

# Explorations of dynamic power processes within copreneurial couples<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Recent researchers have called for a more detailed and nuanced investigation of the behavioral dynamics of an important family firm and entrepreneurial unit of analysis, the married copreneurial couple. In this study, we provide a rare examination of the dynamic power processes within copreneurial couples as a bridge between entrepreneurship and family firm research. Multiple methods, including self-reports, observational coding of team interviews, and analytic induction with team and individual interviews, found support for the importance of copreneurial power structures and interactions for business productivity. Rich field data illustrate the foundational role of an inclusive power structure. Moreover, findings suggest that copreneurial businesses where spouses are seen as equal partners engaging in collaborative power interactions are likely to result in a more productive business decision team that has the resilience to creatively solve important business problems. Several theory-building propositions for copreneurial couple power processes are proposed. Implications for copreneurial couples, entrepreneurial teams, family business consultants, and future research in power structure and power interaction dynamics are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

One important, yet often ignored, aspect of entrepreneurial dynamics is entrepreneurial teams, a group of individuals that actively support the business (Ruef, 2010); most often these entrepreneurial teams are based on family relationships (Chua, Chrisman, & Chang, 2004; Hellerstedt & Aldrich, 2008; Ruef, Aldrich, & Carter, 2003). However, little research has explored the behavioral dynamics of family entrepreneurial teams (Schjoedt, Monsen, Pearson, Barnett, & Chrisman, *in press*). This research contributes to that literature gap by studying copreneurs, a common entrepreneurial team and the smallest family unit.

Research on entrepreneurial teams indicates that these teams are more effective when they exhibit social cohesion (Ensley & Pearson, 2005), when they share leadership (Ensley, Hmieleski, & Pearce, 2006; Ensley, Pearson, & Pearce, 2003), when they have a unified vision (Ensley et al., 2006; West, 2007), and when they have

collective perceptions of how and why they are working together (Shepherd & Krueger, 2002). With copreneurial teams, influence and power exertion are vital constructs to explore because couples constantly manage psychological and physical interdependence involved when working with one's spouse (Fletcher, 2010), not just firm decisions. Based on this premise, the study purpose is to explore dynamic power processes of copreneurial couples as they make a business change decision.

Copreneurs provide a unique and valuable connection between research on family firms and entrepreneurship. Within the dialog about how each discipline can contribute to the other, a stream of thought has evolved recognizing the significance of the social context in which entrepreneurs make decisions. Applying the social psychology principle of "fundamental attribution error" to entrepreneurship, Dimov (2007) noted the tendency in entrepreneurial research to underestimate and even overlook the social context and instead make the cognitive error of attributing performance primarily to individual strengths and weaknesses. Other authors, as well (e.g. Gartner, Shaver, Gatewood, & Katz, 1994; Ruef, 2010) have challenged the notion of the entrepreneur as a lone operator or rugged individualist; entrepreneurial activities rarely are solo acts but rather led by an interacting group of individuals.

The family, in particular, has been identified as an important part of the entrepreneurial social context, both advancing and constraining entrepreneurial activities (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Nordqvist & Melin, 2010). The family can offer economic and

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affective resources (Steier, 2007) and even has been characterized as the source of an entrepreneurial venture (Heck et al., 2006). This study adds to the conceptual specificity of the unique role that family plays in entrepreneurial decision power dynamics (Naldi, Nordqvist, Sjöberg, & Wiklund, 2007; Nordqvist & Melin, 2010).

Further, little attention has been given to spouses who do not hold a formal decision authority positional label or to spousal participation in firm decision-making processes that differ from a formal firm role (Danes, 2006). Conceptually, Szinovacz (1987) differentiated power structures (concerning role position and decision authority) from power interactions (processes of influence when managing tension and conflict during problem-solving). This study is grounded in Family FIRO (Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation) theory that conceptually distinguishes between power structures and interactions. The theory originated in organizational development (Schutz, 1958), was adapted to families (Doherty & Colangelo, 1984), and later was empirically tested with family firms (Danes, Rueter, Kwon, & Doherty, 2002). The study contributes an in-depth examination of individual power relationships within copreneurial couples and suggests theory-building propositions to guide future research on copreneurial teams.

Progressing from investigating power structures to power interactions, however, presents a challenge. Power interactions are family processes that Dyer and Dyer (2009) indicate are largely unseen patterns created, sustained, and modified by families. These underlying processes shape family life and have reciprocal relationships with firm processes and outcomes (Helmle, Seibold, & Afifi, 2011). Exploring power interactions allows for a more vivid and real view of decision processes, providing a fuller understanding of decision making influence that is aimed at the entrepreneurial process of creating business change. Considering these challenges, the study incorporates multiple methods addressing both perceived and observed power dynamics. It incorporates both husband and wife voices and includes videotaped couple interviews to analyze non-verbal couple interactions. Analytical induction procedures facilitate confirmation and/or refutation of spousal content. Using observed, lived power interactions as well as self-reports provide important theoretical contributions to the copreneurs' power process construct.

## 2. Theoretical grounding and literature review

The study requires a behavioral theory focusing on power structures and interactions; Family FIRO theory is such a theory (Fig. 1). The model is proposed not only as a model to guide research but both as an assessment and problem-solving model for working with family firms (Danes, 2006). The theory posits that family firm interactions are manifested through three fundamental dimensions that are interrelated in a developmental sequence: Inclusion, Control, and Integration. Integration or family firm productivity will ensue if owning families address issues in priority sequence. Although Fig. 1 identifies theory dimensions and concepts within those dimensions, no propositions exist relative to those concepts beyond the developmental system proposition that guided this research. Further proposition development is a study aim.

Family FIRO theory is organized similarly to input–process–output (I–P–O) models on designing effective teams as researched in the organizational literature (Farrington, Venter, Eybers, & Boshoff, 2011). However, to assume a copreneurial married couple is like any other organizational team is a fundamental attribution error (Dyer, 2003; Kadis & McClendon, 1991). The intensity and complexity of the couple bond is unique (Danes, Matzek, & Werbel, 2010, chap. 4; Danes & Morgan, 2004) and their interaction patterns play a role in shaping the firm's culture (Sorenson, Goodpaster, Hedberg, & Yu, 2009). Because the study's analysis was so integrated with the grounding theory, the literature review and theory explanation are integrated. The section is organized by Family FIRO's three dimensions.

The conventional copreneur definition is reflective of the power structure focus. This definition first delineated by Barnett and Barnett (1988) is of joint firm ownership, commitment and responsibility. Focusing primarily on defined structural roles, researchers have noted the complexities of having both a personal and business couple relationship (Milton, 2008; Sundaramurthy & Kreiner, 2008) and have explored various spousal leadership roles (Poza & Messer, 2001). Empirical research, however, has tended to overlook the particulars of how copreneurial couples work together. Blenkinsopp and Owens (2010) argued for a broader

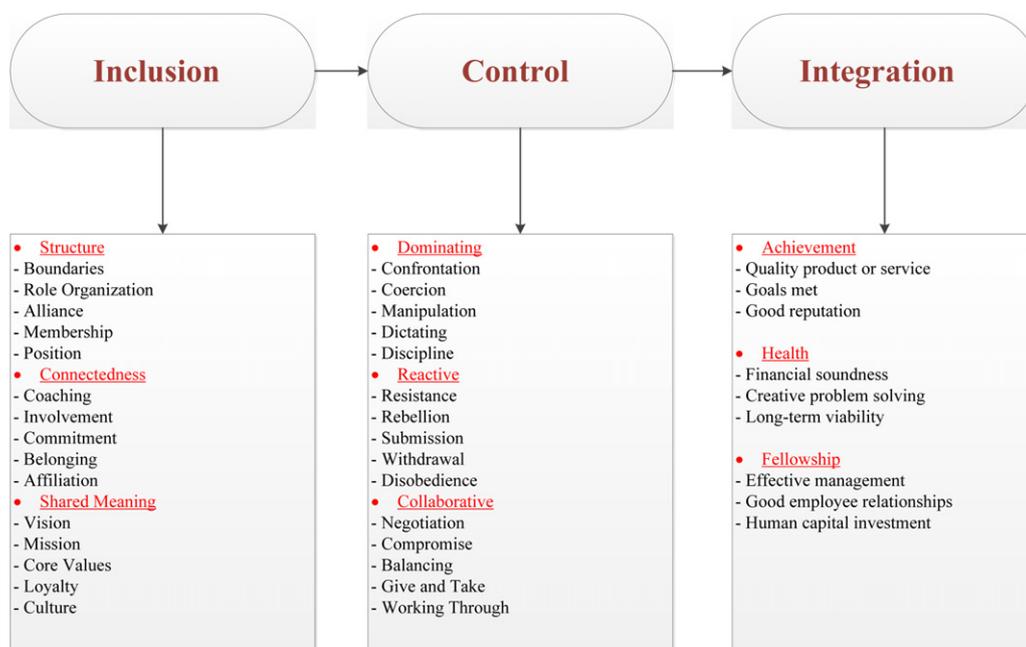


Fig. 1. Family FIRO model.

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