>).

A promising possible access point of entry to the full-time curriculum may come from student interest in international business settings and from international students. Rather than students assuming that they should emulate the economics and finance model of the U.S. public firm, one can imagine their interest in course content on alternative models. These models in turn would include approaches that work well in family businesses in various countries. This link with international understanding also has potential in terms of donor and legislative interest in supporting this area. Equipping students to be effective in international settings, due in part to comprehension of family business contexts, can serve as a call to action for public and private universities alike. Nonetheless, the question of student interest remains vital. As Poza (2010) and Trevinyo-Rodríguez (2010) point out, the fact that many of our students will in due course join family firms will not help us if they fail to foresee this while still in school.

#### *8.5 External support Donors and government*

New fields develop faster when external donors make cases for and provide funding for the long-term development of the field (Hoy, 2010; Treviño-Rodríguez, 2010). Major public firms have traditionally supported business schools in the belief that the schools provide the knowledge that their future potential employees will need to contribute to the firm. It is not clear at this point how family business leaders themselves see the potential for, or value of, institutional support for research and education on family business. The best evidence of such support has been the endowment of chairs in family business, at universities such as Alberta, Case Western Reserve, Concordia, IESE, IMD, Oregon State, and WHU (Otto-Beisheim); the chair at Kennesaw State is a resource for this journal. Advancement officers will try to avoid having funds that are narrowly restricted but fields can be energized by gifts that endow chairs, or provide sustained research incentives, such as the “Theories of Family Enterprise” conferences organized by Alberta, Calgary and Wharton.

An important challenge at this juncture is to find ways to energize and work with external donors with deep interests in this field, while also building its scholarly base. For new phenomenon driven fields, this is especially challenging because family business practitioners understandably care deeply about immediate practical issues and making the case for theoretically sophisticated research is difficult. Fortunately, as Sharma and colleagues observed, “The field has begun to rely on new funding sources (wealthy families, foundations and governments) rather than traditional sources (service providers such as accountants, lawyers and consultants). These new funding sources are less interested in short term revenues from family business clientele, and are more interested

in outcome research (practical and prescriptive in nature), basic research and public policy” (2007, p. 1019).

### *8.6 Building cross-field linkages*

On the educational front, fields such as dentistry, law, physical therapy, anthropology, and family therapy could be sources of student demand for knowledge about family businesses (see Fallone, 2010 for law schools). This approach could mirror recent patterns in the field of entrepreneurship, where cross-campus initiatives have developed good traction (Katz, 2008). One difference from entrepreneurship is that family expertise could prove to be more widely distributed throughout the campus, whereas entrepreneurship expertise may be more concentrated within the business school. This difference may lead to less enthusiastic championing by business school deans but it could also be beneficial in cross-disciplinary research.

There is one other problem related to teaching and links to practice. Building alliances and infrastructure puts family business scholars in the same position as entrepreneurship scholars a few decades ago: playing too many roles for their scholarly good. One solution is to divide the labor with practitioner adjuncts. This also would recreate the early pattern in entrepreneurship which had benefits but also created challenges as the field matured. As entrepreneurship became more established, the early camaraderie turned into a more formal relationships. In this process, practitioners became limited to guest lectures but excluded from the formal decisions that research universities reserve for the tenure track faculty. Family business could make better use of practitioners and may need to do so. It may also need more external support than entrepreneurship, due to differences in course demand. Therefore, the field could treat

this as an opportunity for better involvement of practitioners in teaching and in discussions about research in order to sustain the relevance of family business scholarship (Sharma, 2010).

## **9. Opportunity and Challenges in Being at the Margins between Fields**

### *9.1 Opportunities for bridging between business and family fields*

Hambrick and Chen (2008, p. 36) argued that “the aspiring community [of researchers] will ideally position itself” at the margins between fields. More generally, interstitial positions have often been lauded as sources of scholarly innovations (e.g., Abbott, 2001, p. 153; Dogan & Pahre, 1990; Porter, Roessner & Habegger, 2008). However, being betwixt and between other fields does not by itself lead to institutional success. Following Aldrich and Cliff (2003), we could argue that in a broad sense family business is a subset, a very large and unrecognized subset, of the field of business and its environment, also called business and society. This is a respectable and important field but somewhat marginalized in the business school academy (Hambrick & Chen, 2008; see Dentchev, 2009 for the causes).

Whether or not family business can capitalize on its potential for cross-disciplinary work will depend on how well it manages the challenges of an interstitial field. One challenge is that cross-disciplinary research initially lends itself most readily to the “scholarship of integration” rather than the more prestigious “scholarship of discovery” (Boyer, 1990, p. 19). As Sharma (2010) noted, family business has been receptive to the idea of integrative scholarship, as well as to the scholarship of practice and of teaching. Despite this receptivity in general, specific disciplines that could offer much to family business, such as anthropology, sociology, history and law (Stewart,

2008) have not been used deeply to inform research and teaching. Every now and then the promise of cross-fertilization is realized and family business studies draw on theories from other disciplines, as did Danes, Rueter, Kwon and Doherty (2002) and Nicholson (2008), in both cases using branches of psychology. These studies are the exception not the rule.

### *9.2 Emerging structure and interdisciplinarity.*

How could family business adapt to better realize the potential for cross-fertilization? We offer two suggestions, the first regarding the infrastructure of the field, and the second the choice between teams and solo scholarship. First, we note a finding from another cross-disciplinary and topical specialty, innovation studies. Fagerberg and Verspagen (2009, p. 230) lamented that “there is no meeting place or association that spans the entire field”. A possible reason for this absence is that the field of “innovation studies” is simply too broad and heterogeneous to convene in common venues. However, we can infer from their lament that developing cross-disciplinary venues could be beneficial for family business. This might in fact be feasible because we can point to examples of cross-disciplinary associations and journals, such as the Society for the Study of Social Problems with their journal *Social Problems*, the International Leadership Association with their journal *Leadership Quarterly*, and the National Women’s Studies Association and the independent journal *Signs*. Even without such broadly based associations, family business conferences and journals could proactively promote participation from multiple disciplines. They could do this by means of distinct tracks or by a system of senior editors responsible for different disciplines, as found for example in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*.

Establishing cross-disciplinary bodies that meet the career needs of scholars from multiple fields would not be easy. Difficulties range from discrepant assumptions about scholarly norms, such as differences in styles of conference presentations and articles, to discrepant assumptions about the very purpose of the academy, such as those between applied and primary disciplines. Some disciplines are also more accustomed than others to cross-disciplinary work, which is found most often in fields with the most immediate impact on practice – the applied natural sciences – and found least often in the humanities (Morillo, Bordons, & Gómez, 2003; see also Nolin & Åström, 2010). Further, it may be premature for family business scholars to lead such undertakings. We infer this from the history of sociology, in which the leaders of the field only came to approve of work across boundaries after their young discipline had won widespread recognition (Merton, 1973).

### *9.3 Organizing cross-disciplinary research*

We have argued that existing core disciplines offer deep knowledge on kinship and family dynamics, and that this gives family business unusual potential to develop as a scholarly field. If that is the case, how might research best be organized? We conclude with some observations about two approaches for implementing cross-disciplinary research, solo scholarship and cross-disciplinary teams. It would seem on the face of it that the easiest approach is to form teams of scholars from different backgrounds. This was an assumption in Stewart's (2008) article on potential collaborations in family business.

However, there is another model that may in practice be more realistic. In their paper on the challenges of studying topics that impinge on the expertise of other

disciplines, Devons and Gluckman (1964) proposed a range of modes of cross-disciplinarity. One of these they referred to as “abridgement”, by which they meant the use of selected concepts and findings of another discipline, with the scholar recognizably “naïve” about much of the content of the other discipline (Devons & Gluckman, 1964, pp. 163-164, 168). Abridgement in this sense can be executed by solo scholars.

Solo abridgement, in which an individual scholar gains sufficient expertise in two different fields, would at first blush appear to be less effective than team-based collaborations. After all, teams could assemble the complementary expertise more readily than could an individual scholar. However, there is evidence that this may not be the case in practice. Porter, Roessner and Heberger studied the “integration” of disparate fields, as measured by researchers’ use of divergent, conceptually distant literatures. They found a “very modest association, at most, between the level of integration and the extent of co-authoring or multiple author affiliations” (2008, p. 281). They concluded that “broader co-authorship is a poor prediction of how interdisciplinary a paper is” (as above).

The reasons for this counter-intuitive finding might lie both in the benefits of solo scholarship and in the challenges of cross-disciplinary teams. Regarding the latter, Klein (2005) and O’Donnell and Derry (2005) found that collaboration is rendered difficult due to “power and status differentials, discrepant norms of methodology and publication, and terminological confusion” (as summarized by Stewart, 2008, p. 281). By contrast, solo scholars are freed from the fashions and trends in other disciplines and enabled therefore to pick and choose which parts of the other field are most useful, in ways that insiders might find politically or ideologically difficult (Axtell, 1998, p. 146). Scholars from



outside departments are free to “use the tools that work, shed the theories that do not, and pay no attention whatsoever to” disciplinary provenance (Boyer, 2003, p. 358).

## **10. Final Thoughts: Faculty Lines**

We have noted several areas of challenge and promise for the field. These include the continuing progress of its journals, data and theoretical development, and making explicit its importance to internal and external actors. In conclusion, we focus on the most pressing need faced by any nascent field as noted by Hambrick and Chen (2008). This need is for faculty positions. Hambrick and Chen focused on strategic management, in which tenure track faculty positions are dedicated to that specialty in many universities. Fortunately, however, fully dedicated lines are not needed for every specialty; on the face of it would be impossible. Rather, we foresee an intermediate position, exemplified by entrepreneurship.

### *10.1 Dedicated lines and specialties within other lines*

In entrepreneurship, there is a combination of faculty lines that are dedicated to the field and others in which entrepreneurship is the scholar’s specialty within an embracing field. For example, many strategy positions advertized in the AOM placement service call for combinations of strategy and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship does have dedicated positions, including many endowed chairs (Castrogiovanni, Vozikis, & Mescon, 2007), and these positions make possible the infrastructure of a field. Chair-holders enjoy resources that enable them to take leadership in professional bodies, serve as editors for journals, and develop new doctoral students. Chairs are also important for the development of specialized knowledge. As Campbell (1969) and Dogan (1997; Dogan & Pahre, 1990) have argued, specialties cannot be fruitfully recombined nor can

they collaborate with others if they do not house distinctive capabilities or knowledge. This is why, even and perhaps especially in a world of inter-connected problems, specialized narrowness is needed in research. Specialization leads to greater depth of knowledge, greater productivity (and faculty earnings), as well as a proclivity for collaboration with scholars in complementary fields (Leahey, 2007; Leahey & Reikowsky, 2008).

### *10.2 The need for dedicated lines*

The growth in family business would similarly not have been possible were it not for support from dedicated faculty lines, including endowed positions. Fortunately, the field has enjoyed support from many universities. For example, the editorial board of this journal includes scholars from over three dozen doctoral-granting universities.

Fortunately also, dedicated lines are necessary for the field, but not every family business scholar's faculty line must be defined in family business terms for scholarship that is dedicated to the field. What is needed, at a minimum, is that specialization in family business is perceived as a legitimate approach to an established field, such as entrepreneurship, strategic management or organization theory. Ideally, a specialization in family business would be perceived as not only appropriate but beneficial.

We have little doubt that some business schools still regard family business unfavorably. However, change is afoot. For example, the recent experience of one of the larger doctoral programs in family business, Mississippi State, has been that their graduates have attained better faculty placements because of their family business focus (Jim Chrisman, personal communication, November 24, 2010). This is highly encouraging. As the number of faculty positions grows, echoing the histories of strategy

and entrepreneurship, so too will the number of doctoral students.<sup>v</sup> These new scholars will have the potential to make profound contributions to scholarship and by extension to the teaching and practice of family business.

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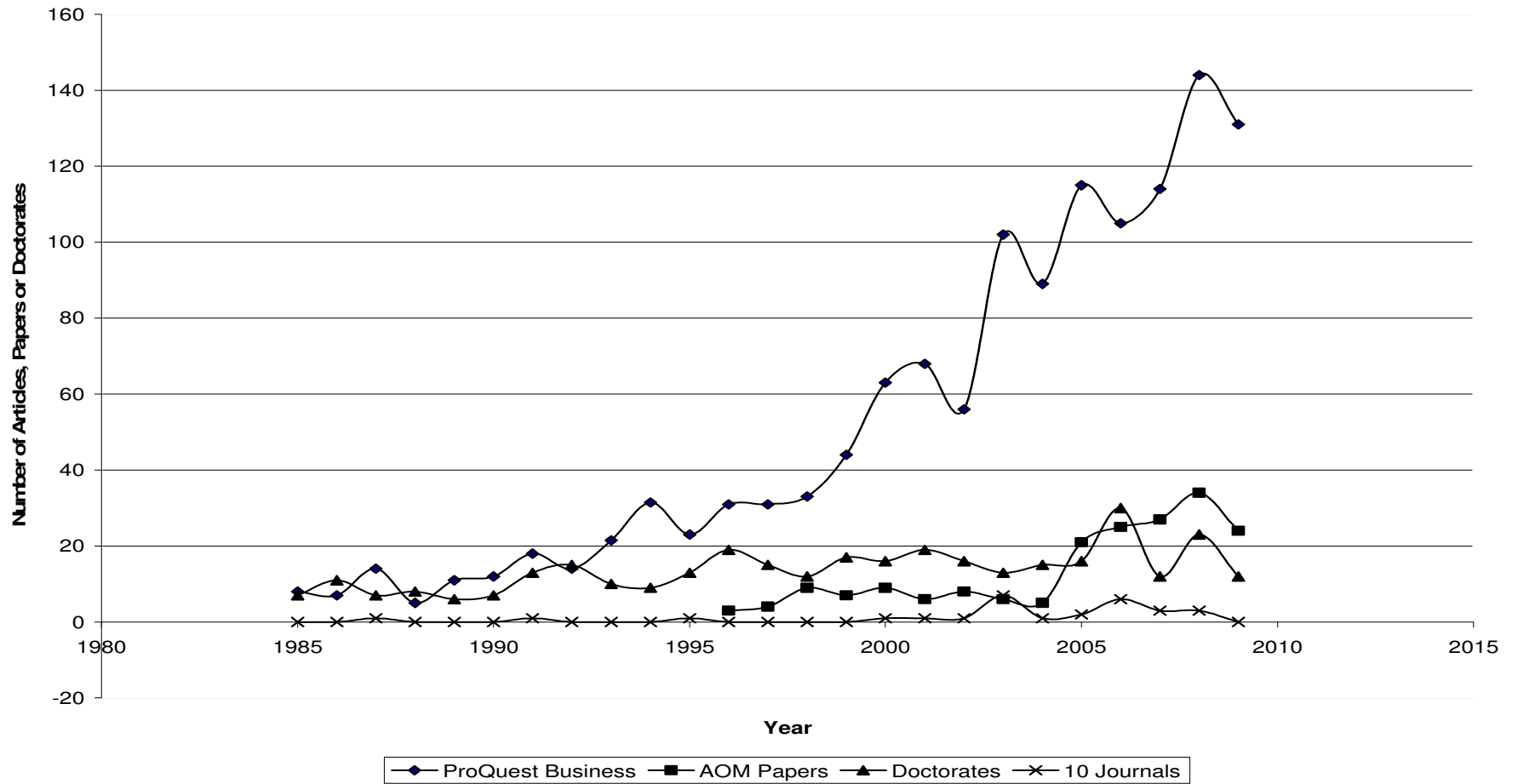
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Figure One: Growth in Articles, Papers and Doctorates, 1985-2009





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<sup>i</sup> Earlier versions of this article were published in *Advances in Entrepreneurship, Firm Emergence and Growth, Vol. 12*, 2010, pages 231-241 (Stewart, 2010a) and pages 323-336 (Miner, 2010), published by Emerald Group. Despite extensive revisions, some passages in this article have few changes from the passages in the two chapters above.

<sup>ii</sup> Articles and dissertations were identified as dealing with family business if they used the terms “family business\*” OR “family firm\*” OR “family enterprise\*” OR “family owned firm\*” OR “family owned business\*” OR “family controlled firm\*” OR “family controlled business\*” in the text or abstract; Academy of Management papers were identified if any of these terms appeared in the title or they were in sessions exclusively devoted to family business. Web-based doctorates such as Capella and Phoenix were not counted. We assume that metaphorical use of the term “family business” does not change over time.

<sup>iii</sup> In our usage, “field” is a general term encompassing three nested orders: disciplines, sub-disciplines (also called specialties) and research areas (also called research topics), following the terminology in Hargens (2000).

<sup>iv</sup> All websites were accessed and checked on November 25, 2010.

<sup>v</sup> Strategy has lately had the most openings posted through the AOM, with the third most openings in entrepreneurship <http://apps.aomonline.org/placement/2010Presentations.asp>.