

Rethinking small firm growth

...while absorbing the processual

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Cover: A colourful abstraction of the different, but intertwined, understandings of small firm growth.

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Abstract

In reaction to the misalignment between one-dimensional determinism informing much of the firm growth literature and the non-linear, recursive and idiosyncratic process of growth, the aim of this thesis is to rethink small firm growth. It is inspired by the vast interest in growing firms, and intrigued by contemporary requests to invigorate the research field with new perspectives. By problematizing the phenomena and discussing its underpinning and often taken for granted assumptions, it serves to provoke new insights into how firm growth works, how it can be conceptualized, and how it can be studied. In terms of methodology the thesis is based on a qualitative case study design.

The process of small firm growth is explored in four separate research papers. In paper I the rural firm growth literature is reviewed and three areas of focus are discussed; the output of growth, the process of growth, and the context of growth. In Paper II focus lies on trigger points - events preceding bursts of growth - showing how these unfold through informal everyday interaction. Paper III shows that making sense of growth is problematic and that the phenomenon may be made sense of in distinct ways; as output indicators, as the internal development of the firm, and as a necessity to which the firm has to conform. Paper IV shows how growth unfolds through the interactions between multiple components, and thus promotes shifting the unit of analysis from individual components to the system of components and their interactions.

By reviewing the philosophical foundations informing both the main stream and alternative perspectives in small firm growth research, this thesis provide an informed position from which we can rethink firm growth. It contributes to the literature and the general understanding of small firm growth by critically discussing how growth is conceptualized and by advocating two alternative conceptualizations in firm growth as constructed and as complex. This thesis also contributes by showing that firm growth is more than an output measure, it is a heterogeneous and multifaceted process challenging to both understand and manage. Finally, it shows the potential of theoretical and methodological frameworks stemming from both the linguistic turn and from complexity science for advancing our understanding of how firms grow.

Keywords: firm growth, small firms, process, growing, linguistic turn, discourse analysis, complexity science

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Sammanfattning

Den icke-linjära, rekursiva och idiosynkratiska tillväxtprocessen som företag upplever när de går från små till större stämmer dåligt överens med den endimensionella determinism som ligger till grund för stor del av tillväxtlitteraturen. Det är därför angeläget att ompröva vår förståelse av hur företag växer. Inspirerad dels av det stora intresset för växande företag, dels av behovet av nya perspektiv i tillväxtforskningen, problematiseras i denna avhandling begreppet tillväxt och dess underliggande antaganden. Genom att kritiskt reflektera över tillväxtprocessen och studera den i detalj genom en kvalitativ fallstudie av ett växande företag nås nya insikter om hur företag växer.

Tillväxtprocessen utforskas genom fyra fristående studier. I den första studien granskas den litteratur som rör tillväxt i landsbygdsbaserade företag och tre fokusområden diskuteras; resultatet av tillväxt, tillväxtprocessen, samt kontexten i vilken tillväxt sker. I den andra studien ligger fokus på så kallade triggerpunkter, händelser som initierar tillväxtprocessen, och resultaten visar hur dessa utvecklas genom informella möten mellan människor. Den tredje studien visar att företagare kan uppleva tillväxt som något problematiskt och att de relaterar till begreppet på flera olika sätt; som kvantitativa resultatmätt av företagets prestation, som företagets interna utveckling, och som en nödvändighet för företagets överlevnad. Den fjärde studien visar att tillväxt kan förstås som komplexa system där multipla komponenter interagerar, ett resultat som innebär att analysenheten bör ändras från de enskilda komponenterna till systemet som helhet.

Genom att kritiskt diskutera de filosofiska grunderna för olika förståelser av tillväxt erbjuder avhandlingen en välgrundad utgångspunkt från vilken vi kan föra kunskapen om hur företag växer framåt. Arbetet bidrar både till tillväxtlitteraturen och till den allmänna förståelsen av hur företag växer genom att föreslå nya tolkningar av tillväxt, alternativa till den dominerande synen där tillväxt porträtteras som en linjär och stegvis process. Avhandlingen bidrar också genom att visa att tillväxt är mer än ett resultatmätt, det är även en heterogen och multidimensionell process som kan vara svår att både förstå och att styra. Slutligen visar denna avhandling på möjligheterna med att inkorporera teorier och metoder från andra vetenskapliga fält för att öka förståelsen för hur företag växer.

Nyckelord: tillväxt, små företag, process, växande, diskursanalys, komplexitetsteori

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Preface

I was early. So instead of driving directly to the farm and processing plant I drove around the village. Reaching the church I took a left turn and drove up onto the gravel covered parking lot. I turned off the car but remained in my seat. It was quiet. Cloudy skies, no wind. Taking a deep breath I tried to calm my nerves and gather my thoughts. Who would I meet, and what should I ask?

My first visit to Orange Inc. took place in early March 2012, a half year into my PhD studies. Gently, but firmly, my supervisors had pushed me out into the field. Searching for a growing firm, I came across Orange Inc. A phone call later I was invited to a meeting with the manger.

So, there I was, sitting in the car. Nervous but also curious. What would I learn? How would this interview fit into the four year adventure that I had just started? And was a PhD really what I was supposed to be doing?

A couple of hours later I was back in my car. Full of energy, hands trembling as if all the new insights had trouble fitting within the boundaries of my body. Somehow it had to come out, and somehow I just had to learn more. This is when I knew that the years to come would be good ones.

Dedication

To my loved ones.

To study processually is to consider the world as restless, something underway, becoming and perishing, without end.

Hjorth, Holt & Steyaert (2015)

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List of publications

This thesis is based on the work contained in the following papers, referred to by Roman numerals in the text:

- I Tunberg, M.* (2014). Approaching rural firm growth: a literature review. *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, 8 (4), pp. 261-286.
- II Tunberg, M.* & Gaddefors, J. (2017). Small firm growth – the unfolding of a trigger point. (manuscript)
- III Tunberg, M.* & Anderson, A. R. (2017). Sensemaking and small firms' growing pains. (manuscript)
- IV Tunberg, M.*, Ferguson, R. & Gaddefors, J. (2017). Rethinking the process of small firm growth – complicated, constructed, or complex? (manuscript)

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* Corresponding author.

My contributions to Papers I–IV are as follows:

- I I am the sole author. I presented a first draft of the paper at the Rural at the Edge – 2nd Nordic Conference for Rural Research in Joensuu in May 2012. In November 2012 I presented a revised and extended version of the paper at the Research in Entrepreneurship and Small Business (RENT) Conference in Lyon, France.
- II This paper is based on a co-authorship. As the lead author I presented a first draft of the paper at the Research in Entrepreneurship and Small Business (RENT) Conference in Luxembourg in November 2014. My main contributions lie in the overall design and development of the paper. I also gathered and analysed the empirical material, and did the majority of the writing.
- III This paper is based on a co-authorship. As the lead author I presented a first draft of the paper at the 8th International Conference for Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Regional Development (ICEIRD) in Sheffield in June 2015. My main contributions lie in developing the idea and design of the paper, and in gathering and analysing the empirical material.
- IV This paper is based on a co-authorship. As the lead author I presented an early (and since then substantially reworked) draft of the paper at the Institute for Small Business and Entrepreneurship (ISBE) Conference in Paris in November 2016. My main contributions lie in the overall design and development of the paper. I also gathered and analysed the empirical material, and performed the majority of the writing.

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1 Introducing the topic

In Orange Inc. a range of projects are in play. Some concern new production lines, others the development of new markets. Many have the potential of increasing the numbers of employees, turnover, or some other quantifiable measure. Some of the projects have already succeeded in this sense, others provide value more challenging to measure. While a few projects developed according to plan, most took an unplanned turn and developed into something quite different, were put on hold, or even closed down.

This thesis is based on a case study of a growing small firm. After numerous visits to the firm and extensive discussions on what had been observed, a picture of growth, far more compound than the one communicated in the yearly reports of the firm, began to crystalize. A range of ideas, discussions, and projects with growth potential seemed to be simultaneously ongoing, all intertwined in an intricate web. This picture of growth does not align well with the main assumptions of determinism and linearity informing the received view of firm growth. Rather, it provokes an exercise of rethinking small firm growth.

1.1 Growing firms

Gazelles. Unicorns. Decacorns. Narwhals. There are many names for those we love. Growing firms are however a rare breed. In fact, most firms start small and stay small for the remainder of their existence (e.g. Birley & Westhead 1990; Davidsson, Lindmark & Olofsson 1998; Garnsey, Stam & Hefferman 2006; Dahlqvist, Davidsson & Wiklund 2000). Firm growth is indeed something unusual or, using Asplund's (1970, p. 111) definition of a phenomena, "an event or occurrence that needs to be explained" [author's translation]. Add to the equation that growing firms contribute considerably to the economic development by generating jobs and tax revenue and by fostering innovation (e.g. Acs 2006; Autio 2007; Leibenstein 1968; Acs & Audretsch 2003; Storey

1995), and the value of really understanding small firm growth becomes even more apparent. Ever since Birch's (1979) seminal work forecasting that most new jobs would be generated by small growing firms established by entrepreneurs, firm growth has been a popular topic, not least among policy-makers:

“Europe’s economic growth and jobs depend on its ability to support the growth of enterprises. Entrepreneurship creates new companies, opens up new markets, and nurtures new skills. The most important sources of employment in the EU are Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs). The Commission’s objective is to encourage people to become entrepreneurs and also make it easier for them to set up and grow their businesses”

(European Commission 2017)

Within Sweden, supporting firm growth is central to the strategy for sustainable regional development (Regeringskansliet 2009; 2007-2013; 2017), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights the importance of improving the growth conditions and incentives in order to for Sweden to thrive (OECD 2017). A range of reforms have been proposed and put into place to solve the perceived issues, such as increasing state financed venture capital and adjustments to the regulations of the immigration of workers (Regeringskansliet 2013). Thus, there are pronounced forces in play, not only promoting the growth of firms, but portraying it as an essential part of a healthy society. Arguably, this combination of rarity and perceived value makes the growing firm particularly interesting to study (Delmar, Davidsson & Gartner 2003; Gilbert, McDougall & Audretsch 2006; Penrose 1959).

The strong belief in growth and its positive connotations does however not stand unquestioned. Critical voices argue that the unidimensional focus on economic factors excludes other important aspects such as those related to the environment and social life (Korsgaard & Anderson 2011), that growing may be far from only a positive experience (Paper III), and even questioning growth as a strategy for developing the firm (Davidsson, Steffens & Fitzsimmons 2009).

1.2 Small firm growth as a research topic

The research field of firm growth is, and has always been, strongly influenced by the field of economics implying a logic of determinism and linearity. Positivistic assumptions inform the choice of theoretical frameworks and methodological designs and interest lies in causal relations and the results of growth. Although there is a variety of theoretical lenses in play, firm growth is

always defined as a “change in amount” (Grant & Perren 2002; Parry 2010), operationalized as a quantifiable indicator measured over time. The type of indicator varies extensively between studies but turnover, number of employees and sales figures are popular measurements (Grant & Perren 2002; Delmar, Davidsson & Gartner 2003). Appropriate to this output-focused view on firm growth, large quantitative data sets are gathered and analysed with suitable econometrical methods.

Although this body of research includes many highly cited studies it has not managed to provide satisfying answers as to how firms grow. Rather, it is argued that essential questions remain unanswered (Leitch, Hill & Neergaard 2010), and that theoretical and conceptual development has been both slow and limited (Wiklund, Patzelt & Shepherd 2009; Davidsson & Wiklund 2001; Delmar, Davidsson, & Gartner 2003; Shepherd & Wiklund 2009), which the, not only sustained, but still extensive use of Penrose’s now more than 50 year old theory of firm growth may serve as a proof. As McKelvie and Wiklund (2010) point out, synthesizing the literature on firm growth gives a rather negative picture of the state of affairs (Coad 2007; Davidsson & Wiklund 2001; Macpherson & Holt 2007; Phelps, Adams & Bessant 2007; Shepherd & Wiklund 2009; Storey 1995; Weinzimmer, Nystrom & Freeman 1998), suggesting something needs to happen.

New perspectives are needed to move the field forward (Leitch, Hill & Neergaard 2010; Parry 2010; Wright & Stigliani 2013), both on a philosophical and a methodological level. It is argued that more “in-depth longitudinal case studies of different types of growth processes would be particularly valuable”, (McKelvie & Wiklund 2010, p. 280), that “knowledge production requires inclusivity and pluralism in research perspectives and approaches” (Leitch, Hill & Neergaard 2010, p. 258), and that “entrepreneurial and business growth represents a rich, kaleidoscopic tapestry, the understanding and appreciation of which is a multi-disciplinary enterprise necessitating the adoption of both positivist and non-positivist approaches as well as the employment of multiple methods” (ibid). Aiming to shift the focus from measuring how much a firm grows to exploring the more fundamental question of how it is growing (McKelvie & Wiklund 2010) process approaches are promoted in combination with more longitudinal and qualitative case studies.

It is within this setting the aim of this thesis is formulated.

1.3 Aim: Rethinking the process of small firm growth

Inspired by the vast interest in growing firms, from both inside and outside of academia, and intrigued by contemporary requests to invigorate the field of

firm growth research with new perspectives, the aim of this thesis is to rethink the process of small firm growth. It may sound pretentious but it is no more than a humble aspiration of providing an alternative view to the ongoing debate on how to understand firm growth. By problematizing the phenomena and discussing its underpinning and often taken for granted assumptions, this text aims to provoke new insights into how firm growth works, how it can be conceptualized, and how it can be studied.

In addition to this summary chapter and the overarching aim of rethinking small firm growth, this thesis is comprised by four research papers, each with their own focus (Table 1.1). The papers all constitute an important part in rethinking small firm growth but, while closely linked, they provide slightly different contributions.

Table 1.1. Aim and research questions within the four papers

Paper	Aim	Research questions
I	...to investigate the extent and content of research on rural small firm growth, and to identify and describe approaches to growth and themes within the rural firm growth literature.	- How is the phenomenon of firm growth approached in existing rural firm studies? - What implications do different approaches have on the development of the field?
II	... to explore the process of growing.	- How does a trigger point, i.e. an activity preceding a burst of growth, unfold?
III	... to explore the process of growing.	- How is firm growth made sense of?
IV	... to discuss the philosophical foundations of small firm growth.	- How can the dynamic, unstable and recursive process of growth be conceptualized?

The papers are summarized in Chapter 4 and included in full text at the end of this book.

1.4 Defining firm growth

Defining a social phenomenon is next to impossible. This is due to the inherent idea that definitions are to serve as formalized expressions, independent of their context. It is not easy, if even possible, to fully eliminate context from a social phenomenon, which causes great challenges in searching for the perfect definition of firm growth. In discussing the difficulties of defining of social phenomenon, it may prove useful to adopt Heylighen's (1999) idea of degrees of formalization. This suggests that the level of formalization is a continuum. Definitions in mathematics and physics represents the most formalized end due

to its low degree of context dependence and the stable nature of the context in question. Human feelings serve as an example of expressions whose degree of formalization adhere to the other side of the continuum with a high degree of context dependence and an unstable nature of the context. Firm growth may be considered floating somewhere in between these end points, serving as an explanation as to why, despite more than half a century of research, there is no such thing as one definition of firm growth. Indeed, the very attempt to establish a specific and all-encompassing definition of firm growth may be questioned. It may be more meaningful to see the attempted definitions as expression of different discourses within the field of firm growth.

There are two main discourses in play with regards to how to define firm growth. The seminal work by Penrose (1959) may serve as a starting point in discussing these. Penrose provides a twofold definition: Firstly, growth as an outcome, and second, growth as a process of internal development. Much of the existing firm growth literature has adopted the first definition. This is likely associated with the neat fit with the ‘economics-logic’ dominating the firm growth literature. Within this outcome-based discourse, firm growth is defined as a “change in amount” (Grant & Perren 2002; Parry 2010) and operationalized as a measureable entity, for example as number of employees or yearly turnover (Delmar, Davidsson & Gartner 2003). The second part – growth as a process of internal development – entails, as is evident from the phrasing, more of a process perspective. This is associated with a range of definitions, such as firm growth as a set of stages, as a social construction, or as a complex system (see Paper IV for a further elaboration on these definitions).

As frustrating as it may be, this lack of unity with regards to how to define firm growth is by no means surprising (one only has to look at the field of entrepreneurship and its ongoing debate on how to define their core concepts) and may in fact open up for new takes on the phenomenon. Due to the inherent challenges of defining firm growth, and the logic of problematization guiding this thesis, I choose to not conform to one specific definition. Instead, I continuously return to this issue within each of the papers and also in this summary chapter.

In brief, within this summary chapter firm growth is discussed in terms of an output-, context-, and process-logic. This approach is also prevalent in Paper I, although combined with an open definition of the phenomenon with regards to the articles included in the review. In Paper II firm growth is discussed in terms of dynamic states and trigger points, in Paper III in terms of how the respondents of the study make sense of the phenomenon, resulting in an output, a process, and a necessity repertoire. In Paper IV firm growth is explored as a complex

system. Common to all attempts at defining or making sense of firm growth in this thesis, is the desire to absorb the processual nature of the growing firm.

1.5 Areas of focus

The aim of rethinking small firm growth opens up for various ways forward. A scope that is too wide may however create great challenges in truly providing an interesting contribution. Delimitations that are well thought out and clearly defined areas of focus therefore become essential. This thesis is set in the wider research discipline of business administration, and it belongs to the research field of entrepreneurship. The phenomenon being analysed is the process of growing, and empirical material is gathered from small firms (Table 1.2).

Table 1.2. Placing the thesis within the wider research field

Discipline	Sub-discipline	Phenomenon	Empirical material
Business Administration	Entrepreneurship	The process of growing	Small firms

In terms of areas of focus, it makes sense to look at each of the four papers in turn. In Table 1.3 below, each paper is commented upon in relation to three vital parts. The topicality refers to a specific contemporary conversation within the literature of firm growth. These conversations are used to provide a setting for the paper and it is also to this conversation that the results of the papers aim to contribute. The conceptual framework serves as a vehicle for reaching these results, and is closely associated with the conceptualization of growth applied in the specific paper.

Table 1.3. Areas of focus within the four papers

	Paper I	Paper II	Paper III	Paper IV
Topicality	Growth in rural firms	Firm growth processes and trigger points	Firm growth processes and problematization	Firm growth processes and alternative conceptualizations
Conceptual framework	Firm growth theory – approaches to firm growth	Discourse analysis, translation theory, social constructionism	Phenomenology, sensemaking, social constructionism	Complexity science
Conceptualization of firm growth	-	A social construction	A social construction	A complex system

1.6 Structure of the thesis

The first chapter of this thesis is devoted to the introduction where, among other things, the problem and aim are articulated. In the second chapter, the matter of methodology is discussed. This is followed by a review of the firm growth literature. The fourth chapter includes summaries of the four papers produced within the scope of this thesis, and the concluding discussion is presented in chapter five. The four papers are included in full text at the end of this book.

1.7 Reflection

In the autumn of 2011 my PhD journey started. I was then hired to deliver on an already formulated study plan focusing on firm growth in rural food production. However, my supervisors were open to - and encouraged - my involvement in the development of the project. As a result, my thesis has come to change as I have gained new knowledge and interests.

The first two years of the project were primarily devoted to familiarizing myself with academia in general and my field in particular, taking courses, and gathering empirical material. As the initial idea was to explore how rural food-producing firms grow, material was gathered from rural firms. However, as the project unfolded I realized the need to rethink the general concept of small firm growth and the rural aspect therefore got a less central role in the thesis. After my half-time seminar in November 2013, the research project was prolonged twice due to the birth of my two children, and also due to teaching duties. While these occurrences created distractions, they also offered valuable time for reflection and maturity as a researcher. I attended a range of conferences during this time, building a valuable network and, through presentations and discussions, becoming more familiar with my own material. Throughout this period I continued to visit the field to build up a longitudinal and in-depth case study of growth in a firm. The final year of the project was focused on research output. This is when paper III and IV came into existence (at least in the format that they are now presented), and the design of this summary chapter found its current layout.

What hopefully comes across as a neatly structured summary chapter, well-aligned papers, and an overall coherent thesis, does by no means reflect the process of getting here. This thesis is not the result of me working my way forward, step by step, according to a predefined plan. Quite the opposite; it is the result of a messy, difficult, and incredibly enjoyable process where people, ideas, and places have come to influence and change not only the thesis but also me as a person.

2 Approaching the matter of methodology

The aim of this thesis – rethinking the process of small firm growth – contains three vital parts: rethinking; process; and small firm growth. Within this chapter I elaborate on the first two parts. The aim of rethinking is inspired by requests for new perspectives in combination with ideas of problematization. The process perspective is formulated as a response to the movement within both the field of firm growth and the wider field of entrepreneurship towards more process-based thinking. Problematizing the assumptions of firm growth and absorbing the processual in turn has a direct impact on the philosophical orientation of the thesis and the research process, topics discussed further on in this chapter.

2.1 Problematizing the assumptions

Filling in the gaps is an important, and widely used, strategy in generating research. Rooted in the positivist tradition, it builds on and extends existing theory. Research questions are developed under the assumption that the existing literature is either incomplete, inadequate, or incommensurate (Sandberg & Alvesson 2011). However, even though gap spotting is a common way of generating research questions and may lead to significant and important contributions it has been criticized for failing to develop novel and interesting theory (Sandberg & Alvesson 2011). To achieve that, the assumptions underlying existing theory needs to be problematized.

Problematization is about questioning the underlying assumptions of existing theories; it is about a desire to generate novel research and create something beyond what gap spotting allows us to do. Problematization allows us to question “the apparently necessary presuppositions about a subject matter and ultimately the subject matter itself” (Alvesson & Sandberg 2008, p. 5). The concept of problematization is brought forward by Alvesson and Sandberg (2008) who define the concept such as “more effort is put into thinking through what may be

rethought in terms of assumptions, ideas, and conceptualization of a particular subject matter” (Alvesson & Sandberg 2008, p. 4). It is however different from critique and deconstruction in the sense that its focus is on developing constructive research questions.

Based on positivistic assumptions, a majority of the firm growth literature aims to fill knowledge gaps and to test and build on existing theories. In contrast, this thesis is about problematization. Frustrated by the lack of development in the field and inspired by the requests of invigorating it with new perspectives, I let Alvesson and Sandberg’s (2008) ideas on problematization guide the design of this thesis, from aim to conclusions. With the aim of rethinking the process of small firm growth, I wish to create room for a discussion of the underpinning assumptions of firm growth; on how growth unfolds; and how it can be conceptualized and studied.

Seeing and discussing what is already taken for granted is not an easy process. Firm growth is a well-established concept, making it challenging to problematize and rethink. The mitigation of these challenges is demanding on several levels, such as freeing oneself from dominating views, provoking structures, and conveying an alternative message. Thankfully there are plenty of great thinkers (both inside and outside of academia) whom have inspired, educated, and provoked me. Without these thinkers this thesis would be nothing more than a pile of blank papers.

2.2 A process perspective

A process perspective, in one shape or another, is central to most firm growth studies. This is likely due to the fact growth, in its purest form, is about change; and since change inevitably includes the aspect of time, a process perspective becomes natural. There are however many definitions and interpretations of what a process is and scholars have different ideas of what this means for entrepreneurship studies. For example, Moroz and Hindle (2012) search for a generic and distinct model of what they call the entrepreneurial process, which in turn is questioned by Hjorth, Holt and Steyaert (2015) who suggest that such a quest is not only irrelevant but that it counteracts the very idea of a process perspective.

Process theory is multifaceted and does not easily allow itself to be condensed into a few pages, let alone a few paragraphs. It is however not the aim of this section to make a complete analysis of process theory, its advances, and applications. Rather, the wide variety of process theories such as; life cycle, teleological, dialectic, and evolutionary perspectives, is noted. So are seminal work ranging from Van de Ven (1992) and Pettigrew (1997) to more recent

studies linking process theory to entrepreneurial activities (e.g. Moroz & Hindle 2011; Steyaert 2007; Hjorth, Holt & Steyaert 2015), and firm growth (e.g. Hamilton 2012; Levie & Lichtenstein 2010, Derbyshire & Garnsey 2015). This thesis however embraces the elegant definition by Pettigrew (1997, p. 338), namely that a process is ‘a sequence of individual or collective events, actions and activities unfolding over time in context’. In addition, focus lies on what Van de Ven and Engleman’s (2004) label event-driven process theory.

Studying entrepreneurship as a process, Aldrich (2001) and Van de Ven and Engleman (2004) propose to distinguish between event- and outcome-based theories. The outcome-driven approach is appropriate for questions like “What are the antecedents or consequences of entrepreneurship?” (Van de Ven & Engleman 2004, p. 355) and is closely associated with what Mohr (1982) refers to as variance – or casual – perspective. The event-driven approach, on the other hand, is suitable when exploring questions such as “How does the entrepreneurship process unfold over time?” (Van de Ven & Engleman 2004, p. 355), associated with Mohr’s (1982) process – or narrative – perspective.

Despite strong proponents for event-driven process theory (e.g. Davidson & Wiklund 2001; Shane & Venkataraman 2000; Van de Ven 1992; Van de Ven & Engleman 2004) a large majority of the entrepreneurship literature applies the outcome-based theories (Chandler & Lyon 2001) and the same holds true for firm growth research (McKelvie & Wiklund 2010). Based on thoughts by Langley (1999) and Van de Ven and Engleman (2004), Moroz and Hindle (2012, p. 787) point to four reasons for this dominance of outcome-driven process theory: (1) a lack of access or support for longitudinal methods; (2) fewer management-trained scholars with event-driven methods training; (3) the commitment of time and resources required to conduct in-depth discovery of process events; and (4) little understanding of what constitutes good theory, methods, and practice. Agreeing with this analysis (although I have some issues with the concept of “good” theory, method and practice) I believe that sticking with the dominant perspective would result in a smoother academic ride. This thesis is however informed by the event-driven process perspective, simply due to its desire to rethink and problematize firm growth rather than filling in the gaps of existing theory.

Applying an event-driven process perspective has implications relating to ontology and epistemology, and hence to methodology. In terms of the ontology and epistemology of process thinking I turn to Hjorth, Holt and Steyaert (2015). They differ between accepting processes and absorbing the processual, where accepting processes implies that the fluid nature of processes are embraced on an epistemological level, but not on an ontological one. Absorbing the processual implies a deeper focus on “movement, change and flow” (Hjorth,

Holt & Steyaert 2015, p. 599). Aiming to absorb the processual and shifting focus from process as “a thing in motion” to the transformation itself (Hjorth, Holt & Steyaert 2015, p. 602), this thesis provides research resting on other philosophical assumptions than those informing the received view within firm growth literature. Rather than applying naïve realism on an ontological level and an objectivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln 1994), as is standard in the positivist tradition, this thesis allows space for alternative views on reality and knowledge. In paper II and III the process of firm growth is conceptualized as a social construction placing the papers in the constructionist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln 1994). In Paper IV a more novel (within firm growth research) perspective is applied, namely that of complexity science. While embracing the idea of rich, non-linear, and transformative interactions, it is more difficult to label this perspective in terms of traditional ontological and epistemological concepts, as is elaborated upon in the paper.

The event-driven process perspective in combination with the alternative philosophical assumptions embraced in this thesis are well suited to study the idiosyncratic, discontinuous, and unstable nature of firm growth (Davidsson, Delmar & Wiklund 2006; Phelps, Adams & Bessant 2007; Penrose, 1959; Vinnell & Hamilton 1999; Garnsey & Heffernan 2005; Garnsey, Stam & Heffernan 2006). This characterization of the phenomenon stands in stark contrast to the tremendously popular view on firm growth as a linear, sequential, and deterministic process, constituting the single most used theoretical framework in firm growth studies (Levie & Lichtenstein 2010) and dominating textbook accounts of how small firms grow (Hamilton 2012). Criticized for a reliance on normative assumptions (Gibb 2000), lack of a common ground for basic constructs and empirical confirmation (Levie & Lichtenstein 2010) and its incompatibility with the nonlinear and temporal characteristics of firm growth (St-Jean, Julien & Audet 2008), the life cycle conceptualization of firm growth needs to be rethought.

2.3 Research design

In order to get oriented within the field and to explore how firm growth is approached within the literature, Paper I is conducted as a systematic literature review. This approach makes this paper substantially different from the other three papers in terms of research design, empirical material, and analytical framework. Paper I, on one hand, and Papers II-IV, on the other hand, are therefore discussed under separate headings in the remaining of section 2.3.

2.3.1 A systematic literature review

Paper I is guided by the second stage of the systematic literature review (SLR) framework (Tranfield, Denver & Smart 2003). This includes guidelines for identification of research, selection of studies, study quality assessment, data extraction and monitoring, and data synthesis. The Web of Science database was selected as a search engine since it is used extensively by scholars in the field, covers a vast range of research areas, and it includes several top-ranked entrepreneurship journals. The keywords identified relevant for the search were divided into four categories: entrepreneurship, growth, firms, and rurality. Synonyms were included among the keywords when deemed necessary and an asterisk at the end of a search word allowed for inclusion of all derivatives of the word. The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles in English, but without limits in terms of publishing date or research area.

The 272 articles identified through this search were reduced to a collection of 50. This reduction was due mainly to a qualitative assessment of the content of the articles, where only the remaining 50 were deemed to focus on the topic of the review, namely rural firm growth. In an attempt to provide the most thorough and well-structured synthesis as possible, a narrative analysis was applied, inspired by the meta-synthesis method proposed by Tranfield, Denver and Smart (2003). This method does not aim for a strict comparison of studies, but instead to construct “interpretations, not analyses ... by revealing analogies between accounts” (Noblit & Hare 1988, p. 8, as quoted in Tranfield, Denver & Smart 2003, p. 218). After an iterative process informed by both theory and multiple readings of the articles they were categorized according to their approach to firm growth: output, process, and/or context. In addition, the methods applied in the articles were classified according to Bryman’s (2004, p. 76–77 and p. 279–282) definition of methods, resulting in a final list of method classifications comprising: quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, literature review, and conceptual.

Within the paper two main limitations with this type of analysis are identified. Firstly, that the selection of database and keywords is associated with particular uncertainties and constraints, and secondly, the potential bias associated with the qualitative part of the review. Despite its limitations, this paper provides a useful account of the firm growth literature and paved the way for paper II, III, and IV, which are all devoted to empirically studying the process of small firm growth.

2.3.2 A case study approach

To move the field of firm growth forward, and to complement the vast range of positivistic and quantitative studies, new research designs are asked for (e.g. McKelvie & Wiklund 2010; Parry 2010; Wright & Stigliani 2013), specifically qualitative longitudinal case studies (Leitch, Hill & Neergaard 2010; Achtenhagen, Naldi & Melin 2010). Adhering to this request, complying with the aim of this thesis, and the desire to absorb the processual, a qualitative lens is adopted.

Qualitative studies are uncommon in leading entrepreneurship journals such as *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* and *Journal of Business Venturing* (Wigren 2007; Aldric, 2000; Gartner & Birley 2002), and the majority of these studies belong to a functionalist paradigm, implying that they aim to provide knowledge which at a later stage can be tested by quantitative studies. Rather than joining this group of qualitative studies, this thesis takes stock of the request articulated, by for example Leitch, Hill and Neergaard (2010) and Achtenhagen Naldi and Melin (2010), specifically asking for interpretivist qualitative studies and to study the social reality of firm growth.

Papers II, III, and IV, are based on a case study design, a common approach in qualitative business studies (Yin 2013; Robson & McCartan 2016; Gummesson 2000), and suitable for addressing the explorative questions informing this thesis (Yin 2013; Stake 1995). Important to note is that case studies form a kind of meta-methodology. They can be set up in different ways and are promoted by scholars with different ontological and epistemological interests, ranging from positivist-influenced (e.g. Yin 2013; Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007) to those active within the linguistic turn (e.g. Phillips & Hardy 2002; Höglund 2013). These two strands are concerned with different aspects of cases. While the first is inspired by the experimental and quasi experimental tradition, where interest lies in generalizability and multiple cases, the second is interested in understanding and learning from a specific case (Johansson 2000).

Aiming to absorb and not only accept the processual, the interest in this thesis lies in "...the uniqueness and complexity of the case, its embeddedness and interaction with its contexts" (Stake 1995, p. 16) placing this piece of research among those case studies interested in learning from specific cases rather than aiming to say something about the population of growing firms. This approach prevents any statistical inference. Generalization to a population is however not the aim of this thesis, or even compatible with the interest of absorbing the processual and studying firm growth as a social phenomenon. Instead, this thesis aims to learn from particular cases, as "The real business of case study is particularization, not generalization" (Stake 1995, p. 8), and as Alvesson and Kärreman (2000, p. 147) argue "...it is more fruitful to focus on particular

situations – a meeting, an interaction, an event in the flow of organisational life – and elaborate its many facets rather than try to say something – almost certainly rather thinly – about all the events and interactions spotted during fieldwork”.

Case studies do however enable analytical, logical and theoretical generalizations (Neergard 2010; Kvale 1998; Mitchell 1983; Kennedy 1979), implying that there is a possibility for concepts, patterns, and theories generated from a specific case to be transferred to other similar cases (Norrman 1970). However, this type of generalization may be made by the reader as well as by the person conducting the study (Neergard 2010).

The research process in Paper II, III, and IV were mainly inductive in nature (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2009). However, rather than applying a strict inductive process, as promoted in early understandings of grounded theory where empirical material gathered from the cases informs the research process, this thesis was built up through an iterative reading of theory and empirical material (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978). Stories from the field shaped the research process, but existing theories and conceptual frameworks were also present and left impressions on the process.

Ethical aspects were considered throughout the research process. Working with qualitative material, the research results rely heavily on observations of human actions and peoples’ experiences, opinions, and understandings of the world around them. Privacy, confidentiality, and transparency (Kvale 2008; Robson 2016; Miles & Huberman 1994) are three such considerations informing this thesis. I aimed to ensure that the respondents’ participation was fully voluntary, that they could end the participation at any time, and that they were free to share any information they wanted. In addition, meetings were always held at a time and place convenient for the respondents. While confident that this is the case with the majority of the respondents, it is less obvious with regards to the co-workers at the in-depth case study firm. This is due to the request of participation coming from their manager, implying it may have been difficult for them to deny participation and they might have felt obliged to answer my questions. However, the manager was not present during the conversation with these respondents and it was clear that I would not report back to the manager what was said. Meeting the same people over and over again and getting to know them, as is the case in an in-depth case study, they may come to share private matters. I therefore needed to carefully think through what material to include in the research and how to include it. Further, although this was not requested from the respondents, confidentiality was ensured by anonymizing the respondents and the case study firms. In terms of transparency, I always tried to ensure that the aim of the meeting was clear. In line with the research design I did however

not state the explicit research question or provide any question transcript in advance. Finally, no compensation was provided in order to attract attendance.

The sampling process

Choosing which case or which cases to study is a delicate process. As emphasized by Stake (1995, p. 4), one option is to let the criteria “maximize what we can learn”, guide the selection. Even though this criterion may sound reasonable in theory, it may prove difficult to adopt in practice. Some cases contain more readily available information than others, but there might also be a range of cases among which it is difficult to distinguish a single case from which we can learn the most. An alternative to Stake’s criterion is the list of criteria presented by Miles and Huberman (1994) ranging from typical to extreme cases, from maximum variation to homogenous cases, and from theoretical to convenience sampling (naming a few).

In order to rethink the process of small firm growth, there is a value selecting a case or cases that will maximize what can be learned about the growth process. At the same time, as resources are limited, some pragmatism was exercised in finding cases, resulting in a focus on one particular geographical area. In addition to the more generic criteria of leaning maximization and convenience, four additional criteria relating more specifically to the topic of the thesis were adopted. Each case should: (1) Have an explicit interest in growing the firm, (2) Have the experience of growing, (3) Be classified as a small firm, (4) Have both primary production and processing activities. The first three criteria are firmly anchored in the aim of this thesis: to rethink the process of small firm growth. The last criteria concerns the empirical application of rural firms. The rurality aspect came to play a less prominent part in this thesis as work progressed (due to the perceived need to rather discuss small firm growth in general). The criteria was however kept since rural areas, with its thinner resources and lower density of actors, provides a more transparent context for empirical study.

Criteria (1) and (2) refer to the process of growing. Aiming to follow the growth process in a firm, the first criteria concerns the willingness of the firm to grow further. Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to know beforehand if a firm will experience growth, the second criteria was included to ensure that the firm had at least experienced growth. Due to the difficulty of defining growth, it was defined in the sampling process by the cases themselves. If the case firm expressed an interest in growing and considered their firm to have experienced growth, then they were considered to fulfil the criterion, regardless of how they defined growth.

Criteria (3) refers to the interest in small firms. There are a range of taxonomies to classify small firms, often using number of employees in

combination with turnover. The classification is by no means straight forward as is evident in the EU guide to SME definition (European Commission 2015). In addition to the challenges inherent to the classification, different countries adopt different levels and measurements. As an indication of the range, in the US a small firm may have 250 employees, or more depending on the industry (U.S. Small business Administration 2016), while in Australia a small firm should have less than 20 employees (Trewin 2002). Due to the challenges associated with these types of measurements, this thesis adopts an open approach, based on the upper level as stated in the US and the lower level as stated by the EU, leaving us with any firm within the range of 10 – 250 employees.

Criteria (4) concerns the interest in rural firms. Rurality is difficult to define (for an elaborate discussion see Paper I) but for the purpose of the sampling process any firm engaged in primary production is considered rural. The second part of the fourth criteria was included to ensure that land acquisition was not the only way of growing the firm since this process includes a range of factors considered outside of the scope for this thesis.

Based on the criteria identified above, the sampling process resulted in the selection of four cases (table 2.1). In addition to the sampling criteria elaborated on above, these four cases all seemed genuinely interesting due to their activities, owner structures, and history, and I found them triggering my curiosity.

Table 2.1. Selected cases

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Name	Orange Inc.	Poultry Meat	Meadow Farm	The Cider House
Type	In-depth, longitudinal	Superficial, snap shot		
Purpose	Getting a well-informed understanding of the growth process over time	Complement the understanding of the growth process and getting an understanding of the context in which Case 1 operates		

While all four firms contributed with interesting material, the level of interest in letting me in and sharing what was actually going on in the firm was quite different. I soon realized that I, and my research, would benefit more from Case 1 than from the others simply due to their attitude towards me and my project. Due to my research aim, requesting depth rather than width, I decided to focus my gathering of empirical material on Case 1. To complement this case and the understanding of the growth process, and to increase the understanding of the context within which Case 1 operates, Cases 2, 3, and 4 were included in the analysis. For the same purpose two municipality officials working with business development within the regions of Case 2 and 4 were interviewed.

Empirical material

Case study design is open to a variety of techniques for collecting empirical material (e.g. Gummesson 2000). In line with the aim, and philosophical assumptions informing the research design, empirical material is collected through an ethnographic approach consisting of conversations, observations, and shadowing (Czarniawska 2007) (Table 2.2). I deliberately use the concept of empirical material, rather than data, since the latter carries with it an idea of the data being, or at least mirroring, the truth. In line with Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000, p. 276) suggesting that “empirical material should be seen as an argument in efforts to make a case for a particular way of understanding social reality, in the context of a never-ending debate”, I view the material from the field as my own interpretation of the respondents interpretation of their social reality.

Table 2.2. Empirical material in paper II-IV

Paper II	Paper III	Paper IV
Case 1: A conversation on firm growth, short narrative description of selected part of the case.	Case 1-4 and two additional conversations. The experiences of growth as expressed by the respondents, short narrative description of selected part of Case 1.	Case 1: A conversation on firm growth, short narrative description of selected part of the case.

The word conversation is used here instead of interview due to the deliberately unstructured nature of these meetings (Alvesson 2003; Czarniawska 2004), focusing on the general development of the firm rather than a set of more or less formalized questions. All conversations and observations were conducted in Swedish and selected parts were translated into English during the analysis.

Case 1 – Orange Inc.

Material for the in-depth case study of Orange Inc. was gathered over a period of five years. The first visit to the firm took place in 2012, and since then I have visited the firm on several occasions. The visits have included both conversations with the staff and observations and shadowing in the office and the processing plant. The conversations have mainly been with the owner/manager, but also with white collar employees responsible for different parts of the firm such as production, finance and certifications (Table 2.3). Most of the conversations were on a one on one, while one session was conducted with a group of people. All recorded conversations took part in the only meeting room in the office, while several unrecorded conversations took place in different locations such as in the lunch room, in the processing plant, and in the fields.

Table 2.3. List of interviewees within the in-depth case study

	Position	Years in the firm	Background
Anna	Founder and CEO	30 +	Physio therapist, farmer
Sam	Senior employee/Cultivation manager	6	Working in the sector
Martin	Senior employee/Production manager	25	Working in the factory
Stina	Senior employee/Controller	11	Business degree, similar positions within other industries
Hanna	Senior employee/Quality manager	1	Working in the sector
Karin	Consultant	-	Horticulturist, working in the sector
Greta	Team leader – managing blue collar workers	17	Working in the factory

In order to preserve their anonymity, the names of the interviewees are fictitious. In addition to the conversations, observations, and shadowing, secondary material such as advertisements, the firm’s blog, yearly reports, and external material like newspaper articles, were gathered (Table 2.4).

Table 2.4. Secondary empirical material

Source	Main content
Yearly reports (2000-2015)	Quantitative and qualitative information about the results and activities within the firm
Marketing material	Promoting the firm’s products and providing informing about the firm
Various internal documents	Budgets, strategy documents, quality routines etc.
Blog	Updates about daily activities within the firm
News articles	Describing the success of the firm, much focus on quantitative measures (both volume and value)
Prizes	Årets marknadsförare 2006, Helsingborg / Skåneländska Gastronomiska Akademiens Pris 2005
People in the sector	Peoples experiences with the firm

The firm is located in a rural community in the south of Sweden, and is devoted to growing and processing vegetables. The owner/manager inherited the firm from her parents about 30 years ago and has since developed a range of activities within the business, such as a golf course and on-farm shop. Focus has however always been on growing, processing, and selling vegetables. Currently the firm employs 43 people of which most are blue collars workers working in the processing plant. The white collar workers are located in a small office building attached to the processing plant. According to the formal strategy

documents, the firm has aspirations of growth. This is manifested both in terms of merits and aims (Table 2.5 and 2.6).

Table 2.5. A selection of financial indicators in Orange Inc. 1997–2015

	1997	2000	2003	2006	2009	2012	2015
Turnover*	26911	35313	63608	103025	120575	110968	131503
Profit*	-77	3098	895	3537	-3280	-3933	-3388
Equity ratio	8,3%	17,8%	11,5%	20,4%	21,8%	14,2%	9,73%
Employees	28	31	46	55	50	45	43

* Numbers in thousand sek.

Table 2.6. Selected quotes on growth

Source	Quote
Anna	“Growing organically – that’s what we do”
Anna	“This production line has gone from 0 to 12 million in two years”
Martin	”When you have been producing 1000 kilos per hour and then you find a solution so that you can increase it to 1200 kilos, that’s really fun”
Yearly report	“The firm reports its highest turnover ever despite an increasingly difficult market situation”
Strategy documentation	”Orange Inc. is a firm with a clear vision: to double the consumption of vegetable X”

In addition to the formal figures and statements, daily activities in the firm also reveal evidence that the firm is aiming towards and experiencing growth. This is evident in the conversations with the owner/manager and the staff and can be exemplified by ongoing projects focusing on product development and new market entry (Table 2.7).

Table 2.7. Selected projects related to growth

Increase the number of fields for cultivation
Develop drying facilities
Introducing/developing new products and production lines
Develop/build storage facilities
Selling waste material

Compiling the data gathered over the years we can see that there are and have been various projects ongoing in the firm, all with the potential to result in increased numbers of employees, turnover, or some other quantifiable measure of growth. Some of the projects have succeeded in this sense while others have provide other types of values. Yet others have taken an unplanned turn, been put

on hold or even closed down for various reasons. During most visits to the firm new projects were in play, some of which had already been fully implemented and others which were only at the stage of an intangible idea. Due to the longitudinal nature of the study, the progress of some of these projects could almost be followed in real time.

Complementary cases and interviews

In addition to the longitudinal case study of Orange Inc., empirical material was gathered from the three complementary case studies (Table 2.8). These cases are firms active in the same region of Sweden and, although they all work with different types of primary resources and products, they are active within the same sector, namely food and beverages. In addition to their main activities of producing and processing food and beverages they all have complementary activities such as restaurants, shops etc.

Table 2.8. Selected information about case 2, 3, and 4

	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
Name	Poultry Meat	Meadow Farm	The Cider House
Firm activities	Meat production and processing, on and off farm shops, restaurants, catering	Farm, food production, hotel, conferences, events, restaurant, on-farm activities	Fruit production and processing, restaurants, shops, gardens, social activities
No. employees	184 (2012) 162 (2014) 144 (2016)	10 (2011) 7 (2013) 7 (2015)	103 (2011) 116 (2013) 191 (2015)
Turnover*	241 (2012) 270 (2014) 285 (2016)	17 (2011) 15 (2013) 16 (2015)	470 (2011) 500 (2013) 621 (2015)
Legal type	Ltd	Ltd	Ltd
Owner structure	Industry group	Family	Family

* million sek

Conversations were held with the managers and/or founders of the complementary case firms on one occasion (Table 2.9). The conversations with the managers were held on site, while the conversation with the two founders and previous owners/managers of Case 2 was held in their home.

Table 2.9. Case 2, 3, and 4 – interviewees and selected quotes

	Interviewee	Position	Background	Said about growth
Case 2	Cecilia	Founder	Farmer	“When I left the firm they decreased the number of products because they started to calculate in purely economic terms: this product is not profitable”
	David	Founder	Farmer	“Ok, now we have too few animals, then we need to expand – we need more stables and so we built that, then the issue was that the slaughterhouse couldn’t accept that many animals so we had to expand the slaughterhouse, and so we did, and then the issue was that we didn’t have refrigeration space enough so we had to expand the fridges... That’s how it was – all the time”
	Eric	CEO	Business degree, positions within the industry	“We have grown 100 million [sek] in five years”, “That’s where we grow the fastest at the moment, it’s a two digit grow rate right now”, “I build an organization to manage this, we invest in this shop, we invest in IT, to be able to take the next step for the firm”, “If you want to stay in the game you have to invest in more capacity”
Case 3	Fred	Founder and CEO	Farmer, entrepreneur	“I had to get my products out there. So I needed a shop, and a restaurant”, “To be able to offer a full menu I needed pork, cheese etc. so now I have pigs, sheep, and cheese production”, “Due to bad cash flow I had to diversify”.
Case 4	Gunnar	CEO	Business degree, positions within the firm	“I had a goal that we would grow to half a billion [sek], which we reached – so we are growing vigorously”, “In three years we’ve increased with almost 60%”, “We have to do it this way: build a little and then get some money, then we build a little”, “This is The Cider House from above, it looks a bit like a patchwork because when the family had a good year they expanded the site”, “We had to grow to survive”.

As a further complement, conversations were held with two municipality officials working with business development in the same municipality as two of the case firms, namely Case 2 and 4. The purpose of these conversations was to get a wider understanding of the context in which the ongoing process of growth was occurring.

Unit of observation versus unit of analysis

An important distinction within any research project is that between the unit of observation and the unit of analysis. The unit of observation refers to where the empirical material is gathered, while the unit of analysis refers to, as the words suggest, what is being analysed (Boyd 2011). Hence, these may be the same, but may also be different. In quantitative contexts observation is normally a sub-set of analysis, where as in qualitative contexts, analysis may be a sub-set of observation.

In this thesis, the unit of observation is the cases – the firms and the people they employ. This is by no means controversial. The chosen units of analysis, on the other hand, deserve some elaboration. Without much reflection (it seems), a lion's share of the firm growth literature uses the legal entity of the firm as unit of analysis. However, what at first sight may seem like an appropriate and evident choice, reveals its shortcomings upon closer inspection.

Defined in terms of the name of the organisation or the organisation number, the individual firm often forms the unit of analysis in firm growth studies (McKelvie & Wiklund 2010). This is convenient since this type of data is often easily accessible. To embrace the processual aspect of growth, the legal entity of the firm is often revisited at a number of points in time, most commonly with an interval of one, three or five years (Delmar, Davidsson & Gartner 2003). Obviously however (for everyone with knowledge of the world of business), the content of the legal entity of the firm does not necessarily remain constant over time. A range of things may happen, causing changes of different kinds: the firm may become incorporated in another firm, it may change in terms of vision, activities, or people, etc. In fact, Davidsson and Wiklund (2000), studying all Swedish firms with 20+ employees over 10 years, show that as much as 50% of the firms were subject to such a fundamental change that it made it questionable as to whether the analysis included the correct firms. Although these issues are increasingly acknowledged and discussed (e.g. McKelvie & Wiklund 2010) no alternative unit of analysis seem to have gained much of a foothold in the firm growth literature.

Inspiration for alternative units of analysis may however be found outside of the firm growth literature. As discussed previously, there is an ongoing movement within the wider field of entrepreneurship towards an understanding

of, and interest in, entrepreneurship as an entrepreneurial process (e.g. Hjorth, Holt and Steyaert 2015; Steyaert 2007). In line with this approach are attempts to change the focus from the entrepreneur to a wider and more contextually considerate unit of analysis such as the community within which the entrepreneurial process is taking place (e.g. Gaddefors & Anderson 2017). Inspired by such alternative takes on the unit of analysis, frustrated by the issues associated with the legal entity of the firm as the unit of analysis, and intrigued by the process movement, this thesis is engaged in shifting the focus from the firm to the actual process of growth.

Moving from the legal entity of the firm to the process of growth as the unit of analysis has implications. It causes challenges in terms of establishing the boundaries of the process; where to start and where to end the study become central questions. Indeed, the growth process may be larger than the firm in that it may be initiated by forces outside of the firm and have effects well outside the boundaries of the firm. In contrast, it may also be situated within the firm, constituting only a small part of the total internal activities. These characteristics of the growth process requires an awareness of, and interest in, the specific case. As there is no general understanding of exactly what a growth process entails or what it looks like, this results in certain demands in terms of methodology and choice of method. These requirements are dealt with differently within the papers included in this thesis (Table 2.10).

Aside from Paper I (where both the unit of observation and the unit of analysis are constituted by peer reviewed articles), the process of growth serves as the units of analysis in Papers II – IV. The process of growing is a rather intangible concept and therefore in need of an interpretation in order to operationalize the study. In Paper II the process is interpreted as a trigger point, an event foregoing a burst of growth. In Paper III, the sensemaking of growth as expressed through the narrative accounts of our respondents, and in Paper IV, growth is seen as a complex system.

Analysing the empirical material

Due to the distinct, but interlinked, aims of each paper they are informed by different analytical frameworks (Table 2.10). These include discourse analysis in terms of a Discursive Devices Analysis (Paper II), and the Constant Comparative Method as a means of identifying patterns and concepts (Paper III) and as a means of supporting a conceptual reasoning (Paper IV). These are presented in brief below, and elaborated on within the relevant paper. The empirical material - texts, conversation transcripts and field notes - were sorted into Nvivo.

Table 2.10. Analytical method in paper I-IV

	Paper II	Paper III	Paper IV
Unit of analysis	The process of growing operationalized as a trigger point	The process of growing operationalized as the sensemaking of growth	The process of growing operationalized as a complex system
Analytical method	Discursive Devices Analysis	Constant Comparative Method	
Analytical tool	Paper and pen	Nvivo software	
Main reference(s)	Mueller and Whittle (2011), Goffman (1981, 1974), Clayman (1992), Potter (1996), Potter and Putcha (2007), Edwards (2005, 1995), Edwards and Potter (1992)	Glaser and Strauss (1967), Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000), Silverman (2000)	

In Paper II the focus lies on discursive devices in order to analyse how a conversation on firm growth unfolds. This type of analysis entails an in-depth linguistic analysis of a specific piece of conversation or text. For the purpose of this study we selected an informal conversation concerning the potential development of a new business model, Model X, for storage of vegetables. This method enables an analysis of the process in which an idea is chosen, dis-embedded from one context and re-embedded in another and it illuminates how the linguistic building blocks shape reality (Höglund 2013) and how actors try to make their version of reality the most plausible (Cunliffe & Coupland 2012). This enhances our understanding of the linguistic tools enabling the translation of an idea within the organization, and thereby getting a detailed analysis of how the conversation, and thereby the process of growth, unfolds.

The analysis in Paper III and Paper IV are devoted to understanding ‘What is going on here?’ Described formally, the Constant Comparative Method (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2000; Silverman 2000) was applied, implying an iterative reviewing of the empirical material. This involved comparing and contrasting patterns of activities and resulted in emerging categories and concepts. The narratives gathered from the case studies were continually compared with others within emerging categories. While the analysis in Paper III resulted in the identification of three repertoires, the analysis in Paper IV aimed at using Case 1 as an illustration for the conceptual reasoning.

2.3.3 Research quality

Although there are opponents to the art of ‘criteriology’ as a way of judging the quality of social science (Alvesson 2002), most scholars seem to agree that some type of criteria are not only unavoidable but essential to ensuring the quality of the research. In a broad sense, criteria for assessing quality is about “(a) care, awareness and insightful handling of the production/construction processes [of knowledge claims]”, and “(b) care in the interpretation of it” (Alvesson 2002, p. 166). Trying to make these broad criteria more tangible and hence useful in the practice of conducting research, more specific quality criteria are often referred to.

Within the functionalist paradigm (Wigren 2007) four criteria have been developed corresponding to the well-established quality criteria within quantitative research (expressed in parentheses): credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity) (Guba 1981; Lincoln & Guba 1985). These criteria have however been criticized due to them being inspired by the positivistic quality assurance methods, and their relevance has been disputed in relation to qualitative research under the interpretivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln 1994). An alternative to these quality criteria is to argue that a piece of ‘qualitative and interpretivist research is trustworthy when it is authentic, plausible, and critical (Wigren 2007; Golden-Biddle & Locke 1993). These three criteria therefore seem more appropriate to reflect upon in this thesis.

Research does, according to Wigren (2007, p. 391) become authentic when the reader is convinced that the “researcher has been in the field and is genuine about what s/he has experienced there”. To create such a conviction at the reader, the text has to offer both thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) and a balance between novelty and familiarity (Golden-Biddle & Locke 1993). This is by no means an easy task, and adding that each reader may have different expectation on the text increases the challenge of authenticity. Within this thesis these issues have been handled on two levels. Firstly, empirical material has been gathered by a combination of methods including conversations, observations, and shadowing (Czarniawska 2007). Secondly, the material within the papers is presented in multiple forms, including more overarching descriptions, specific quotes, and transcriptions of full conversations.

Creating authenticity also requires the researcher to move beyond taken for granted assumptions about the field (Wigren 2007) or what Van Maanen (1979) refers to as first-order concepts. These are concepts that people ascribe to themselves or their organisations and are often “abstract, represent the rationalized talk of an organization, and stand for the formal practices of the organization” (Wigren 2007, p. 392 based on Martin 2002). These concepts, also

referred to as grand narratives (Boje, Luhman & Baack 1999), may indeed be interesting but they do not necessarily say anything about the actual practices and risk to creating a too one-dimensional and superficial understanding of the case or phenomenon. The aim of this thesis is to rethink the process of small firm growth and to uncover taken for granted assumptions in relation to firm growth. The sensitivity of first-order concepts, or grand narratives, on one hand, and informal practices on the other hand, have therefore been central to the research process. However, this is by no means an easy process as we tend to become so accustomed to certain things that we stop seeing them as constructions and treat them as a natural state. Moving beyond the superficial level requires presence in the field and a study of the daily life within the case, which was enabled through the in-depth case study. In addition, by reading broadly, critically analysing and questioning, and continually discussing the material with peers and practitioners (both from within and outside of the entrepreneurship domain) I tried to identify and move beyond the taken for granted assumptions, resulting for example in the identification of the output, process, and necessity repertoires in Paper III.

Plausibility refers to the act of connecting empirical material and theoretical constructs (Wigren 2007). This process of theorizing the material implies creating second-order concepts in order to explain the patterns of the first-order concepts (Van Maanen 1979). This is explicitly done in Paper I and Paper III where an analysis of the empirical material is sorted into categories, creating second-order concepts used to discuss theoretical implications.

Being critical has many connotations, here the term will be discussed in relation to work by Wigren (2007). Discussing criticality as a quality criteria in qualitative research, and in ethnographic work in particular, Wigren (2007) emphasizes the importance of being open with regards to any limits with the empirical material and the analysis. The reader should be informed about the successes and failures in the study and the researcher should be explicit in explaining the researcher's activities in the field. In addition, since the researcher plays a major part in collecting and analysing the empirical material in qualitative studies it is important to be as honest and transparent as possible in terms of the background, interest, and abilities of the researcher and how this may have influenced the research process and the results. (See Table 2.11 for a reflection on my role as researcher and the reflection sections at the end of each chapter). It is vital to recognize the inevitability and importance of the researcher's interpretation of the empirical material, or as Stake (1995, p. 41) formulates it, "Standard qualitative designs call for the persons most responsible for interpretations to be in the field, making observations, exercising subjective

judgment, analysing and synthesizing, all the while realizing their own consciousness.”

Table 2.11. Reflection on my role as researcher

Taken to the extreme, every moment in my life has influenced me as a person and made me into what I am today. Reflecting on my role as a researcher, and especially in gathering and analysing the empirical material used in this thesis, it may however be reasonable to highlight a few things. I graduated with a business degree, from an agricultural university, in Sweden. I’m a woman, I’m from the south of Sweden, from a (kind of) rural place, I’m rather young, I’m a mother; I’ve worked and lived abroad, I’ve spent most of my PhD period in the capital. I like meeting new people and I’m a social person, but I do not like imposing myself on others or lingering about without a purpose.

I believe that all of these things have made a difference in terms of gathering and analysing the empirical material. I feel confident that my background (for example me being from the same region, speaking with the same accent) made my respondents think of me and the situation in a certain way. Although I’m sure all these things matter, it is impossible to say exactly how they influenced the results.

What is a little easier to say is how these things influenced me. I felt more confident visiting my respondents because of my connection to the area, and comfortable asking about business development due to my degree and my professional experience. However, I did struggle with gaining the courage and energy to ask for new meetings, asking very open ended questions, and for generally ‘hanging around’ to do observations and shadowing. In addition, becoming a mother significantly restricted my time for doing field visits, as it implied traveling.

Looking back and reflecting on what I could have done differently I wish that I had spent more time in the field and gathered more empirical material. I believe this would have strengthened my arguments, especially in paper III.

In addition to the three quality criteria of authenticity, plausibility, and criticality addressed above, I have in the work on this thesis been inspired by Alvesson and Sköldberg’s (2000) concept of reflexivity; or more accurately, a reflexive pragmatist approach. Rather than adopting the more general understanding of reflexivity as the recognition that the researcher is a part of the reality being studied, therefore constituting a need for a self-examination (a view similar to what is discussed under the criticality criteria above), Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) interprets the concept somewhat differently. They view reflexivity as “conscious and systematic efforts to view the subject matter from different angles, and to avoid strongly privileging a favoured one” (Alvesson 2002, p. 171). While arguing for multiple interpretations, based on the idea that

“there is more than one good way of understanding something” (p. 172), pragmatism acts as a counterweight, suggesting an awareness of common restrictions such as time, space and patience - things which limit the possibilities for reflection. The reflexive approach “calls for epistemological awareness rather than philosophical rigour” (p. 172), underlining the strength in questioning and testing one’s own assumptions and horizons. Doing so requires wide reading and a meta-theoretical understanding, and a balance act in terms of research design. In this thesis I have tried to take the reflexive approach to heart, expressed through the conversations with different theoretical strands, resting on distinct ontological and epistemological foundations, all aiming to understand the phenomenon of firm growth. I thereby strive to provide “a framework involving a set of potential lines of thinking and theoretical ideas for how to understand a subject matter – rather than a definitive theoretical formulation and privileged vocabulary for grasping it” (p. 172).

Finally, I would like to emphasize that I have tried my best to embrace the complexity of my cases, allow for different interpretations to surface, and to reflect carefully on my work and my findings. Working on this thesis I have come to appreciate the difficulty in researching social phenomenon, and fully agree with Stake when he states that “...most qualitative researchers not only believe that there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented, but that there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view.” (Stake 1995, p. 108).

2.4 An alternative approach

The aim of this thesis is to rethink the process of small firm growth. This has implications for the methodology of the thesis as outlined in this chapter. The exercise of rethinking requires a problematization of the topic, serving to uncover taken for granted assumptions and suggesting new ways forward. Further, the focus on the process of growing, rather than on firm growth as a static event, called for an elaboration on what a process perspective entails, in which I lean on Hjorth, Holt and Steyaert’s (2015) almost poetic description of process studies:

“Process studies put movement, change and flow first; to study processually is to consider the world as restless, something underway, becoming and perishing, without end. To understand firms processually is to accept but also – and this is harder perhaps – to absorb this fluidity, to treat a variable as just that, a variable” (Hjorth, Holt & Steyaert 2015, p. 599).

To accommodate these overarching methodological requirements, this thesis employs a qualitative, interpretive case study design with a strong focus on linguistic research methods, thus providing a rather alternative approach to studying firm growth.

2.5 Reflection

Just like the overarching design of the thesis, the matters of methodology have developed and changed direction over time. In addition to gradually deepening my understanding of research philosophy, analytical methods etc. there are some events that have had more of a crucial impact on these issues. Although there is so much to reflect upon in terms of methodology, I will here focus on three events reflecting important shifts in the development of the thesis.

Firstly, after an intense, fun, and thought-provoking study-visit to Aarhus University, Helle Neergaard, Steffen Korsgaard, and Sabine Müller, pushed me into a serious reflection on the overarching approach of the thesis. Even though it was not until much later that I finally formulated the approach in writing, it was at this point that I started to realise just how intrigued I was by an alternative take on the phenomenon of firm growth. Around this time, texts by Mats Alvesson and others on problematization started to appear on my theoretical repertoire (most likely due to an elegantly conducted act of manipulation by my main supervisor), influencing my view on research.

Secondly, up until my half time seminar the project design included two qualitative studies and two quantitative papers. Although this mixed methods approach very well may have resulted in an interesting thesis, my opponent Anders W Johansson urged me to reconsider the design and focus only on one methodological approach. The argument being that this would be crucial in bringing a necessary depth to the research conducted. Taking this advice to heart, the study plan was changed shortly after the seminar removing the quantitative perspective.

Thirdly, having settled on a qualitative design, my thoughts shifted to method. Taking a course in discourse analysis opened Pandora's Box in terms of linguistic analysis, providing me with a framework and a vocabulary allowing me to discuss the importance of language in shaping reality. More specifically, it had direct impact on the methods applied in both Paper II (discursive devices) and III (interpretive repertoires). Indeed, Paper II is very much the result of my fascination of discursive devices, causing quite some challenges in developing it into a publishable paper. In Paper III, my co-author Alistair Anderson successfully helped me re-write my intense methods section into something much more palatable to a wider audience (for which I am very thankful).

The journey of methodology has been adventurous indeed (in a nerdy academic way that is). Learning more about philosophy of science has challenged my understanding of the world and the role of science, and has provided me with a better understanding of different philosophical camps within science. It has also created intriguing and sometimes heated discussions at home (my husband holds a technical licentiate and a master in medicine) about what reality and truth really are. Such discussions have challenged my conceptions, forcing me to sharpen my arguments, and ensuring I had read my material carefully (for which I am forever grateful).

3 Theorizing the process of small firm growth

This chapter is devoted to the third part of the aim of this thesis: small firm growth. This phenomenon has long interested entrepreneurship scholars and features strongly in the entrepreneurship literature. Growth is central to many entrepreneurial enquiries and it has been argued that growth forms the ideology of entrepreneurship. Subsequently, this close connection demands a brief note on the conceptualization of entrepreneurship before shifting focus to the process of small firm growth.

3.1 A brief note of the conceptualization of entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship does not lend itself to simple definitions. Rather, a whole range of alternatives has been launched over the years. Schumpeter (1934; 1942) refers to the entrepreneur as an innovator and entrepreneurship as a process of creative destruction. Kirzner (1973) later emphasized the entrepreneurial quality of alertness and defined entrepreneurship as a mean of removing market imperfections. Over the years, other attempts at defining entrepreneurship have gained a foothold. Gartner (1985) suggests that entrepreneurship can be conceptualized as the “creation of new organizations”, while others focus on opportunities and claim that individuals’ pursuit, discovery, and exploitation of opportunities constitutes the core of entrepreneurship (Stevenson & Gumpert 1985; Stevenson, Roberts & Grousbeck 1985; Stevenson & Sahlman 1986; Venkataraman 1997; Shane & Venkataraman 2000). Davidsson, Delmar and Wiklund (2006) suggest that an important feature of these opportunity-focused definitions is that they shift emphasis from the creation of an organization to something that may happen within an established organization, or as Davidsson, Delmar and Wiklund (2006) summarize it: “creation of new economic activity”.

As an alternative, stemming from a more constructionist logic, the entrepreneurial process (e.g. Gaddefors 2007; Bouwen & Steyaert 1990; Jack & Anderson 2002; Brockner, Higgins & Low 2004) has been promoted as a way of conceptualizing entrepreneurship. Adopting such a conceptualization, focus may be on the creation of economic activities or on the way of thinking and organizing (Gaddefors 2007). Looking at the latter interpretation of entrepreneurial processes, scholars have emphasized the importance of concepts like relationships, interaction, networks and connections (Anderson 2000; Anderson, Dodd & Jack 2012, Jack, Dodd & Anderson 2008).

As this brief review shows, there is no such thing as the one conceptualization of entrepreneurship. Rather, there are different discourses in play, some that seem to have had their time in the spotlight and others that are growing in importance. Among the latter group, we have the conceptualizations building on a process perspective. Similarly, there are a range of discourses in play in the conceptualization of firm growth, and, as within the wider entrepreneurship literature, a process logic seem to be gaining in interest.

3.2 Conceptualizing the process of small firm growth

The literature on firm growth is vast. Typing “firm growth” into the search field on Google Scholar results in more than 3 million hits. Searching within Web of Science, firm growth generates substantially less hits, but still more than 20 000 articles appear. Not surprisingly, Macpherson and Holt (2007) and McKelvie and Wiklund (2010) find synthesizing firm growth literature to be highly challenging. To overcome this issue, most literature reviews on firm growth focus on a specific dimension of the phenomenon. Accordingly, Paper I in this thesis focuses on growth in a specific type of firms, namely rural firms. New firm growth is a topic covered by Gilbert, McDougall and Audretsch (2006), and Macpherson and Holt (2007) and Phelps, Adams and Bessant (2007) focus on knowledge and learning in growth. Dobbs and Hamilton (2007), on the other hand, concentrate on small firm growth, and Shepherd and Wiklund (2009) devote a review to measurement constructs in growth. Naturally, there are also special issues in journals such as *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* (2010), providing compiled accounts of different dimensions of firm growth.

For the purpose of structure and guidance, the rest of this chapter is inspired by the three aspects of firm growth: output, context, and process. This is in line with the findings from the conceptual review conducted as part of Paper I, and also corresponds to the three themes considered indispensable in terms of understanding entrepreneurial endeavours (Low & Macmillian 1988; Aldrich & Martinez 2001). After elaborating on the output, context, and process approach

to firm growth, a synthesized reflection is provided suggesting that firm growth constitutes a field in transition.

3.2.1 The output of firm growth

Greatly influenced by the field of economics, and parts of the famous work by economist Edith Penrose, most research on small firm growth rests on a logic of determinism and linearity. This is expressed through a view on reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) were positivistic assumptions inform the choice of theoretical frameworks and methodological designs. Interest lies in the results of growth and on establishing causal relations between variables associated with firm growth. A variety of theoretical lenses are used to study these connections, ranging from population density approaches (Barron 1999), to human resource practices (Batt 2002), and individual traits and motivations (Baume, Locke & Smith 2001), yet they are all united in their view on firm growth as a “change in amount” (Grant & Perren 2002; Parry 2010). This ‘change’ is operationalized as a quantifiable indicator measured over time. The type of indicator varies extensively between studies but turnover, number of employees and sales figures form some of the more popular measurements (Grant & Perren, 2002; Delmar, Davidsson & Gartner 2003). Appropriate to this output-focused view on firm growth, large quantitative data sets are gathered and analysed with suitable econometrical methods. Although this body of research includes many highly cited studies and is widely recognized as valuable in understanding small firm growth it does not come without limitations.

Several challenges with the output focus, and the logic upon which it is founded, have been lifted - often by scholars themselves highly productive within this logic. Based on studies by Shepherd and Wiklund (2009) and Weinzimmer, Nystrom and Freeman (1998), McKelvie and Wiklund (2010, p. 264) argue that “despite hundreds of studies into explaining firm-level growth differences ... researchers have been unable to isolate variables that have a consistent effect on growth across studies”. They continue by suggesting that there may be several potential empirical and theoretical explanations causing these limitations, including finding a relevant and correct units of analysis, indicators of growth, and the incapability of handling differences in modes of growth. In addition, Wright and Stigliani (2013) argue that by focusing on the firm and its output, the role of the individual is excluded causing a lack of understanding of the micro foundations of growth. It has indeed come to a point where a range of scholars argue that these types of studies no longer contribute to the development of the understanding of firm growth, and that to move the

field forward it needs to be invigorated with new perspectives (Leitch, Hill & Neergaard 2010; Parry 2010; Wright & Stigliani 2013).

3.2.2 The context of firm growth

Influenced by the contextualized perspective on entrepreneurship, based on assumptions of social constructionism, (e.g. Ahl 2004; Anderson 2000; Gaddefors 2005; Shelton 2010; Welter 2011), the context approach to firm growth offers an understanding of the phenomenon different to what the output approach may provide. As the heading suggests, interest here lies in specifically exploring contextual factors such as for example gender (Ahl 2004) or ethnicity (Shelton 2010). To clarify how this approach differs from how contextual factors are (sometimes) included in output-oriented studies Welter's (2011) work becomes useful. Discussing the concept of context in relation to entrepreneurship, she distinguishes between omnibus and discrete contexts. Discrete contexts refer to context as a variable which is a common way of including context within the output approach. The omnibus context, on the other hand, refers to context as a lens, implying that context cannot be reduced to just one of many variables. In addition, Welter (2011) suggests not focusing on only the business context, but to also including other types such as social, spatial, and institutional contexts.

Prior to Welter (2011) but in line with her work, Anderson (2000) argues for the importance of contextualizing entrepreneurship and explicitly uses a social constructionist ontology and epistemology as a foundation. He suggests that entrepreneurship needs to be understood as the process of co-creation by both the context and the entrepreneurial actions. Gaddefors and Cronsell (2009) present a similar approach, developing a theoretical framework based on the concepts of translation and embeddedness, aiming to better understand the phenomenon of entrepreneurship. Rooted in this tradition, the context approach to firm growth is evolving.

Firm growth, like any entrepreneurial process, happens at a certain place, at a certain time, and with certain people involved. Therefore, a range of contextual aspects will affect, and be affected by, the growing firm. Korsgaard and Anderson (2011) argue that, to understand the reasons for growth and how growth materializes, the underlying social processes should be investigated. They suggest that increases in profit or sales gives a superficial picture of the dynamics of the growing firm, which ignores the actual means of growth (Korsgaard & Anderson 2011). Cahn (2008) uses a contextual lens of local culture to explore its influence on entrepreneurship and firm growth, and Robles and Cordero-Guzman (2007) focus on Latino entrepreneurs and challenges

regarding firm growth specific to this ethnic group. Hence, in line with Korsgaard and Anderson (2011) and Welter (2011), these studies de-emphasize the economic aspects of firm growth and focus on a wider range of contextual lenses, such as culture and ethnicity.

3.2.3 The process of firm growth

To understand entrepreneurship attention should be redirected from the individual entrepreneur to the process of new firm creation (Gartner, 1985). Similarly, the process approach to firm growth aims to redirect attention from firm growth as an isolated phenomenon to consideration of the process of growing a firm. As McKelvie and Wiklund (2010) argue, to enhance our understanding of firm growth, we must shift attention from 'how much' to 'how' the firm is growing. The first question is closely related to the output approach, and McKelvie and Wiklund (2010) claim that what primarily needs to be examined is the more fundamental question of 'how' growth works.

Taking a process approach there is (at least) one important path division to consider: a process may be either linear or non-linear. These two categories come with distinct packages in terms of philosophical underpinnings, resulting in different theoretical and methodological frameworks. Due to their differences, they are discussed under separate headings beginning with the linear view conceptualizing the process of firm growth as a life cycle, then turning to the non-linear view including two distinct conceptualizations: firm growth as a social phenomenon, and as a complex system.

A linear process

The most influential process perspective in understanding firm growth is that of stage models. These models have become incredibly popular and informs much of both the academic and practice oriented literature on firm growth. In fact, they have become the single most used theoretical framework in firm growth studies (Levie & Lichtenstein 2010), are dominating within textbooks on small firms growth (Hamilton, 2012), and are the first (and often only) thing you get when Googling images of firm or business growth. A multitude of models are in play (see Levie & Lichtenstein 2010 for a comprehensive review on stage models) of which the Greiner (1972), Christensen and Scott (1964), Lippitt and Schmidt (1967), and Normann (1977) models are some of the most influential. Although the models differ in number and the sequence of the stages, their conceptual similarities justify speaking of them as a group (McKelvie & Wiklund 2010).

The common denominators between stage models is that they all portray growth as a linear, sequential, and deterministic process in which the firm passes through a set of pre-determined growth stages. As outlined by Levie & Lichtenstein (2010) the life cycle of an organism is extensively used as a metaphor for this view on firm growth. This metaphors suggests that the growth process is comprised of a specific number of distinctive stages playing out in a predetermined sequence, identical in every firm. The metaphor hence depicts growth as a predictable and inevitable part of running a firm. It is seen as something natural, and a one-directional and an irreversible process starting with birth and ending with decline and ultimately death. Often illustrated through the lifecycle of a plant, the metaphor claims that if the right conditions prevail (sun, water and nutrition) the seed will unavoidably grow to a tree. This depiction of firm growth implies that if the right set of resources is available, growth will automatically take place, making it possible to provide a “recipe for growth” applicable to every firm. Viewing firm growth as a process, the stage models represent a static view similar to that in the more aggregate econometric studies, resting on a positivistic foundation that considers reality stable and objective and data the truth. Like the econometric studies, the stage model studies have been subject to criticism.

Critique of the stage models is not new. Indeed, already back in 1952 Edith Penrose (p. 806) argued that “...the available evidence does not support the theory that firms have a life cycle characterized by a consistent transition through recognizable stages of development similar to those of living organisms”. More recently, other aspects of the stage models have been scrutinized and questioned. Gibbs (2000) argues that they rest on normative assumptions, and, based on a thorough review of the stage models, Levie and Lichtenstein (2010, p. 336) conclude that “After more than 40 years, there is no agreement as to what the stages of growth are, how they progress, or why they shift. Of the 100 + roadmaps published, each one points in a different direction, while all of them are based on inaccurate assumptions about the firm”. The poor fit between the models and the empirics is also supported by others, such as McKelvie and Wiklund (2010) and Coad (2007). The life cycle metaphor assumes that growth is always organic and that it takes place within a single and distinct organizational unit. This basic assumption is criticized by McKelvie and Wiklund (2010) arguing that there are different types of growth modes, namely organic, acquisitions and hybrids. Coad (2007) argues that while the metaphor assumes that all firms grow in a certain way - moving from one stage to another in a specific sequence - most firms in fact do not grow at all (e.g. Davidsson, Lindmark & Olofsson 1998; Garnsey, Stam & Hefferman 2006) and among the ones that do grow, many firms only pass through a few of the proposed stages.

In conclusion, the stage models are poorly adapted to understanding the process of firm growth.

A non-linear process

In contrast to the linear view on the process of firm growth, a non-linear view has developed. This view has multiple foundations. To some extent, it is triggered by scholars normally active within the output approach and/or the linear process view, arguing that the linear view is faulty and that empirical material shows that firm growth is characterized by non-linear and temporal processes (Davidsson, Delmar & Wiklund 2006; Garnsey & Heffernan 2005; Garnsey, Stam & Heffernan 2006). To handle this non-linearity, scholars have (at least) two alternative conceptualizations at their disposal. The process of firm growth can be understood as a social construction, taking inspiration from the growing tribe within the field of entrepreneurship who take stock of social constructionism to understand the nature of entrepreneurial processes. The lack of linearity can also be understood by leaning on complexity science and the idea of firm growth as a complex system.

There are only a few studies conceptualizing the process of firm growth as a social construction (Macpherson & Holt 2007). The few studies available include a range of ideas and areas of focus, such as Perren and Grant (2000) who look at management accounting routines in small growing firms, Rae (2004) who focuses on entrepreneurial learning with regards to managing firm growth, and Wai and Yeung (2005) who explore the firm as a social network and questioning an unreflective promotion of firm growth. Further examples include work by Anderson and colleagues, such as Anderson and Ullah (2014), promoting the concept of the "condition of smallness" as an explanation of why most firms stay small; Anderson, Dodd and Jack (2010) using Bourdieu's work on habitus to discuss network practices in relation to firm growth; and Korsgaard and Anderson (2011) promoting the importance of the social aspects of growth. Despite their different foci, these studies share the common view that sees firm growth as a social phenomenon constructed and reconstructed in the interplay between actors.

With roots in both social psychology and sociology (Chell 2000), the nonlinear approach provides answers to fundamental issues within social science research by explicitly declaring a position with regards to both reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology), as is thoroughly discussed in the seminal piece "The Social Construction of Reality" (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Within this approach, the world is assumed to be constructed by people's interactions, thus explanations of reality construction "are to be found neither in the individual psyche nor in social structures, but in the interactive processes that take place

routinely between people” (Burr 1995, p. 7). In applying a constructionist perspective to small firm growth, each individual is considered subjectively creating their own understanding of the phenomenon, rather than relating to an objective truth readily available “out there”. This understanding is constructed and constantly re-constructed by e.g. policy makers, practitioners, and scientists, creating more or less stable structures of how to understand reality.

Conceptualizing the process of firm growth as a social construction is however not unproblematic, rather it has its advantages and limitations. Research based on social constructionism works well on two levels: a detailed, micro-level aiming to improve the understanding of change processes in practice, and a meta-level allowing us to problematize existing perspectives and taken for granted assumptions. However, neither of these two levels of understanding are very helpful when it comes to developing knowledge that can be generalized to a larger population - thus offering advice to practitioners and politicians - or to build grand theory.

As a complement to the constructionistic view on the process of firm growth stands complexity science. Stemming from the natural and life sciences and from system theory, complexity science has made an appearance within the social sciences over the last few decades. Being concerned with the creation of order, and embraced by what Sawyer (2005) label the “emergence paradigm” in social sciences, it has been proposed as a relevant theoretical framework for understanding entrepreneurial processes. As described by Lichtenstein (2011) and Selden and Fletcher (2015), it entails a range of frameworks and methodologies including (but not limited to) cybernetics (Weiner 1948), synergetics (Haken 1977), systemdynamics (Forrester 1961), hierarchical complexity (Simon 1962), chaos theory (May 1976), dissipative structures theory (Prigogine & Stengers 1984), complex adaptive systems (Holland 1975) and co-evolutionary theory (McKelvey 1999).

Inspired by complexity science, Levie and Lichtenstein (2010) promote a dynamic states model as a step away from the lifecycle approach and instead build upon the assumption that there may be any number of states occurring at any sequence. Continuing in this vein, Brown and Mawson (2014) propose the concept of trigger points as a way of understanding what provokes the transition between different states in the growth process. Complexity science is also used by other firm growth scholars such as Derbyshire and Garnsey (2015) who in an academic dispute with Coad et al. (2015) argue that the reason for a lack of progress in the understanding of firm growth is due to the complexity of the growth process, not that the process is random.

Similarly, Levie and Lichtenstein (2010) also refrain from a static view of firm growth, proposing instead a dynamic state model that considers the

idiosyncratic nature of firms. The dynamic state model allows for any number of states in any number of sequences, since “organizations can anticipate and even co-create their environment, making internal shifts to fit current or projected changes” (Levie & Lichtenstein 2010, p. 336). This reasoning embraces the complexity and multidimensionality of firm growth, as also argued by Davidsson, Delmar and Wiklund (2006) and Delmar, Davidsson and Gartner (2003), suggesting openness to the external environment and implying interaction between the firm and its context.

3.3 Small firm growth – a field in transition

To summarize, the above conceptual review highlights three distinct approaches to firm growth evident in the firm growth literature: output, context, and process (Table 3.1). With its roots in economics, firm growth is traditionally defined as a quantitative measure and interest lies in establishing casual relations between growth variables. This outcome-driven process perspective (Aldrich 2001; Van de Ven & Engleman 2004) constitutes the received view in firm growth literature and informs a large majority of firm growth studies. In contrast stands the context- and process- approach, both based on event-driven perspectives (Aldrich 2001; Van de Ven & Engleman 2004). Based on social constructionist underpinnings, studies in the context approach use context as a lens to understand the process of growth. Finally, the process approach, encompassing both a linear and a non-linear view on processes, has a diverse foundation and includes a range of perspectives.

Table 3.1. Approaches to the process of firm growth

	The output of growth	The context of growth	The process of growth	
			Linear	Non-linear
Process perspective	Outcome-driven	Event-driven	Event-driven	Event-driven
Conceptualization	A quantitative output measure	A social construction	A life cycle (of an organism)	A social construction/ A complex system
Main points	Establishing causal relations between variables associated with firm growth	Using context as a lens to understand firm growth	Predetermined and clearly distinguishable stages of growth equal to every firm	The creation and re-creation of growth through the interaction between people/ Rich, nonlinear, and recursive interaction between a large number of components
Exemplifying references	Delmar, Davidsson and Gartner (2003), Wiklund, Patzelt and Shepherd (2009), Wiklund and Shepherd (2003)	Korsgaard and Anderson (2011), Cahn (2008), Robles and Cordero-Guzman (2007)	Greiner (1972), Christensen and Scott (1964), Lippitt and Schmidt (1967), Normann (1977)	Perren and Grant (2000), Rae (2004), Anderson, Dodd and Jack (2010)/ Derbyshire and Garnsey (2015), Levie and Lichtenstein (2010), Brown and Mawson (2014)

Hence, firm growth may be understood in distinct ways, justifying a palette of complementing approaches, or as is expressed by Davidsson, Delmar and Wiklund (2006, p. 29) “In fact business growth may perhaps best be conceived of as a collective term for several rather different phenomena, requiring separate methods of inquiry as well as separate theoretical explanations”.

3.4 Reflection

Never in a million years would I have guessed that there could be so many different takes on small firm growth, and that researchers could get so passionate about a specific view, furiously refusing to accept others’ perspectives. Although challenging, I am convinced that there is much to learn from this plurality and that it is within these debates between interests that we develop our understanding of the phenomenon of firm growth. Just like a musician, a firm growth researcher may benefit from widening the perspective, putting her or his own convictions into context.

Imagine that science is like music. There are many different topics a musician can choose to focus on. Perhaps the most popular being love. Similarly, there are many different topics a researcher can choose to study, one being small firm growth.

Within music there are a great variety of genres, ranging from punk, to main stream pop, to jazz. Each genre has its own history and is influenced by different events and places. Some musicians stay within the same genre throughout their careers, while others change or perform in several genres simultaneously. Some genres are more popular in some parts of the world, others are more popular in a specific culture. Likewise, small firm growth research encompass a range of genres. Some researchers measure the output of growth while others study the construction of growth. These genres have different roots and are influenced, and provoked by, different historical and contemporary ideas and research results. Some genres are more popular in certain geographical areas - like the European school of entrepreneurship – while others are more popular among particular academic cultures, such as economy or sociology. While some researchers devote their lives to a specific culture others move effortless between these academic tribes.

The musicians use different instruments to perform their music. Many use a guitar or a piano, others prefer more unusual instruments like the harp. In the same fashion, a researcher has to pick a tool to solve their research question. Some choose widely recognized tools like Regression Analysis, others more obscure ones like Discursive Devices Analysis, and yet some develop their own.

Last but not least, the different genres have different goals. While punk serves to provoke, main stream pop aims to appeal the masses, and jazz above all wants to deliver a feeling. This is not at all unlike the different genres within small firm growth were some want to build on what is already there and reach a large audience, others want to provoke, and some just seem to be in search of a new perspective.

In the end, just like music entails a range of genres so does research. And, rather than considering this a problem and a sign of weakness, we can choose to embrace the idea of plurality and trust that it will enhance our experience, intellect and understanding.

4 Studying the phenomenon

This chapter contains short summaries of the four papers, in combination with a section summarizing the main findings. As elaborated on earlier, all papers have different design and methodology and serve an important part in rethinking the process of small firm growth.

4.1 Paper I

Approaching rural firm growth – a literature review

Tunberg, M. (2014). Approaching rural firm growth: a literature review. *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, Vol. 8 Iss: 4, pp.261 – 286.

This review investigates the extent and content of research into rural firm growth, and identifies and describes various approaches to studying firm growth. The paper is guided by the systematic literature review framework which, combined with a qualitative assessment, ensures a rigorous review. An initial set of 200 peer reviewed articles was included in the review. During the quality assessment stage this set was reduced to 50 articles which were analysed in depth. Three approaches to firm growth are identified and explored, focusing on the output, process and context of firm growth. The results further indicate increasing interest in rural firm growth and identify six themes constituting the research field. Firm growth is advocated as a solution to development challenges, especially in rural settings. However, the firm growth literature is dominated by outcome-based research, often focused on technology-based businesses in dynamic urban regions, whose results are not easily transferable to rural contexts. This review contributes by mapping the current state of

knowledge in the field, by articulating and discussing taken for granted assumptions with regard to firm growth and by identifying three approaches to firm growth, of which the context approach is the least common but which may prove valuable to further increase in the understanding of rural firm growth.

Keywords – Entrepreneurship, Firm growth, Literature review, Rural firm

4.2 Paper II

Small firm growth – the unfolding of a trigger point

Manuscript

This study combines the concept of trigger points, events preceding bursts of growth, with a linguistic approach to show how firm growth unfolds. By marrying theories and methods rooted in the linguistic turn with firm growth theories this study conveys new insights on growth contributing to both the advancement of the trigger point concept and the wider understanding of entrepreneurial activities as complex and contextually bound processes dependent on human interaction. In doing so, the study also adheres to the current demand for advancing firm growth theory by relaxing the outcome focused approach and static life cycle paradigm and, complementing it with alternative theoretical and methodological perspectives.

Keywords: Firm growth, process, trigger points, linguistic turn, translation, discursive devices

4.3 Paper III

Sensemaking and small firms' growing pains

Manuscript

This study explores how firm growth is made sense of. In contrast to perspectives where growth is simply being assumed as universal and unproblematic, the meanings of growth, especially respondents' understandings, take a central place in this study. Narratives of growth, collected as part of an extended case study of an established small firm trying to grow and experiencing some growth, show

that making sense of growth is problematic and identifies three distinct thematic patterns: Growth is understood through output indicators, growth is treated as the internal development of the firm and finally, growth is taken to be inevitable - a necessity to which the firm has to conform. This illustrates that growth can be understood as processes of growing, bound up in the context, created in space and time, and contingent on how growth is understood and experienced. Far from a smooth trajectory, enacting growth reflects the experience of the moment, is often reactions rather than strategy and messy rather than ordered. This study contributes to the literature by complementing the functionalist and output oriented view by understanding firm growth as a social phenomenon constructed and reconstructed in the interactions between people and experiences of context.

Keywords: firm growth, growing, process, small firm, sensemaking, sensegiving

4.4 Paper IV

Rethinking the process of small firm growth – complicated, constructed or complex?

Manuscript

In reaction to the misalignment between one-dimensional determinism informing much of the firm growth literature and the proven non-linear, recursive and idiosyncratic process of growth, this study sets out to rethink small firm growth. Three conceptualizations of growth are identified in the literature: growth as complicated, constructed, and complex. Focusing on growth as complex, we suggest three learning points 1) acknowledge the myriad of components active in the process 2) recognize that growth unfolds through the interactions between these components; and thus 3) shift the unit of analysis from individual components to the system of components and interactions.

Keywords - Firm growth, process, complex system, complexity science

4.5 Main findings

Due to the distinct, although closely linked, aims and research questions informing the four papers, the findings are similarly distinct but linked. The main findings, summarized in Table 4.1, show that firm growth is heterogeneous and

multifaceted, both in terms of research topic and practical phenomenon. Both researchers and practitioners seem to struggle with making sense of firm growth, a process informed by the context of the person, reflected in the many approaches to and interpretations of the phenomenon.

Table 4.1. Summary of the main findings in paper I-IV

Paper I	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Three approaches to firm growth are found in the literature, focusing on 1) the output of growth, 2) the process of growth, and 3) the context of firm growth. - Rural firm growth as a research topic is gaining increased interest. - Six themes are identified in the literature 1) relationship between the entrepreneur's/firm's characteristics and firm performance, 2) relationship between structural characteristics and firm performance, 3) funding, 4) diversification and multifunctionality, 5) social capital and networks, 6) embeddedness
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Paper II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A trigger point unfolds through the verbal interaction between people, can take place in informal everyday conversations, is contextually bound, and several trigger points may be at play simultaneously.
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Paper III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making sense of growth is problematic but it can be understood as processes of growing, bound up in the context, created in space and time and contingent on how growth is understood and experienced. It is far from a smooth trajectory and enacting growth reflects the experience of the moment, reactions rather than strategy and is messy rather than ordered. - Three sensegiving repertoires are identified in the empirical material 1) growth as output, 2) growth as internal development of the firm, and 3) growth as a necessity to which the firm has to conform.
<hr/>	
Paper IV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Three conceptualizations of growth are identified in the literature 1) growth as complicated, 2) growth as constructed, and 3) growth as complex. - Three learning points are suggested 1) acknowledge the myriad of components active in the growth process, rather than try to simplify them; 2) recognize that growth unfolds through the interactions between these components; and 3) shift the unit of analysis from individual components to the complex system of components and interactions.

4.6 Reflection

The very first version of my study plan, written back in 2011, included titles and descriptions of the four papers. However, just as the thesis as a whole has changes over time, so has the content of the papers. My supervisors and I have always tried to make sure that the papers fit into the overarching idea of the thesis – but within these very broad borders the papers have changed substantially during the process. Indeed, writing a paper based thesis puts the PhD student out of control in some sense as the final version of the papers is a co-effort by the student, supervisors, co-authors, conference reviewers and attendants, and not the least, journal editors and reviewers. In addition, the ideas and interests of the student may change over time. Nevertheless, six years after starting my PhD journey, including moments of both distress and euphoria (but most often just long hours in front of the laptop and uncountable cups of coffee), four papers are complete and ready to submit to peer reviewed academic journals.

Paper I is a literature review. This is partly due to inspiration from other PhD projects, such as that of Sabine Müller and her supervisors, and our own wish to get a good grip on the literature on small firm growth. At the time it seemed like most people were primarily advocating systematic literature reviews, which influenced me on my endeavour. During the progression of the review I did however come to understand how misplaced a pure systemic review is in my field. The idea and method stems from the natural sciences and developed to fit studies devoted to quantitative methods and well defined and established definitions. As neither of these are the case for the field of small firm growth I soon bumped into problems. These were solved by relieving the strict rules of a structured review and rather letting the rules guide and inspire me. After a review round in Entrepreneurship and Regional Development, which yielded very useful comments, I sent the paper to Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy in November 2013 and exactly one year later it was published. This was a great relief on two levels: being sole author it meant that I didn't have to go through a formal internal quality check before defending my thesis, and on a personal level it felt like a validation that I was on the right track. It did however also create false expectations of how easy it would be to get published, causing quite some distress later on as Paper II took me for a rough ride.

Paper II is very much the outcome of a course in discourse analysis and my fascination with the linguistic method of discursive devices. It seemed lovely - a method on the fore front, a reaction to the flaws with earlier methods within the linguistic turn, hands on, and perfect for my empirical material. Said and done, the paper was designed and executed but as the work progressed I started to realize challenges with the method and in giving the method such a central

place in the design of the paper. Thankfully my main supervisor came to my aid to co-author the paper. After first being rejected for the RENT conference in 2014, the conference host herself stepped in and accepted the paper, giving us some indication that although this was a very alternative paper, it had some merit. Since the conference, the paper has been through several rewriting processes, four submissions, three reviewing procedures, and one desk reject. Surprisingly the most positive review comments came from the highest ranked journal, and the desk reject from the lowest ranked – giving some indication of the unpredictability (or our challenges in navigating) of the system. At the time of writing these lines a new version of the paper is ready for submission, so we shall see if the fifth time is the charm.

Paper III was first designed as a follow up to Paper II. The aim was to take the insights from Paper II and lift the analysis to a meso-, rather than a micro-level. I did this and presented it at the ICEIRD conference in June 2015. Entering into a co-authorship with Alistair Anderson, Paper III gradually changed from a conference paper with a good idea into a publishable paper with a clear and robust contribution. Keeping the core of the conference paper, it was reworked with the aim of speaking to a broader audience and being applicable to some of the more well-established entrepreneurship journals. The main challenge in this paper has been to communicate the logic of the empirical material in relation to the research aim, but at the time of writing this, we deem the paper is ready for submission.

Paper IV was first developed as a conference paper, presented at ISBE conference in November 2016. After the conference the paper took a drastic turn due to my sudden obsession with complexity science. This changed the paper from focusing on metaphors for growth to a theoretical discussion on the conceptualization of growth as a complex system (a change which probably caught my co-authors, also my two supervisors, by surprise). Forcing ourselves onto new grounds - theoretically and philosophically speaking - the paper has resulted in some of the most absorbing and fascinating discussions during my PhD period. Convinced that this paper may provide the field with some valuable food for thought, we are crossing our fingers others will be as intrigued as we are by this subject.

5 Concluding remarks

The aim in this thesis is to rethink the process of small firm growth. This is triggered by the frustration many firm growth scholars express over the slow and limited advancement in the field (Wiklund, Patzelt & Shepherd 2009; Davidsson & Wiklund 2001; Delmar, Davidsson & Gartner 2003; Shepherd & Wiklund 2009), and is also in line with recent requests of complementing existing literature on firm growth with new perspectives (Leitch, Hill & Neergaard 2010; Parry 2010; Wright & Stigliani 2013). To realize the aim I problematize (Alvesson & Sandberg 2008) the phenomena of firm growth and discuss its underpinning, and often taken for granted, assumptions. My wish is that this endeavour provides new insights into how firm growth works, how it can be conceptualized, and how it can be studied. Although some practical implications can be drawn from this, the focus on problematizing implies that the main contributions are of a more theoretical nature and directed towards providing a future research agenda.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

As is elaborated on within each of the four papers, they all contribute to the field of small firm growth (Table 5.1). Paper I contributes by mapping and discussing the current state of knowledge in the field, and by specifically highlighting the role and state of rural small firm growth. Such mapping may be valuable in understanding the development of the field and suggesting in which direction it is progressing. Paper II contributes to the literature on two levels: On a more abstract level it shows the potential of bringing linguistic frameworks into the study of small firm growth, and on a more detailed level it shows the potential in shifting the focus from the result of growth to the initial events (trigger points) preceding bursts of growth. In addition, it contributes to the concept of trigger points by extending our knowledge of how, why, and when they unfold.

Although based on a different conceptual framework, Paper III also contributes by complementing the result (or output) oriented perspective in small firm growth. This is done by showing how growth is a process of interactions and how it is made sense of and shaped by people’s experiences of growth. Paper IV is the most conceptual paper of the four and contributes both by articulating different conceptualization of growth, and by showing the potential in alternative conceptualizations such as growth as constructed and growth as complex. The paper also provides a detailed discussion of what growth as complex may bring to the understanding and study of small firm growth.

Table 5.1. Summary of the main contributions in paper I-IV

Paper I	Maps and discusses the current state of knowledge in the field, specifically focusing on growth in rural firms.
Paper II	<p>Illuminates the benefits with marrying firm growth as a phenomenon with theories and methods rooted in the linguistic turn (and rarely applied in firm growth studies).</p> <p>Shows the potential in studying the unfolding of an activity with the power of initiating a burst of growth, as opposed to studying the results of growth.</p>
Paper III	<p>Complements the functionalist and output oriented view by understanding firm growth as a social phenomenon constructed and reconstructed in the interactions between people and experiences in context.</p> <p>Engages with the experiences of growing and processes over time, thus avoiding ‘one hit wonders’ of rapid but episodic growth.</p>
Paper IV	<p>Articulates the received conceptualization of firm growth as complicated and brings forward two alternative conceptualizations: growth as constructed and growth as complex.</p> <p>Shows the potential in complexity science as a philosophical tool for advancing our understanding of firm growth and as a platform for scholars from different perspectives to meet and discuss firm growth.</p>

Taken together, the main contribution of this thesis is to uncover taken for granted assumptions about small firm growth. It can always be discussed who takes what for granted. It is, however, evident that the field of firm growth is heavily influenced by a deterministic and linear view on growth, but that this rarely is questioned or discussed. By reviewing and discussing the philosophical foundations informing both the main stream, and more alternative perspectives informing firm growth research, this thesis illuminates taken for granted assumptions, and thereby provides an informed position from where we can

rethink firm growth. In addition, it contributes with a discussion of how firm growth is conceptualized and provides two alternative conceptualizations in firm growth as constructed and as complex. Finally, it contributes by showing the potential in (to the field of firm growth) alternative theories and methods for advancing our understanding of how firms grow. By doing this, I have both responded to claims such as "... it is still true today that knowledge about what facilitates and hinders growth is still scattered and limited", and that "the same is true for insights into the process of firm growth" (Davidsson et al., 2006, p. 39), and have answered to requests for providing alternative theoretical and methodological takes on firm growth (e.g. McKelvie & Wiklund, 2010; Leitch, 2010; Wright & Stigliani, 2013).

5.2 Practical implications

It is not only the research community which leans heavily on a one dimensional deterministic and linear view on firm growth. This view also constitutes a powerful discourse outside of academia. We all have to relate to it, and by acting upon it we contribute to building it stronger. Policy makers, management consultants, firm support organisations and managers are a few of those who cannot avoid relating to this discourse and view on firm growth. There is nothing strange about this, nor much can we do about it. It does however become a problem when we relate to it without reflecting upon it, especially since there is more and more compelling evidence that there are also other, contrasting, experiences of how a firm grows.

Acting upon an inadequate, or even misleading, view of how firms grow has several practical implications. It creates false expectations of what it is to be growing and how growth works, causing firm owners and managers - but also politicians, consultants, and investors (to mention a few) - to make questionable decisions. There is a risk that the abundant public and private activities related to firm growth, such as growth programmes and courses, are misguiding. That firm screenings aiming to evaluate the growth potential of firms are incorrect, and that policy measures and incentives to create firm growth are inefficient.

So what should we do? Since this thesis isn't designed to make normative suggestions or recommendations, this is a tricky question. However, two things may be said. Firstly, to unreflectively draw upon, and contribute to, one specific view on firm growth is risky business. Instead, it may be beneficial to realize that the deterministic and linear view on firm growth, which often comes with strong positive connotations, is one of many perspectives. Indeed, contemporary research suggest that, growing is not always (if ever) a successful result of high ambition and careful planning, it is also a painful and messy process stretching

far outside of the premises of the legal entity of the firm. The choice of, and focus upon, one perspective inevitably puts other in the shadows, and privileging one perspective over others has consequences. Secondly, as the results of this thesis show, the growth process is not easily comprised into a general model or recipe. This suggests that firms have to find their own way to grow and rather than constructing policy to form a universal path for growth, policy makers need to try to avoid introducing measures and regulation that hinder firms' individual processes.

5.3 A research agenda

It seems as if the 'future research' sections often provide suggestions in line with 'do the same but fine tune the method, include a few more variables, or add a case'. These kinds of suggestions may indeed be important and useful in increasing our knowledge, but I take a different approach. Rather than suggesting to build on and fine tune the existing theories and methods informing much of the firm growth field, I am inspired by conceptual studies where one of the main contributions is to provide a new research agenda (e.g. Welter 2011; McKelvie & Wiklund 2010).

In line with both the request from the field (of more alternative perspectives), and the contributions of this thesis, I argue that the research agenda for future firm growth studies should be informed by a shift in focus on three levels 1) ontology and epistemology, 2) theory and method, 3) empirical material (table 5.2).

Table 5.2. An agenda for future firm growth research

Ontology and epistemology	Complement existing philosophical assumptions (for the firm growth field) with alternatives such as social constructionism and complexity science
Theory and method	<p>Marry firm growth research with theories and methods applied elsewhere in the research community, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discourse analysis • In-depth, longitudinal, and interpretative case studies <p>And, shift the unit of analysis from the firm to the process of growing.</p>
Empirical material	Add alternative types of empirical material such as rural firms

First, in order to seriously widen the perspective within the field of firm growth we need to start with something as abstract as ontology and epistemology. While new perspectives are often asked for (Leitch, Hill & Neergaard 2010; Parry 2010; Wright & Stigliani 2013), they fall flat without also discussing and allowing alternative philosophical foundations. I argue that, by opening up for what is today considered alternative philosophical foundations in firm growth research (e.g. social constructionism and complexity science) we can begin to discuss alternative conceptualizations of firm growth. This will lead to new kinds of questions being asked, which will trigger alternative research designs, and potentially result in advancing our understanding of how firms grow.

Second, and closely linked to the first suggestion, is including theories and methods available elsewhere in the scientific community that have yet to be fully explored in relation to firm growth. An example of such theoretical frameworks and associated methods is discourse analysis and in-depth, longitudinal, and interpretative case studies, as is explored in this thesis, or perhaps system theories and computational modelling available under the complexity science framework. Associated with this point is the choice of unit of analysis. As is elaborated on in Paper IV, by complementing the traditional legal entity of the firm with alternative units of analysis, such as the growth process, this creates challenges but makes sense if taking a process perspective seriously. It also provokes questions such as what is context and what is internal, linking in to the contemporary discussion on context and entrepreneurship (e.g. Welter, 2011).

Third, and as is discussed explicitly in Paper I, I suggest widening the perspective in terms of empirical material. Much of the existing firm growth research is based on fast growing urban high-tech firms. There are however many other types of firms and settings, such as low-tech rural firms growing at a slower pace. Including a variety of empirical material may lead to a wider understanding firm growth.

Taken together, I argue that we should not be afraid of bringing in new perspectives on firm growth. Rather the opposite; I suggest that these three levels of alternative perspectives may be vital in unlocking the stagnated development within the field of firm growth, and thereby helping us to advance our understanding of how firms grow.

5.4 Reflection

Any reader making it this far deserves a treat, so go get a nice cup of coffee, a cake or whatever makes you happy – it's on me (give me a call and we'll sort it out). Reflecting on the final chapter in this thesis I want to share two things;

the challenges of communicating theoretical work, and the benefit of multiple perspectives.

As I mention above this thesis does not aim to provide normative suggestions or recommendations. It does not provide the recipe for growth á la “five steps to get a successful business”. It does something else. It provides space for reflection, for rethinking what we take for granted. In doing so, it provides an informed platform for bringing in new, alternative ideas and understandings. This approach causes challenges since many people, both within and outside of academia, request hands on solutions and advice. Not fulfilling these expectations has often felt frustrating, and it has been (and still is to some extent) difficult to explain and communicate my contribution to those less interested in the perspective upon which my research is based.

And so, the very final reflection of this thesis is this: six years, six conferences (and conference papers), four papers, one summary chapter, one wedding, two children, and two moves. That’s the output, in quantitative indicators, of my PhD period. It’s all correct, fairly interesting, and it is easy to compare with others. But is there more to it? Of course! Taking the process more seriously, studying how my PhD period actually unfolded, something else emerges. Something much messier. During these years my priorities in life have changed, I have developed new friendships, I have lost people close to me, and I have learned things I never dreamt of learning. Most words in my texts are channelled through my mind and my keyboard. But what is my mind if not a melting pot for all my experiences and interactions with people and their thoughts. Doing an in-depth case study of one of my papers, or indeed a single section of one paper, it would be evident how the text is influenced by an intricate web of interactions and components (to borrow from complexity science). These include discussions with co-authors of course, but also other academics (whom I may or may not know personally), colleagues, friends, and family (after all, it was my husband who introduced me to complexity science). And we must not forget my mood of the day, which is heavily dependent on my children’s mood (which only God knows what steers). So, the perhaps most crucial thing in producing an interesting line of academic arguments, is happy kids. Now, all this would of course be very difficult to see if not studying the evolvment of the text as it happened – there and then and over time.

Epilogue

Over the years I visited Orange Inc. several times. I was always nervous pulling up next to the small office building. And always full of energy upon leaving. I learned so much at Orange Inc. My perceptions and knowledge of how to run a firm were continuously challenged and the firm, with all its amazing people, came to serve as a major source of not only empirical material for my research, but also as inspiration on a much more personal level. For that I will be forever grateful.

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Popular science summary

Firm growth is a hot topic – it ranks high on the political agendas all over the world and it occupies a range of professions, from firm managers, business consultants, and venture capitalists to policy-makers and researchers. Growing firms generate jobs and tax revenue, and foster innovation. Subsequently, they are essential to economic development. However, almost all firms stay small for their entire existence. To change this and to increase the growth rates, a considerable amount of efforts and money is directed towards facilitating the growth process. Yet the fact is, *how* firms grow is far from clear.

Firm growth is generally portrayed as a step by step process, where growth is the inevitable result as long as the firm is provided with the right set of resources. Google firm growth and you will be fed images of upward pointing arrows, presenting growth through a set of clearly distinguishable stages, or as a growing plant affectionately held in a pair of hands and nurtured by soil and water. It is not difficult to understand why these models and metaphors have become so widely spread and accepted. They are clear, easy to understand and remember, and portray firm growth as something positive, predictable and manageable. Unfortunately, there is not much evidence supporting these models of firm growth. Despite thousands of research studies it has proven difficult to explain how growth works and why certain firms grow while others do not. Greater numbers of researchers have therefore come to ask for new ideas about how to study and understand firm growth.

Inspired by this vast interest in growing firms, from both inside and outside of academia, and intrigued by the requests to invigorate firm growth research with new perspectives, the aim of this thesis is to rethink the process of small firm growth. By scrutinizing the concept of firm growth and discuss the, often taken for granted assumptions associated with firm growth (such as that it is a linear and predetermined process) new insights are gained on how firms grow.

This thesis is based on a case study of a growing small firm. After numerous visits to the firm over a five-year period, and extensive theoretical discussion

about what had been observed, a picture of growth, far more complex than the one communicated in the yearly reports of the firm, began to crystalize. A range of projects with growth potential seemed to be simultaneously ongoing, intertwined in a disordered web. New production lines were opened up, foreign markets were entered, and new collaborations were initiated. Many of these projects had the potential to increase the numbers of employees, turnover, and other quantifiable measures; in fact, some of them had already succeeded in this sense. Other projects, although still adding value, proved more challenging to measure. While a few projects developed according to plan, most took an unplanned turn and developed into something quite different, were put on hold, or even closed down. As growth in this firm does not fit into the linear, step by step model of growth, it provides useful material for discussing alternative understandings of how firms grow.

One way to understand growth is to focus on the events prior to bursts of growth, so called trigger points. This thesis shows how these trigger points unfold through the verbal interaction between people, that they take place in informal everyday conversations, and that they are dependent upon the context within which they are situated. In addition, the results shows that several trigger points may be occurring at the same time.

Another way to understand firm growth is to study how people relate to it. This thesis shows that to make sense of growth is problematic. It is not understood as a smooth path, and enacting growth reflects the experience of the moment. Growth is associated with reactions rather than strategy, and is seen as messy rather than ordered. Further, it can be made sense of in various ways: As an increase over time measured by output indicators, such as turn over or number of employees; as the internal development of the firm such as the purchase of a new piece of machinery or the introduction of a new product; or as a necessity to which the firm has to conform - it may for example be absolutely vital to grow in order to divide overhead costs or avoid to be overtaken by a competitor.

A third way to understand firm growth is to reflect upon how we look at the phenomenon on a more philosophical level. The results of this thesis suggests that firm growth can be seen as a complicated phenomenon. This implies that as long as we can understand all the components creating growth we will understand growth itself. The whole is no more than the sum of the parts, like an airplane which, even though it is complicated, is possible to pick apart and reassemble. Firm growth can also be seen as something constructed through the interaction of people. By talking to, observing, and working together, people can make a firm grow. Finally, firm growth can be seen as complex system. This implies that there is a vast range of components, such as people, machines and natural resources, active in the growth process, interacting with each other,

creating a complex system of dynamic interactions. A growth project in a small firm may for example be influenced by increasing prices due to bad weather and conflicts in foreign regions, a successful recruitment process, and a supplier on the verge of bankruptcy. The growth process may hence be understood in various ways, but how and why does this matter?

To focus on one understanding of growth inevitably puts others in the shadow, and privileging one perspective over others has consequences. Acting upon an inadequate or misleading view of how firms grow creates false expectations. This may in turn cause firm owners and managers, but also politicians, consultants, and investors to make questionable decisions. There is a risk that the many public and private activities related to firm growth, such as growth programmes and courses, are misguiding, that firm screenings aiming to evaluate the growth potential of firms are incorrect, and that policy measures and incentives to create firm growth are inefficient.

This thesis is not designed to make suggestions or recommendations. However, two things may be said on the subject. Firstly, to unreflectively draw upon, and contribute to, one specific view on firm growth is risky business. Instead, it may be beneficial to realize that firm growth as a linear, step by step model or a natural process such as that of a growing plant are just two of many ways to understand the process of growing. Indeed, growth can also be a painful and confusing process, stretching far outside of the premises of the legal entity of the firm. Hence, we need to be aware of which view we choose, what benefits and limitations it brings with it, and which views we have chosen to leave out. Secondly, as the results of this thesis show, the growth process is not easily translated into a general model or recipe. This suggests that firms have to find their own way to grow. Rather than constructing policy to form a universal path for growth, policy makers need to try to avoid introducing measures and regulation that hinder firms' individual processes.

Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

Tillväxt engagerar. Det ligger högt på den politiska agendan världen över och det sysselsätter människor från en rad olika yrken som företagsledare, konsulter och riskkapitalister men också politiska beslutsfattare och forskare. Växande företag skapar jobb och skatteintäkter och främjar dessutom innovation. De är därför viktiga för den ekonomiska utvecklingen av vårt samhälle. Nästan alla företag förblir dock små. För att ändra på detta investeras en betydande mängd resurser, i form av tid, pengar och kunskap, i tillväxtrelaterade aktiviteter. Faktum är dock att vi inte riktigt vet *hur* företag faktiskt växer.

Tillväxt avbildas vanligtvis som en 'steg-för-steg-process' där företaget oundvikligen växer så länge det förses med rätt resurser. En sökning efter bilder av tillväxt på Google ger uppåtriktade pilar, tydligt urskiljbara tillväxtstadier som följer på varandra, och växande små träd. Det är inte svårt att förstå varför dessa modeller och metaforer av tillväxt har spridits vitt och blivit allmänt accepterade. De är tydliga, lätta att förstå och komma ihåg, och de skildrar tillväxt som något positivt, förutsägbart och hanterbart. Dock finns det inte mycket stöd för dessa bilder av tillväxt. Trots tusentals forskningsstudier har det visat sig svårt att förklara hur tillväxt egentligen fungerar och varför vissa företag växer medan andra inte gör det. Allt fler forskare efterfrågar därför nya perspektiv på tillväxt.

Det stora intresset för växande företag, i kombination med behovet av nya perspektiv, ligger till grund för denna avhandling. Genom att kritiskt diskutera tillväxt och prova nya sätt att studera och förstå växande företag syftar denna avhandling till att skapa en välgrundad utgångspunkt från vilken vi kan föra kunskapen om växande företag framåt. Genom att granska begreppet och de antaganden det bygger på (som att tillväxt är en linjär och förutbestämd process) nås nya insikter om vad som egentligen händer när små företag blir större.

En fallstudie av ett litet växande företag ligger till grund för avhandlingen. Företaget besöks regelbundet under en femårsperiod och i kombination med omfattande teoretiska diskussioner började en bild av tillväxt, mycket mer

komplex än den som kommunicerades i företagets årliga rapporter, att träda fram. En rad projekt med tillväxtpotential pågick samtidigt, sammanflätade i invecklade nätverk. Nya produktionslinjer öppnades, utländska marknader erövrades och nya samarbeten initierades. Många av dessa projekt hade potential att öka antalet anställda, omsättningen eller något annat kvantifierbart mått. Faktum var att vissa av projekten redan lyckats i denna mening, medan andra resulterat i värden svårare att mäta. Några projekt följde planen men de flesta tog en oväntad riktning och utvecklades till något helt annat, avstannade, eller till och med avslutades. Eftersom tillväxt i det här företaget inte passar in i de linjära stegmodellerna utgjorde det en bra bas för att diskutera alternativa uppfattningar av hur företag växer.

Resultatet av denna avhandling visar att tillväxt är ett mångfacetterat fenomen som kan uppfattas och upplevas på en rad olika sätt. I den andra studien i avhandlingen ligger fokus på händelserna som föregår själva tillväxten, så kallade triggerpunkter. Analysen visar hur dessa triggerpunkter utvecklas i den verbala interaktionen mellan människor, att de äger rum i informella vardagliga samtal och att de är beroende av sitt sammanhang. Vidare visas att flera triggerpunkter kan pågå samtidigt inom ett och samma företag. I den tredje studien i avhandlingen undersöks hur människor relaterar till begreppet tillväxt. Resultaten belyser att tillväxt uppfattas på en rad olika sätt; som en ökning över tiden mätt i kvantifierbara mått (som antal anställda eller omsättning), som företagets interna utveckling (som inköp av en ny maskin eller införande av en ny produkt) eller som en nödvändighet som företaget måste hantera (det kan till exempel vara absolut nödvändigt att växa för att fördela kostnader eller för att undvika att bli uppköpt av en konkurrent). Analysen visar också att tillväxt kan vara förknippat med reaktioner snarare än strategi och uppfattas som en rörig och problematisk snarare än ordnad process. I den fjärde studien i avhandlingen diskuteras den teoretiska och filosofiska grunden för begreppet tillväxt. Diskussionen visar att tillväxt kan ses som ett komplicerat, konstruerat, eller komplext fenomen. Att se det som ett komplicerat fenomen innebär att så länge vi kan förstå alla komponenter som skapar tillväxt så kommer vi även att förstå tillväxt. Precis som i ett flygplan där det, trots att det är mycket komplicerat, går att plocka isär och sätta ihop alla komponenter, så är helheten inte mer än summan av delarna. Tillväxt kan också ses som något som konstrueras i interaktionen mellan människor. Genom att prata, observera och samarbeta med andra kan människor skapa tillväxt. Slutligen kan tillväxt ses som något komplext. Det innebär att ett brett spektrum av komponenter (som människor, maskiner och naturresurser) är aktiva i tillväxtprocessen. Dessa komponenter interagerar med varandra vilket skapar ett komplext system där helheten är mer än summan av delarna. Ett tillväxtprojekt i ett litet företag kan t.ex. påverkas av

förändrade råvarupriser som ett resultat av dåligt väder och konflikter i ett annat land, samtidigt som ledningsgruppen gjort en lyckad nyrekrytering och deras största leverantör håller på att gå i konkurs. Vad innebär det då att tillväxt är ett heterogent och mångfacetterat fenomen? Och hur kan vi använda denna kunskap?

Att agera utefter en otillräcklig eller missvisande syn på hur företag växer skapar falska förväntningar. Det kan i sin tur leda till att ägare och chefer, men även politiker, konsulter och investerare fattar beslut som inte leder dit det var tänkt. Det finns också risk för att de många offentliga och privata aktiviteter som rör tillväxt, som till exempel tillväxtprogram och kurser, har brister, att utvärderingar av företags tillväxtpotential är felaktiga, och att politiska åtgärder och incitament för att skapa tillväxt är ineffektiva. Att fokusera på enbart ett sätt att förstå tillväxt placerar oundvikligen andra uppfattningar och upplevelser av fenomenet i skuggan, och privilegierandet av ett perspektiv över andra har konsekvenser. Denna avhandling är inte avsedd att ge förslag eller rekommendationer, men två saker kan lyftas fram. För det första är linjära och stegvisa modeller, eller växande små träd, bara två av många sätt att förstå tillväxtprocessen. Faktum är att tillväxt också kan vara en smärtsam och rörig process som sträcker sig långt utanför företaget som juridisk enhet. För det andra lämpar sig inte tillväxtprocessen för en generell modell. Företagen behöver därför hitta sitt eget sätt att växa och snarare än att utforma politiken för att skapa en universell tillväxtväg bör beslutsfattare försöka undvika att införa åtgärder och regler som hindrar företagens unika tillväxtprocess.

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