

Current State of Family Business Theory and Practice as Reflected in *Family Business Review* 1988–1997

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Family Business Review (FBR) has made a significant contribution to the development of the field of family business. This article examines the evolution of the field as reflected in FBR since its inception and attempts to create a guide for future research and practice. It is suggested that more collaboration between academics and practitioners, along with more case studies and cross-cultural work could prove useful to develop increasingly better theory and enhance practice.

Introduction

It has been a decade since the first issue of *Family Business Review (FBR)* was published in the spring of 1988. Two years earlier, the Family Firm Institute was founded under the leadership of the late Barbara Hollander. Shortly thereafter *FBR* began as a forum for sharing the findings of those who studied the unique dynamics of family businesses. Many of us have vivid memories of Ivan Lansberg, *FBR*'s first editor, christening the first issue at the annual meeting of the Family Firm Institute in December 1987 at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. At the time this article is being written 40 issues have been published, and we believe it is a good time to look back and see how the field of family business has evolved.

We also believe that the future of the field depends on a deeper understanding of the past. Indeed, for a field to move forward, it must build on the foundation of previous work. Moreover, knowledge should be cumulative; that is, current ideas must relate to those of the past so that new theories and methods can be compared and contrasted with those already known. As theories and methods can only improve by complementing them with new knowledge, we hope that this article will create a need on the part of researchers and practitioners to use previous learning as tools to enhance their work.

In the early 1980s, this senior author, like a few other academics, was attempting to define and better understand the concept of “organizational culture.” However, many academics in the field of management ignored or were unaware of the writings of anthropologists, such as Malinowski, Boas, and Kluckhohn, or of sociologists, such as Becker, Hughes, and Strauss, who understood and appreciated the concept of culture. Academics in the 1980s could have benefited greatly from reading the classic writings of these scholars. In regard to this situation, one prominent academic lamented that most new doctoral students graduating from business schools knew nothing of the classic writings on culture. It was then suggested that most of these graduates “probably think that Malinowski was some guy who played third base for the New York Yankees.” Unlike anthropology and sociology, the field of family business does not have decades of writings to review. To avoid the “historical myopia” of other disciplines, we must examine the direction the family business field has taken and by so doing create a map for the future.

Because *FBR* is the only major scholarly publication devoted to family business, it is the best source available from which to review the evolution of theory and practice in the field. As we analyzed the 186 articles, commentaries, and essays (excluding “classic” articles and interviews)

published during the last 10 years, we considered the following questions:

1. What has been written in *FBR*? Specifically, we wanted to find out the types of articles published in *FBR* and the topics covered.
2. Who is writing for *FBR*? We wanted to know the professional backgrounds of authors in *FBR*. We also wanted to examine the extent of collaboration across disciplines and between academics and practitioners who were researching and writing about family businesses.
3. What implications does this previous work have for the future of theory and practice in the field of family business?

To answer these questions we conducted a content analysis of each article. The analysis included a classification of each article by type (e.g., research, commentary, or theory), by topic and by author. We believe that our analysis provides useful information regarding the direction the field has taken and what must be done to move the field forward in the future.

What Has Been Written in Family Business Review?

Types of Articles. We were interested in discovering the types of articles being published in *FBR* and the content of those articles. Table 1 lists the different types of articles and a count of each type by volume number. Articles were assigned to one of nine categories. It should be noted that at the beginning of this project we only had three categories in mind—research, theory, and methodology. However, in the course of our analysis we discovered that the range was broader. We therefore created additional categories as we recognized them. The final categories were as follows:

1. Quantitative research
2. Qualitative research
3. Case study
4. Essay (personal accounts, such as testimonies or points of view)
5. Commentary (e.g., responses to other articles and research notes)

6. Theory focused
7. Practice focused
8. Method focused (innovative or unique approaches to the study of family businesses)
9. A combination of theory and practice or theory and method

Although the interviews and conversations featured in *FBR* can be of value to the field, they were omitted from the analysis because most did not present a systematic approach that advanced knowledge in the field. In many cases, topics in a single interview ranged widely. For instance, in “A Conversation with Tony and Victor Kiam” (Drozdow, 1989) topics ranged from work experience and education to tennis. This wide variety of topics made such interviews difficult to categorize and analyze.

Of the 186 articles, the single largest category was quantitative research ($n = 55$; 29.6%), followed by theory only and practice only ($n = 32$; 17.2% and $n = 26$; 14%, respectively). Of all articles, 22 (11.8%) combined either theory and practice or theory and methods, but only two focused exclusively on research methods. (Although 25 articles did introduce innovative or original methodology within the context of research.) This distribution by article type is not surprising since quantitative methods tend to drive research in the social sciences. This trend has continued in the field of family business. Of all the articles, 11.2% featured either qualitative research ($n = 10$) or case studies ($n = 11$). This is a positive finding because in a new field qualitative research and case studies, which are often exploratory in nature, are needed to describe new phenomena and build theory.

Figure 1 displays the percentage of each type of article over time. There is a distinct upward trend in the number of research articles published since the inception of *FBR*, particularly those that present quantitative research. For instance, in the first volume only 14.3% of all articles were research articles (4.76% case studies and 9.52% quantitative research). By the tenth volume, the number of research articles increased substantially, making up more than 64% of all articles published in *FBR* during that year. Note also that

Table 1. Summary of *FBR* Article Types by Volume

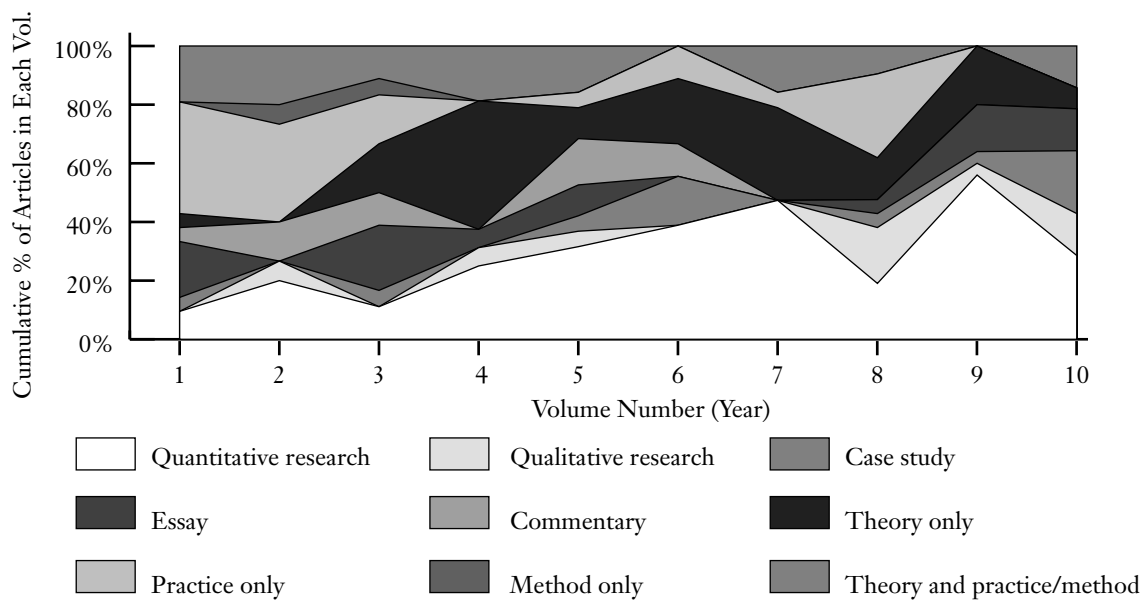
<i>Article Type</i>	<i>Volume Number</i>										<i>Totals (%)</i>
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>	
Quantitative research	2	3	2	4	6	7	9	4	1	4	55 (29.6%)
Theory only	1	0	3	7	2	4	6	3	5	1	32 (17.2%)
Practice only	8	5	3	0	1	2	1	6	0	0	26 (14.0%)
Theory & practice/method	4	3	2	3	3	0	3	2	0	2	22 (11.8%)
Method only	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 (1.1%)
Essay	4	0	4	1	2	0	0	1	4	2	18 (9.7%)
Case study	1	0	1	0	1	3	0	1	1	3	11 (5.9%)
Qualitative research	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	4	1	2	10 (5.4%)
Commentary	1	2	2	0	3	2	0	0	0	0	10 (5.4%)
Total articles in each volume	21	15	18	16	19	18	19	21	25	14	n=186

the percentage of practice articles has slowly declined over time, from about 38% of the articles in the first volume to none in the last. (The only exception was volume eight, in which almost 29% were practice articles.) Hence, it appears that the

interest in the field is more focused on quantitative research and less on articles that specifically describe the art of helping family businesses.

Considering the types of articles published, we might draw four conclusions about the state

Figure 1. Time Comparison of Types of Articles



of the field. First, a trend has been growing over time in conducting research, particularly quantitative research. This evolution is apparently the result of the natural development of a field that began when certain individuals recognized a need for research in the field of family business and attempted to meet that need. As awareness and interest in family firms increased, more research was sponsored and consequently produced.

Second, although family business research, like other social science disciplines, has relied heavily on quantitative methodologies, recent volumes have revealed a trend in the use of case studies and qualitative methods, compared with earlier volumes of *FBR*. Third, although several articles featured original methodology, only two articles out of the 186 we examined specifically

introduced innovative and sophisticated methodologies for studying family firms and their complexities. We believe that family firm scholars will need to continually critique and develop new research methodologies to move the field forward.

Finally, in earlier volumes practice articles reflected the needs and concerns of practitioners who sought to help family-owned businesses. However, interest in practice articles seems to be decreasing, particularly because the number of such articles has steadily declined, which we viewed with some concern. We can only test our theories and develop better ones through application. We need to encourage professionals in the field to explicitly connect theory with practice and methodology. Such papers typically ac-

Table 2. Summary of Articles by Topic and Article Type

Topic	Article Type									Total Articles <i>n</i>
	Quantitative Research	Qualitative Research	Case Study	Essay	Commentary	Theory Only	Practice Only	Method Only	Theory/Practice or Theory/Method	
Interpersonal family dynamics	12	1	6	3	0	9	2	0	7	40
Succession	10	4	0	1	0	4	10	0	5	34
Interpersonal business dynamics	12	0	5	3	0	8	2	0	2	32
Business performance & growth	12	0	2	3	0	6	2	0	0	25
Consulting family firms	0	0	0	0	3	1	7	0	5	16
Gender and ethnicity issues	5	4	1	0	1	3	1	0	1	16
Legal and fiscal issues	3	1	0	3	1	1	3	0	1	13
Estate issues (planning, taxes)	2	0	0	3	1	3	1	0	1	11
Organizational change & development	3	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	4	10
Governance (boards, directors)	3	0	0	3	2	0	1	0	1	10
Family & work life	5	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	8
Environment (macro systems)	3	1	0	2	0	1	1	0	0	8
Entrepreneurship (the entrepreneur)	1	0	2	1	0	2	1	0	0	7
Management of the firm	4	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	1	7
Family firms in international context	2	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	1	7
Wealth management	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	4
Approaches to studying family firms	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	4
Philanthropy	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2
Other	9	0	1	2	2	3	2	0	0	19

counted for no more than 20% of the articles in any given volume. Good theory is the result of good methods and good practice—each informs the other. To that extent, there is still much to be done.

Article Topics. We categorized each article by topic. However, unlike article types, these categories are not exclusive because articles often contained more than one topic. Table 2 illustrates frequency count of the topics found in the first 10 volumes of *FBR*.

Interpersonal family dynamics and succession were the topics that received the most coverage, followed by managing business relationships and performance of family firms. Issues of consulting, gender, ethnicity, estate planning, organizational change and development, and governance were covered only moderately. Topics that received the least attention were philanthropy, unique approaches to studying family firms, wealth management, and the family firm in the international arena.

The content of the literature on the field is likely where it should be at this stage. Because the field was developed to understand the inter-

play between family dynamics and business performance, it is not surprising that the most common topics are family relationships, succession, interpersonal relationships in the business, and the performance of family firms. We should also recognize that special issues of *FBR* have contributed to our understanding of such issues as ethnicity, gender, philanthropy, and the role of family firms in an international context. These special issues have spurred an increase in the number of articles on these topics. Nevertheless, those working in the field need continued encouragement to provide an increasingly broader spectrum of interests. For example, wealth accumulation, its management, and its transfer are critical issues that have received little attention. Those in the fields of accounting, law, economics, and other disciplines should be encouraged to bring their expertise to such issues and to share their knowledge with others in the field of family business. While the field will undoubtedly continue to focus on the interplay between family and business, we must continue to expand our knowledge of other critical factors that affect family enterprises.

Table 3. Authorship by Fields and Professions

<i>Professions & Fields</i>	<i>Number of Authors</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Professions & Fields</i>	<i>Number of Authors</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Academics			Practitioners/Consultants		
Management	174	55.41	Business Manager	17	5.41
Psychology	12	3.82	Lawyer	12	3.82
Economics	6	1.91	Family Therapist	7	2.23
Family Science/Studies	6	1.91	Psychologist	7	2.23
Family Therapy	5	1.59	Banking and Investment Advisor	3	0.96
Accounting	5	1.59	Accountant	3	0.96
Anthropology	3	0.96	Other	1	0.32
Law	3	0.96			
Education	2	0.64	<i>Total Practitioners</i>	50	15.92
Social Work	1	0.32			
Humanities	1	0.32	Executives or Managers	37	11.78
Other	2	0.64	Not Available	1	0.32
Not Specified	6	1.91			
<i>Total Academics</i>	226	71.97	Total	314	100.00

Who Is Contributing to *Family Business Review*?

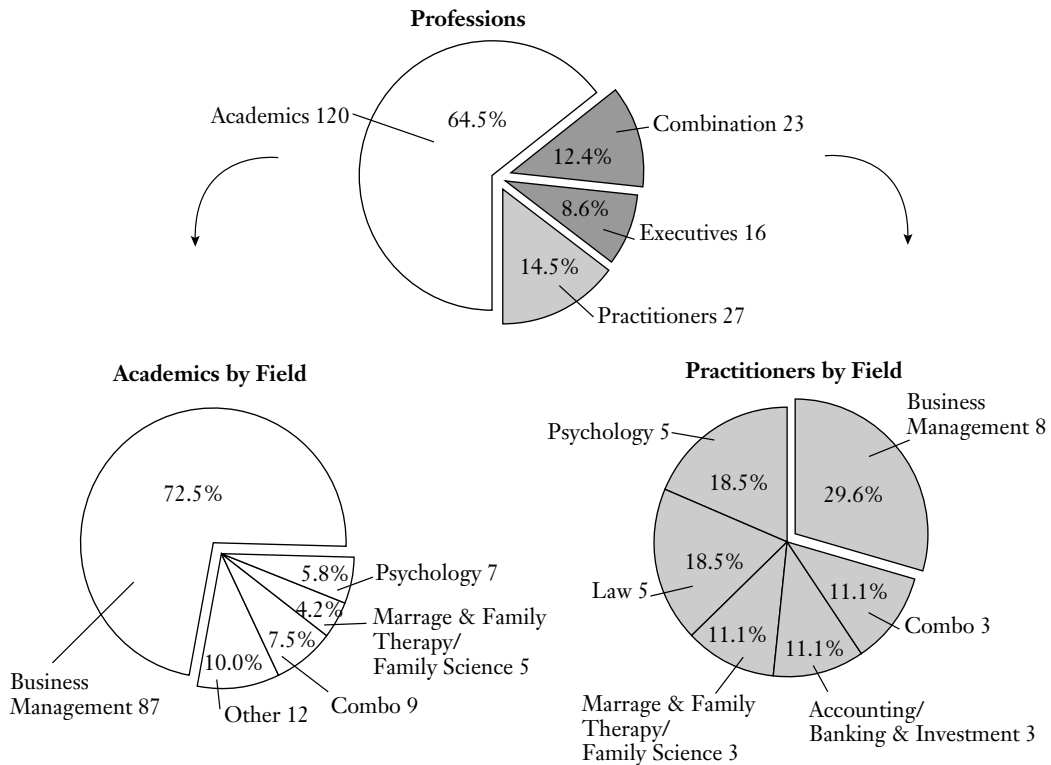
Authorship by Discipline and Profession. To answer this question we counted the number of authors in each article and listed them by discipline and profession. Discipline had a total of 13 categories (see Table 3); professional status had 3 categories:

1. Academics: those mainly associated with a university or research institute
2. Practitioners: those who consult with family businesses or those who practices a specific discipline
3. Executives: those in high-level management positions in a firm, including family firms, many of whom are founders and/or heads of their own companies

During the past decade a total of 314 authors contributed to *FBR* (authors who contributed to more than one article were counted multiple times). Academics accounted for 71.97% ($n = 226$) of all the authors and practitioners/consultants accounted for 15.92% ($n = 50$). Executives made up the smallest group (11.78%, $n = 37$).

Of the academics, the most prolific were those in management (55.41%, $n = 174$), followed by those in psychology (3.82%, $n = 12$), economics (1.91%, $n = 6$), and the family sciences (1.91%, $n = 6$). Of the 49 practitioners or consultants, the majority practiced management and legal consulting (5.41%, $n = 17$, and 3.82%, $n = 12$, respectively); the remainder were family therapists, psychologists, and financial consultants (a combined 6.38%, $n = 20$).

Figure 2. Authorship by Profession & Field



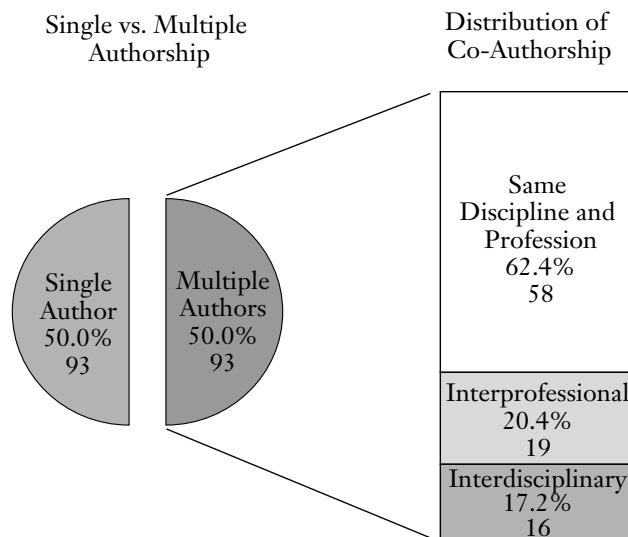
A total of 186 articles were written over the past 10 years (excluding interviews). As part of the analysis, we looked at how many authors were in the same profession (e.g., only academics) and how many of those were within the same field (see Figure 2). Academics wrote 64% of all articles ($n = 120$); practitioners, 14.5% ($n = 27$); executives, 8.6% ($n = 16$); and coauthors with different professions, 12.4% ($n = 23$). Moreover, of the articles written by academics ($n = 87$), the vast majority (72.5%) were written by either a single author or multiple authors in the field of business management. Though the articles written by practitioners were more evenly distributed among authors in different fields, practitioners in business management accounted for 29.6% ($n = 8$) of such articles.

This distribution of authorship by field and profession clearly demonstrates the dominant role of academics, particularly those in business schools, in the development of the field of family business. Such an interest from business school academics in the family business field is most likely related to the increasing interest in family businesses on the part of the students and family businesses who are key stakeholders in business

schools. Unfortunately, the influence of the business schools may present biases toward topics of interest and methodologies employed to study those topics. Without input from academics in such disciplines as psychology, family science, anthropology, and law, the field would likely reflect the agenda of business schools, which are primarily interested in corporate earnings and performance. On the other hand, the percentage of authors who are executives and practitioners/consultants (combined 27.7%) is quite impressive. Very few academic journals attract the interest of and submissions from those other than academics. To the extent that *FBR* continues as a vehicle that links academics with executives and consultants, the better able it will be to effectively merge theory and practice, and hence develop better theory and practice.

Collaboration of Multiple Authors. We also examined the collaboration of authors that exists across disciplines and professions. We performed a frequency count of multiple-author articles and then compared the difference in authorship across the 10-year period that *FBR* has been published. Figure 3 illustrates the breakdown of types of authorship. Half ($n = 93$) the articles were written

Figure 3. Distribution of Authorship



by a single author and the other half were coauthored. Of the 93 coauthored articles, 16 (17.2%) were written by interdisciplinary authors, 19 (20.4%) were written by authors in different professions, and 58 (62.4%) were written by authors within the same profession and discipline.

In Figure 4 we compare the contributions of the various types of authorship over time. Single authors (80.95%, $n = 17$) primarily wrote the articles in the first volume. That percentage has steadily declined over the years as the number of jointly authored articles has increased sharply, especially those articles written by authors in the same profession and discipline. The percentage of articles written by interdisciplinary and interprofessional authors (about 10%) has remained fairly constant over time starting with volume 3.

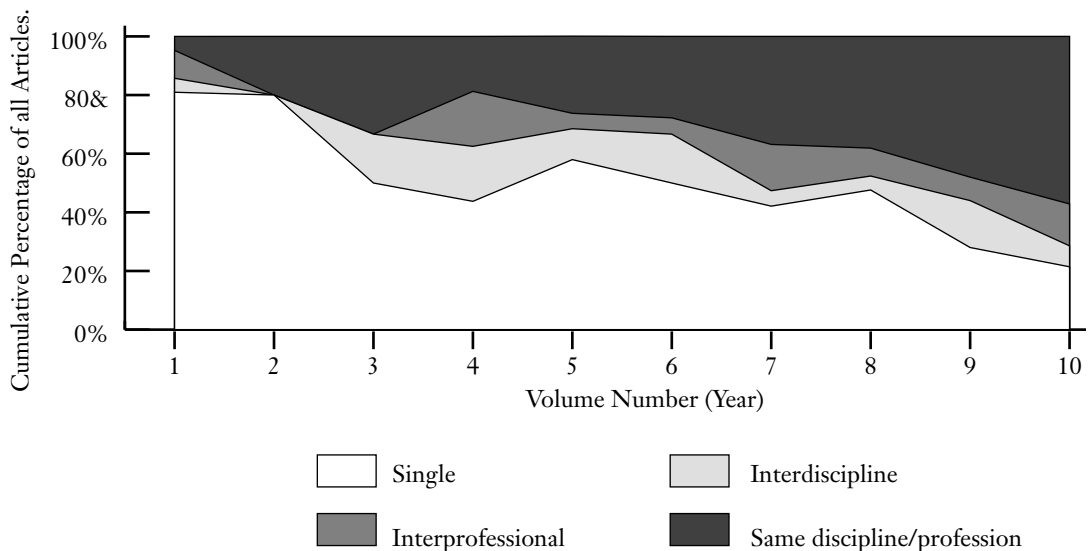
The good news regarding these data is the overall increase in joint authorship of articles. This means that collaboration on research in the field is increasing. However, most of this collaboration is between like-minded individuals who are in the same discipline and profession. Break-

throughs and advances in various fields often occur when individuals across disciplines collaborate. Therefore, potential authors in different professions and disciplines should be encouraged to collaborate to help expand the horizons of the field.

Implications for the Future of the Field

Thomas Kuhn (1970) noted that scientific communities emerge as they create “paradigms” that “for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community of practitioners” (p. viii). Have we, as a field, developed a paradigm for family business that clearly defines problems and presents solutions? Although we believe the answer is no, a paradigm is apparently emerging that articulates the dominant problems in family business as well as a movement toward using certain methodologies to study and solve those problems. On reviewing the writings of the past decade in *Family Business Review*, we have seen the emergence of business school academics who are

Figure 4. Comparative Analysis of Authorship



defining the core questions to be studied and are using standard quantitative methodologies in their research for answers to those questions. Though the business school academics have helped move the field forward, without input from academics and practitioners in other disciplines, new theories, methodologies, and communities of practice may be missed.

Kuhn further noted that as disciplines begin to mature, they suppress “fundamental novelties because they are necessarily subversive of [the discipline’s] basic commitments” (p. 5). At this early stage of the field’s development, we need to encourage novel approaches to studying and helping family businesses, and we believe that most new ideas stem from questioning established assumptions and looking beyond the confines of a particular discipline. For example, Sigmund Freud, who trained as a neurologist, became the founder of a new field largely because he found that the models and methods in which he was trained provided unsatisfactory explanations and prescriptions for his patients who experienced a variety of maladies that had no discernible physiological origin.

Because our theories need to be well-grounded, we should encourage collaboration between academics and practitioners. More case studies are needed to develop theories that are well-grounded in the empirical domain. More cross-cultural work is needed to make sure that our theories are not “culture bound.” We might also identify exemplars that highlight what are considered “best practices” in family firms as well as best practices in family business consulting. Furthermore, we need to encourage variety in the issues and topics featured in *FBR* to reinforce, clarify, and challenge existing knowledge and open new avenues for research and practice, thereby expanding the boundaries of the field.

Conclusion

Family Business Review has made a significant contribution to the development of the field of family business. We must thank Ivan Lansberg for his energy and foresight in making *FBR* a reality. He, along with his co-editor Kelin Gersick,

helped stimulate interest in doing research on family business. We have to be impressed with the volume of articles that have been published and the breadth of their coverage. Moreover, *FBR* has attracted the interest of authors in a variety of professions and disciplines. Although a firm foundation has been laid, we must also recognize some of the pitfalls. The eminent scientist Karl Popper (1968) wrote:

Science does not rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above a swamp. It is like a building erected on piles. The piles are driven down from above into the swamp, but not down to any natural or “given” base; and if we stop driving the piles deeper, it is not because we have reached the firm ground. We simply stop when we are satisfied that the piles are firm enough to carry the structure, at least for the time being. (p. 111)

Those of us who have worked in the murky swamp of the family business field over the past decade have made a good start in creating a skeletal structure to rise above the swamp and better understand and help these enterprises. Now is the time to begin adding the bricks and the mortar. However, as we construct our “field of family business building,” we must develop a consensus on new ways to strengthen its foundation while allowing for diversity of thought to continue. Only then will the field continue to remain exciting and vibrant.

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