

## WHAT IS STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT, REALLY? INDUCTIVE DERIVATION OF A CONSENSUS DEFINITION OF THE FIELD

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*It is commonly asserted that the field of strategic management is fragmented and lacks a coherent identity. This skepticism, however, is paradoxically at odds with the great success that strategic management has enjoyed. How might one explain this paradox? We seek answers to this question by relying first on a large-scale survey of strategic management scholars from which we derive an implicit consensual definition of the field—as tacitly held by its members. We then supplement this implicit definition with an examination of the espoused definitions of the field obtained from a group of boundary-spanning scholars. Our findings suggest that strategic management's success as a field emerges from an underlying consensus that enables it to attract multiple perspectives, while still maintaining its coherent distinctiveness.* Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

An academic field is a socially constructed entity (Hagstrom, 1965; Kuhn, 1962). In comparison to a formal organization, which can be identified and defined, for instance, by its web of legal contracts (Williamson, 1979), an academic field has socially negotiated boundaries and only exists if a critical mass of scholars *believe* it to exist and adopt a shared conception of its essential meaning (Astley, 1985; Cole, 1983). Such shared meaning is far from assured, however, since various forces can serve to dilute or blur consensus. These forces might include heterogeneity of members' training,

the intellectual pull and hegemony of adjacent fields, and an ever-shifting body of knowledge and theory (Astley, 1985; Whitley, 1984).

Strategic management represents a case of an academic field whose consensual meaning might be expected to be fragile, even lacking. The field is relatively young, having been abruptly reconceptualized and relabeled—from ‘business policy’—in 1979 (Schendel and Hofer, 1979). Its subjects of interest overlap with several other vigorous fields, including economics, sociology, marketing, finance, and psychology (Hambrick, 2004), and its participant members have been trained in widely varying traditions—some in economics departments, some in strategic management departments, some in organizational behavior, some in marketing, and so on. It comes as little surprise, then,

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that the published, espoused definitions of strategic management vary (as we shall review below). And we can anticipate that asking strategic management scholars to define the field might elicit an array of responses.

How, then, does the field of strategic management maintain its collective identity and distinctiveness? The answer, we anticipate, is that there is a strong implicit consensus about the essence of the field, even though there may be ambiguity about its formal definition. This paradox is reminiscent of the fabled quote of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart: 'I'm not sure how to define pornography, but I know it when I see it' (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184, 1964).

Stewart's legendary remark captures a fundamental challenge facing the young, rapidly expanding field of strategic management. Exactly what is it? There is a substantial need for discourse and reflection regarding the very nature of the field; scholars—especially young scholars—need analytic signposts to help them understand the scope and meaning of the field. What does it mean to be doing research in strategic management? What does it take to be seen as a strategic management scholar? While prior analyses have examined the rise and fall of specific theories or research topics within strategic management (e.g., Hoskisson *et al.*, 1999; Ramos-Rodriguez and Ruiz-Navarro, 2004), in this paper we pursue a more fundamental objective: to identify the consensus definition—both implicit and explicit—or the very meaning of the field.

To achieve this objective, we conducted two distinct but mutually reinforcing empirical projects. In Study I, we asked a large panel of strategic management scholars to rate 447 abstracts of articles appearing in major management journals, as to whether the articles were in strategic management or not. The raters exhibited a very high level of agreement. Then, using automated text analysis, we identified the distinctive lexicon of the field, which in turn allowed us to derive the implicit consensual definition of strategic management, as held by its members. In Study II, we surveyed key 'boundary-spanners,' or scholars whose recent work is jointly in strategic management and adjacent fields, not only for the purpose of validating the definition gained in Study I, but more importantly to derive their explicit definitions of the field. We surveyed 57 such scholars who had published in both *Strategic Management*

*Journal* (*SMJ*, the leading journal dedicated to the field) and major journals in one of three adjacent fields: economics, sociology, and marketing. By surveying boundary-spanners, we sought to stringently test the validity of the implicit definition gained in Study I, as well as to derive an explicit, and perhaps inclusive, definition of strategic management. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications of our analyses for the field and proposing further applications and extensions of our research.

## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

### Past efforts to define the field

Since 1979, when Schendel and Hofer (1979) rechristened the field of business policy as strategic management and proposed a new paradigm centered on the concept of strategy, scholars have conducted numerous analyses of the field.<sup>1</sup> These works primarily have attempted to examine the intellectual ebbs and flows, research trends, and theoretical perspectives of the field (Rumelt, Schendel, and Teece, 1994; Saunders and Thompson, 1980; Schendel and Cool, 1988). Among these various assessments, for instance, Hoskisson *et al.* (1999) traced the pendulum-like swings in the field's emphasis on firms' external environments and internal resources. Summer *et al.* (1990) analyzed the historical progression and status of doctoral education in the field. Recently, Ramos-Rodriguez and Ruiz-Navarro (2004) used citation analysis to chart the intellectual progression of the field.

As important as all these prior analyses have been, they have omitted any attention to a fundamental question: just what is strategic management? The field's lack of interest in addressing this basic question is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the field's identity, by its very nature, is ambiguous and highly contestable (Hambrick, 1990; Spender, 2001). It intersects with several other well-developed fields, including economics,

<sup>1</sup> Actually, the first documented proposal to change the name of the field may have been in an unpublished paper by Dan Schendel and Kenneth Hatten, 'Business Policy or Strategic Management: A Broader View for an Emerging Discipline,' presented at the 1972 program of the (then named) Business Policy and Planning Division of the Academy of Management.

marketing, organizational theory, finance, and sociology (Bowman, Singh, and Thomas, 2002); without a clear sense of collective identity and shared purpose, strategic management is vulnerable to intellectual and practical attack (in terms, say, of resources, journal space, and tenure slots) from these other fields.

Lack of attention to the essence of the field is noteworthy for a second reason: the formally espoused, published definitions of the field are quite varied. The Appendix presents a selected set of definitions, including Learned *et al.*'s (1965) definition of the precursor field: business policy.<sup>2</sup> The definitions range widely. Some refer to general managers (Fredrickson, 1990; Jemison, 1981; Schendel and Cool, 1988), while others do not. Some indicate the overall organization or firm as the relevant unit of analysis (e.g., Learned *et al.*, 1965), while others do not. Some refer to the importance of organizational performance or success (Bowman *et al.*, 2002; Rumelt *et al.*, 1994; Schendel and Hofer, 1979), some to external environments (e.g., Bracker, 1980; Jemison, 1981), some to internal resources (e.g., Bracker, 1980; Jemison, 1981), some to strategy implementation (Van Cauwenbergh and Cool, 1982), and some refer to none of these (e.g., Smircich and Stubbart, 1985).

Although these definitions are not flatly incompatible with each other, they are sufficiently diverse as to convey ambiguity in what the field of strategic management is all about, as well as how it differs from other closely related fields. It is a puzzle, then, as to how the field can survive, much less flourish. But flourish it does. Strategic management has its own highly regarded refereed journal, *SMJ*, and its members' papers appear with significant frequency in other top-tier journals; the Business Policy and Strategy Division is the second-largest division of the Academy of Management, receiving far more submissions for its annual meeting program than any other division; and strategic management scholars regularly qualify for tenure at top-tier research universities. How can an academic field that, by all appearances, lacks a clear and agreed-upon definition maintain its momentum?

<sup>2</sup> This set of definitions is merely illustrative and should not be interpreted as the most influential or most recognized. Indeed, we are not aware of any particular published definition of the field that is singularly prominent in members' minds.

This puzzle is answered if, as we anticipate, strategic management scholars have an implicit (and perhaps even explicit) consensus about the meaning of the field. Despite varied theoretical and methodological approaches, and despite an absence of any agreed-upon extant definition, strategic management scholars can be expected to have a widely shared understanding, a common worldview, of what makes up their field. This implicit understanding, as we show in Study I, can be used to impute a consensual definition of the field. It can also help us understand the collective identity of the field that its members share—the identity that gives members a fundamental sense of who they are as a community and how they differ from other communities (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), which we address in Study II.

## STUDY I: DERIVING THE CONSENSUAL IMPLICIT DEFINITION OF THE FIELD

### The social and linguistic view of science

Our primary point of departure is the premise that a scientific field is a community of scholars who share a common identity and language. The roots of this premise can be traced to the sociology of knowledge, in which science is seen as a fundamentally social enterprise (Kuhn, 1962; Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Merton and Storer, 1973). Some have gone to the extent of describing academic communities as 'tribes,' or 'intellectual villages,' replete with their own peculiar cultures, norms, and language (Becher, 2001; Geertz, 1983).

Essential to Kuhn's (1962) concept of paradigm is the existence of commonly shared goals, values, and norms that demarcate the members of the community holding that paradigm, from other scientific and non-scientific communities. The scope and boundaries of a scientific community are strongly influenced by the specialist knowledge and technical norms of its members (Shapin, 1995).

If we assume that scientific knowledge is socially constructed, then language, in the form of scientific discourse, is the fundamental medium that makes that social construction possible (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Grace, 1987). Language provides the basis for the emergence of a distinctive identity shared by members of a scientific community (Whorf, 1956). Astley (1985) asserted that

scientific fields are ‘word systems’ created and maintained by their members.

If it is through language that members of an academic field express their ideas, then it is also through language that the very essence, or implicit definition, of the field can be identified. Members of an academic field should be able to examine a body of text—even out of context—and, using the language in that text, conclude whether the text represents work in their field. This is not to presume that all members of the field will favor the same theories, methods, and styles of research, but rather that they will be able to conclude whether a given text is part of their shared conception of the field. Then, other analysts should be able to work backwards: using the members’ conclusions about whether individual texts come from their field, the analysts should be able to identify and assess the distinctive language that gave rise to the members’ conclusions, thus imputing the members’ implicit conceptions of what makes up their field. This is the logic we applied in conducting Study I.

### Overview of method

Study I involved multiple steps. First, we asked a large panel of strategic management authors to rate 447 abstracts of articles appearing in leading management journals, as to whether the abstracts represented strategic management articles or not. The raters exhibited a very high level of agreement. Second, we divided those 385 articles that received the most consistent ratings into ‘strategic management’ (SM) and ‘non-strategic management’ (non-SM) categories; then, using automated text analysis, we conducted a lexicographic analysis of the abstracts, through which we identified the ‘distinctive vocabulary’ of the field of strategic management—a set of 54 words that appeared in SM abstracts with significantly greater frequency than in non-SM abstracts. Then, moving iteratively between prior definitions of the field and our own interpretation of how the 54 words could be placed into conceptual categories, we identified six elements that constitute the implicit consensual definition of strategic management. Finally, we tested the validity of this classification scheme—both on the original sample and on an additional sample of abstracts of articles published in *SMJ*. These tests indicated that the six elements of the implicit definition of the field allow the highly accurate assignment of articles as SM or non-SM.

### Identifying strategic management texts

As noted earlier, it is widely held that the field of strategic management has amorphous boundaries. Our first step, therefore, was to present a panel of strategic management scholars with a set of articles and ask them to rate each, essentially asking, ‘Is this a strategic management article?’ We asked the panel (which we will describe momentarily) to rate a total of 447 articles. To generate this pool of articles, we selected every article that might even remotely be considered a strategic management article (liberally including any article that focused on the overall organization as the unit of analysis or that addressed any of the roles typically associated with general managers (Mintzberg, 1973), from the *Academy of Management Journal* ( $n = 186$ ), *Academy of Management Review* ( $n = 153$ ), and *Administrative Science Quarterly* ( $n = 108$ ), for the years 1980–81, 1985–86, 1990–91, 1995–96, 2000–01. Some brief explanations of this sampling are warranted.

We excluded *SMJ* articles from our initial pool because we anticipated that raters would see the *SMJ* imprint on an article as providing *prima facie* evidence that it was an SM article.<sup>3</sup> Because *ASQ*, *AMJ*, and *AMR* publish papers on a wide array of management and organization topics, the raters would need to focus on the content of each article to make their determinations. As will be seen, we examined a large body of articles published in *SMJ* as a subsequent corroborative step in our project.

We used a 20-year time-span to allow a broad perspective on the field’s research domain, and to avoid the problem of overemphasis on the research of a more limited era. Again, we were interested in identifying the fundamental definition, not the momentary fashions or cycles, of the field.

Our approach to selecting the pool of articles to be coded (i.e., all those that might very liberally, or remotely, be considered as SM) yielded two benefits. First, it helped to minimize rater fatigue or annoyance, which would have occurred if raters had been asked to code random samples of articles from the focal journals (since only about 10–20% of the articles in these journals are in the SM domain). Second, our skewed pool of articles required raters to make relatively more fine-grained discriminations than they might have if

<sup>3</sup> We did not include *Organization Science*, the only other top-rated refereed journal that regularly publishes strategic management articles, because it started publication only in 1990.

they were also asked to code, say, a large number of micro-OB or human resources articles. As a result, the raters' evaluations of the extent to which the articles were SM, and in turn our extraction of the distinctive lexicon of SM, can be considered relatively conservative.

Still, we should acknowledge three limitations of the pool of articles we asked our panel to rate. First, we drew articles strictly from management journals, in an effort to distinguish strategic management from other subfields of management; but such an approach omits any consideration of how strategic management differs from, or relates to, other academic fields such as economics, marketing, or sociology. We would have liked to include strategy-oriented articles in journals from these other related fields, but they are too rare to allow the type of analysis we conducted. Second, our pool of articles was drawn strictly from U.S.-based journals, while omitting journals based in other parts of the world. (As will be seen, however, a substantial proportion of our raters were based at institutions outside the United States). Third, we examined only those journals with the highest academic impact (i.e., *ASQ*, *AMJ*, *AMR*, and subsequently *SMJ*) as judged by citations tracked by Social Science Citation Index, while omitting the managerially influential *Harvard Business Review*, less influential academic journals, and books. These limitations provide opportunities for future research, which we will discuss below.

By e-mail, we invited to participate in our panel all 585 authors of papers presented in the Business Policy and Strategy (BPS) Division program at the 2002 and 2003 annual meetings of the Academy of Management. Of those, 269 completed useable surveys (a response rate of 46%).<sup>4</sup> All the panelists can be presumed to have some familiarity with the field of strategic management by virtue of being authors of accepted papers on the BPS program; therefore, they are knowledgeable raters. At the same time, they are diverse, in terms of stage of career (25% professors, 19% associate professors, 36% assistant professors, and 19% doctoral candidates), type of institution (evenly split between nondoctoral- (51%) and doctoral-granting (49%)), doctoral study area (74% received their PhD in

strategic management, and the remainder in other management subfields, economics, or sociology), and geography (20% teach at institutions outside the United States).

Each panelist was presented with a web-based survey that contained the titles and complete abstracts of 18 randomly generated articles from our pool of 447.<sup>5</sup> Each panelist was asked to rate the 18 titles/abstracts on a four-point scale: 1 = clearly not a strategic management (SM) article; 2 = probably not an SM article; 3 = probably an SM article; 4 = clearly an SM article. The rater was also presented with the abstracts/titles of two articles that were definitely not strategic management articles (the same two for every panelist); these fillers were included to safeguard and test for the problem of panelists lapsing into a pattern of rating all the articles highly. Over 95 percent of the ratings for these two filler articles were 1s (clearly not SM), and the remainder were 2s; thus the raters discriminated in their ratings.

Through the randomization process, every one of the 447 articles was rated by at least eight panelists, and over 90 percent were rated by 10 or more panelists. The panelists exhibited strong agreement in their ratings, with an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) of 0.50 ( $p < 0.001$ ).

We retained for further analysis any article that had a standard deviation (among raters' scores) of less than one, for a total of 385 (or 86% of the original 447). These 385 articles, then, were the ones for which the panelists exhibited particularly strong agreement as to whether they were strategic management articles or not.

The mean ratings for the 385 articles could be considered as providing a scale of the 'degree' to which an article was rated as SM. Such an approach, however, would have the unnecessary and unfortunate result of drawing distinctions between every increment of the scale, including between articles with mean ratings of, say, 1.2 and those of 2.0, which clearly was not our purpose. Instead, we used a categorical distinction, treating all articles with mean ratings above 3.0 as SM articles (a total of 200 articles) and those with mean ratings of 3.0 or lower as non-SM (185 articles). As a way to illustrate how the articles were rated,

<sup>4</sup> Using a random sample of 50 non-respondents, we tested for non-response bias based on two demographic variables—doctoral student vs. faculty and U.S. vs. non-U.S.—and found no significant differences between respondents and non-respondents.

<sup>5</sup> Authorship information for all articles was omitted from the survey to control for the possibility that certain authors might be familiar as strategic management scholars. There was, of course, no way to control for the possibility that some of the authors, while not indicated, were known by the panelists.

Table 1. Selected examples of article titles, arranged by mean ratings

Scale anchor	Mean ratings	Article titles <sup>a</sup>
<i>Coded as SM</i>		
4.0 (Clearly SM)	4.0	Causal ambiguity, barriers to imitation, and sustainable competitive advantage (Reed and DeFillippi, 1990) <sup>b</sup>
	4.0	Excess resources, utilization costs, and mode of entry (Chatterjee, 1990)
	3.5	Architectural innovation: the reconfiguration of existing product technologies and the failure of established firms (Henderson and Clark, 1990)
	3.5	Interorganizational collaboration and the locus of innovation: networks of learning in biotechnology (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983)
	3.1	Organizational differences in management compensation and financial performance (Gerhart and Milkovich, 1990)
	3.1	Crisis and the content of managerial communications: a study of the focus of attention of top managers in surviving and failing firms (D'Aveni and MacMillan, 1990)
<i>Coded as non-SM</i>		
3.0 (Probably SM)	3.0	Organizations unfettered: organizational form in an information-intensive economy (Child and McGrath, 2001)
	2.9	Political influence: strategies employed by organizations to impact legislation in business and economic matters (Aplin and Hegarty, 1980)
	2.1	Isomorphism and external support in conflicting institutional environments: a study of drug-abuse treatment units (D'Aunno, Sutton, and Price, 1991)
2.0 (Probably not SM)	1.9	Cross-functional project groups in research and new product development: diversity, communications, job stress, and outcomes (Keller, 2001)
	1.1	Impact of work experiences on attitudes toward sexual harassment (Konrad and Gutek, 1986)
	1.1	Recruiters' and applicants' reactions to campus interviews and employment decisions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983)
1.0 (Clearly not SM)	1.0	Fairness perceptions as a moderator in the curvilinear relationships between job demands, and job performance and job satisfaction (Janssen, 2001)

<sup>a</sup> Ratings were based on panelists' interpretations of titles and abstracts. Here, abstracts are omitted because of space constraints.

<sup>b</sup> Names of authors were omitted in the surveys.

Table 1 provides the titles of several articles at different mean rating levels.<sup>6</sup>

### Extracting the distinctive lexicon of strategic management

We used content analysis of the abstracts to identify the distinctive lexicon of the field (Stone *et al.* (1966). In recent years, computer-aided text analysis (CATA) has been used to process large amounts

of text for systematic investigation of a range of social phenomena, including managerial and organizational cognition (Gephart, 1993; Porac, Wade, and Pollock, 1999), team mental models (Carley, 1997), and institutional isomorphism (Abrahamson and Hambrick, 1997). Using CATA software, Concordance (Watt, 2002), we analyzed all 385 abstracts to identify the frequently recurring, distinctive lexicon—or vocabulary—of the field of strategic management.

We chose to examine individual words (and their various forms) rather than entire phrases or word relationships. Analysis of individual words is a common approach to automated text coding, including for studies in the organizational sciences. For example, Abrahamson and Hambrick (1997) used counts of individual words in

<sup>6</sup> It is important to emphasize that the scale we asked the panelists to use was worded strictly in terms of whether an article was SM or non-SM (on a four-point continuum). They were not asked to rate the apparent quality or significance of the articles. Indeed, one could imagine a given SM researcher deriving great usefulness or insight from an article rated as non-SM by our panel.

companies' letters to shareholders in constructing their measure of attentional homogeneity (or uniformity of managerial attention) within industries. Recently, Walsh, Weber, and Margolis (2003) counted a set of key words in *Wall Street Journal* articles, over a 100-year period, to determine whether American business had become more focused on competitive behavior for economic advantage than on the contributions of business to social welfare.

The alternative of examining groups of words or phrases has the advantage of considering the context within which words are used, but it also has notable drawbacks (Halliday, 1961; Singleton, 2000). A focus on word strings or word pairs either leads to such a great number of combinations as to be analytically intractable, or it requires the researcher to inject a priori judgments as to what kinds of word combinations might be sought out. For example, we might anticipate that such phrases as 'top management team,' 'capital intensity,' and 'market structure' are commonly used in strategic management, but the very act of predetermining such phrases introduces significant bias to the analytic endeavor. Therefore, to minimize such biases, we examined the appearance of individual words, or lexemes, as our primary analytical approach.

There were of course thousands of unique words contained in all the abstracts. To make this large body of text analytically tractable, we needed to impose some restrictions on the words we would examine, but in a way that would not bias the results. The most significant restriction was that we excluded all words that appeared less than 10 times among all the 385 abstracts; these words were used so rarely that they could not be thought of as part of any distinctive lexicon.<sup>7</sup> Next, we excluded proper nouns, prepositions, and articles, and certain common descriptors such as 'very,' 'much,' and 'many.' Finally, we consolidated all variations of a root word and treated them collectively.

<sup>7</sup> We also encountered acronyms such as 'RBV,' 'SBU,' and 'KVB.' To process these, we adopted a rule that, if the absolute frequency of a given acronym in the entire corpus was greater than or equal to 10, then we would use the acronym as a stand-alone root term and add the frequency of the words in the acronym's expanded form to the frequency of the root acronym. For example, the acronym CEO had an absolute frequency greater than 10. We therefore adopted a rule that every time the expanded form 'Chief Executive Officer(s)' occurred in an abstract, we would count it as a 'CEO' term. On the other hand, the acronym RBV did not occur more than 10 times in the entire corpus, so we counted an RBV occurrence as a form of the word 'resource.'

For example, the words 'financial,' 'financed,' and 'finance' were all treated as the same word; we report them by referring to the most common variant (in this case, 'financial'). This multistage process yielded a total of 223 root words, or lexemes, which became our basis for analysis.

Our objective, again, was to identify the distinctive lexicon of the field of strategic management—the vocabulary that is used by SM scholars, but not used, or rarely used, by non-SM scholars. As our next step, then, we sought to identify words that were much more prevalent in those abstracts coded by our raters as strategic management (ratings >3) than in abstracts rated as not strategic management ( $\leq 3$ ). For each word, we calculated the biserial correlation between (a) the number of times the word appeared in an abstract and (b) whether the abstract was coded SM or non-SM. Biserial correlations are appropriate for examining the association between an interval variable and a dichotomous variable (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994; Tate, 1955).

A total of 54 words had significant ( $p < 0.10$ ) positive correlations, indicating that they appeared appreciably more frequently in SM than in non-SM abstracts. The words with the highest positive correlations were 'strategy' (biserial  $r = 0.38$ ) and 'firm' (0.38). Other words that had significant positive correlations included 'diversification' (0.12), 'CEO' (0.10), and 'risk' (0.12). (We will report the entire list shortly.)

### Imputing the implicit definition of the field

The 54 words generated from the text analysis formed the basis for imputing a consensual definition of the field of strategic management. We conducted this inductive exercise in an iterative manner. First, we developed some tentative categories, based upon conceptual clusters of words. For example, several of the words dealt with an organizational unit of analysis (e.g., 'firm,' 'SBU,' 'company'); some dealt clearly with initiatives taken by organizations (e.g., 'acquisition,' 'alliance,' 'investment'); some referred to the people who are involved in such initiatives (e.g., 'CEO,' 'top,' 'board'); and other words fell into other tentative categories.

Next, we turned to existing definitions of strategic management, including those presented in the Appendix, as a way to observe the conceptual elements that recur when scholars define the field.

Despite the variety among these definitions, as highlighted earlier, they do carry some common elements. For example, several refer to general managers, several refer to performance or success, several specify the firm or overall organization as the unit of analysis, and so on. By examining these existing definitions and comparing them to our tentative conceptual categories, we were able to take the third step in this inductive process: identifying the major elements that constitute the implicit, consensual definition of the field.

We three authors engaged in multi-way discussions to assign the 54 words to conceptual categories, seeking to balance several considerations. We attempted to use the conceptual nomenclature from existing definitions whenever possible; at the same time, we did not want to be constrained by prior definitions. For the sake of parsimony, we wanted to develop as few definitional elements as possible, but it was also important that all the words assigned to a category genuinely cohere and fit together. Finally, as a way to maintain simplicity, we only allowed a given word, or lexeme, to be assigned to one category, even though its various forms might reasonably belong in additional categories.

This multistep process led us to the following definition of strategic management, as imputed from the distinctive lexicon of the field: 'The field of strategic management deals with (a) the major intended and emergent initiatives (b) taken by general managers on behalf of owners, (c) involving utilization of resources (d) to enhance the performance (e) of firms (f) in their external environments.' Table 2 shows the assignment of the 54 distinctive words to these six elements.<sup>8</sup>

These six elements make up the implicit consensual definition of the field of strategic management. This definition differs fundamentally from others, because it represents, *de facto*, the way members

think about the field, rather than the way they *should* or *might* or *want* to think about the field. By asking our panel to distinguish between strategic management and non-strategic management research, and then examining the differences in language appearing in the two groups of abstracts, we have been able to impute the panel's latent conception of what the field is. (We should acknowledge that this imputed definition is not elegantly worded or graceful in its syntax. Rather, it represents our best effort to integrate the six elements into sentence form.)

The first definitional element, 'the major intended and emergent initiatives,' as shown in Table 3, is represented by words such as 'strategy,' 'acquisition,' and 'diversification,' which refer to

Table 2. The distinctive lexicon of strategic management

Distinctive words <sup>a</sup>	Definitional elements ('The field of strategic management deals with ...')
Strategy (0.38)	... the major intended and emergent initiatives
Innovation (0.14)	
Acquisition (0.14)	
Investment (0.12)	
Operation (0.12)	
Diversification (0.12)	
Learning (0.12)	
Entry (0.11)	
Activity (0.10)	
Alliances (0.10)	
Transaction (0.10)	
Top (0.15)	... taken by general managers on behalf of owners
Incentives (0.12)	
Board (0.12)	
Director (0.12)	
Compensation (0.11)	
CEO (0.10)	
Succession (0.10)	
Agency (0.09)	
General (0.08)	
Ownership (0.08)	
Stock (0.15)	... involving utilization of resources
Capability (0.14)	
Assets (0.13)	
Technology (0.12)	
Competency (0.10)	
Financial (0.10)	
Product (0.10)	
Ties (0.10)	
Slack (0.09)	
Knowledge (0.09)	
Resources (0.08)	

<sup>8</sup> As a corroborative step, we asked three other strategic management scholars (who teach at three different schools and hold doctorates from three different institutions) to assign the 54 lexemes to the six conceptual categories. For each lexeme, the coders were asked to rank the three most appropriate conceptual categories. The coders were told they could indicate that a word did not fit with any of the categories; one coder designated two such words. To measure the level of agreement with our assignments of words, we examined only the conceptual category that the coders designated as best fitting for each word (those categories that were ranked 1). The average Cohen's kappa statistic, measuring agreement between our assignments and those of the three independent coders, was 0.68, indicating substantial agreement (Landis and Koch, 1977).

Table 2. (Continued)

Distinctive words <sup>a</sup>	Definitional elements (‘The field of strategic management deals with ...’)
Growth (0.16)	... to enhance the performance
Advantage (0.11)	
Returns (0.11)	
Decline (0.10)	
Dominance (0.10)	
Performance (0.08)	
Firm (0.38)	... of firms
Business (0.13)	
Company (0.12)	
Corporate (0.09)	
Enterprise (0.09)	
Multibusiness (0.09)	
SBU (0.09)	
Subsidiary (0.09)	
Industry (0.27)	... in their external environments.
Competition (0.21)	
Market (0.17)	
Environment (0.17)	
Contingency (0.15)	
Uncertainty (0.14)	
Threats (0.14)	
Risk (0.12)	

<sup>a</sup> We include all words that appeared significantly ( $p < 0.10$ ) more frequently in SM abstracts than in non-SM abstracts. Numbers in parentheses are biserial correlations between the frequency of use of a root word (including its various forms) and the binary variable indicating whether an article was SM or non SM.

relatively deliberate, planned initiatives; but it also includes such words as ‘learning’ and ‘innovation,’ which represent the more emergent activities that occur in a firm.<sup>9</sup> The second element of the definition, ‘taken by general managers on behalf of owners,’ concerns the key actors who are the focus of attention in strategy research. Terms such as ‘CEO,’ ‘top,’ ‘directors,’ and ‘boards’ represent the upper echelons and governing bodies of companies; and words such as ‘agency’ and ‘ownership’ represent a focus on owners, rather than on any other stakeholders. The third definitional element, ‘involving utilization of resources,’ pertains to the resources that managers use in their strategic initiatives; words such as ‘capability’ and ‘knowledge’ represent the resources that are primarily internal to the firm, whereas terms such as ‘ties’ signify resources that link the firm to its environment. The fourth element, ‘to enhance the performance,’ conceptualizes the key objectives or outcomes that are of interest to strategic management scholars; words such as ‘growth,’ ‘performance,’ and ‘advantage’ align with this definitional element. Terms such as ‘firm,’ ‘company,’ and ‘SBU’ signify the fifth definitional element, ‘of firms,’ which reflects the focal unit of analysis of

<sup>9</sup> We recognize that innovation and learning sometimes occur as a result of very deliberate philosophies and processes. At the same time, however, they are widely seen as emergent, bottom-up activities (e.g., Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel, 1998).

Table 3. Logistic regression analysis: using the presence of words in each definitional element to differentiate between strategic management and non-strategic management abstracts

Element of the consensual implicit definition	SM abstracts (from <i>AMJ</i> , <i>AMR</i> , and <i>ASQ</i> )		SM abstracts (from <i>SMJ</i> )	
	vs. non-SM abstracts	vs. non SM abstracts	β	S.E.
‘The field of strategic management deals with ...’				
‘... the major intended and emergent initiatives’	2.09***	0.29	2.55***	0.40
‘... taken by general managers on behalf of owners’	1.14**	0.33	0.94*	0.44
‘... involving utilization of resources’	0.87**	0.33	1.16**	0.41
‘... to enhance the performance’	0.34	0.31	0.68†	0.41
‘... of firms’	1.32***	0.29	1.30**	0.40
‘... in their external environments.’	1.77***	0.28	1.03**	0.40
Constant	-3.06***	0.34	-3.58***	0.51
-2log-likelihood	321.10		170.50	
Sample size	385		224	
Percentage of cases correctly classified	82.34		82.58	

† $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

strategic management. Finally, the sixth element, 'in their external environments,' is represented by words such as 'market,' 'competition,' and 'industry,' which refer to the immediate environment of a firm, as well as by words such as 'environment,' 'uncertainty,' and 'contingency,' which indicate a potentially broader external context.

### Validating the imputed definition

To determine the validity of our imputed definition of SM, we examined whether the six elements themselves (rather than the individual lexemes used to induce the elements) would allow significant discrimination between SM and non-SM abstracts. To conduct this test, we used logistic regression (LOGIT) in which the dependent variable was whether an abstract was SM or non-SM. The independent variables were six binary variables, each representing one of the elements of the imputed definition, coded to 1 if there was at least one appearance of one of the words we assigned to that element. For example, if an abstract included any of the words that comprise the sixth element of our definition, '... in their external environments,' then the dummy variable for that element was coded 1. If none of the words in that element appeared in the abstract, the binary variable was coded 0. This approach puts our categorization scheme (and our assignment of words to the definitional elements) to a direct and stringent test.

The LOGIT results are reported in the left-hand column of Table 3. The overall model is highly significant and correctly distinguishes 82 percent of the articles (as SM vs. non-SM). All the definitional elements are highly significant in distinguishing between SM and non-SM abstracts—with one exception. The element, 'to enhance the performance,' was not a significant differentiator. This is a noteworthy result, since it is commonly asserted that an interest in performance is a distinctive feature of the field of strategic management (Rumelt *et al.*, 1994; Summer *et al.*, 1990). Such an assertion, however, overlooks the fact—apparent from the LOGIT result—that other fields of management, including organizational behavior and organizational theory, are also concerned with performance, albeit at individual, job, team, and societal levels. Overall, though, the LOGIT results provide substantial validation of

our imputed six-element definition of the field of strategic management.

As a further validation, we expanded our scope to include a sample of articles published in *SMJ*. We selected a matched sample of 112 *SMJ* articles to correspond to the distribution of publication years of 112 non-SM articles from our initial sample. This matching ensured that we had the same time periods represented in the *SMJ* and non-SM samples. We assumed that all the *SMJ* articles were indeed strategic management articles (and would have been coded as such by our panelists) and proceeded to test them against the matched sample of NonSM articles. We used the same LOGIT procedure as described above; results are shown in the right-hand column of Table 3. As can be seen, the results are essentially identical to those obtained from the comparison based on SM articles drawn from *AMJ*, *AMR*, and *ASQ*. The model correctly classified 83 percent of the abstracts; all the definitional elements were significant, including the 'performance' element at  $p < 0.10$ , and the individual coefficients were very similar to those generated from the other sample of SM articles. Thus, across two samples of strategic management abstracts, we find validating support for our imputed definition. In summary, the implicit consensual definition of the field of strategic management—as based upon our panel's ratings of abstracts in leading U.S.-based journals—can be stated as: '*The field of strategic management deals with the major intended and emergent initiatives taken by general managers on behalf of owners, involving utilization of resources, to enhance the performance of firms in their external environments.*'

### STUDY II: EXPLICIT DEFINITION OF THE FIELD

Our second study considers the explicit, or espoused, conceptions of the field, as held by scholars who were selected for their paradigmatic diversity. Explicit definitions reflect an intentionality and deliberateness that may be missing in implicit definitions such as we have imputed above. A scholar's explicit definition of the field may reflect his or her strongly held views, conscious assertions of what strategic management is (and is not), and even hints of where the field should be headed.

We report on an analysis of the explicit definitions of the field of strategic management, obtained from 57 scholars who are recent authors in major journals. Again, our emphasis in this inquiry was on paradigmatic diversity, so as to put to a stringent test the consensus that we saw in Study 1. Specifically, our sample of 57 consisted of four subgroups—scholars who are active at the intersection of SM and economics, SM and sociology, SM and marketing, and SM and mainstream management. Thus, we sought to determine the definitions of the field, as held by four distinct groups of scholars, including three groups of boundary-spanners.

As discussed earlier, by its very nature the field of strategic management resides at the intersection of numerous other fields, including economics, sociology, finance, and marketing.<sup>10</sup> This overlapping diversity can be thought of as a source of multi-way intellectual exchange, stimulation, and advancement for the field (Merton, 1996). But this variety could also cause harmful fragmentation and splintering, as scholars of diverse stripes try to exert—consciously or subconsciously—various forms of hegemonic pulls on the field (Hambrick, 2004). Sharing terrain with more established, high-stature fields can be a source of intellectual enrichment and legitimacy for strategic management, or it could lead to its co-optation and, ultimately, its disappearance. This was essentially the fate of the field of international business, which emerged as a distinct and vigorous academic community in the 1960s and 1970s, only to be subsequently subsumed by other business disciplines.

By surveying boundary-spanners, or scholars who are active both in SM and other fields, we have an opportunity to obtain insights—from those directly involved—as to whether the perspectives of diverse strategic management scholars reflect enough commonality to sustain the coherence of the field, or instead suggest an impending fragmentation. We should emphasize that by studying scholars who have differing disciplinary orientations, we are examining only one form of diversity. One could also consider the heterogeneity of perspectives that arises due to age or rank,

national culture or region, or type of employing institution. Still, the diversity that exists because of discipline-based variety is widely seen as especially salient for the trajectory of the field (Whitley, 2000).

### Identifying boundary-spanners

We identified a set of informed boundary-spanning scholars who had recently published both in the leading journal in strategic management (*SMJ*) and in one of three adjacent fields that intersect with SM: economics, sociology, and marketing. We focused on these three fields because of their long-standing and pronounced influence on SM, both as evidenced by a series of seminal articles in 1981 that addressed their intersection with SM (Biggadike, 1981; Jemison, 1981; Porter, 1981) and by the recent ratings of over 900 SM scholars who were asked to indicate which non-management fields have had the greatest influence on SM (Michel and Chen, 2004).

Our sampling pool consisted of authors who published both in the *SMJ* during the period 2001–05 and in at least one leading journal in one of the three adjacent fields during the same recent period. The leading journals we considered included *American Economic Review*, *Rand Journal of Economics*, and *Journal of Industrial Economics* for economics; *American Sociological Review*, *American Journal of Sociology*, and *Social Forces* for sociology; and *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, and *Marketing Science* for marketing. We used multiple search engines, such as the Social Science Citation Index, Google Scholar, ABI-Inform, and JSTOR to identify our sample scholars. We sought to identify every author who met our joint-publishing criteria, but we may have missed some who qualified. We contacted, by e-mail, a total of 40 boundary-spanning scholars. Of those, 37 agreed to participate, a response rate of 92.5 percent. Of our respondents, 12 work in economics, 17 in sociology, and eight in marketing.<sup>11</sup> Once a scholar had agreed to participate, we sent him/her a brief e-mail-based survey (several respondents preferred to be surveyed by phone). Our main

<sup>10</sup> Strategic management is not alone in its eclectic nature, as other subfields of management, such as organizational behavior and organizational theory, similarly intersect with the fields of psychology (House and Singh, 1987; Pugh, 1969) and sociology (Perrow, 2000), respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Although the profiles of these boundary-spanners varied considerably, our review of their records in SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) suggests that most of them had their main affiliations with the fields outside SM and occasionally published in SM (particularly in *SMJ*), rather than the reverse.

question—and the one we report on here—was: ‘What is your definition of the field of strategic management?’<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> We would have liked to include psychology and finance boundary-spanners, since these fields (especially finance) have had considerable influence on SM, but there were too few individuals who met our criteria of publishing both in *SMJ* and the top journals of these respective fields during the period 2001–05. By our count, there were fewer than five such individuals in each of psychology and finance. Among our economics-oriented boundary-spanners, however, were three individuals who had published in both mainstream economics journals and top finance journals (e.g., *Journal of Finance* or *Journal of Financial Economics*). Because their explicit definitions of strategic management were not distinctly different from those of the other economists, we decided to keep them combined.

For comparative purposes, we also selected a group of 20 ‘mainstream management’ scholars, who published both in the *SMJ* and in other leading management journals such as the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, and *Organization Science* during the period 2001–05—but not in any journals outside the field of management. These scholars were randomly selected (provided that they met the above ‘mainstream management’ criteria) from among a group of scholars who had provided us their definitions of the field of strategic management as part of a separate project. Hence, in total we present data from 57 academics representing four distinct scholarly orientations.

Table 4. Representative definitions espoused by four sets of boundary-spanning scholars

Adjacent field	Espoused definitions
Economics	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The strategic management field is—positively—the scientific study of the plans that firms build and implement in order to achieve and maintain competitive advantage, and—normatively—the attempt to identify optimal plans for achieving and maintaining competitive advantages</li> <li>2. A field aimed at understanding competitive heterogeneity</li> <li>3. Strategic management is the interdisciplinary field that studies the behavior of companies and other market parties, in terms of their strategic behavior, the choices they make with regard to organizing their production, their interrelationships, and their competitive positioning. All of this is set against a thorough understanding of the broader environment in which companies have to operate</li> </ol>
Sociology	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. The study of firms’ performance from a platform of tangible and intangible resources in an evolving environment that includes their market and value network</li> <li>5. I think of the field relatively broadly. I would say that it encompasses the definition and implementation of an organizational course of action. Central to the determination of those actions is an understanding of the relationship between choices available to a manager and firm performance (which I would define far more broadly than profitability to include dimensions such as innovation and survival). Hence, most research in the field either concerns understanding the links between organizational actions (routines) and performance outcomes, or considers how one actually goes about changing these routines</li> <li>6. The study of how organizations create value, including not only ‘the plan’ but also the organizational configuration that it is combined with</li> </ol>
Marketing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. It is a field about what drives performance of certain businesses and which strategy works</li> <li>8. I view the field of strategic management as eclectic, involving all the various business functions such as finance, marketing, supply chain, economics, psychology, statistics, etc. More specifically, it involves firm boundaries, market and competitive analysis, strategic positions and dynamics, and internal organization</li> <li>9. The field looks at substantive and process issues such as strategy content, governance mechanisms, strategy choices, market driven strategy, choices of markets, advantage, value propositions, configuration, reacting to markets, and structure, Governance, CEO, leader, strategic choices</li> </ol>
Management	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Developing an explanation of firm performance by understanding the roles of external and internal environments, positioning and managing within these environments and relating competencies and advantages to opportunities within external environments</li> <li>11. Strategic management is the process of building capabilities that allow a firm to create value for customers, shareholders, and society while operating in competitive markets</li> <li>12. The study of decisions and actions taken by top executives/TMTs for firms to be competitive in the marketplace</li> </ol>

### Integration of implicit and explicit definitions

Table 4 gives a representative sample of definitions from the four groups of respondents, showing variety in the range of constructs that were included. For example, Respondent 2, an economics-oriented SM scholar, defined the field in concise terms, as 'understanding competitive heterogeneity;' in contrast, Respondent 9, a marketing-oriented scholar, referred to an array of constructs—content, process, governance, leaders, structure, and especially markets (mentioned three times). Of course, it might be said that these two definitions are not incompatible, but instead differ merely in their specificity: Respondent 9 simply gave an inventory of the major factors—in his or her mind—that give rise to the 'competitive heterogeneity' referred to by Respondent 2.

Indeed, despite their differences, the definitions provided by our respondents showed substantial commonality, or at least frequently recurring use of a certain set of conceptual elements. As a way to systematically examine the conceptual elements that made up these definitions, we conducted content analysis (as we did earlier on article abstracts), in which we identified and assigned words to the six elements of the implicit definition we generated above. On the basis of our preliminary examination of the respondents' definitions, however, we added a seventh element that referred to 'internal organization,' because we noted that a number of respondents referred in various ways to 'structure,' 'internal organization,' decision processes,' and 'organizing'—all of which we included in this seventh element. For the other six elements, we assigned the root words identified in Study I to their respective elements (as shown in Table 2). (Of course, not all the 54 words used in generating our earlier implicit definition appeared in the respondents' explicit definitions.) We also included some words that were used by our respondents but that did not appear in our earlier analysis. For example, the word 'leader' was included in the definitional element that refers to managers and owners. Table 5 shows the root words in the respondents' definitions that we assigned to the seven elements.

We coded a respondent as referring to a specific element if her/his definition included one or more of the words that comprised that category. Then we aggregated these counts for our entire sample

Table 5. Explicit definitions of strategic management: major conceptual elements and their component words<sup>a</sup>

Conceptual elements	Member words	Incidence of appearance in definitions (%)
Strategic initiatives	Actions Plans Strategy Choices Positioning	45
Internal organization	Process Internal Behavior Implementation Practices Organizing Routines	30
Managers and owners	CEOs Managers Top Leaders Executives	30
Resources	Resources Capabilities	14
Performance	Performance Advantage Value Success Outcomes Sustainability Profits	86
Firms	Firm Organization Business Company	64
Environment	Competition Environment Market External	43

<sup>a</sup> Based on explicit definitions obtained from 57 scholars.

of respondents, as well as for each subgroup. The last column of Table 5 reports the percentage of all respondents who referred to each of the seven elements. As can be seen, the two most prevalent definitional elements were 'performance' (appearing in 86% of all definitions) and 'firms' (64%). The least common element of the respondents' explicit definitions was 'resources' (14%).

We next sought to determine whether the four subgroups differed in their inclusion of the various elements in their definitions. We report these

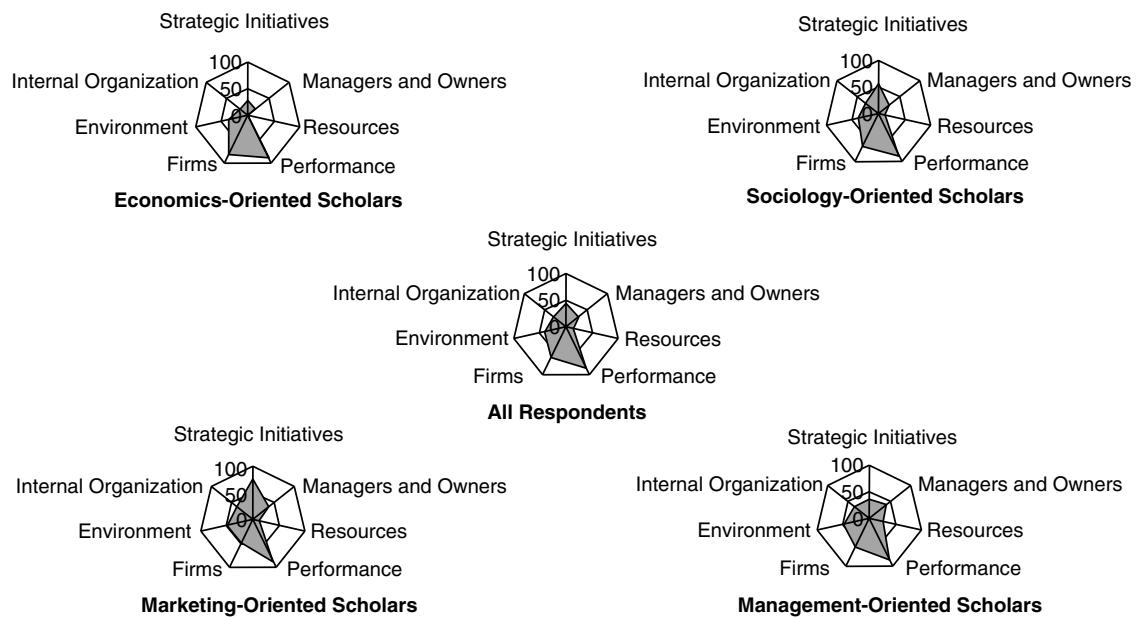


Figure 1. Images of strategic management. Note: The scales indicate the percentage of respondents who included a given perceptual element in their definitions of the field of strategic management

results schematically in Figure 1, as a set of concept webs. Each web consists of the seven elements, scaled from zero (no appearance of an element) to 100 (100% of all respondents referred to an element). In the middle of Figure 1, we show results for the full sample (graphically portraying the tabular results from Table 5).

As can be seen, the four groups of respondents exhibited striking similarity—but some differences as well—in their inclusion of the various elements in their explicit definitions of strategic management. All four groups heavily emphasized ‘performance’ in their definitions, and all four substantially noted ‘firms’ as the unit of analysis for the field. Mention of ‘the environment’ was also relatively uniform, appearing in 40–50% of the definitions of all four groups.

The economics-oriented SM scholars tended to have the most restricted conceptions of the field. As a group, they made very little mention of ‘resources,’ ‘managers and owners,’ ‘strategic initiatives,’ or ‘internal organization.’ The collective portrayal from this group, then, was highly congruent with the prevailing logic of industrial organization economics, often described as the structure–conduct–performance (S-C-P) paradigm (Porter, 1981; Scherer and Ross, 1990).

At the other extreme, the management-oriented

SM respondents had the most expansive, multi-faceted definitions of the field. All seven elements were substantially represented, including the three elements that had the lowest representation across the total sample: ‘resources,’ ‘managers and owners,’ and ‘internal organization.’

The sociology-oriented and marketing-oriented groups were largely similar in their relative mention of the various elements in their definitions. They particularly emphasized—more than the other two groups—the ‘strategic initiatives’ element, often referring to choices, actions, and decisions, or the volitional aspect of the strategic management framework. Coming from the sociology-oriented respondents, this relatively heavy emphasis on volition or purposive action could be seen as ironic, since two of the major strands of sociological theory that bear on strategic management—population ecology and institutional theory—accord little role for strategic choice or distinctive managerial action (at least in their original arguments; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Hannan and Freeman, 1989).

Despite these differences between subgroups, the fact remains that the similarities were great. None of the seven elements exhibited statistically significant differences across the four groups (as judged by chi-square and Kruskal–Wallis tests),

and there was especially equal and heavy emphasis placed on ‘performance’ and ‘firms.’

In asking four distinct subgroups of scholars for their explicit definitions of the field, we were anticipating the possibility of divergent views, but wholesale differences did not appear. Instead all four groups overwhelmingly defined the field by its unit of analysis—the firm—and by a primary outcome of interest: performance. Even on the lesser-represented elements, such as ‘resources’ and ‘internal organization,’ the four groups did not differ significantly in their mentions. Indeed, one could reasonably argue that the definitions differed primarily in their specificity, or in their tendency to note individual elements of the strategic management framework, rather than in their fundamental assertions of what the field is all about. It is entirely possible, even likely, that we would have seen stark differences among the subgroups if we had asked about their preferred theories, methods, or causal logics. But on the fundamental question we asked about—their definition of the field—the four types of strategic management scholars exhibited considerable agreement.

### **Perceived differences between strategic management and adjacent fields**

As a secondary part of our survey of boundary-spanners, we asked how they viewed the differences, or demarcations, between strategic management and the adjacent fields of economics, sociology, and marketing. Their responses were wide ranging, but some overarching themes emerged from each of the three groups of scholars.

Those active at the intersection of SM and economics particularly emphasized that the two fields differ primarily in their degree of interest in the challenges facing practicing managers. Several of these respondents indicated, in various ways, that economics tends to be ‘epistemologically-driven,’ according primacy to ‘deductive reasoning and modeling,’ but without involving ‘the intricacies of organizations.’ These respondents described SM as more ‘phenomenologically-driven,’ with a concern for generating ‘practical insights.’ This comparison of the two fields is particularly reflected in a comment by one respondent: ‘Economics tends to study firms as “fixed effects” whereas strategic management thrives on firm-level idiosyncrasies.’

The boundary-spanners at the intersection of SM and sociology emphasized differences in the primary causal logics of the two fields. According to these respondents, strategic management primarily focuses on logics of ‘rationality,’ ‘technical superiority,’ and ‘economic fitness.’ In contrast, these respondents said, sociology—or the sociological vantage on SM—focuses on the less rational, or more socially propelled aspects of organizations, including issues of ‘status,’ ‘power,’ ‘contagion,’ and ‘identity.’ One of the respondents illustrates this difference in his comment: ‘While economicistic [sic] thinking is the central strand of strategic management, sociologists tend to emphasize how social relations and cultural elements affect organizational outcomes. Sociologists also conceptualize organizational performance more broadly than do most strategic management researchers, to encompass legitimacy and survival and not only shareholder returns.’

Finally, those respondents at the intersection of SM and marketing emphasized a theme that stands in contrast to the comments from the SM-economics boundary-spanners. As noted above, this latter group consistently indicated that economists primarily operate outside of, or above, the details of the individual firm. The marketing-oriented boundary-spanners, however, said recurrently that marketing is more ‘specifics-oriented,’ ‘detail-oriented,’ and ‘operational’ than strategic management. As one of these respondents said, ‘The marketing perspective is rooted in understanding customers, customer value propositions, tradeoffs, and channel intermediaries. Strategic management has a somewhat remote, simplistic view of these matters.’

In sum, then, these boundary-spanners highlighted important distinctions between SM and three adjacent fields. Because these respondents reside at paradigmatic intersections, each straddling SM and another field, none of them—perhaps understandably—spoke of the superiority or correctness of one view over another. In fact, their comments consistently indicated that SM coexists in a complementary, symbiotic relationship with the other fields. And as our earlier analysis of their explicit definitions of SM indicates, these boundary-spanners—even though intellectually diverse—have a generally shared conception of the field of strategic management.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Kuhn (1962) asserted that a scientific community does not need a unifying paradigm in order to exist, but that it does need a shared identity. Our research contributes to an understanding of what constitutes the shared identity of the field of strategic management. Indeed, the fact that our large panel of strategic management scholars in Study I, and the diverse boundary-spanners in Study II, exhibited a high level of agreement in their assessments of the field's implicit and explicit definition suggests that a relatively strong common bond exists within the field, which perhaps helps to account for the success the field has enjoyed.

But the vitality of strategic management is also probably due to the fact that the field's intellectual content consists of numerous conceptual elements, thus allowing exploration of a wide array of theoretical and practical issues. According to our analysis, the consensual definition of the field consists of six elements, each with several sub-elements. In our examination of explicit definitions, we included a seventh element, the internal organization. These components, then, can be examined in various combinations, which allow for exceedingly fertile research opportunities. Moreover, as our analysis of boundary-spanners indicates, scholars who are active in the field of strategic management bring diverse but complementary conceptual lenses and tools to their study of SM issues. Thus, strategic management benefits from the combination of a fundamental consensus about the meaning of the field and substantial variety in how SM issues are framed and explored.

This duality—agreement on the basic definition and essence of the field, but coupled with considerable intellectual diversity—is reminiscent of Durkheim's (1933) concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity, as applied to academic communities. According to Durkheim, communities based on mechanical solidarity are driven by a strong dogmatic collective conscience and shared beliefs. Members are driven primarily by what is held as sacrosanct and fundamental by the community, and no room is given for deviance from the basic tenets. In contrast, communities bound by organic solidarity are based on division of labor, and without an overpowering collective conscience. Individual members are free to express their peculiar approaches; solidarity and cooperation are maintained through a system of interdependence, in

which the specialized functions symbiotically work together.

Applying Durkheim's framework to the study of academic communities, Hagstrom (1964) argued that the field of mathematics is bound predominantly by mechanical solidarity: despite the existence of various mathematics specialties, there is a consensus about the core propositions and criteria for judging research validity and quality. On the other hand, Hagstrom asserted that sociology is bound primarily by organic solidarity, as there is no single, widely accepted theory of social behavior or agreement on research methods. Sociologists, compared to mathematicians, find it relatively easy to engage in new research domains and to accept the differences in approach and core assumptions held by the different specialties in their field. It seems, from our analysis, that strategic management is much more like the organic field of sociology than the mechanical field of mathematics. It is held together by agreement on basic definition and purpose, but is also engaged in a wide and ever-shifting range of theoretical and practical explorations.<sup>13</sup>

Our results also call to mind Merton's (1996) analysis of the interplay between 'insiders' and 'outsiders,' or differing intellectual camps, in an academic field. Contrary to the popular belief that insiders and outsiders follow completely incommensurate approaches to research in a field (and thereby talk past each other or, worse, end up in conflicts and battles for control), Merton concluded that the *interchange* and *syntheses* that occur between the two groups actually lead to each one adopting some of the other's perspective. Thus, according to Merton, the boundaries between insiders and outsiders are far more permeable than often thought to be. This interchange of ideas, however, does not occur without some competition and conflict. Rather, it is in the process of competing over ideas that the two groups adopt perspectives and procedures from each other (Merton, 1996: 261). The upshot of Merton's arguments is that the same forces that create dissensus in a field also paradoxically provide the grounds for consensus and commonality.

<sup>13</sup> In the early 1990s, the broader field of management witnessed a significant debate about the advantages of paradigmatic consensus vs. pluralism, precipitated by Pfeffer (1993) and countered most notably by Cannella and Paetzold, 1994).

Having extracted a consensual definition of the field, the obvious question is, ‘So what?’ Perhaps the greatest benefit of having this definition is that it allows strategic management scholars to frame the debate about what they want the field to become, or how they want it to change. In this vein, for example, the consensus definition of the field appears to give primacy to financial shareholders ('owners') rather than other stakeholders, such as customers or employees. Similarly, the definition emphasizes profit-seeking 'firms,' rather than other types of organizations such as not-for-profits or public institutions. Indeed, we informally noticed a clear pattern in our panel's ratings of abstracts in Study I: no matter how 'strategic' the overall topic of an abstract, it received lower ratings, or simply mixed ratings, if it involved non-financial performance outcomes or not-for-profit settings. With the consensus definition now in front of us, members can ask whether such implicit biases about the field are desirable and/or inevitable.

At the most basic level, the consensus definition we have extracted could serve either as a *screen* or as a *magnet* for future research. If the field of strategic management adheres to its own concept of distinctive competence, then the existing definition might be seen as a screen or filter; and scholarly work that does not fit this definition would be treated as outside the field, beyond the realm of strategic management. If, however, we treat the current definition as a magnet, which attracts or invites related work, then the shape of the field—including the definition itself—might change over time. Under this perspective, one of the distinctive competences of the field might be seen as its ability—and willingness—to broker, reconcile, and integrate the works of multiple other fields (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997; Meyer, 1991).

## Future research

Our study indicates a number of opportunities for future research. We will note four such possibilities. First, the field of strategic management could be examined from different vantages. We based our analysis on the lexical distinctions between strategic management and other areas of management, as revealed in article abstracts in mainstream management journals. But strategic management also might meaningfully be contrasted with economics

or sociology—if suitable source materials could be obtained in sufficient quantity.

A second research possibility is to replicate our assessment of the field of strategic management in the future, in essence exploring how members might have altered their conceptions of the field over time. We have purposely avoided any type of longitudinal analysis, because we gathered members' perceptions at a single point. The scope and essence of a field, however, can evolve and it might be very interesting to examine how members view the field, say, in 5 or 10 years—in terms of what is inside, what is outside, and what their implicit consensus definition is of the field.

A third research opportunity is to examine the intersection of the consensual definition of a field and the amount of influence that individual scholars (and their works) have within that field. Using citation analysis, for example, one could explore whether works that adhere closely, or centrally, to the definition of a field are likely to have the greatest influence; or whether, in contrast, works that reside on the periphery of a field are most influential because of their novelty and deviance from the mainstream. Or researchers could work the other way, by exploring how highly cited works shape the basic definition and language of a field. In this vein, for instance, one could reasonably surmise that one of the elements of our consensus definition of strategic management—‘involving utilization of resources’—would not have been nearly as prominent in our findings if not for the highly influential works of Wernerfelt (1984) and Barney (1991) in launching the now well-known resource-based view of the firm.

Fourth, our methodology could be applied to other academic fields, including those in the administrative sciences. For example, our empirical approach, based on the systematic measurement and analysis of community members' views, could be used to comprehend the distinctions between industrial/organizational psychology and human resource management, between economic sociology and organizational theory, and between entrepreneurship and strategic management. Thus, our study not only sheds new light on the field of strategic management as a social entity, but also provides an analytic roadmap for conducting such inquiries in other fields.

## CONCLUSION

Some strategic management scholars have lamented the field's disparate, ambiguous nature. But how can such concerns be reconciled with the substantial success that strategic management has experienced over the past quarter-century or so? Strategic management's apparent weakness seems to be its strength. Its amorphous boundaries and inherent pluralism act as a common ground for scholars to thrive as a community, without being constrained by a dominant theoretical or methodological strait-jacket. Our study suggests that strategic management acts as an intellectual brokering entity, which thrives by enabling the simultaneous pursuit of multiple research orientations by members who hail from a wide variety of disciplinary and philosophical regimes. At the same time, however, these diverse community members seem to be linked by a fundamental implicit consensus that helps the field to cohere and maintain its identity. The success of strategic management thus suggests an alternative view of academic communities—as entities that are dynamic and malleable, yet at the same time held together by a common, underlying, but permeable core.

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## APPENDIX A: SELECTED DEFINITIONS OF STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

Author	Definition
Learned <i>et al.</i> (1965)	[This definition is of business policy, the precursor of strategic management.] Policy is the study of the functions and responsibilities of general management and the problems which affect the character and success of the total enterprise
Schendel and Hofer (1979)	Strategic management is a process that deals with the entrepreneurial work of the organization, with organizational renewal and growth, and, more particularly, with developing and utilizing the strategy which is to guide the organization's operations
Bracker (1980)	Strategic management entails the analysis of internal and external environments of firms to maximize the utilization of resources in relation to objectives
Jemison (1981)	Strategic management is the process by which general managers of complex organizations develop and use a strategy to coalign their organization's competences and the opportunities and constraints in the environment
Van Cauwenbergh and Cool (1982)	Strategic management deals with the formulation aspects (policy) and the implementation aspects (organization) of calculated behavior in new situations and is the basis for future administration when repetition of circumstances occur

APPENDIX A: (*Continued*)

Author	Definition
Smircich and Stubbart (1985)	Strategic management is organization making—to create and maintain systems of shared meanings that facilitate organized action
Schendel and Cool (1988)	Strategic management is essentially work associated with the term entrepreneur and his function of starting (and given the infinite life of corporations) renewing organizations
Fredrickson (1990)	Strategic management is concerned with those issues faced by managers who run entire organizations, or their multifunctional units
Teece (1990)	Strategic management can be defined as the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of managerial actions that enhance the value of a business enterprise
Rumelt, Schendel, and Teece (1994)	Strategic management is about the direction of organizations, most often, business firms. It includes those subjects of primary concern to senior management, or to anyone seeking reasons for success and failure among organizations
Bowman, Singh, and Thomas (2002)	The strategic management field can be conceptualized as one centered on problems relating to the creation and sustainability of competitive advantage, or the pursuit of rents