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## Exploring the Final Years of the Life of John F. Kennedy Jr.: A Mixed Methods Psychobiographical Case Study

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### Abstract

This present study utilized a mixed methods design to explore the inner emotional experiencing of John F. Kennedy Jr. during the last five years of his life. A large first-person data set culled from JFK Jr.'s letters and interviews was subjected to a qualitative theme analysis and the quantitative Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) program (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015). Among the major themes emerging from the qualitative analysis were JFK Jr.'s efforts to balance and integrate his public and private selves; navigating the Kennedy legacy and understanding his family's place in political history; and establishing *George* magazine with a goal of connecting politics to the general public. The LIWC analysis provided evidence of a highly logical critical thinker who generally carried himself with confidence and who was able to successfully adapt his tone to the needs of different contexts. It also found significant increases in word usage related to analytical thinking, anxiety, sadness, and death across two time periods. Collectively the data suggested that at the time of his death, JFK Jr. was in a period of contemplation, in which he sought to determine whether it was possible to balance a public and private life.

### Keywords

John F. Kennedy, Jr., Psychobiography, Case Study, Mixed Methods, Linguistic Analysis, Politics, *George Magazine*

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The year 2019 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of John F. Kennedy, Jr., the popular and much beloved son of President John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Fascination with the Kennedy family, the mystique of “Camelot,” and the life and future potential of JFK Jr. had he lived, remain high internationally. Recently, three new biographies (Cohan, 2019; Gillon, 2019; Taraborrelli, 2019), one psychobiography (Ponterotto, 2019), and multiple television documentary films (*JFK Jr. & Carolyn's Wedding: The Lost Tapes*, The Learning Channel, 2019; and *JFK Jr.: The Final Year*, Arts & Entertainment, 2019) have revisited the life of JFK Jr. During this very turbulent political time in the United States and worldwide, it is interesting to reflect on whether the U.S. political landscape would be different if JFK Jr. had lived and entered the political arena. In 2016, the year of the last presidential election in the U.S., JFK Jr. would have been 56 years of age, an opportune time to enter a presidential race.

One goal of psychobiography is to explore unanswered questions and remaining mysteries in the lives of public personalities (Schultz, 2005b; Schultz & Lawrence, 2017). In the case of JFK Jr., remaining questions include: was he destined to a life and career in politics like his father, President Kennedy, and his uncles, Senators Robert and Edward Kennedy? What was the status of his marriage to Carolyn Bessette Kennedy and how might the relationship and future family plans influence his career goals. The present psychobiographical case study attempts to answer these questions through an analysis of JFK Jr.'s first person documents spanning the five-year period, 1995-1999. In the next sections we revisit briefly the life of JFK Jr. and introduce readers to the psychobiographical approach to case study research.

## Remembering JFK Jr.

John F. Kennedy Jr. was in the public eye from his birth in 1960, two weeks after his father was elected president, until his death in 1999 when the Piper Saratoga small aircraft he was piloting crashed into the Atlantic Ocean seven miles off the coast of Martha's Vineyard (MA), killing him, his wife of three years, Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, and her older sister Lauren Bessette (Ponterotto, 2019). Many readers may remember iconic images of JFK Jr. throughout his short life. One of the earliest images was of young JFK Jr., then referred to as "John-John," playing under his father's desk in the Oval Office. More solemn was the image of young JFK Jr. saluting his father's casket as the funeral procession passed by on his third birthday, November 25, 1963.

As a young man, JFK Jr. was selected by *People* magazine in 1988 as the "Sexiest Man Alive" and one of the world's most eligible bachelors. Always under a media microscope, JFK Jr.'s life was chronicled throughout his years at Brown University and then New York University Law School (e.g., Littell, 2004). His first two failed attempts at passing the New York State Bar exam made headline news, as did his success on attempt number three. JFK Jr. spent four years as Assistant District Attorney for Manhattan, where he won all six cases in which he was the lead prosecutor. Not finding his calling in the field of law, JFK Jr. struck out on his own in co-founding the political magazine *George* with partner Michael Berman in 1995 (Littell, 2004; Noonan, 2006; Ponterotto, 2019). Though the magazine was initially successful, by 1999 *George* was failing financially and in the process of closing down. At this time JFK Jr. was contemplating his next career move (Gillon, 2019). Unfortunately, JFK Jr.'s personal and career development ended abruptly and prematurely on July 16, 1999 in his last and fatal flight on route to Martha's Vineyard. The track that JFK Jr.'s life would have taken if but not for that fatal flight, remains a mystery that we attempt to unravel, in part, in this mixed methods study.

## The Psychobiographical Approach

Psychobiographical research can be defined as a longitudinal case study of aspects of an historic person's individual life course (van Niekerk, Prenter, & Fouche, 2019). Psychobiography has long been associated with psychological case study methods since Freud's (1910/1957) profile of Leonardo da Vinci, and since other psychoanalysts applied their inquiry approach to understanding the unconscious motives of exceptional personalities throughout history (reviewed in Dooley, 1916; Fearing, 1927). By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, psychological theories undergirding psychobiography began to expand, as did methodologies employed to study exceptional lives (Elms, 1994; Runyan, 1982).

Perhaps the most influential psychobiographer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Harvard psychologist Erik Erikson, who used psychodynamic and psychosocial identity development models in profiling Martin Luther (Erikson, 1958) and Mahatma Gandhi (Erikson, 1969). Erikson's Gandhi profile earned him the 1970 Pulitzer Prize for "General Non-Fiction" and introduced psychobiography to millions of readers worldwide (Ponterotto, 2015).

In recent decades there has been an expanded growth and interest in psychobiography internationally by psychologists representing diverse specialty areas, including personality, developmental, child, counseling, and positive psychology (Mayer & Kovary, 2019; Schultz, 2005a; van Niekerk et al., 2019). One aspect of the growing interest in psychobiography has been a call for promoting a more rigorous science of psychobiography by supplementing traditional historiographic and qualitative methods with quantitative approaches (Kasser, 2017; Schultz & Lawrence, 2017). While acknowledging the primacy of discovery-oriented qualitative methods anchoring psychobiographical study historically (Elms, 2007; Kovary,

2018; Ponterotto, 2014), quantitative and mixed methods designs can enhance the collective understanding of exceptional personalities. Perhaps the most often cited proponent of quantitative approaches to psychobiography is Dean Keith Simonton of the University of California at Davis, whose quantitative approaches to studying the lives of King George IV (Simonton, 1998) and Thomas Edison (Simonton, 2015) have been exemplary.

Examples of mixed methods approaches to studying the inner psychology of historical figures include Kasser's (2013) study of musician John Lennon, and Ponterotto and Reynolds's (2013) profile of former world chess champion Bobby Fischer. Kasser (2013) incorporated recent quantitative methodology in linguistics by utilizing the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) computer program (Pennebaker, Boyd, Jordan, & Blackburn, 2015) to unearth the emotive and character origins of Lennon's classic song, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," while Ponterotto and Reynolds (2013) utilized retrospective personality assessments and inter-rater reliability measures to understand Bobby Fischer's psychological symptoms and character strengths at multiple points in his life. The present study turns to a more contemporary iconic figure who died tragically at the age of 38 years while piloting his own small aircraft: John F. Kennedy, Jr.

### **The Present Study**

The present psychobiographical sketch of JFK Jr. focuses specifically on the last five years of his life (1995-1999). This period was chosen because it represented multiple transition points in his personal life and career development. First and foremost, following the death of his mother, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in 1994, John became fully independent and at liberty to pursue his own personal and career path free from his mother's strong influence (Noonan, 2006; Ponterotto, 2019). During this time period John launched his own business venture, co-founding and editing the political-media magazine, *George*, and married Carolyn Bessette in 1996. John was establishing himself as a successful and independent professional outside Kennedy family connections. His closest friends and colleagues (e.g., Berman, 2014; Blow, 2002; Littell, 2004; Noonan & Huber, 2006; Terenzio, 2012) believed that John would use his career as a magazine publisher and editor as a launching pad to enter politics in New York State, perhaps in a run for New York State Governor. His untimely death at age 38 fed into the lore about the "Kennedy curse" and solidified his place in history as a tragic figure (Cohan, 2019; Klein, 2004).

Previous studies on John F. Kennedy Jr.'s life have taken a life-span and developmental approach and have relied primarily on secondary data sources to paint a living portrait of the Prince of Camelot (Heymann, 2007; Ponterotto, 2019; Taraborrelli, 2019). These biographies and psychobiographies are thorough and should be consulted for more detailed and all-encompassing information about John's life and development. However, the present work focuses on JFK Jr.'s life as reflected through his own voice - - public statements, culled via first person documents, during the last five years of his life (1995-1999). First-person sources such as letters, interviews, and public statements can be windows into the inner psychology of the person (Allport, 1942; Elms, 1994).

The present study aims to go below the surface of JFK Jr.'s image to learn about his inner emotional world towards the end of his life, and ponder what he would have done next had he lived beyond his 38 years. Understanding the inner psychology of historic figures, including those whose lives were tragically cut short, advances the profession of psychology and the study of exceptional personalities. Furthermore, studying the successes and challenges of a prominent figure of a multigenerational political family can inform those possibly interested in a career in politics. The research questions of the present mixed methods study are:

- 1) What do first person documents reveal about JFK Jr.'s inner life during the last five years of his life?
- 2) Do the documents provide insight into what JFK Jr.'s would have done next, such as enter politics, start a family, or both?

### Method

The present mixed methods study incorporated a constructivist-oriented phenomenological theme analysis (Moustakas, 1994) and a postpositivist, large data, statistical analysis using the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Mehl, & Neiderhoffer, 2003) program. The specific mixed methods design used was the Concurrent Triangulation design where the qualitative and quantitative components of the study are equally prioritized and where the data is collected and analyzed concurrently (Hanson, Creswell, Plano Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005).

### Data Sources and Collection

This study relied primarily on three first-person data sources, supplemented by secondary and tertiary-source documents. As JFK Jr.'s private correspondence is not available for research, the study was limited to a convenience sample of materials available to the general public. The authors then used purposive sampling to compile data consisting of statements spoken or written by JFK Jr. between 1995-1999. The first-person documents included JFK Jr.'s *George* magazine editor's letters, *George* magazine interview questions posed by JFK Jr. to political and public figures, and the transcripts of select television and radio interviews with JFK Jr. between 1995 and 1999. More specifically, twenty-six *George* magazine editor's letters were transcribed from the complete set of *George* magazine issues in the period 1995-1999. Twenty-two sets of *George magazine* introductions and interview questions from JFK Jr.'s interviews of political and public figures were transcribed (see list of interviewees in Table 1). Eight of JFK Jr.'s television (the Oprah Winfrey show, the History Channel, the Today Show, NBC, Washington College Commencement, and Hardball with Chris Matthews), or radio appearances (The Howard Stern Show, the Don Imus show) were also transcribed from YouTube.com. These three first-person sources of data totaled 53,619 words that formed the data base for the linguistic analysis. In addition to being publicly available, these data sources represent a wide and fairly comprehensive window into JFK Jr.'s first-person voice.

Secondary and tertiary sources were utilized to triangulate the data and provide context regarding events happening in John's life at different points in time. For secondary data the autobiographies and memoirs of individuals known to be close to J.F.K., Jr. during this period in his life were selected (Berman, 2014; Littell, 2004; Noonan, 2006; Radziwill, 2005; Terenzio, 2012). Third-person documents included major biographies and journalistic accounts of his life (Heymann, 2007; Klein, 2004; Ponterotto, 2019). In psychobiographical research it is important to attempt to triangulate multiple data sources to increase confidence in conclusions and interpretations made regarding the historic subject's behaviors and motives (see Ponterotto, 2017). In addition to transcribing all document sources, the authors also took notes during the television interviews to note body language and nonverbal behavior. All transcriptions were completed utilizing the free online web-site, OTranscribe.

Table 1: Public Figures Interviewed by John F. Kennedy, Jr. for *George Magazine*

Interviewee	Occupation/Significance	Issue
George Wallace	Controversial pro-segregation governor during 1960s	Oct./Nov 95
Warren Beatty	Academy Award winning actor	Dec.95/Jan.96
Charles Barkley	Controversial pro-basketball player	Feb./Mar. 96
Marion Hammer	First female leader of NRA	April/May 96
Christine Todd Whitman	Former governor of New Jersey	June 96
Iain Calder	Editor-in-chief of National Enquirer	Aug. 96
Pat Schroeder	First female U.S. Representative elected in Colorado	Sept. 96
Louis Farrakhan	Leader of Nation of Islam	Oct. 96
Gerald Ford	38 <sup>th</sup> President of the United States	Nov. 96
Billy Graham	Prominent American Evangelical Christian preacher	Dec. 96
Cokie Roberts	Journalist; co-anchor of ABC News' Sunday morning broadcast	Jan. 97
Bill Gates	Creator of Microsoft	Feb. 97
Dan Quayle	Vice President under President George H.W. Bush	Mar. 97
Colin Powell	4-star General in the U.S. Army	May 97
Don Imus	Controversial radio host	June 97
Ralph Reed	First Director of the Christian Coalition; conservative activist	July 97
Gerry Adams	Former leader of Ireland's Sinn Féin party	Aug. 97
Dalai Lama	Leader of Tibetan Buddhism	Dec. 97
Madeleine Albright	First female U.S. Secretary of State	Feb. 98
Vo Nguyen Giap	North Vietnamese General	Nov. 98
Mike McCurry	White House Press Secretary under President Bill Clinton	Jan. 99
Garth Brooks	Best-selling recording artist of all time; Country music superstar	April 99

### Text Analysis Procedure

The qualitative component of the study following a discovery-oriented constructivist research paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005). The senior author of this study took primary responsibility in reading and rereading the transcribed magazine letters and interviews, and listening to the radio interviews and watching the television interviews. During the initial round of coding, salient statements related to our research questions and to understanding John's inner emotional experiencing were highlighted, labeled, and included in a research journal. Following a second round of coding, the themes present in each data set were identified as major themes. Minor themes included clusters of meaning that did not transcend all data sets, but were determined by the authors to be relevant to the research questions and important to understanding John's experiencing and behavior. The research journal was consulted throughout the analysis process to guide our delineation of both major and minor themes. Throughout the coding process, the senior and second author met regularly to review emergent themes and reach consensus on theme formation, description, and quote selection.

The second component of the data analysis incorporated quantitative methods guided by the postpositivist research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ponterotto, 2005). Each of the three data sets was loaded into the computerized text analysis program called the Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC) (Pennebaker et al., 2003). The program utilizes a word count method to calculate the percentage of word categories within a text file. The program has over 70 word dimensions that encompass both content and style, including linguistic dimensions, grammatical units, as well as psychological processes (Pennebaker et al., 2015). The LIWC operates on the empirically supported theory that individuals convey psychological information about themselves through their speech and writing, as in the case of other approaches to discourse analysis (Pennebaker et al., 2003; Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010).

The LIWC has been utilized to answer a variety of psychologically based research questions, including identifying linguistic markers associated with emotional processes, such as psychological distancing (Tackman et al., 2018). It has been used to show that self-referential language can be interpreted as a linguistic marker of general distress proneness or negative emotionality and to identify the linguistic signature of psychological distancing (Markowitz & Hancock, 2016; Nook, Schleider, & Sommerville, 2017). Kacewicz and her colleagues demonstrated differences in the use of personal pronouns between higher and lower status individuals (Kacewicz, Pennebaker, Davis, Jeon, & Graesser, 2014). The LIWC has helped to identify differences between the suicide notes of males and females who complete suicide as well as to improve scientific understanding of speech patterns common to psychopathic offenders (Le, Woodworth, Gillman, Hutton, & Hare, 2017; Lester & Leenaars, 2016). Researchers have also utilized computerized text analysis to profile anonymous authors, dissect the underlying meaning of Beatles' songs, as well as to predict students' college grades from their admissions essays (Boyd & Pennebaker, 2015; Kasser, 2013; Pennebaker, Chung, Frazee, Lavergne, & Beaver, 2014; Petrie, Pennebaker, & Sivertsen, 2008).

The LIWC can provide frequency information on a variety of variables associated with the structure, grammar, and other linguistic dimensions of a text, as well as on psychological constructs and personal concerns. As the current study is focused on uncovering inner psychological processes as opposed to a discourse analysis, the LIWC output variables concerned with standard linguistic dimensions (i.e. pronouns, articles, auxiliary verbs, etc.), punctuation categories, and informal language markers (i.e. swear words, netspeak) were not included in the analysis. For the purposes of this study, only the categories directly related to the study's research questions were selected for analysis. These included *Affective Processes*, *Cognitive Processes*, *Time Orientation*, and *Personal Concerns*. Clustered within each of these broad categories are more specific content areas that will be delineated in the results section.

## Results

### Theme Analysis

The following eight themes emerged from the qualitative coding of the data and are discussed in turn: (a) Public versus Private, (b) Kennedy legacy, (c) Search for understanding, (d) Connection/ Engagement, (e) Influence, (f) Balance, (g) Humor, and (h) History. The themes presented here and in Table 2 were found at least five times in all three data sets.



Table 2

*Qualitative theme analysis codes*

Code	Definition
<i>Public vs. Private</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mentions of the difference between behavioral expectations in public vs. private spheres</li> <li>2. Lack of privacy involved in being a public figure</li> <li>3. How the two domains impact each other</li> </ol>
<i>Kennedy legacy</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discussion of Kennedy family members</li> <li>2. Seeking to know more about his father and other lost family members</li> </ol>
<i>Search for Understanding</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Statements where a concept is considered, debated, discussed in an effort to achieve understanding</li> </ol>
<i>Connection</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Directly or indirectly encouraging engagement in public life (e.g. through civic participation, discussion, reflection)</li> </ol>
<i>Influence</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. People/institutions/organizations who have influence and how they use it</li> </ol>
<i>Balance</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discussion of the different life domains</li> <li>2. Navigating different aspects of life</li> </ol>
<i>Humor</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Humor used to engage (sarcasm, self-effacing jokes)</li> <li>2. Humor used to deflect unwanted questions</li> </ol>
<i>History</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Statements about historical facts</li> <li>2. Comparisons between current situations and previous ones</li> </ol>

**Public vs. private.** One of the most prevalent themes was the notion of “public vs. private.” This theme refers to situations where the idea of public versus private aspects of an individual’s life are discussed. This includes examining different expectations for the two spheres and how the two domains interact to impact the individual. These references can be positive or negative. This theme generally arose in reference to public figures, most notably politicians, whose private behavior contradicts their public image. The magazine was published during the time when Bill Clinton’s infidelities were news staples, which likely had at least some influence on the frequency of the conversation’s occurrence. JFK Jr. asks nearly all of his interviewees about the public/private distinction suggesting a strong interest in learning about different people’s perspectives on the subject (see again, Table 1).

JFK Jr.’s statement that “public life is inherently dramatic,” reveals some of his perception of what it means to be in the public eye (Editor’s Letter, Dec. 1995/Jan. 1996):

These days, politicians, like celebrities, are as newsworthy for their private conduct as they are for their public duties. So why do we hold them to a higher standard than the other glitterati who are famous for being famous? And don’t tell me it’s because politicians are role models. That solemn fraud is obsolete...It might still be an honorable profession, but it is combat (Editor’s Letter, Feb. 1999).

He goes on to ask his readers, “If, as we have been so sternly reminded of late, we are a nation of laws and not men, isn’t it enough that our laws have moral authority even if our lawmakers don’t?” In essence, JFK Jr. is asking why the separation that seems to exist between the public and private spheres for other kinds of celebrities does not exist for politicians. Specifically, he is referring to the apparent lack of impact of a celebrity’s personal exploits on their career.

JFK Jr.’s interest in the public/private distinction is also deeply personal. Notoriously private around his family and dating life, JFK Jr. typically does not engage in such conversations. However, under certain circumstances he could be engaged around his private life, and his interview on Howard Stern’s radio show in 1996 is one such example. Stern starts off by discussing his surprise at being asked by JFK Jr. to be on the cover of *George* magazine considering how dismissive he has been of JFK Jr.’s role at the magazine. JFK Jr. ribs Howard about how nervous Howard was when they first met, while Howard teases JFK Jr. about his love of roller-blading. Howard then pivots to the infamous footage of JFK Jr. and Carolyn Bessette, his girlfriend at the time, arguing in Central Park. Siding with JFK Jr., he criticizes the public’s strong reaction to the video. Rather than avoiding the subject, JFK Jr. shared that he and Carolyn noticed someone with a camera but did not realize they were being filmed until several days later when the news broke. “Everyone comes up and says, ‘Did you see the tape? Did you see the tape?’ No, I was in it, why do I have to see the tape?” JFK Jr. said. Stern talks more about the tape itself before shifting to talk about the famous women JFK Jr. has been linked with. Eventually, Stern returns to the video and asks about the reason for the argument. Despite his persistence, JFK Jr. only reveals that the argument was about “the dumbass things you can argue about, it was like something silly,” he never sounds frustrated and continues to banter playfully with Stern for several more minutes until the end of the interview.

JFK Jr. also openly contemplates the public’s interest in his family, telling Warren Beatty, “It’s interesting to me that the personal lives of my family are such a source of public fascination” (Dec. 1995/Jan. 1996). This implies that he is considering this public, private distinction in reference not just to himself but in terms of his family. This leads to the second theme, the Kennedy legacy.

**Kennedy legacy.** JFK Jr. is often asked, in different degrees of directness, about his family. He is forced to contend with what it means to grow up with a famous family and to be asked about relatives (e.g. his father) he barely remembers, if at all. JFK Jr. generally tries to be vague when asked personal questions, but his response differs greatly on the context in which the subject comes up. When confronted with unexpected or indirect questions about his family in interviews, JFK Jr. often appears very guarded in response. Video shows JFK Jr. appearing apprehensive, and he often looks away or shakes his leg, as in his interview with talk show host Oprah Winfrey. She immediately dives into the subject of the Kennedy family by touting her friendship with Kennedy cousin, Maria Shriver. JFK Jr. appears taken aback and visibly uncomfortable -- stuttering his answers and pointing out what he thinks Oprah really wants to talk about, saying, “I mean, I don’t know, I feel like this is a segue to talk about my mother so...” effectively ending the conversation there.

When acting as a Kennedy family representative, JFK Jr. will talk slightly more openly about his family. In an interview with news anchor Katie Couric in 1999, he discusses his mother’s efforts to make sure that his father’s interests were represented in his and Caroline’s upbringing. Then he discloses his mother’s opinion on entering politics, “That it was better to have a sense of who you are and your own place in life before you really took that on so that kind of healthy skepticism I think was an important part of her parenting.” Later in that same interview, Couric plays a video clip of President Kennedy being asked about whether or not he would want his children to go into politics, and he responds affirmatively. Couric proceeds to

ask John if he thinks he is disappointing his father by not pursuing a life in politics, and he firmly responds, “No,” and goes on to state that, “We all want to participate in the way we can.” Later adding, “I think everyone has to find their own way in politics or any other profession on their own. Do it on their own speed and in their own way.”

When the Kennedy legacy comes up on his own terms, as it does during many of John’s *George* magazine interviews, he relishes the opportunity to ask his father’s and uncle’s contemporaries about their memories of his father. When interviewing George Wallace, noted segregationist and former Alabama governor, John asks him about his relationship with President Kennedy, at one point asking, “Did you ever think yourselves as enemies?” “Political enemies, sometimes; but personal enemies, no,” Wallace responded, going on to speak of his fondness for President and Jacqueline Kennedy.

John also asks actor Warren Beatty about working on his uncle, Robert Kennedy’s 1968 presidential campaign and how Beatty responded to being asked by RFK to play the former president in a biopic. In these moments, John seems truly interested in utilizing the opportunity he has to pick the brain of people who knew family members, particularly his father, that he never had the chance to know. John selected interview subjects who were often considered contrarians, international figures from across the political spectrum, who generally went against the status quo (refer back to Table 1).

**Search for understanding.** John’s search for understanding is the third major theme. Across all data sets, John clearly is a man in search of knowledge. John tries to understand his family by asking those who knew them about their recollections. The *George* magazine editor’s letters focus on John’s musings about the current state of politics, pressing social issues, and the intersection of politics and pop culture. He makes comparisons between current events and their historical predecessors. He attempts to decipher current political issues through critical examination and calls attention to the people he believes will be influential in shaping the future. He often utilizes the editor’s letters as a place to wonder out loud. John often connects current events to existential concerns, as in:

The author surmised that the more we live a life governed by conventional norms of proper behavior, and the nicer and more responsible we force ourselves to be, the further we drift from the essence of our true self- one that’s ruled by passion and instinct (Editor’s Letter, Sept. 1997).

John also engages his interview subjects in difficult dialogues, regularly asking his subjects about controversial and challenging moments in their lives, such as when he asks the Dalai Lama, “Do you ever regret that perhaps you did not have a choice in the life that you have to lead?” John does not shy away from complex topics and questions about controversies associated with the subjects. John discusses race with former-NBA star Charles Barkley and Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, repeatedly pressing Farrakhan about the inflammatory nature of his rhetoric firmly but respectfully. He asks Gerald Ford whether he regrets pardoning Richard Nixon and asks Gerry Adams, the leader of the Irish Republican Army, why Americans should even care about the unrest in Northern Ireland.

**Connection.** The fourth major theme, connection, refers to John’s focus, whether directly or indirectly on fostering people’s engagement with politics at both the local and national level. John states that one of the reasons he and his business and *George* Magazine partner, Michael Berman, started the magazine was to, “...make politics more accessible by covering it in an entertaining and compelling way, popular interest and involvement in the process will follow” (Editor’s Letter, Oct./Nov. 1995). In another letter he invites the readers

to “defy the prognosticators and stay involved in the public life of our country, whatever that means to you” (Editor’s Letter, Jan. 1997). In 1996, he told journalist Chris Matthews of MSNBC, that he saw his new role as journalist to have put him, “in the business of harvesting attention” and he used *George* as a platform for him to bring issues he and his team felt were important into the public eye.

**Influence.** Influence is another prominent theme that surfaced during coding. In the broadest sense, *George* magazine was in the business of exploring the institutions, organizations, and individuals that influenced the political and broader social landscape. John’s editor’s letters often reflect his analysis of both historical and current influences on the changing political landscape. John describes his interviews, listed in Table 1, as “stories about intriguing people - - not just elected officials, who are “political” in the traditional sense of the word, but a wide range of folks that have a profound impact on our nation” (Editor’s Letter, Jan. 1997). Indeed, an examination of the list of John’s interviewees includes politicians and other political figures from both sides of the aisle; from controversial figures like Louis Farrakhan and North Vietnamese leader Vo Nguyen Giap; and religious leaders including the Dalai Lama and the evangelist Billy Graham. Interviewees also includes a range of other noteworthy personalities including actors, musicians, and sports superstars. John was interested in exploring not only major players in the national consciousness, but also the technological and social determinants at play.

**Balance.** Among the issues tackled in *George* magazine, one that repeatedly comes up is the notion of balance, specifically how one can manage a public and private life. John asks nearly all of his interviewees about how they navigate balance among their different life domains. He asks conservative political strategist Ralph Reed, “Is there a conflict between the obligations of your faith and the demands of your position as a political strategist engaged in some bare-knuckled political fights?” Later in the same interview, John asks how Reed navigates the demands of career and family, “You present a picture to the world of family bliss, yet you know as well as I that politics is hardly a family-friendly profession, particularly if you travel over 200,000 miles a year. So without being too nosy, how do you do it?” Reed’s response acknowledges that there is “a sacrifice you and your family choose to make because you believe the trade-off is worth it.”

John empathizes with the many roles the Dalai Lama must fulfill saying, “You have many roles to play: religious leader, political leader, world advocate for Tibet. Your life is not easy.” John even goes so far as to ask former President Gerald Ford whether he consulted his family for advice when dealing with most difficult decisions of his presidency. Perhaps here, John is contemplating how his family (e.g. his wife) might be involved in a potential political career.

The fact that John himself was considering the place of these roles in his own life is also suggested in other small moments, where he mentions how people always seem to ask whether he is running for office or, “Is your wife pregnant yet?” (Editor’s letter, Jan. 1997). John remains evasive when directly faced with direct questions like whether or not he will run for political office, once stating that “there is time for many things.” He acknowledges the pressure he faces in this area, telling Oprah in a 1996 television interview, “There is this great weight of expectation and anticipation and I think that part of you wants to sort of address that in some way. And maybe do something different, but just sort of engage it.”

**Humor.** Humor occurs across all data sets, although its style and use vary. John’s overall tone in the editor’s letters is relatively light and optimistic. He utilizes sarcasm and levity to engage the reader and balance the serious nature of the topics addressed in the

magazine, “There have been many memorable speeches made at national political conventions. Mine wasn’t one of them” (Editor’s Letter, Aug. 1996). Unafraid to poke fun at himself, John wrote in the editor’s letter, “In this, our media issue, we at George do what comes easiest in our business: We talk about ourselves” (Editor’s Letter, May 1997). The overall tone of the interviews John conducts tends to be more reserved and formal. However, John manages to incorporate humor, such as when he sarcastically tells Ralph Reed, “Moving on to your career as a hack like the rest of us...” or when he asks Charles Barkley if he could handle the pay cut that comes with being governor.

When John himself is being interviewed, he uses humor to connect with his interviewer. His entire interview with Howard Stern is characterized by a playful banter, despite the often intrusive nature of Stern’s questions. He also uses humor in his interview with Don Imus; he responds to a question about his connection to Esther Neuberger saying, “She is my literary agent. Literary in quotes.” Later on, he shares an anecdote about how President Warren G. Harding’s wife poisoned him with “an endless dose of laxatives.” Here he also uses sarcasm as a way to deflect from tough questions, like when Don Imus asked about the personal impact of him discussing his cousin’s controversial private behavior he responds by minimizing the notion of an impact at all saying, “I think a career outside politics doesn’t qualify as ruining a life so, I think he’s looking forward to it.” Part of John’s charm on camera seems to come from the positive, lighthearted tone he often employs.

**History.** History is the final theme that emerged from the data. Historical facts figure prominently in John’s editor’s letters as he often invokes the words of George Washington and the other founding fathers. John provides historical context for the theme of each issue and he often juxtaposes historical situations with current ones. It is in this context that John sometimes writes about events from his personal history, particularly his adolescence, as if to provide a frame for the reader to understand how these experiences have shaped his evolving views over time. Academic historians are also brought in with semi-regularity to write articles about political history. John’s interviews always begin with a concise explication of the subject’s historical relevance and his inevitably his questions touch on pivotal moments in the subject’s political life.

### **Linguistic Inquiry Word Count**

Compilation data sets (organized by time period in Table 3 and by data source in Table 4) composed of the relevant data files were run through LIWC for the previously selected sets of variables (Pennebaker et al., 2015). Output provided quantitative insight into John’s communication style, emotional life, and the content of his public statements. Individual variables represent the frequency of occurrence. Summary variables, which each take into account several individual variables, are standardized composite scores that represent percentile scores between 0-100. The summary variables were developed by LIWC creators based on prior research in linguistic analysis (Pennebaker et al., 2015).

Table 3

*Comparison of all first-person data across two time periods, 1995-1997a and 1997b-1999*

Variable	1995-1997a	1997b-1999	F-ratio
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	
<i>N</i>	37	31	
<i>Summary Variables</i>			
Analytical Thinking	72.58 (21.04)	82.71 (16.46)	1.196*
Clout	81.33 (10.69)	78.28 (9.11)	0.23
Authentic	27.35 (14.03)	21.94 (9.18)	4.704
Emotional Tone	61.22 (20.38)	49.65 (24.11)	0.805*
<i>Affective Processes</i>			
Affective Processes	4.52 (1.58)	4.83 (1.13)	0.735
Positive Emotion	3.19 (1.26)	3 (0.96)	0.943
Negative Emotion	1.19 (.65)	1.7 (.96)	3.595**
Anxiety	0.19 (0.19)	0.33 (0.31)	11.116*
Anger	0.4611 (0.37)	0.612 (0.61)	2.955
Sadness	0.19 (0.22)	0.357 (0.29)	2.159**
<i>Social Processes</i>			
Social Processes	11.94 (2.51)	10.38 (2.96)	0.495*
Family	0.65 (0.67)	0.38 (0.47)	2.047
Friends	0.17 (0.16)	0.12 (0.20)	0.602
<i>Cognitive Processes</i>			
Cognitive Processes	11.56 (2.51)	9.90 (2.40)	0.042**
Insight	2.92 (1.29)	2.09 (0.84)	0.754**
Causation	1.72 (.59)	1.43 (0.73)	2.396
Discrepancy	1.20 (0.68)	0.96 (0.48)	0.618
Tentative	2.58 (0.72)	2.71 (1.05)	9.184
Certainty	1.45 (0.56)	1.30 (0.63)	0.09
Differentiation	3.12 (0.86)	2.74 (1.33)	0.64
<i>Time Orientation</i>			
Past Focus	4.22 (1.69)	3.83 (1.72)	0.002
Present Focus	8.88 (2.54)	7.46 (2.26)	0.287*
Future Focus	1.03 (0.63)	0.81 (0.48)	2.895
<i>Personal Concerns</i>			
Work	3.83 (1.35)	4.07 (1.98)	5.796
Leisure	1.36 (0.98)	1.14 (1.07)	0.042
Home	0.44 (0.38)	0.38 (0.41)	0.031
Money	0.68 (0.51)	0.89 (0.70)	2.619
Religion	0.30 (0.57)	0.42 (0.53)	0.275
Death	0.14 (0.17)	0.42 (0.37)	10.645**
<i>Word Count</i>	33046	20573	

Note: \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$

Table 4

*Comparisons of data by source: Editor's letters, Interview questions, and Interviews with John*

Variable	Editor's Letters	Interview Q's	Interviews w/ John	F-ratio
<i>Summary Variables</i>				
Analytical Thinking	85.15 <sup>b</sup>	77.18 <sup>b</sup>	39.53 <sup>ac</sup>	37.15**
Clout	77.54 <sup>a</sup>	87.36 <sup>bc</sup>	70.94 <sup>a</sup>	14.43**
Authentic	25.83 <sup>ab</sup>	18.45 <sup>bc</sup>	38.08 <sup>ac</sup>	9.79**
Emotional Tone	58.46 <sup>ab</sup>	42.34 <sup>bc</sup>	81.43 <sup>ac</sup>	12.29**
<i>Affective Processes</i>				
Positive Emotion	4.87	4.1	5.22	2.97
Negative Emotion	3.26 <sup>ab</sup>	2.42 <sup>bc</sup>	4.31 <sup>ac</sup>	11.89**
Anxiety	1.48	1.56	0.854	2.29
Anger	0.3	0.17	0.27	1.8
Sadness	0.51	0.7 <sup>b</sup>	0.18 <sup>a</sup>	3.57*
<i>Social Processes</i>				
Family	0.31	0.27	0.08	2.76
Friends	10.13 <sup>a</sup>	12.71 <sup>c</sup>	12.41 <sup>c</sup>	8.01**
<i>Cognitive Processes</i>				
Insight	0.47	0.59	0.65	0.478
Causation	0.13	0.17	0.17	0.264
Discrepancy	10.19 <sup>b</sup>	10.54 <sup>b</sup>	14.41 <sup>ac</sup>	11.97**
Tentative	2.3 <sup>b</sup>	2.24 <sup>b</sup>	4.58 <sup>ac</sup>	22.08**
Certainty	1.34 <sup>a</sup>	2.09 <sup>c</sup>	1.37 <sup>a</sup>	12.18**
Differentiation	1.03	1.16	1.21	0.493
<i>Time Orientation</i>				
Past Focus	2.75	2.23 <sup>b</sup>	3.26 <sup>a</sup>	5.22**
Present Focus	1.38	1.23	1.83	3.1*
Future Focus	2.89	2.9	3.36	0.62
<i>Personal Concerns</i>				
Work	3.54	4.66	4.76	4.16*
Leisure	7.34 <sup>b</sup>	8.35 <sup>b</sup>	12.14 <sup>ac</sup>	18.51**
Home	1.03	0.75	0.94	1.75
Money	3.82	4.24	3.71	0.532
Religion	1.36	1.25	0.79	1.04
Death	0.35	0.52	0.41	1.33
	0.92 <sup>b</sup>	0.67	0.39 <sup>c</sup>	3.22*
	0.29	0.55	0.07	2.8
	0.32	0.24	0.07	2.308

Note. <sup>a</sup>= significantly different from Interview Questions; <sup>b</sup>= significantly different from Interviews with John; <sup>c</sup>= significantly different from Editor's Letters; \* = p,.05; \*\* = p<.01

The LIWC output for each of the compilation text files organized by time period: 1995-1997a and 1997b-1999, were analyzed by t-tests to determine if differences between groups were statistically significant. *Analytical thinking* increased between the first and second time period. *Emotional tone*, or sentimentality, decreased significantly over time from slightly positive to neutral. This change is also reflected in the *Anxiety* and *Sadness* variables which both increased across time. The rate of occurrence for cognitive processing words drops significantly over time, likely stemming from the significant reduction from *Insight* words, reflecting less of a feeling of understanding during the latter time period. *Present focus* dropped significantly over time, perhaps indicating John's attention was more divided in the months closer to his death. Words associated with *Death* occurred more frequently during the latter time period, as John's closest cousin Anthony Radziwill battled terminal cancer (see Radziwill, 2005), and as his cousin Michael Kennedy was killed in a ski accident in December of 1997 (see Ponterotto, 2019).

The LIWC analyses for each of the compilation text files organized by data source: Editor's letters, Interview questions, and Interviews with John, were subjected to simple between-subjects analyses of variance (ANOVAs). In the cases where the overall ANOVA was significant, post-hoc tests were conducted. As seen in Table 4, several interesting effects emerged. Both the editor's letters and the interview questions were significantly higher on summary variable *Analytical thinking* than the interviews with John. Both of the *George* magazine sourced groups scored very high on *Analytical thinking*, which indicates formal, logical thinking, while the interviews with John are on the lower end, suggesting informal, narrative thought. This would be expected as the first two are culled directly from the magazine, where more formal writing would be used.

The interview questions group scored significantly higher than both the editor's letters and interviews with John on *Clout*. This suggests that John operated from a perspective of relatively high expertise, particularly when he conducted interviews. Overall, the relatively high marks found across groups on *Clout* are likely indicative of social status, confidence, and leadership potential (Pennebaker et al., 2003). *Authentic*, a summary variable indicating how relatively open an individual's communication style is, varied significantly from source to source. John was most open and disclosing when being interviewed, less so when writing his editor's letters, and he is relatively guarded when conducting his own interviews. *Emotional tone* was also significantly different across data sources. Interviews with John had a very positive *Emotional tone*, while John's editor's letters were only slightly positive. The interview questions scored lowest, indicating either a relatively emotionless tone or ambivalence (Pennebaker et al., 2003).

Statistically significant differences were also found on ten of the individual variables examined, see Table 4. Notably *Positive emotion* was highest in the interviews with John, followed by the editor's letters and then the Interview questions. *Anger* was highest in the interview questions and significantly lower in the live interviews with John. This speaks both to John's positive public persona and his more confrontational interview style. John's interview questions scored significantly higher on *Social processes* than his editor's letters did, perhaps lending insight into the content of John's interview questions. Words indicative of cognitive processes, including *Insight* and *Tentativeness*, occurred most frequently in the interviews with John, where a *Present orientation* was strongest. *Causation* words were found at significantly higher rates in the interview questions than in both the editor's letters and the interviews with John. Across sources John displays a present-focused time orientation, as opposed to past or future orientation.

Overall, this suggests that in live, less structured situations like television and radio interviews, John presented himself as a thoughtful, happy person interested in exploring and understanding the relationship between social processes. In more formal contexts like the



editor's letters and the interviews that John conducts in particular, he adopts a more neutral tone. John's interview questions have a more confident tone and are concerned with understanding cause and effect.

### Discussion

The qualitative analysis paints a picture of John as a man searching for understanding of both the world and himself. He was concerned with living under the weight of the Kennedy legacy. John wondered about the blurring between the public and private spheres of public figures and if one could achieve balance among life areas. He analyzed the people, institutions, and systems that influenced political process at the time and throughout United States' history. His public statements, often rife with humor, encouraged connection—with the issues and with the nation's political process at large.

The quantitative analysis both supported and further illuminated the qualitative analysis. It demonstrated how John shifted his tone across contexts, from very positive in interviews where he is the subject, to a relatively neutral presentation when he is the interviewer. John's first-person documents portray a highly logical, critical thinker who operated from a perspective of relatively high expertise. However, when in more casual contexts, John expresses a lot of positive emotion and is able to let his guard down somewhat. John became increasingly formal and analytical over time, however, he appeared less confident in the final two years of his life. John's emotional tone also became more negative across the two time periods, as words indicative of anxiety and sadness increased. John's attention was less present-focused and death a more prominent concern from the first to the second time period. The qualitative and quantitative results complement each other in such a way that leads to a richer understanding of John's final years. Below we revisit the study's two guiding research questions.

#### **RQ 1. What do first person documents reveal about JFK Jr.'s inner life during the last five years of his life?**

The first-person documents utilized in this project reveal a great deal about John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s attitude and communication style from 1995 to 1999. John was a confident, charming man who was serious and intellectual when writing or interviewing subjects for *George* magazine, and humorous and amiable in person. John utilized humor and *Positive tone* both as a means of engagement (such as connecting with the reader or interviewer) and deflection (avoiding answering uncomfortable personal questions). John was guarded about his private life and protective of his family. He was trying to make sense of being in the shadow of the legacy of a father he did not know while struggling to find his own identity. John also appears to be really trying to understand or make sense of things, political and otherwise. He is concerned with social processes and people. John thought deeply about politics and what the benefits and costs were of being a public figure, and how one could navigate the varying demands inherent in being an adult. He approached these concerns in an objective, neutral manner. However, despite his overall confidence, John had not yet reached a place where he had made sense of those concerns.

#### **RQ2. Do the documents provide insight into what JFK Jr.'s would have done next, such as enter politics, start a family, or both?**

According to our data, John's focus was primarily on the present during the last five years of his life, although his present focus decreased significantly during the final two years

of his life. John was notably more concerned with the past and its relationship to the present, rather than the future. This was true across domains whether regarding political issues or contending with his own family legacy. Across analytical methods, JFK Jr. had a clear focus on politics, culture, and the connection between the two. The content of John's discourse focused on understanding work and social issues, and at first glance appears to be scarcely concerned with family life. However, in more subtle ways, JFK Jr. is keenly interested in how public figures navigate and attempt to balance their public and private lives. In different ways JFK Jr. asks many of his interviewees how they feel about their decision to live in the public eye. This reflects JFK Jr.'s inner search for understanding and clarity regarding his identity and his future.

When asked directly if he has a future in politics, JFK Jr. often implies that there is time to make such decisions but that there is an important internal process of identity building that must occur first. These statements, made during several interviews with JFK Jr., support the conclusion that JFK Jr. was in the process of determining who he was and what he stood for before taking on politics. The political nature of the magazine itself implies a sort of fascination with the political world and speaks of an effort to dissect and understand it. In conclusion, the present analysis, along with extensive secondary information from close friends (particularly from Littell, 2004; Noonan & Huber, 2006; Terenzio, 2012) lead to the conclusion that John would have eventually pursued politics. This conclusion is far more certain than any that can be made about his family life. JFK Jr.'s guardedness around his marriage and his wife's well-known discomfort with public attention contribute to difficulty in drawing firm conclusions in this area.

### Limitations and Impact

Although a sizeable sample of first-person words was included in our analysis, the data is limited in terms of its focus. All of the sources are public, related to *George* magazine, and relatively professional in nature. This increases the odds that John was cautious had his guard up and was engaging in impression management, potentially skewing the results. Some *George* magazine data were not able to be included in analysis as they were not available. Similarly, all of the television and radio interviews JFK Jr. participated in during the time period examined were not available to the researchers. Additional data would allow for stronger conclusions to be made, and could possibly alter and/or expand our conclusions.

The current work expands the available knowledge about John F. Kennedy, Jr., particularly about how aspects of his psychology presented themselves during the final five years of his life (e.g., Ponterotto, 2019). It also is an example of how computerized text analysis programs can be utilized in psychobiography research. It is hoped that this study will stimulate follow-up research on John F. Kennedy, Jr., his life, and his potential future had he lived. The mixed methods approach employed in this study can also be extended to other public figures.

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