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An Exploration of Successful Copreneurial Relationships Post Divorce

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Abstract

It is a commonly held belief that divorce “kills” the family business, especially when copreneurs divorce or separate. Yet, there are examples of copreneurs who have successfully continued to work together post divorce. However, to date, there have been no studies or theories developed of successful, post divorce copreneurs. This Grounded Theory study examines successful post divorce copreneurs and proposes a model which can help advisors navigate the many potential pitfalls a divorcing couple can experience. This study finds that copreneurs, who have a great deal of trust in one another, can continue to work together post divorce. Emotional connection, compartmentalization, synergy, commitment to the business, and positive gender issues also contribute to the success of the business and the business relationship.

Key Words: Copreneurs, Divorced Copreneurs, Grounded Theory

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Introduction

Couples in business together have their own unique set of challenges as they attempt to combine loving, intimate lives with business lives focused on the bottom line. Although these couples may optimistically begin marriage with the expectation that they will remain in a long term relationship together, their chances of accomplishing marital permanence are far from guaranteed. Approximately half of all American first marriages end in divorce, a statistic that has remained fairly constant for almost three decades. (Raley and Bumpass, 2003.) When couples divorce or separate but decide to continue in their business together, they are faced with the daunting task of rebuilding their multiple and complex relationships. Their ability to resolve differences and heal the pain of separation or divorce has both an immediate and a long term impact on the health and prosperity of their business and the well being of their family.

In our professional contacts with family businesses, we have observed couples who are continuing to work together after the termination of their intimate relationship. This is a curious phenomenon given the popular perception that divorce is a real “business killer.” To date, we have found little in the literature that addresses this population. Couples who are experiencing this unique situation do not have access to any models of post-divorce business success. However, we found that couples who are meeting this challenge seem to have common factors in their successful working relationship that are central to the survival of the business as well as to their business relationship. These factors and the theory that evolved from the data will be presented following a discussion of the literature review and the qualitative research process that was informed by Grounded Theory.

This study will offer suggestions for various constituencies: for divorced couples who want to maintain a successful business relationship, for married couples who want to learn strategies to enhance their personal and business relationships, and for other family members who are estranged yet want to remain in business together. We anticipate that our research findings will impact studies on couples, both married and divorced, in disciplines outside of family business, e.g. family therapy and family studies.

Review of the Literature

As copreneurship involves a family and a business, it falls under the multidisciplinary field of family business research. In fact, theories and research from the domains of entrepreneurship and management research are relevant, as are the ideas from the behavioral science. While these fields have devoted some attention to both copreneurs, as well as to the negative effects of divorce on family business, there appears to be little or minimal literature, and no research, concerning divorced copreneurs successfully continuing a business together. There appears to be minimal literature and no research concerning divorced copreneurs successfully continuing a business together. However, some attention has been given to copreneurs and the negative effects of a divorce on the family business. Because copreneurship is in the family business field, it is multidisciplinary in that it includes both family and business. Entrepreneurship and management contributed to the literature review; however behavioral science provided the most relevant information for this study, because it often focuses on the relationship of business couples, especially the dual relationship challenge of combining a personal, romantic relationship with a practical, business one. When one understands the complexity of this challenge, it is not surprising that couples can find themselves torn between these competing roles.

Married business couples who own and work together had been discussed but not specifically addressed until more relevant literature emerged in the 1980s. In 1988, Barnett & Barnett coined the term, “copreneurs” as couples having joint ownership, commitment, and responsibility to the business. They, along with Jaffe (1990) and Nelton (1986), were the first to observe the increase in copreneurial ventures and to describe the unique characteristics and potential hazards of the couples’ dual relationships of combining a personal, romantic relationship with a practical, business one.

This theme of dual relationships was the basis for many of the family business articles published in the 1980s and 1990s in which the confusion caused by the interface of family and business generated a built in problem for many individuals who were attempting to combine the two roles. One of the most prolific authors, Marshack (1993, 1994, 1998), addressed entrepreneurial couples. Her seminal article (1993) examined existent literature to illustrate how these couples negotiated the dual roles of personal and business relationships. Other authors who contributed to this dual relationship theme in business couples (Hilburt-Davis, 1994; Hilburt-Davis & Dyer, 2003; Hoover & Hoover, 1999; Jaffe, 1990; James & James, 1997; Kadis and McClendon 1991; Ponza & Messer_2001) suggested that if not addressed, dual relationships would negatively affect the marriage or the business. Most of the emphasis centered on preserving the marriage when it was overwhelmed by work demands.

In her studies, Cole (1993; 1997) found that business couples created unique ways to cope with the dual relationship strain by designing context markers to separate the business from the marriage. For example, something as simple as picking up a newspaper and placing it in front of one’s face was a signal to the partner that no more business talk was allowed at home. Again, preserving the marriage became the primary concern.

As useful as these ideas may be for married copreneurs, their applicability after a divorce is called into question. Are divorced couples carrying over some of the built in problems of combining family with business? If so, how are they coping? Are they creating new ways to make this unique situation work? If so, how could that information help others determine how or if a post divorce business venture would be possible?

In addition to these questions, others like it developed from reviewing the family business literature on gender issues in copreneurships. Although a number of authors have examined the role of gender in copreneurial business arrangements, the findings to date have been inconsistent. Cole (1993) found that her participants reported minimal gender concerns, particularly that women did not feel held back in the power base of the business. Ponthieur and Caudill (1993) found that men tended to be in charge even though the women were equal partners. If this were the case, Cole's (1993) participants didn't mind and thought they had the option to take on as much responsibility as they wanted. If wives held subordinate positions to their husbands, it was their choice rather than the result of a power struggle between the sexes.

Marshack's (1994) previous examination of dual career couples and copreneurs concluded that copreneurs had more specific, traditional, and clearly defined role definitions. Marshack lamented the apparent rigidity of roles although she observed that this may have been an adaptive response to the reality of such a relationship. Larsen's (2006) study of married couples who owned harness racing enterprises provided an example of adaptability. In the harness racing industry, tension was so intense among the sexes that separate work sites were needed. Another perspective on gender differences is Danes and Olson's (2003) study that examined family business tension and conflict and found that the greater the woman's level of involvement in the business, the higher the degree of conflict experienced. Therefore, couples

working together have a greater potential for tension or conflict. Danes and Morgan (2004) suggested Emotionally Focused Therapy as a way to deal with this conflict.

Considering these different perspectives on gender, researchers should question if divorced copreneurs would follow any of these trends. Do women feel held back from the power base of the business? Does the couple need to be in separate work spaces, meaning more distance than separate offices, in order to keep a civil working relationship?

Keys to success is another theme that researchers have addressed. Ponthieur & Caudill (1993) identified four factors important for decision making and responsibility in copreneurial ventures: equality, independence, trust, and confidence in each other's work ethic. Tompson and Tompson's (2000) factors for success included managing working and family conflict, role priorities, and role clarity. Fitzgerald and Muske's (2002) descriptive study comparing copreneurs to other family businesses found that these couples had an attitude that embraced the business as a lifestyle which may allow for greater intimacy in relationships than for those in larger non-copreneurial businesses. In their later descriptive study, Muske and Fitzgerald (2006) found that successful copreneurs were most likely to be older and more educated.

The question remains to what degree any of the existing copreneurship literature reviewed to date is relevant in the case of divorced copreneurs. More questions arise from the even more limited literature on how divorce affects couples in business, because most of it focuses only on the problems that couples experience with the assumption that the business will eventually terminate after the divorce occurs. For example, Galbraith (2003) utilized a systemic approach to study the effects of divorce on the financial performances of family businesses. He found divorce was a unique business crisis that not only had a short term, negative impact on the copreneurs' personal finances but also had the potential to impact the economic structure of the

family business. Galbraith did not mention the possibility of copreneurs continuing the business after the divorce but did suggest that further research was needed on the long term effects of divorce on a family business.

Strategies for helping the family business survive a divorce include specific legal contracts such as prenuptial agreements. Because of its prevalence, Gilbert, (1999) viewed divorce as significant a problem in family business as succession planning. Sildon (2006), an attorney and estate planner, also emphasized the need for prenuptial agreements that addressed the family business but concluded that business owners would not choose to work with former spouses. The impact of divorce on copreneurial ventures is described by Doody (2005) as complicated, difficult, and painful with the assumption that the business will be divided or sold. However, she noted that planning for divorce was occurring in more family owned businesses.

On a more optimistic note, Nelton (1986) provided examples of entrepreneurial couples who were able to maintain a business after a divorce/separation. She also observed that those who were unable to sustain a business post divorce would have benefited from specific dissolution agreements even though both couples and their advisors appeared to resist this idea. Brown (1990) suggested ways consultants could deal with divorce in a family business and concluded that “divorce may end a marriage but there is no need for it to end a business or lead to a family dissolution” (p. 41).

However, to date there is no empirical study of how these divorced copreneurs are making their relationships work. If divorcing couples face the decision of whether or not to continue the business, what factors or guidelines for success do they need to consider? What role models do they have to follow?

Methodology

As demonstrated in the literature review, there is a total lack of past research or theories dealing with our research question, and qualitative methodology is an appropriate strategy for an investigation of an unknown subject. Qualitative researchers study phenomenon in their natural settings and attempt to make sense of what people living the experiences have to say (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Narrowing down which qualitative approach to select was inspired by Morgan and Smircich's (1986) comments: ". . . the choice and adequacy of a method embodies a variety of assumptions regarding the nature of knowledge and methods through which that knowledge can be obtained, as well as a set of root assumptions about the nature of the phenomena to be investigated" (p. 491). We wanted to go beyond a rich description and to generate an explanation of how and why divorced copreneurs were successful. With this in mind, the research paradigm of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) seemed the best approach to this study because its intent is "to generate or discover a theory, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon, that relates to a particular situation" (Creswell, 1998, p. 55-56).

The research intentions were to explore the relationships of copreneurs who had separated or divorced but continued to work together successfully in order to develop a theory that could help others. Therefore, the research question was how are separated or divorced copreneurs able to end their marital relationship but maintain their business together? This research question then helped us develop our main interview questions which sought to elicit from the study participants the problems and challenges they faced as well as solutions and coping mechanisms they developed. The literature review provided the problem questions, particularly the challenge of combining a business relationship with an ex spouse relationship. How the participants were meeting that challenge became an important part of the interview. We

did not want to be so guided by our biases or the literature review on copreneurs and divorce that we assumed that the participants had these problems nor did we want to assume that these couples were solving the problems successfully. Therefore, the research challenge was to stay open to the participants' experiences and hear what they had to say.

Sampling

We deliberately sought out participants who would be representative of the population we were studying. The number of couples in this study was not specifically defined because Grounded Theory relies upon a purposive sample until the point of saturation is reached. Since this was a qualitative study, we were curious about particular cases but were not necessarily focused on generalizing the research findings to a larger population (Patton, 1990). Therefore, depth rather than breadth of sample size was important.

Information was obtained from 9 couples or 18 adult men and women who work together in a first generation family business after a divorce or separation. We attempted as much as possible to maximize diversity and variation of both couples and the businesses (Insert Table A and Table B). By increasing the variation in the sample, researchers can have more confidence in common patterns that emerge (Patton, 1990). Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), new participants were recruited after each interview and data analysis. This ensured that we continued our search for diversity and rethought questions asked in each interview. In this study's sample the 18 participants ranged in age from 35 to 65, and the couples' marriages or cohabitation lasted from 3 years to 32 years. Their ongoing post divorce or post separation relationships had existed between 4 years and 19 years. Only one couple had received consulting or therapeutic interventions. Although we were concerned this might present a potential sampling bias, the data did not reflect this concern.

The couples resided in 5 different areas of the United States: in the South, Southeast, Northeast, Midwest, and the West. Their businesses included construction, healthcare, real estate, food service, transportation, hotel chain, restaurant chain, electronics, and home furnishings. Age of business ranged between one and twenty five years. The one year business was started by divorced copreneurs who had worked in a previous business together. Most were successful businesses with a net worth of \$50,000 to \$100,000,000. The race of participants who grew up in the United States, Holland, and Australia was predominantly Caucasian. One Cuban American participant was included in the sample. Although we sought more ethnic diversity, we resigned ourselves to the available sample. The diversity was strengthened by the addition of one gay couple whose answers were consistent with the answers of the heterosexual couples.

Data Collection

We conducted 27 in depth, audio-taped interviews with these participants, usually at their place of business. We interviewed the couples together and separately, not always in that order. Interviews lasted between 2 ½ and 6 hours. During the semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 1995), the use of open ended questions elicited answers concerning the experience of continuing the business together after a divorce or separation. Some of the sample questions included:

- How did you decide to continue in the business together?
- What holds the business relationship together?
- What has been your biggest challenge? How are you coping with that?
- What strategies have been most helpful in being able to work together?

After the interviews, we toured the physical environment of the businesses and observed

employee interactions and morale. Most of the employees seemed content and demonstrated positive interactions with their bosses and each other. Also, the physical environments appeared to be bright, clean, and conducive to the work of each business.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by continuing the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) looking for common categories and themes. As Constat (1992) explained, these themes don't just emerge during data analysis, but occur before, during and after data collection. The four step constant comparative process includes: comparing incidents applicable to each category; integrating categories and their properties; delimiting the theory, and writing the theory. We also tested the themes (Harry, Sturges, & Klinger, 2005) by going back into the data (interview transcripts, literature about each business, our observations while at the work site, our reflexive journals) and comparing the data to the themes. By doing so, we were able not only to evaluate the themes but also to refine them.

Methodological Issues

Chenail (1995) suggested that in creating quality and credible research, the researcher's best resource is openness, especially about assumptions, logic, and choices for conducting a qualitative study. Although this reflexive position was not that evident in the beginning work of Glaser and Strauss, it has emerged as an important consideration over the years (Gilgun, 2001). Guba and Lincoln (1989) advocated for researchers to be open and aware of their assumptions during the study process, because the way the interviewers make sense of the world shapes the research process, including the written report. As Kerlinger (1986) pointed out, "The major problem with behavioral observation is the observer himself" (p. 487).

The two researchers brought similar assumptions to this study. As upper middle class, Caucasian, Eurocentric women in long-term marriages, we believed that the anger and pain of a divorce or separation would destroy the possibility of continuing to work together. The potential for maintaining a business partnership seemed even more incomprehensible after we discovered that infidelity was the cause for the breakup in over half of the participants.

In order to minimize the impact of our biases and to strengthen the validity of the findings, we worked together in designing the research instruments and collecting and analyzing the data. This provided a check and balance so that the research was not processed through the perception of just one individual. We also followed Denzin and Lincoln's (1998) suggestion of writing our individual assumptions and biases about our research topic at the beginning of the study. Additionally, we each kept a reflexive journal, debriefed after each interview, and included member checking to further strengthen trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The categories and themes which emerged from the data analysis describe the commonalities cut across the sample. There seemed to be no correlation between diverse factors, such as size of company or revenue, and the findings. Although these categories and themes initially appear to be unique, they are actually related and interwoven with one another. Their interconnectedness will be noted in the discussion of each theme and in the development of the theory which developed from these themes. Six major themes emerged: trust, compartmentalization, emotional connection, synergy, commitment to business, and positive gender issues. A secondary finding will also be briefly discussed.

Trust

The word “trust” was mentioned by 100% of the participants when discussing their working arrangement. Even before the interview began, one participant proclaimed, “I’ll tell you what it takes. It’s all about trust.” Another male participant indicated that “trust is a very big issue. If you can’t trust your partner. . . you would have to worry every time that you left here, what was going on. Why would you want to work as hard as you work?”

Participants talked about trust in different ways. For example, concerning exit strategies, only one couple felt the need for a legal business document at the time of their divorce. Their document addressed multiple issues in the working relationship and did not simply focus on an exit strategy. Three couples had no document. The remaining couples developed exit strategies later on, but several of them described their documents as vague and based on contingency plans for death or incapacitation. It is interesting to note that the size and profit margin of the business did not affect whether or not a legal document was drawn up at the time of the divorce or separation. While a less formal arrangement about an exit strategy might be more understandable in a smaller, “Mom-Pop” operation, the fact that the level of trust extended to the most financially successful business in this sample was significant. For example, the couple who represented the most profitable business in this study had a very informal arrangement. In explaining the level of security in their friendship and business, this participant said, “. . . our relationship never got to a stage where either of us checked back to see what in fact it [document] said.”

Authors such as Ponthieur and Caudill (1993) mentioned trust as a necessary ingredient for a successful copreneur relationship, but not in the dramatic way described by these

participants. Perhaps these divorced copreneurs believed that in the business relationship trust had to be absolute in order for them to survive the wounds in their personal relationship.

Compartmentalization

Compartmentalization is one of the more interesting findings in this study. This theme became apparent when we observed how participants handled the issue of trust. More than 50% of the couples broke up over issues of infidelity, and all of them experienced a contentious divorce or separation. Initially, we had difficulty comprehending how trust could be so high when there had been a major trust violation in their personal relationship. How they separated the romantic trust from the business trust could best be understood by the compartmentalization of their business and personal lives. These work and personal relationship boundaries underscored the couples' ability to keep personal issues out of the work environment. Most of the participants spoke of dealing with past annoyances and hurts by focusing on the bottom line of the business. However, they had different ways of doing this. One participant explained her pragmatism:

When we were in the heart of our divorce and in the beginnings of what we were doing, separating out the personal hurts on things was not always easy...If you don't have the ability to separate yourself from what you mean and what you do, it can get you into a lot of trouble.

One of the more interesting findings of this study is the theme of compartmentalization. Most of the literature on copreneurship advocates the separation of business and personal lives to preserve the marriage. Ironically, in this study separating these two became a way to preserve the business.

Emotional Connection

Compartmentalization helped these couples overcome old hurts and annoyances and continue their strong emotional connection. When asked their rationale for keeping the business after the divorce and the advantages of doing so, practical reasons like economics made up only 1/3 of the responses. More often, unique reasons like “being committed to each other”, “keeps us close”, “helps the healing”, and “emotional stability” were given. Other emotional connections were friendship, shared history, and similar values. As one respondent described the way he conceptualized their relationship:

I think in our case [the decision to keep working together] was rooted in need and accountability for circumstances beyond the two of us. . . . On the other hand, it’s way more complex. We didn’t do it over the kids. There has always been a need for us. . . we’re like soul mates somehow or other.

This emotional connection in the divorced copreneurial relationship came as a surprise to us as we assumed that economics would be the main reason for staying in business together. Although authors such as Kadis and McClendon (1991) addressed the importance of this emotional connection when working with a spouse, it remains unclear whether these couples sustained their original emotional connection or created a deeper level post divorce. Regardless, this connection and its importance in their business relationship remained a significant factor for the participants.

Synergy

Closely related to the emotional connection was the synergy these couples possessed. When they discussed the advantages of working together, many of them spoke in different ways of the yin and yang of their business relationship. For example, several couples mentioned their respect for each other’s talents. Other partners mentioned style. “A big part of the success of our

relationship is first and foremost, we have a style sense that is so synergistic, it's unbelievable. We have a whole management style that is the same."

One way these couples were able to preserve the synergistic relationship was having clear roles and job descriptions to ensure that they did not violate each other's turf. This allowed them to resolve conflicts. As one female participant noted:

Well, the one thing that I say over and over again is keeping the job responsibilities very defined and very different. You can not have two partners bringing the same things to the table. . . it's like two accountants; you are going to look at books different than I am. And if we are both doing it the exact same way, then it's like, 'is this your job or my job?' or whatever, and you start stepping on each other's toes.

Keeping the synergy alive by clear role definitions is a theme in Larsen's (2006) study of harness racing copreneurs. Role definition was so necessary that it even included separate work sites with separate projects. Although divorced, the participants in our study didn't feel the need for such extreme measures. All of them worked in the same work site in separate offices near each other. And although they had clear role definitions, they interacted throughout the day while using their synergistic energies to accomplish the same project or goal.

Commitment to the Business

All of the respondents spoke of their commitment and even passion for the business which fits with the entrepreneurial profile. Jaffe (1990) has suggested that the copreneurial venture always does a difficult balancing act by addressing the competing needs of the marriage and the business. In this study, couples ultimately chose to leave the intimate relationship and maintain their business, which they viewed in an almost parental way. In fact, several of the

participants mentioned words related to “our baby” when talking about their company. One participant observed the feelings of protectiveness about their business:

It’s funny but when we started it, it was such a fragile business. I always kind of remember it, if this was in the wild, we’d be like two animals watching the nest and making sure that no predators got into it and hurt it.

Commitment in family business has been identified as an important attribute, but Sharma and Irving (2005) pointed out that the discussions so far have been largely one dimensional with no distinctions. They recommend expanding the discussion to include different types of commitment with different definitions. With this in mind, the commitment in this study is affective, meaning an emotional attachment to the business. The participants certainly illustrated this as they anthropomorphized their business roles as parents rather than partners.

Positive Gender Issues

We were surprised that little information came from direct questions about gender issues. Most of the participants perceived this as a non-issue in their relationships. However, gender concerns did surface when other areas were discussed. When asked to comment on the balance of power in their working relationship, most of the women reported feeling they had more power now because they had more influence in running the business. Three of the male respondents noticed this occurrence and encouraged it. The rest of the men perceived they had always been in power, and the separation/divorce had not changed that dynamic. The women attributed their feelings of empowerment to going through a separation or divorce. The connection may be that the process of breaking up as a romantic couple helped strengthen these women to participate more effectively in the business relationship.

It is also interesting to note that most of the females mentioned conscious strategies for maintaining serenity and stability in their working relationships. They discussed techniques or strategies such as using patience, choosing battles, and timing to “keep the waters smooth.” One of the female participants, who described herself as direct and aggressive in her business dealings, consciously switched gears when disagreement with her ex spouse surfaced.

I have my agenda of what I want but I always give him a choice and then, if it’s not what I want, I kind of work with it. But it’s the way you have to do it, and because there is a business at stake, I do not want to get in a fight with him personally, ‘cause it just takes away from the goals for the business. So when I say the relentless pursuit of peace on any level, I mean it.

The title of this theme is Positive Gender Issues, because the women and men in this study seemed satisfied with what was going on between them in terms of power and role definitions. Many of the women were the public face of the business and held the amount of power that they desired with no resistance from their former mates. Women also functioned as the peace keepers in the relationship, something that may be a carry over from their married life. This fits with one of John Gottman’s (1999) criteria for a successful marriage: Usually, women know their husband’s moods and take the responsibility for calming things down in order to maintain a more peaceful, married relationship. The women in this study did the same thing, but used this as a way of maintaining a more peaceful business relationship.

Secondary Findings

Although the major themes focus primarily on how separated or divorced copreneurs deal with each other or with an internal issue, an interesting minor theme focused on the environmental factors or roles that other stakeholders played in the business couples’

relationship. Staff, vendors, customers, and clients created little tension after they realized that their lives were not going to be negatively affected by the divorce or separation. Children and friends created more tension, but the biggest source of problems resulted from new significant others who felt threatened by the copreneurial relationship. On the other end of the spectrum, former in laws provided the most support. All but one participant mentioned that they maintained a cordial and even close relationship, with the families of their ex-spouse.

Discussion

The theory that developed from this study points to an interesting phenomenon in these couples' responses. According to their experiences, successful post separation/divorce copreneurial relationships cannot flourish simply by meeting tangible, practical needs such as the economics of earning a living or retaining a partner with the necessary skill sets. The driving force appears to be generated by multiple intangible, emotional factors such as trust, ability to compartmentalize, emotional connection, synergy, commitment to the business, and positive gender issues. The potential for success in post divorce copreneurial relationships increases when these internal factors interact with the external stakeholders or environmental factors.

According to our participants, trust is the most critical intangible ingredient (Insert figure A) and serves as the foundation for successful post separation/divorce copreneurial relationships. Even trust violations in the personal relationship are not enough to negatively impact trust concerns in the business relationship. Trust is a rare commodity in today's business world, and this may be the reason why these participants value it so highly. This pervasive trust exists not only between couples but also with each other's extended family. Trust is relied upon, though not always understood, and appears to operate as a lens through which one is allowed to enter and participate in this system. That may explain why significant others have a problem feeling

secure with the close working relationship of these copreneurial couples unless they “join the trust system.” These couples’ unspoken reliance on this existing trust allows them to interact without apparent, conscious energy. Without trust, the participants contend that the success of their divorced copreneurial relationships would be unable to exist.

The emphasis on trust is noteworthy in this study, because trust in the personal relationship had been broken with over 50% of the participants reporting extra marital affairs as causing the end of their marriage. Also, even without affairs, all participants experienced contentious divorces which can negatively affect the level of trust. How is it that the couples were able to distinguish between that trust and the trust in their business relationship? Perhaps the ideas of McEvily, Perrone, and Zaheer (2003) begin to address these questions. They contend that the empirical research on work related trust is fragmented and confusing, especially as to the preferred definition. Perhaps these couples will be adding to that confusion with yet another type of trust that is unique to their situation.

Another uniqueness of these divorced copreneurs is how they identify. Are they a family business or were they a family business? According to Rosenblatt, de Mik, Anderson and Johnson (1985), a family business is defined as “any business in which the majority ownership or control lies within a single family and in which two or more family members are or were directly involved in the business” (p. 4-5). Though technically not meeting the family business definition, the ongoing support of the extended family along with the participants’ perceptions suggest that everyone continues to identify themselves as “family.”

Another reason these divorced couples should remain within the family business field is that in many ways, their relationship still functions with many of the characteristics of a successful marriage. For example, John Gottman (1994, 1995, 1999, 2000) identified criteria for

what makes a successful marriage. These couples seemed to exhibit many of these characteristics including mutual respect, knowledge of managing problems, and knowing how to overcome gridlock. They also had a shared meaning, supported each other's dreams, and influenced each other in their business relationship.

In addition to Gottman's work, Johnson (1997) identified commitment as the central ingredient in sustaining a long term marriage. The participants held a strong commitment to their business and functioned together in a seemingly parental role. Perhaps this commitment was sufficient to sustain a long term business relationship for them and served in place of a marriage. And yet, the question remains: Have these couples evolved into business partners rather than former spouses or significant others? Or do the emotional connections expressed by the participants point to an additional perspective---that of redefining the expectations of marriage?

In thinking about expectations, our findings fit most closely with Coontz's (2005) observations on the future of marriage. In her comprehensive examination of the history of this institution, she observed that the primary motivation for marriages in the past was to create economic and political unions while today's marriages relied more on romantic love and sexual fulfillment. With the high divorce rate, Coontz identified these current expectations as unrealistic. She hypothesized that in order to stabilize marriages, future partners will have to rely primarily on real friendship and respect. The participants in this study appear to be the forerunners of a new model of couple relationships. They have retained past expectations of unions based on practical reasons, moved beyond current, unrealistic expectations of marriage, and created relationships based primarily on friendship and respect. By simultaneously embracing past and future models of marriage, these "retro-harbingers" have taken the negative connotation of divorce and reframed their relationship to a more positive conceptualization.

Implications for Practice

An important question to address is how this study is related to practice and research. A discussion of transferability will help in the understanding of how these findings and theory may be useful to family business practice. Transferability is the degree to which the results can be generalized or transferred to other contexts. This is strengthened when those transferring the results evaluate the appropriateness of this transfer (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). With this in mind, the results of this research may be used as guidelines for consultants and advisors working with business couples. For example, family business advisors should not automatically assume that a divorce means the end of a business. When working with copreneurs who are considering divorce, advisors can evaluate the couple's emotional and practical relationship components and help clients decide whether they have the necessary factors to remain in business together post divorce. Also, advisors may want to apply these findings when working with other partnerships in a family such as sibling partnerships or cousin consortiums.

Implications for Research

The limitations of this study lead the way for further research. In the methodology section, we expressed our disappointment in interviewing couples from similar cultural and racial backgrounds. What remains unknown is whether a more diverse sample would have significantly changed the findings. Another area that should be explored is whether these results are a U.S. phenomenon or if they exist universally. Does the concept of divorced copreneurs even translate to other cultures? If so, how is it similar or different from this group of U.S. participants? Would the addition of a researcher from another discipline such as management or finance add an important non-behavioral perspective?

Since intangible factors were significant in the research findings, they need further exploration. Are other factors such as a sense of responsibility central to these couples' success? Another area of investigation should focus on the evolution of couples' relationship post-separation/divorce. Finally, a longitudinal study that revisited these couples in a few years to compare their future answers with the present ones may strengthen the findings of this research.

The emergence of trust as the critical factor in these relationships suggests the need for further investigation on how these research findings compare to other business partnerships and married copreneurs. Do married copreneurs regard trust as such an integral part of their business relationship? How does trust evolve? Was it expressed in different ways or at different times?

In spite of its unanswered questions and limitations, we believe this study is significant as it extends the discussion on copreneurs and introduces another perspective on the effects of divorce. Our contribution is generating a theory that may enable consultants to assess, and copreneurs to evaluate, the potential of continuing the couple's business relationship post separation/divorce. We contend that divorce does not have to end a business relationship; in fact, a post divorce copreneurial business can continue to thrive.

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Table A

Characteristics of Couple

Reference #	Age M/F	Years Married	Years Divorced or Separated	Children in Business
1	62/61	28	14	3
2	57/49	12	13	0
3	49/36	13	3	0
4	36/36	6*	9	0
5	45/44	6	18	0
6	64/62	22	14	1
7	35/34	3	7	0
8	50's/43 M/M	15*	4	0
9	58/59	32	8	1

*Denotes that couple cohabitated but did not marry

Table B

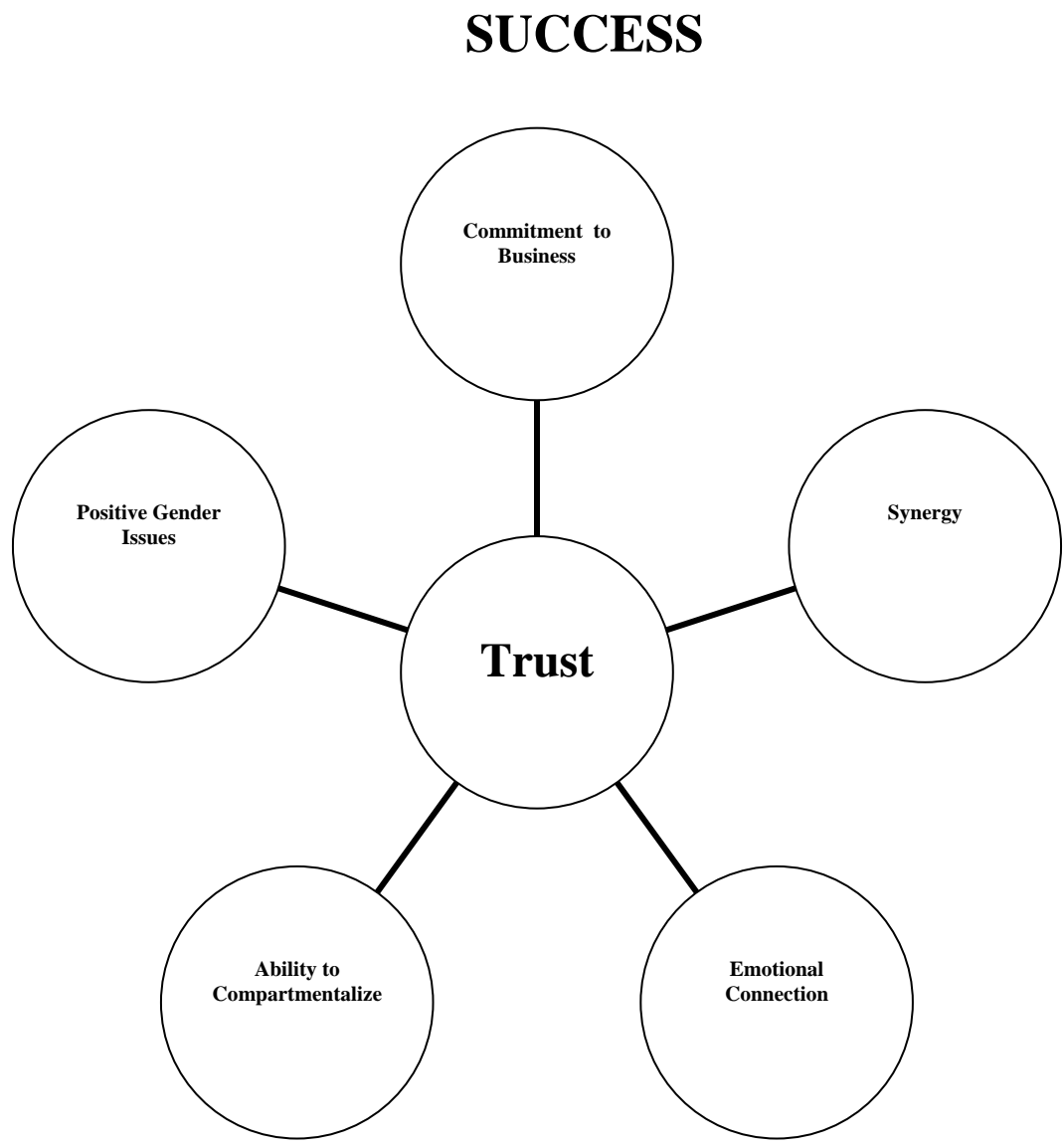
Characteristics of Business

Reference #	Industry	Age of Business*	Number of Employees	Assets/ Revenue (in millions)
1	Construction	17	25	1.3
2	Healthcare/ Nutrition	13	6	4.5
3	Real Estate	1	5	.05/.08
4	Food Service	11	2	1
5	Transportation	24	115	Not Offered
6	Hotel Chain	25	400	Not Offered
7	Restaurant Chain	12	175	1
8	Home Furnishing Manufacturing	16	700	100
9	Manufacturing Electronics	9/15	75	6

*All were first generation businesses

Figure A

Factors for Successful Copreneur Relationships: Post Divorce



There are six factors contributing to successful post divorce copreneur relationships, with trust as the most central and essential.