Spotlight
by CeFEO

Why is qualitative research still underused in family business studies?

A review of 26 influential studies finds the field prioritizes method over foundational inquiry

DENISE FLETCHER · ALFREDO DE MASSIS · MATTIAS NORDQVIST

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Family businesses operate at the intersection of emotion, identity, and enterprise. Their dynamics—succession tensions, loyalty conflicts, generational shifts—are layered with meaning that resists reduction to survey scales and regression tables. Qualitative research, with its capacity for depth, context, and interpretation, should be central to the field. It is not. Among the most-cited family business studies, only a small fraction use qualitative methods. And even those that do tend to focus on improving technique rather than questioning what kind of knowledge they are trying to produce.

This article by Fletcher, De Massis, and Nordqvist reviews **26 of the most influential qualitative studies** published between 1996 and 2010, selected from a broader bibliographic analysis across eight academic journals. The goal is not just to assess methodological quality but to examine the foundational assumptions behind these studies—and to argue that the field needs to move beyond method diversity toward deeper epistemological engagement.

WHAT WE STUDIED

The authors analyzed each study across five dimensions drawn from the qualitative research tradition: capturing lived experiences, understanding phenomena in context, attending to language and meaning, acknowledging the researcher's role, and building theory from data. The framework, adapted from Miles and Huberman, was applied not as a scoring rubric but as a diagnostic lens—revealing where family business qualitative research is strong and where it falls short.

KEY INSIGHTS

The field prioritizes technique over foundational questions

The most common shortcoming across the reviewed studies is an emphasis on method choice over inquiry purpose. Researchers ask "which method should I use?" before clarifying what they are trying to understand and why it matters. The result is technically competent work that often fails to generate the kind of deep, interpretive insight that qualitative methods are uniquely positioned to deliver. The article argues that reconnecting with foundational questions—how do family members experience succession? what role do emotions play in strategic decisions?—would produce richer and more consequential research.

Context is claimed but rarely explored

Family businesses are embedded in specific cultural, generational, and industry contexts that shape behavior and meaning in ways that defy generalization. Yet many of the reviewed studies treat context as a backdrop rather than a driver. Few invest in the longitudinal, immersive designs needed to capture how context shapes action over time. The studies that do—tracing decision-making across years or situating business strategies within socio-political narratives—stand out as the most compelling contributions in the review.

Language is used as illustration, not as evidence

Direct quotations appear in most of the reviewed studies, but they are typically deployed as illustrations of already-formed arguments rather than as primary analytical material. The symbolic, rhetorical, and identity-constructing functions of language are largely ignored. Family members' narratives about succession, conflict, or legacy are rich with meaning that goes beyond what the words literally say—but extracting

that meaning requires analytical attention to discourse, metaphor, and framing that few studies provide.

Researcher reflexivity is almost entirely absent

Only a handful of the reviewed studies acknowledge the researcher's influence on the research process. This is a significant gap. In qualitative research, the investigator is not a neutral instrument—their assumptions, relationships with participants, and interpretive choices shape every stage from data collection to theory development. Without reflexive transparency, readers cannot assess how findings were produced or what alternative interpretations might be equally valid.

Theory development lacks transparency

All 26 studies aimed to develop theory, but few showed how they moved from raw data to theoretical claims. The analytical journey—how codes became categories, how categories became frameworks, how rival explanations were evaluated—remains a black box in most cases. The article calls for more transparent, iterative approaches where theory emerges visibly from the interplay of data, context, and researcher interpretation.

TAKEAWAYS

Start with the question, not the method

Before selecting a research design, clarify what you are trying to understand and why existing approaches have failed to capture it. The method should serve the inquiry, not the reverse. Family business phenomena that involve emotion, contradiction, or temporal unfolding are natural candidates for qualitative approaches—but only if the research question is formulated with enough specificity and ambition to warrant the investment.

Treat context as an analytical variable

Context is not background. It shapes meaning, constrains action, and produces the variation that makes qualitative research valuable. Designs that immerse the researcher in the setting over time, or that deliberately compare cases across contexts, are more likely to produce insights that matter beyond the individual study.

Make the analytical process visible

Document how you moved from data to theory. Show the coding decisions, the category development, the moments of surprise or revision. This transparency strengthens credibility and invites the kind of scholarly dialogue that advances the field.

IMPACT

This article serves as both a diagnostic and a manifesto. By mapping where qualitative family business research falls short—and where its unrealized potential lies—the authors provide a framework for raising the quality and ambition of interpretive scholarship in the field. The contribution extends beyond methodology: it is fundamentally about what kind of knowledge the family business field values, and whether it is willing to invest in the depth required to understand phenomena that resist simplification.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Prioritize foundational inquiry.** Move beyond methodological checklists and engage with the epistemological questions that shape what qualitative research can reveal.
2. **Design for context and time.** Invest in longitudinal and immersive research designs that capture change, continuity, and contradiction in family firms.
3. **Analyze language as evidence.** Treat interview narratives, metaphors, and discursive patterns as primary data, not just illustration.
4. **Practice and document reflexivity.** Acknowledge the researcher's influence on the process and make the analytical journey transparent.

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CEFEO AUTHORS



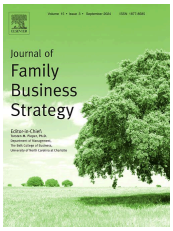
Mattias Nordqvist

Professor

Jönköping International Business School

mattias.nordqvist@ju.se

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