



What constitutes a compelling case study?

Never Stand Still

Case-Based and Qualitative Research in Business Administration in China

2014 Conference at Nanjing University

Roadmap

A bit of background

Case studies in the field of management over the past 20 years

A case for teaching is very different from a case for research

What is a compelling case? Or how to persuade with case studies

Reviewing 4 excellent case studies

Some concluding thoughts

50 min



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Want to encourage you to submit to MOR



EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Arie Y. Lewin, Duke University, USA

2011	2013
Impact Factor: 2.441	ISI Impact Factor: 3.277
ISI Ranking: 29/168 (Management)	ISI Ranking: 14/172 (Management)

- **New decentralized editorial process**
- **25 Senior Editors such as myself are fully autonomous in their decisions on a submission**

The status of case studies in the field of management over the past 20 years



I was a master and doctoral student
at Columbia Business School
1991 to 1997

We were taught:

- Good social science = large n sample with elaborate econometrics
- You must have regression analyses in dissertation to get a good job!

A more detailed account is given in my "Stanley Reiter Lecture 2005" available at <http://jpm.li/80>

But I have been more successful with my case studies than my large-n-econometric studies

My Top Google Scholar Citations

Title	1-20	Cited by	Year	
Knowledge and competitive advantage: the coevolution of firms, technology, and national institutions	JP Murmann Cambridge Univ Pr	681	2003	Descriptive Historical Analysis with theory
Toward a systematic framework for research on dominant designs, technological innovations, and industrial change	JP Murmann, K Frenken Research Policy 35 (7), 925-952	346	2006	Theory
Dominant designs, technology cycles, and organizational outcomes	ML Tushman, JP Murmann Managing in the modular age: architectures, networks, and organizations, 316	271 *	1998	Theory
Competition in a multimarket environment: The case of market exit	W Boeker, J Goodstein, J Stephan, JP Murmann Organization Science 8 (2), 126-142	109	1997	Regression Analysis
Bringing managers into theories of multimarket competition: CEOs and the determinants of market entry	J Stephan, JP Murmann, W Boeker, J Goodstein Organization Science 14 (4), 403-421	45	2003	Regression Analysis

1992: Very Little Qualitative, Small-n or Case Studies



47 Research Articles published in total

1 Qualitative Article published

2% Share

2013: More Qualitative, Small-n or Case Studies



74 Research Articles published in total

14 Qualitative/small-n Articles published

19% Share

Data available from me upon request

Today 10 times as many Qualitative, Small-n or Case Studies in AMJ



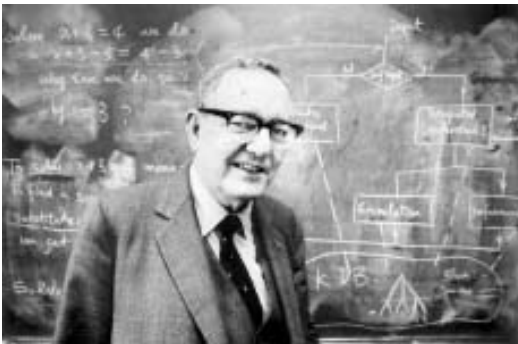
Articles	1992	2013
Total	47	74
Qualitative/small-n	1	14
Share	2%	19%

This is fantastic news for us!

Today 10 times as many Qualitative, Small-n, or Case Studies in AMJ



Why did this change happen?



In Herber Simon's obituary, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reports:

[Simon] had hoped to use mathematics to give the social sciences the same rigor as such hard sciences as physics and chemistry, but found that a frustrating experience; even with the new machine called a computer that was available at Carnegie Tech, **it seemed that something was always missing when human factors were translated into numbers.**

Maria Konnikova rearticulates this point in [Scientific American](#).

Today 10 times as many Qualitative, Small-n, or Case Studies in AMJ



Why did this change happen?

- Many people came to feel that there is something profoundly missing from scholarship in management:

Meaning and Purpose

Example



Jane Dutton

*Robert L. Kahn Distinguished University
Professor of Business Administration and
Psychology at University of Michigan*

Center Positive Organizations: Our domains of research are **Positive Leadership, Meaning and Purpose, Ethics and Virtues, Relationships and Culture** in an organizational setting.”

Many researchers crave to publish case studies

Evidence

Article	Google Scholar Citations
Eisenhardt, K. M. 1989. Building Theories from Case Study Research. Academy of Management Review, 14(4): 532-550.	27395
Eisenhardt, K. M., & Graebner, M. E. 2007 . Theory Building From Cases: Opportunities And Challenges. Academy of Management Journal, 50(1): 25-32.	4228
Siggelkow, N. 2007 . Persuasion With Case Studies. The Academy of Management Journal, 50(1): 20-24.	1361

I ran PDWs on Qualitative Methods at Academy of Management Meeting from 2005 to 2008



The Power of Richness: The Why, When, Where and How of Qualitative Research Methods



The Power of Richness II: Exploring Qualitative Research Methods

200 to 300 people came each year.



The Power of Richness III: Crafting Qualitative Research Papers



The Power of Richness IV: How Can Qualitative Methods Help us

Slides from Presentations
Available at <http://jpm.li/81>

Today 10 times as many Qualitative, small-n or Case Studies in AMJ



How did this change happen?

- Editors of AMJ since 2001 wanted to have more qualitative research
- Appointed associate editors for it

Editor	Period
Tom Lee	2002-2004
Sara Rynes	2005-2007
Duane Ireland	2008-2010
Jason A. Colquitt	2011-2013
Gerry George	2014 -

There are still too few qualitative, small-n, or case studies in our journals

Articles	2013	My goal for 2025
Total	74	
Qualitative/small-n	14	
Share	19%	50%

- **How do we get more to be published?**
- **By submitting a large number of compelling studies to journals!**
- **I am here to share with you some ideas to help you prepare compelling case studies**

Research case studies are very different from Teaching cases

- **A case for teaching**
 - can simply illustrate a general principle that was already known before
 - can even be fictitious
- **A research case study**
 - needs to develop some potentially new theoretical knowledge
 - or at least develop a new idea that was not previously articulated

What is a compelling case? Or how to persuade with case studies

Siggelkow, N. 2007.

Persuasion With Case Studies.

The Academy of Management
Journal, 50(1): 20-24.



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What is a compelling case?

Or how to persuade with case studies



Make sure that you have a talking pig!

会说话的猪



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What is a compelling case?

Or how to persuade with case studies



Pick a case with one or more of the following features:

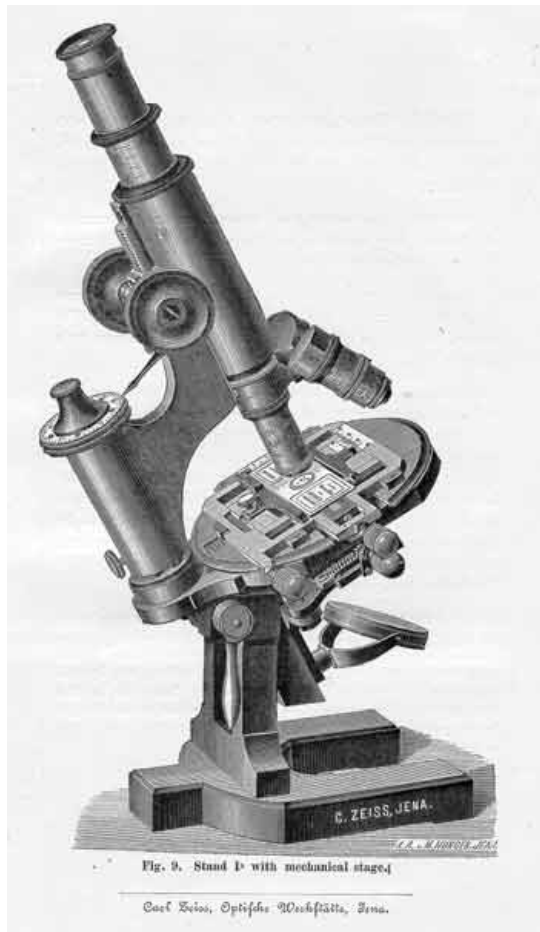
- readers would not expect it (it is counterintuitive)
- existing theories say that it should not exist or cannot explain it
- it sheds light on a phenomenon that no one has studied before

Biology: **Lizards** who lose all or part of their tails can grow new ones.

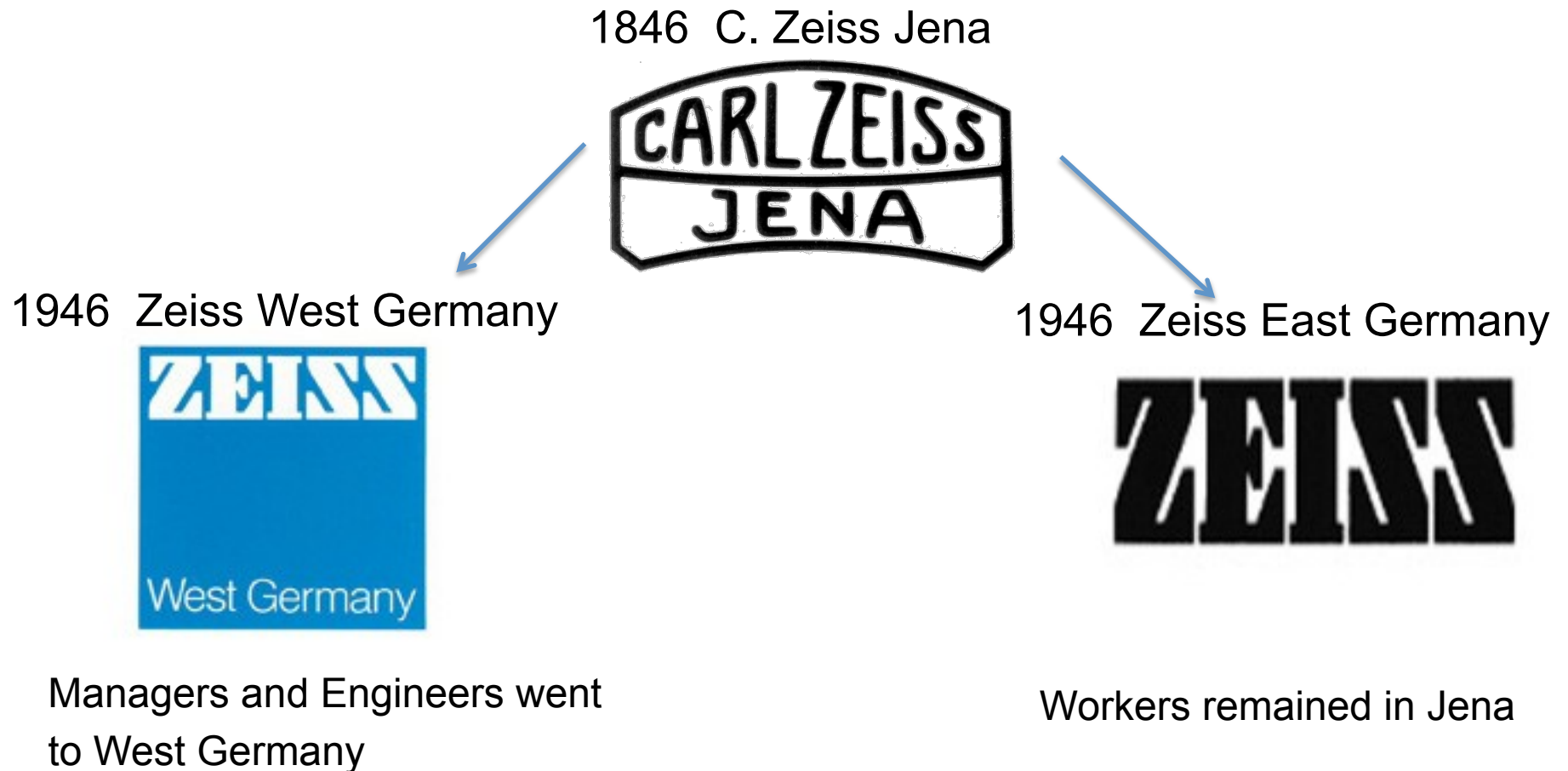


1. A seemingly unexpected, counterintuitive case

1846 C. Zeiss Jena formed



1. A seemingly expected, counterintuitive case



Over next forty years both firms developed similar technological capabilities

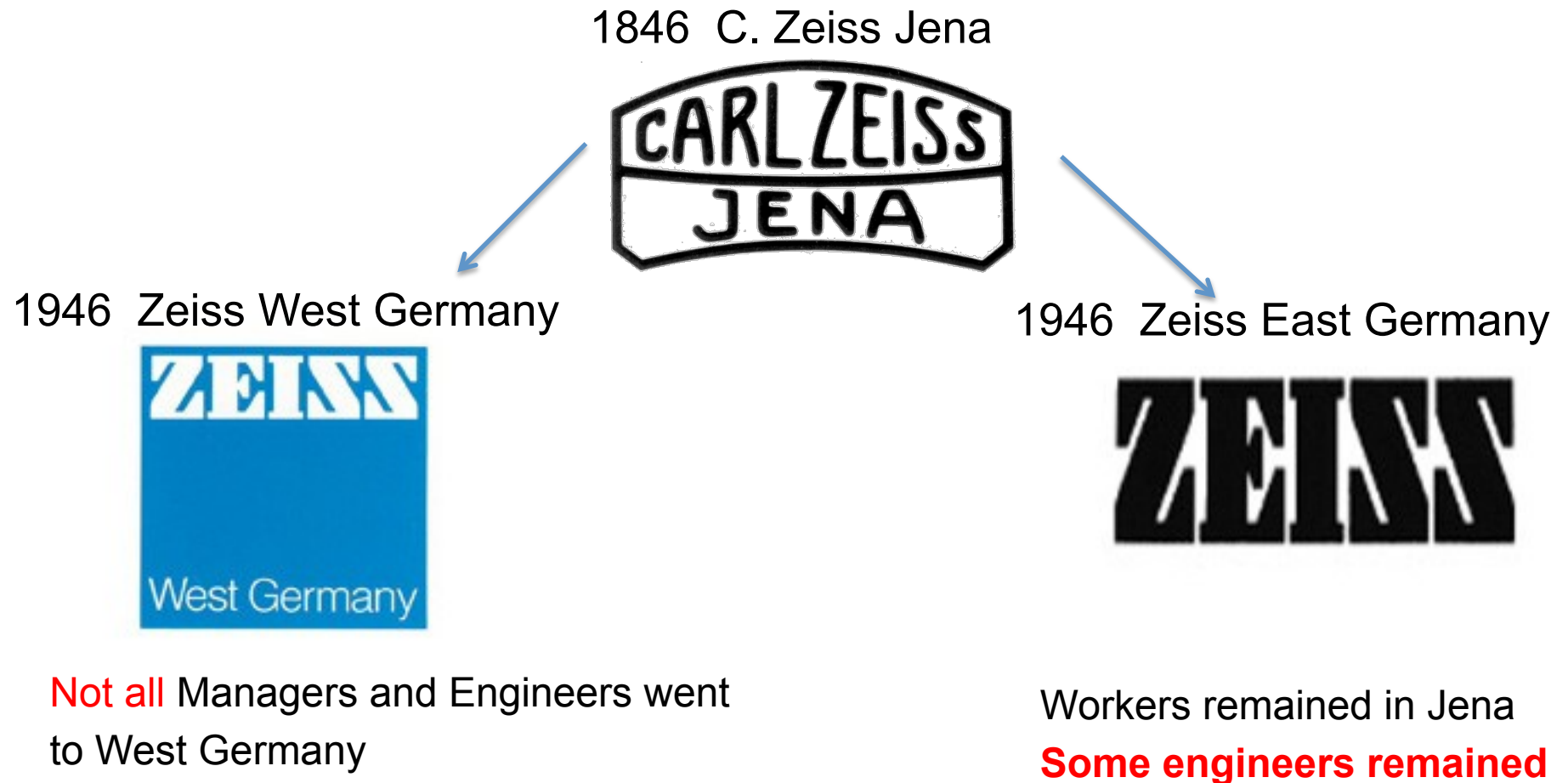
Kogut, B., & Zander, U. 2000. Did socialism fail to innovate?

A natural experiment of the two Zeiss companies. American Sociological Review, 65(2): 169-190.



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A closer look at the case showed it was **not** counterintuitive



But we discovered something different that was very interesting about the company

1846 C. Zeiss Jena



and wrote it up



Buenstorf, G., & Murmann, J. P. 2005.
**Ernst Abbe's Scientific Management: Theoretical
Insights from a Nineteenth-Century Dynamic
Capabilities Approach.**
Industrial and Corporate Change, 14(4): 543-578.

Example: What would be a “talking pig” like case in the context of China

Today one company in China
is the most innovative company
in all of world history



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What is a compelling case?











2. Theories say that the case should not exist or they cannot explain it

Example: The Wesfarmers Case



Why Wesfarmers is a good case study: I

The corporate strategy literature would not predict that an **unrelated diversified firm** would be the best performing firm on the stock market.

	Home Improvement & Office Supplies
	Coles
	Target
	Kmart
	Insurance
	Director Industrial Divisions
	Resources
	Chemicals & Fertilisers
	Industrial & Safety
	Energy

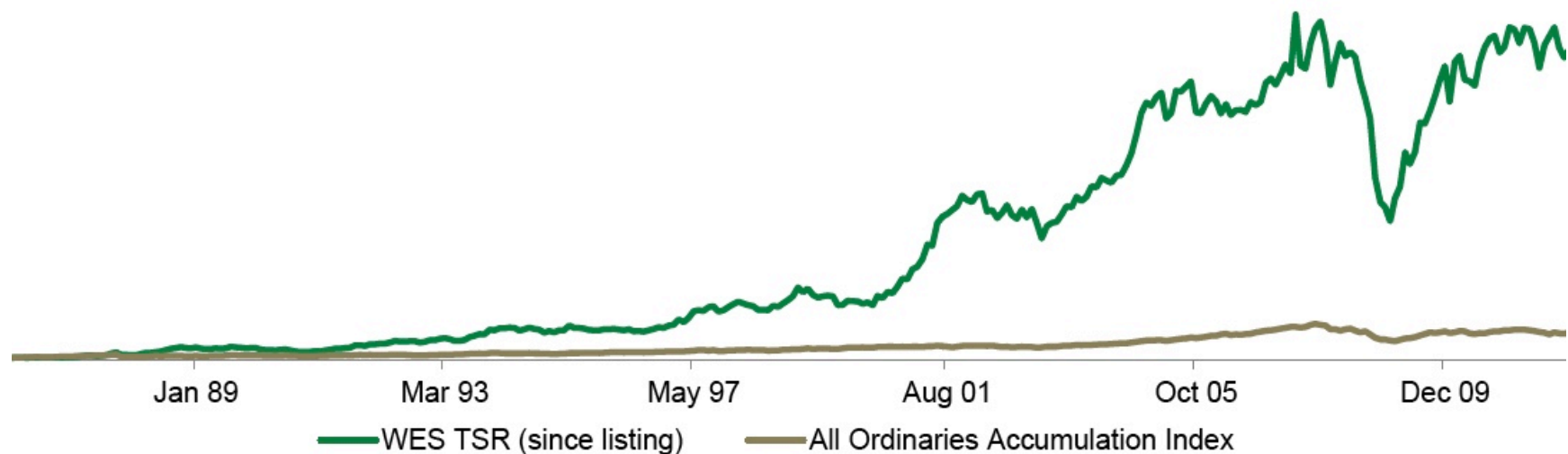


Methods: Why Wesfarmers is a good case study: II

But it has Highest Total Share Holder Return in Australia

84 = 100)

TSR since November 1984:
Wesfarmers: 21.4% (CAGR)
All Ordinaries: 11.3% (CAGR)



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What is a compelling case?

3. Case sheds light on a phenomenon that no one has studied before

Example:

Murmann, J. P. (2013).

“The Coevolution of Industries and Important Features of their Environments.”

Organization Science 24(1): 58-78.



A lot of research using idea of “Coevolution”

Previous Research on

Henderson & Stern, 2004
Van Den Ende et al., 2003
Burgelman, 2002
Repenning & Sterman 2002
Eisenhardt and Galunic, 2000
McKelvey, 1999
Lewin and Volberda, 1999
Baum and McKelvey, 1999
Lewin et al., 1999
Van De Ven and Grazman, 1999
Rosenkopf and Nerkar, 1999
Koza and Lewin, 1998

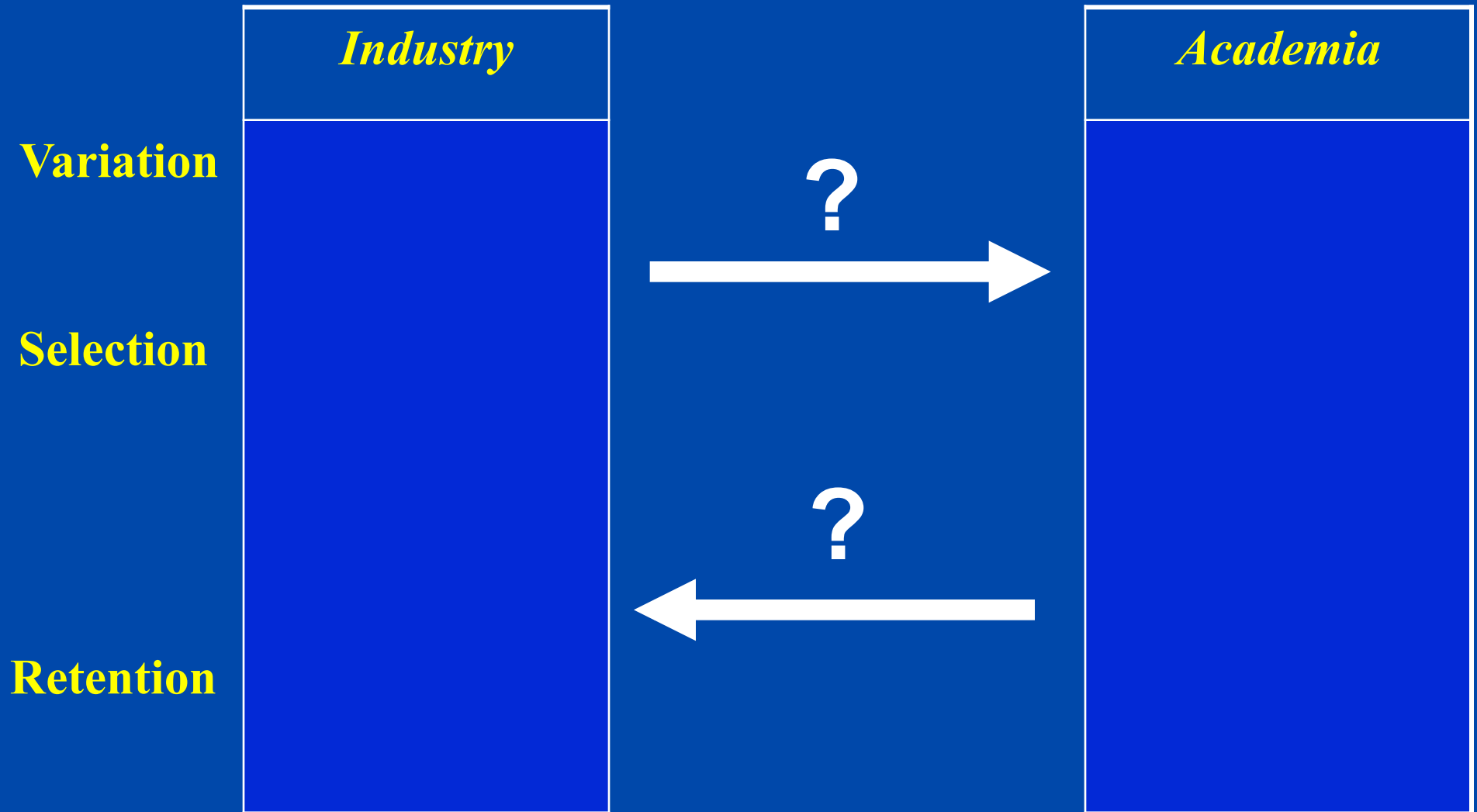
Coriat and Dosi, 1998
McKelvey, 1997
Haveman and Rao, 1997
Barnett and Hansen, 1996
Levinthal and Myatt, 1995
March, 1994
Baum and Singh, 1994
Nelson, 1994
Rosenkopf and Tushman, 1994
Yates, 1993
Dosi & Kogut, 1993
Kieser, 1989

But research has not focused on the actual processes of coevolution

Step 1: Specific Evolutionary Mechanisms

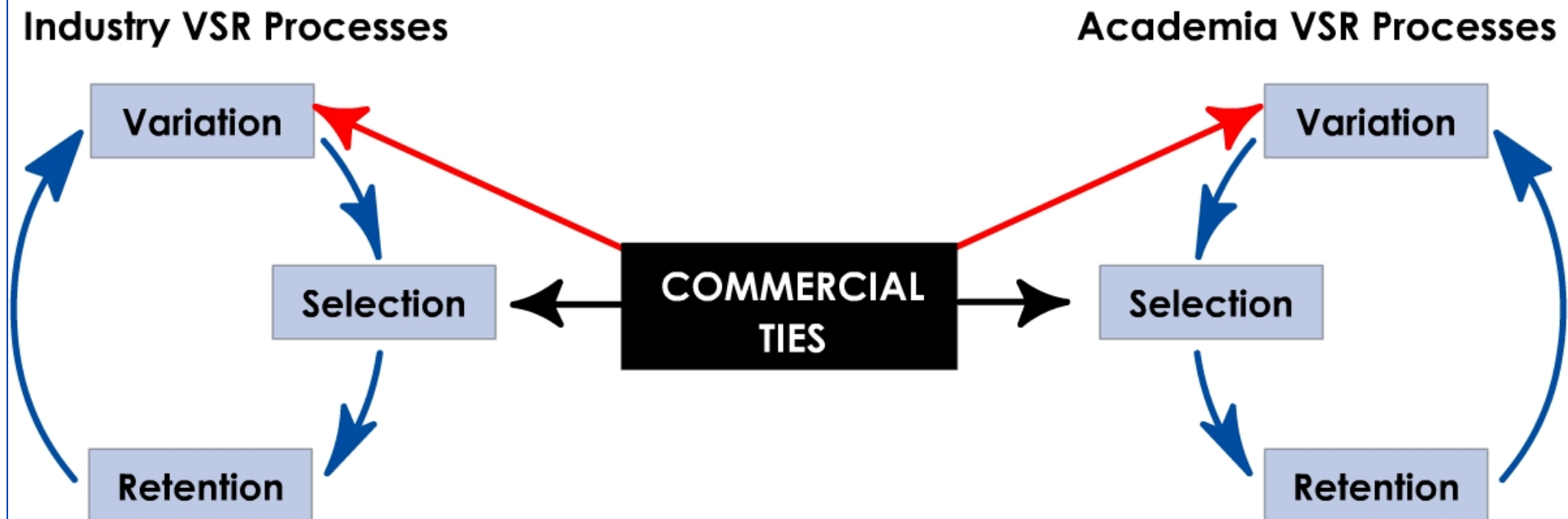
	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Academia</i>
Variation	Entrepreneurs or firm members develop new action patterns	Researchers propose new scientific ideas about a class of phenomena
Selection	Profitable firms grow, unprofitable firms die	Productive ideas attract more researchers and gain influence
Retention	Blueprints for actions are stored in organizational rules and individual memory	Ideas are stored in individual memory, the shared practices of lab groups, and the scientific literature

Step 2: Specific Mechanisms of Coevolution?



Commercial Ties: I showed they influenced variation and selection but not retention

- A professor gives only one or two firms access to his and his students' innovations
- Firms provide professors with expensive chemicals for their laboratories



Roadmap

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What is a compelling case? Or how to persuade with case studies

Reviewing 4 examples of excellent case studies

Some concluding thoughts

Reviewing 4 examples of excellent case studies

1. **Mirabeau, L., & Maguire, S.** 2014. From autonomous strategic behavior to emergent strategy. [Strategic Management Journal](#), 35(8): 1202-1229.

2. **Danneels, E.** (2011). “Trying to become a different type of company: dynamic capability at Smith Corona.” [Strategic Management Journal](#) 32(1): 1-31.

3. **Siggelkow, N.** (2002). “Evolution toward Fit.” [Administrative Science Quarterly](#) 47(1): 125-159

4. **Miller, R., M. Hobday, T. Leroux-Demers and X. Olleros** (1995). “Innovation in Complex System Industries: the Case of Flight Simulation.” [Industrial and Corporate Change](#) 4(2): 363-400

Why is **Mirabeau & Maguire 2014** excellent?



Beautiful summary of the entire literature on strategy process.

Provides a statement about gap in literature.

In sum, the literature is unambiguous in its evidence of emergent strategy but contains surprisingly little about its formation.

Our study is therefore guided by two questions:

(1) How does emergent strategy form from autonomous strategic behavior in organizations? and (2) Besides practices of allocating material resources, which strategy practices are involved in this transition and what role do they play?

You need a detailed longitudinal case study to answer these questions!



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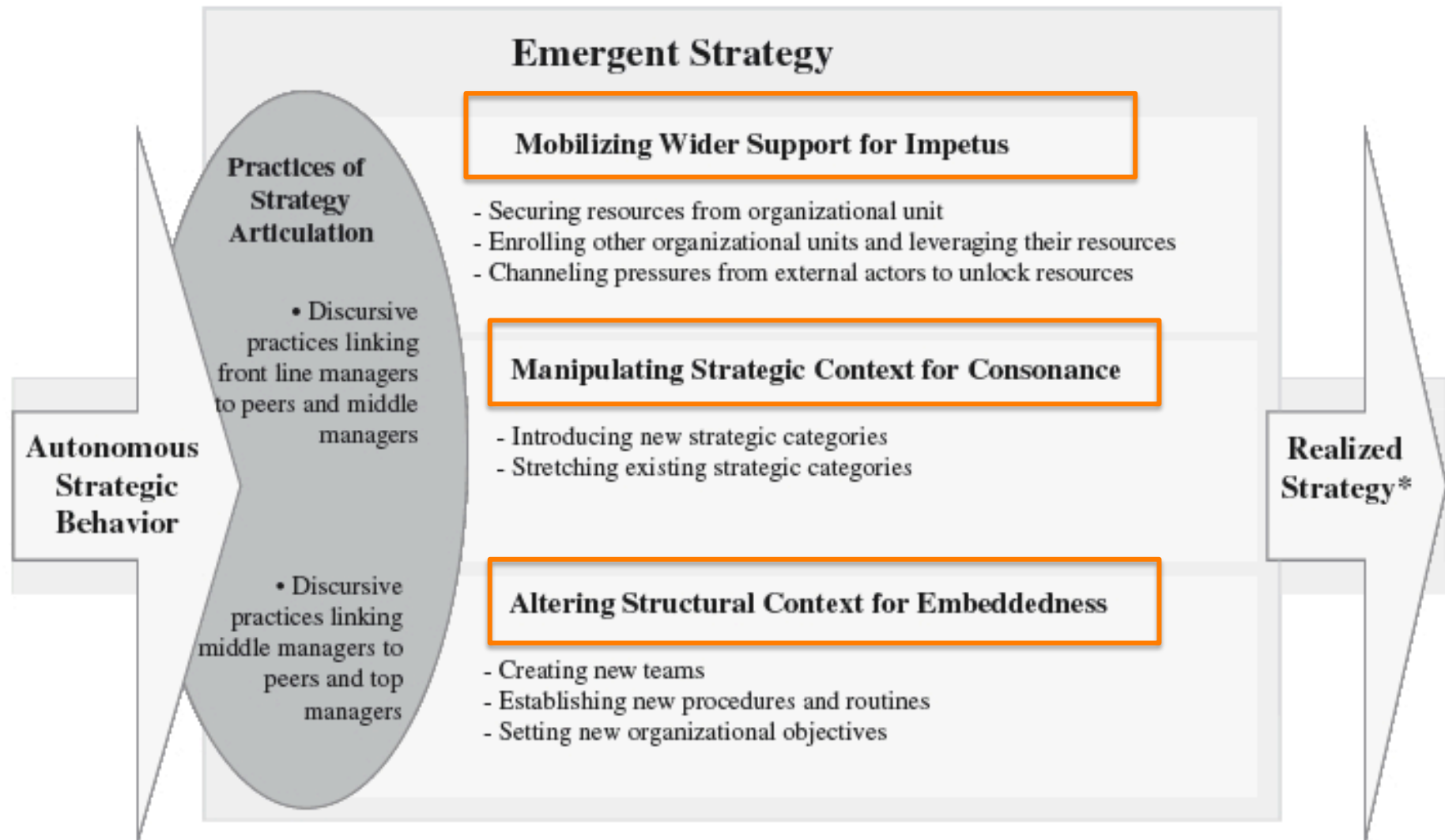
Why is **Mirabeau & Maguire** 2014 excellent?



Excellent data on different strategy initiatives within one company

- Two years of fieldwork
- Access to documents and PowerPoint slides tracing strategy initiatives in the firm
- 30 semi-structured interviews
- Access to 2000 archived emails

Why is **Mirabeau & Maguire** 2014 excellent?



They provide conclusions one can believe to apply more broadly than their case!

Why is **Danneels** 2011 excellent?

Amazingly detailed data from a variety of sources on one type-writer company, Smith-Corona

Clear-contribution to the theoretical literature on dynamic capabilities, a very hot literature at the time:

The study highlights resource cognition as a missing element in dynamic capability theory

The paper shows something that no one had shown before: **How extensively a firm tries to adapt to changing environments yet still does not succeed.**

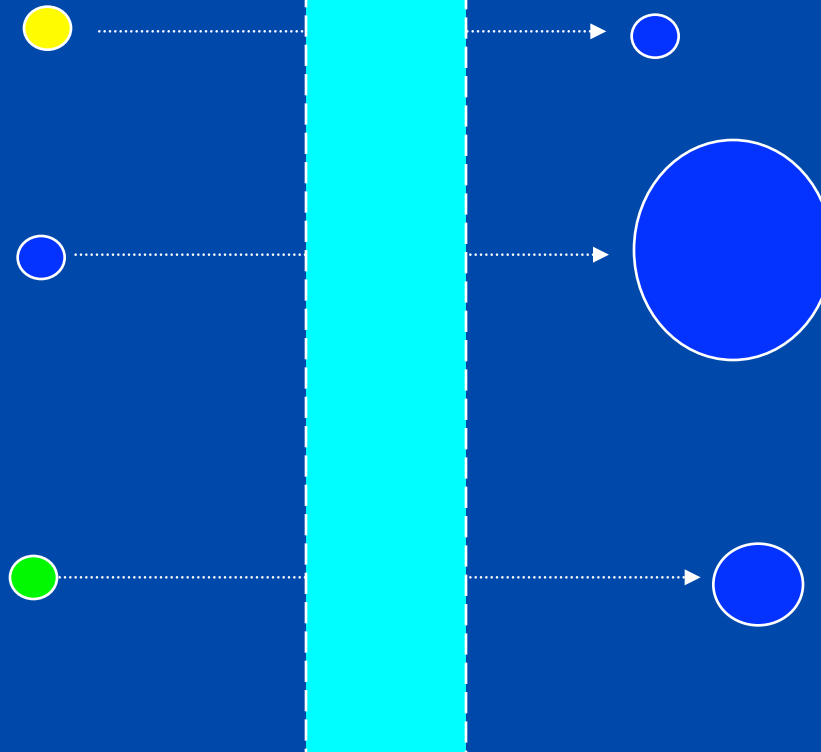


An Firm-level Adaptation Process of Change

Population of Firms at Time 1

Heroic
Managers

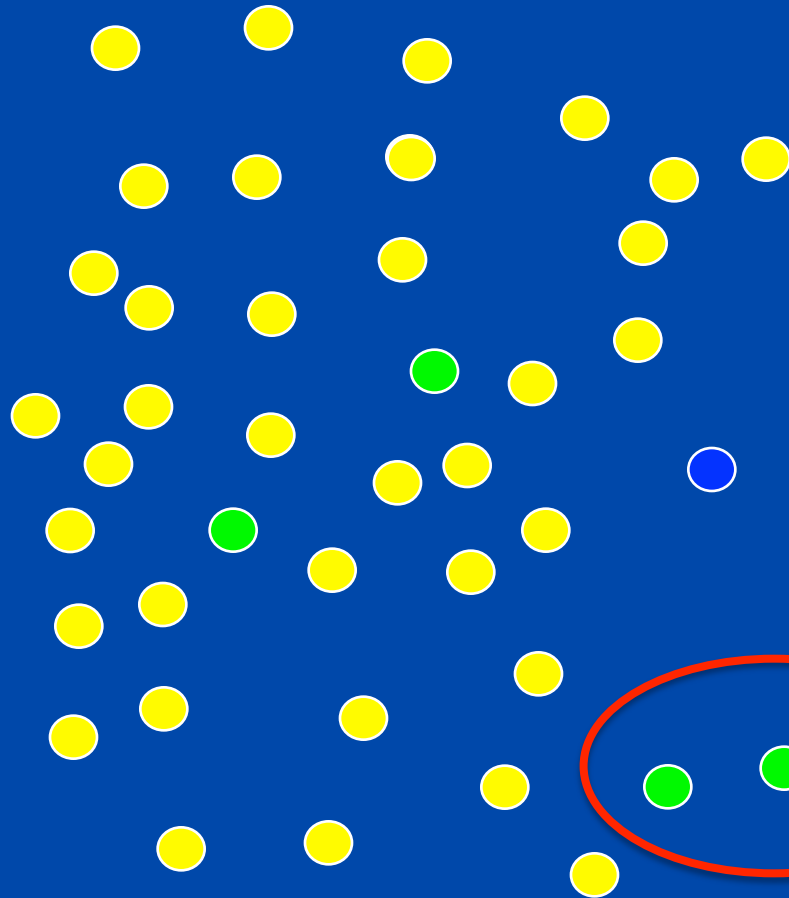
Population of Firms at Time 2



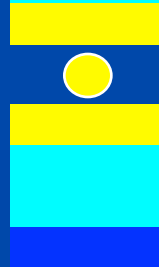
● Standard Firm ● Firm with Informal R&D ● Firm with Formal R&D

Change industry level through a Selection Process

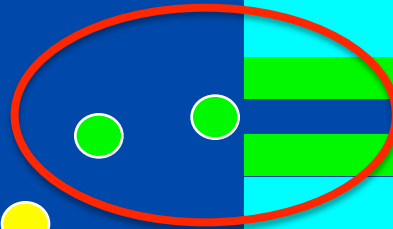
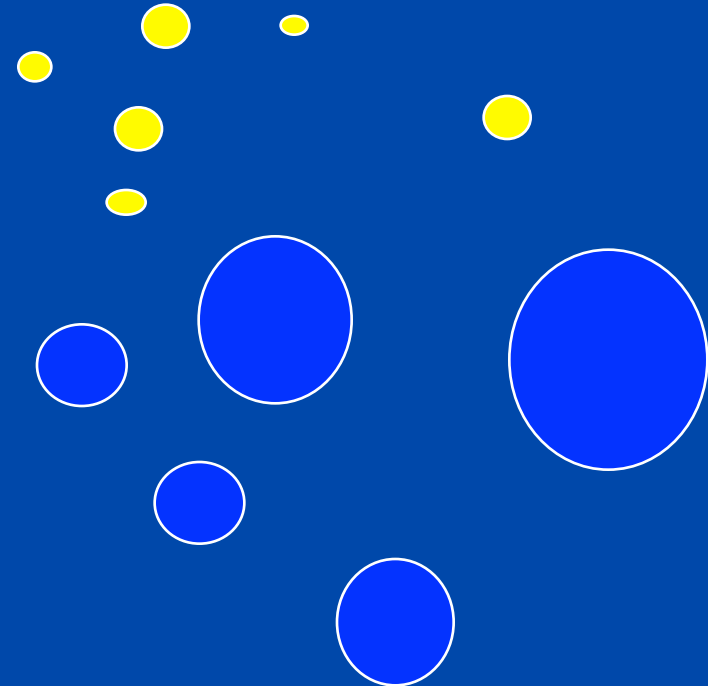
Population of Firms at Time 1



Selection
Filter



Population of Firms at Time 2



e.g.
Profits

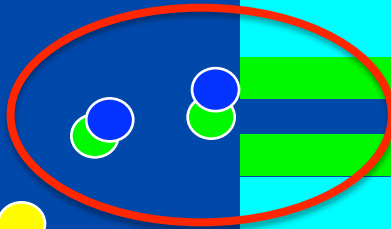
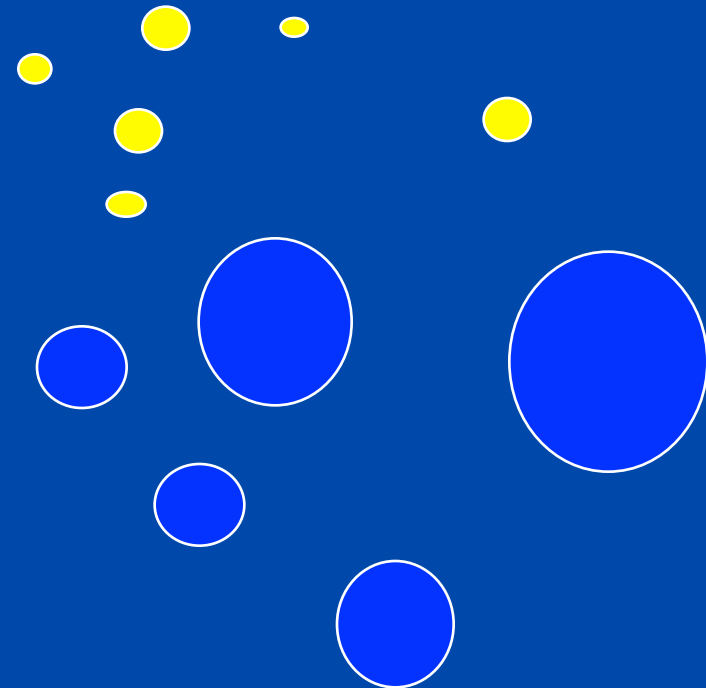
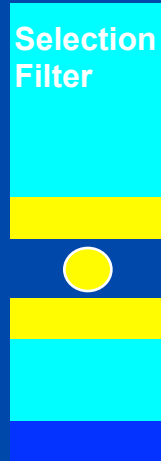
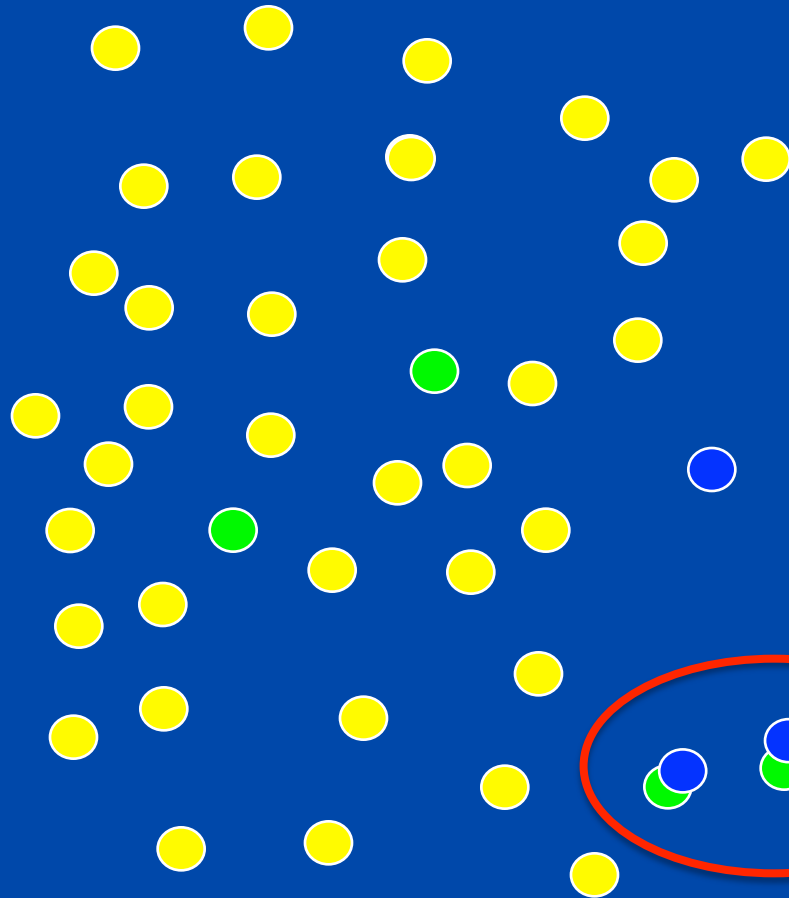
● Standard Firm ● Firm with Informal R&D ● Firm with Formal R&D

Change industry level through a Selection Process

Population of Firms at Time 1

Selection
Filter

Population of Firms at Time 2



e.g.
Profits

● Standard Firm

● Firm with Informal R&D

● Firm with Formal R&D

Why is **Siggelkow 2002** excellent?

Clear-contribution to big theoretical literature on core and peripheral organizational elements going back to Hannan and Freeman (1984) and to literature on internal fit (Khandwalle 1973).

Studies for the first time one large organization over more than 20 years, systematically tracing how core organizational elements change over time.

Drew on archival data, interviews with managers, writings of CEO, and two long-interviews of CEO to refine his understanding of what occurred in the firm.

Developed a new method for determining what organizational elements are core.

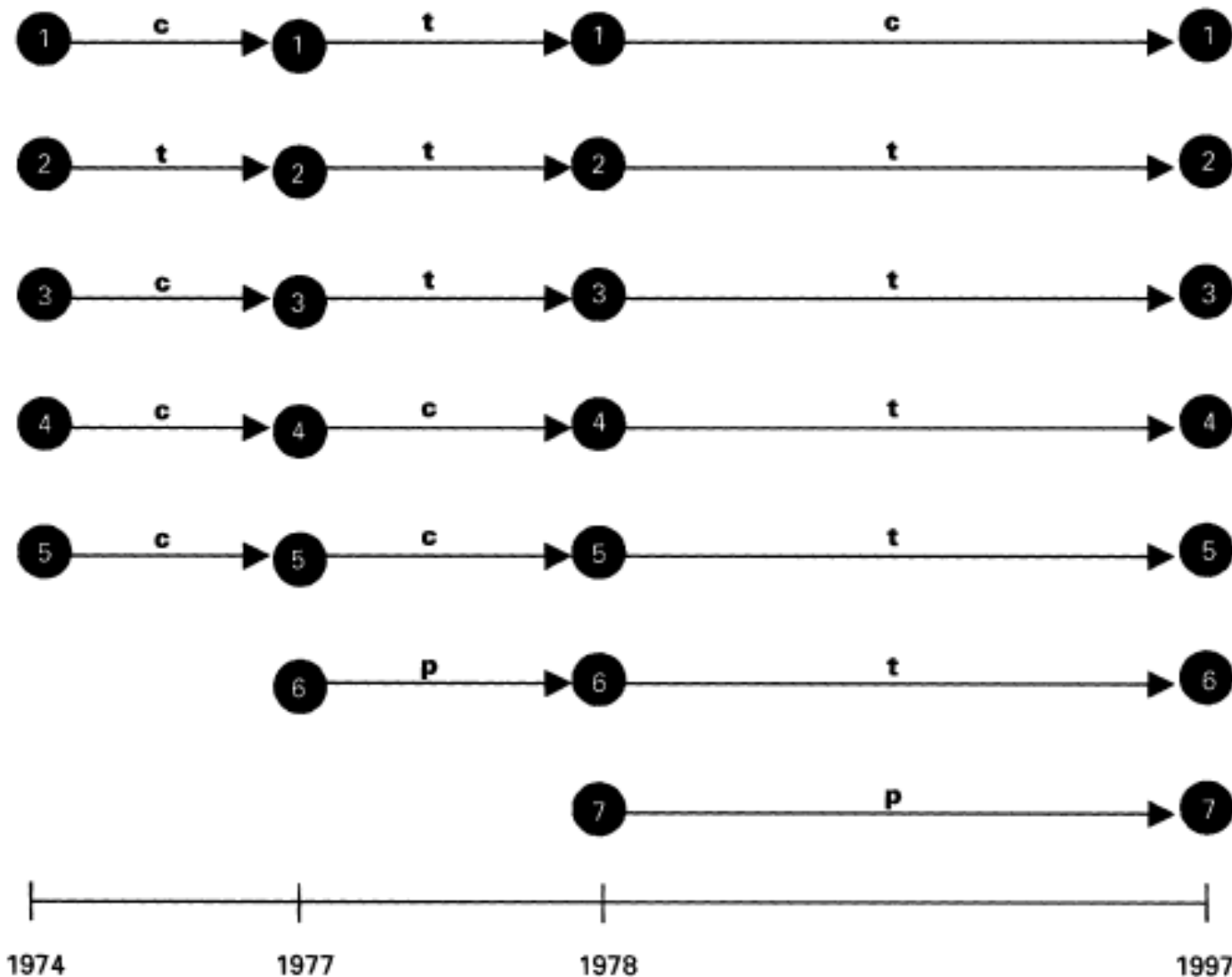
Developed inductively an abstract typology of four processes characterizing how core elements change over time.



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Figure 6. Stylized evolution of Vanguard's organizational system.



Legend: ● = core element; **t** = thickening; **p** = patching; **c** = coasting

Core element 1 = mutual structure; core element 2 = focus on conservatively managed funds; core element 3 = low cost; core element 4 = candid communication; core element 5 = focus on long-term performance; core element 6 = direct distribution; core element 7 = high-quality service.

Why is **Miller et al. 1995** excellent?

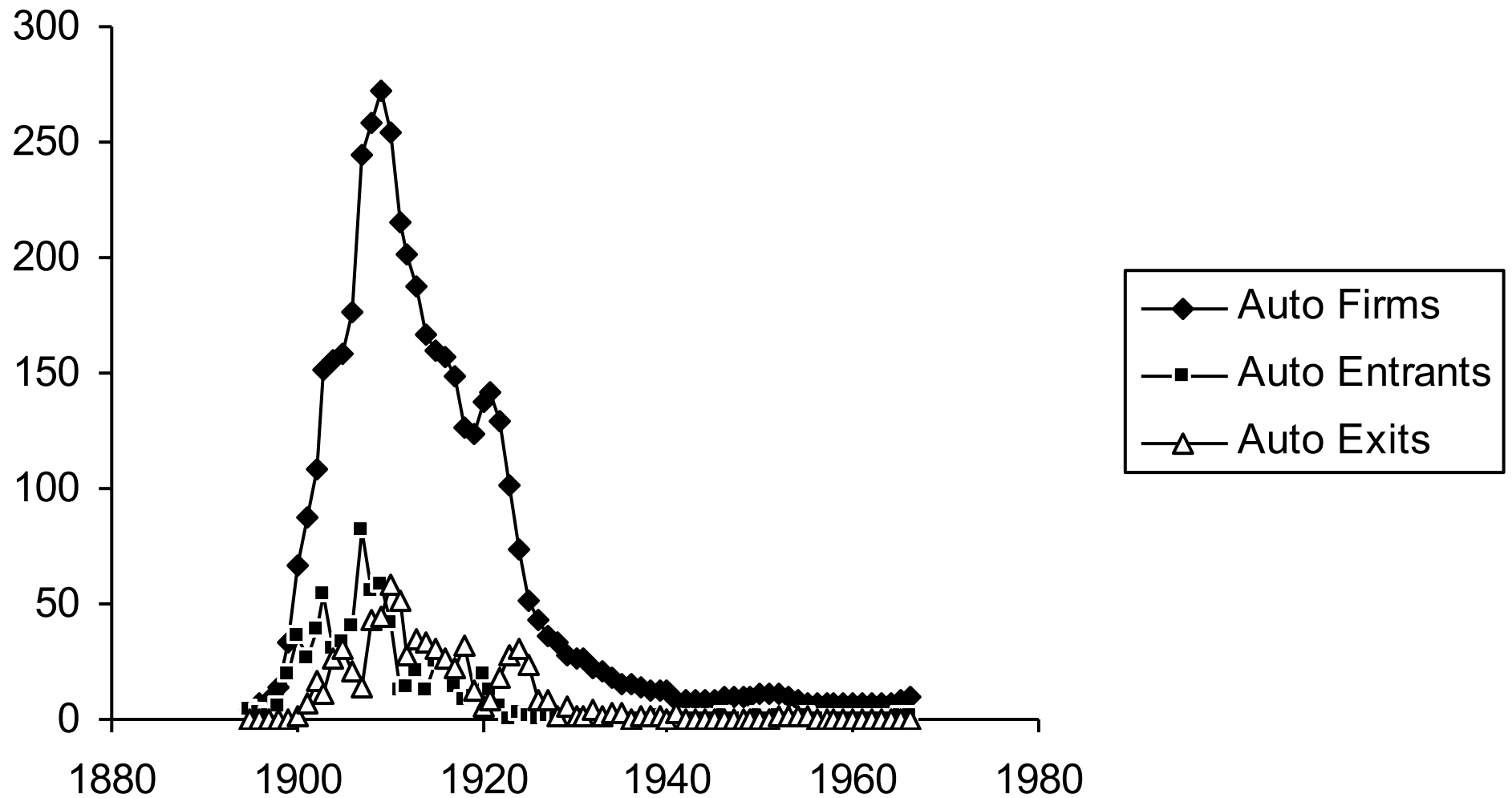


Reveals very detailed knowledge on how the flight simulator industry and its supplier system evolved.

Convincingly showed that theories developed for large-scale manufacturing industries (e.g. automobiles) do not explain patterns of evolution of large-scale customized products (e.g. flight simulators)

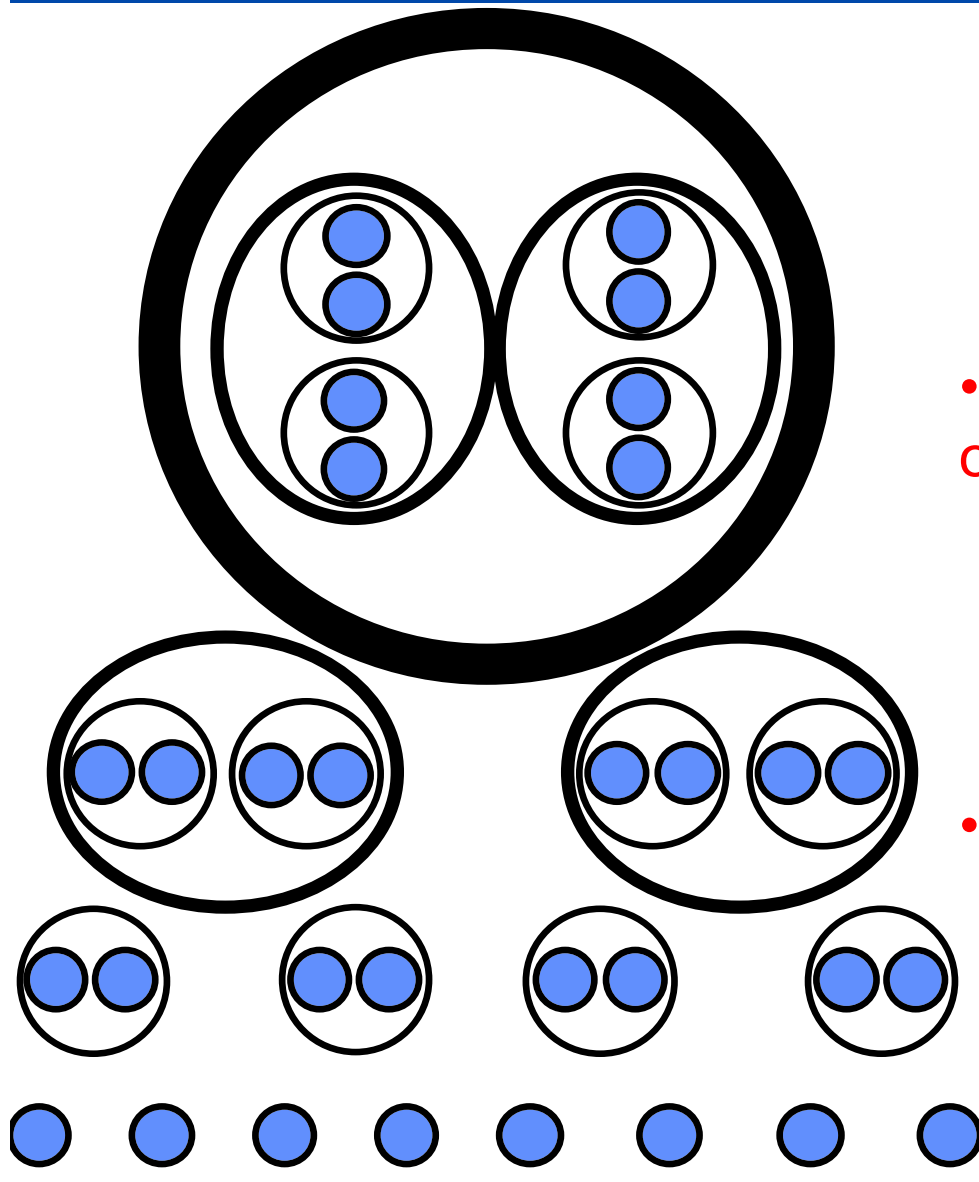
Very careful not to make claims that the findings are general. Only additional research on large-scale customized products can do this.

Entry, Exit, Number of U.S. Automobile Producers, 1895-1966



Source: S. Klepper 2005

Production System Hierarchy



System
Assembler

- Same firms from one generation of products to the next

First-tier Subassemblers

- A lot of new firms from one generation of products to the next

Second-tier Subassemblers

Component Makers

Some concluding thoughts of the case studies

- In management research, it is difficult to find a case that is truly amazing as a “talking pig” but it is useful to look for one
- But all of the 4 case studies we reviewed were extremely good at identifying theoretical gaps
- They were able to make a clear contribution to developing new theoretical ideas
- They all had very detailed empirical understanding of their cases
- They all offered data that had never been presented at that level of detail