

Entrepreneurship Research in Emergence: Past Trends and Future Directions*

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Abstract

This article evaluates the emergent academic field of entrepreneurship to better understand its progress and potential. We apply boundary and exchange concepts to examine 97 entrepreneurship articles published in leading management journals from 1985 to 1999. Some evidence was found of an upward trend in the number of published entrepreneurship articles, although the percentage of entrepreneurship articles remains low. The highly permeable boundaries of entrepreneurship facilitate intellectual exchange with other management areas but sometimes discourage the development of entrepreneurship theory and hinder legitimacy. We argue that focusing entrepreneurship research at the intersection of the constructs of individuals, opportunities, modes of organizing, and the environment will define the field and enhance legitimacy. Decision theory, start-up factors of production, information processing and network theory, and temporal dynamics are put forward for entrepreneurship scholars to explore important research questions in these intersections.

The nature of entrepreneurship research and the emergence of entrepreneurship as a legitimate academic pursuit have begun to attract the interest of scholars. Aldrich and Baker (1997) claim that the field of entrepreneurship has made only limited progress toward disciplinary status in a normal science framework. Others think that entrepreneurship remains in a theory-building stage (Wiseman & Skilton, 1999) and is a “multidisciplinary jigsaw” characterized by accumulative fragmentalism (Harrison & Leitch, 1996: 69). Examining whether or not scholarship on the topic of entrepreneurial activity is worthwhile and legitimate has both practical and theoretical importance. Since entrepreneurial activity is increasingly relevant to economic output and labor employment in both developed and developing nations, new

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knowledge about entrepreneurship can speed the outcomes desired by enterprising individuals, firms, and societies. For academics involved in developing this new knowledge, decisions on faculty promotion, tenure, and merit-pay increases depend in part on an assessment of the worth and relevance of research conducted (Pfeffer, 1993). Worth and relevance in turn depend on collegial and administrative appraisal of the legitimacy and value of the individual's targeted field of study.

Theory on emerging organizations defines *boundary* and *exchange* properties that provide a clear distinction between existing and emergent organizations (Aldrich, 1999). Together, the concepts of boundaries and exchange help build others' perception that entrepreneurship offers a unique understanding of organizational phenomena and is therefore a legitimate research endeavor. By legitimacy we mean the extent to which research in entrepreneurship advances useful knowledge and is substantively endorsed by powerful external collective actors.¹ The issues of emergence and legitimacy prompt us to ask the following research questions: How is entrepreneurship emerging? Are entrepreneurship scholars obtaining increased legitimacy? Where should research be directed to build the field? We explore this issue by analyzing entrepreneurship research published in major management journals from 1985 to 1999. We also investigate the exchange of scholarship between the general management domain and the entrepreneurship area as evidenced by article citation. We are fundamentally interested in the status of entrepreneurship scholarship in terms of volume of publication, which helps to establish a domain; tendency to bridge to other management domains, which may help to establish its uniqueness or may limit its acceptance as an independent field with appropriate boundaries; and the contribution entrepreneurship scholars can make to the broader Academy.

The article proceeds as follows. Based on earlier studies, we develop the concept of emergence as it relates to the field of entrepreneurship. Since we view entrepreneurship as a field of study within management, an analysis of entrepreneurship research appearing in major management journals is presented. Lastly, we propose directions for entrepreneurship research in its pursuit of distinctive boundaries and legitimacy. Given the emergent status of the discipline, we argue that the distinctive domain of entrepreneurship research is the nexus of business opportunities, individuals and teams, and modes of organizing within the overall context of market environments.

Studies about Entrepreneurship Research

Several studies in recent years have referenced or discussed entrepreneurship research in terms of its development and can provide background on the legitimacy issue central to this article. In his survey of tenured entrepreneurship scholars at major universities, MacMillan (1991, 1993) found that publications indicative of

¹ Pfeffer similarly describes paradigm development. Paradigms are recognized when there is wide agreement that attention to certain research questions, methods, and programs of study will "advance training and knowledge" (1993: 600). Developed paradigms result in outcomes that include greater resource provision, lower journal rejection rates, less time to publication, increased governance in academic departments, and greater presence in broader academic organizations, among others. Thus cognitive legitimacy and socio-political legitimacy for an emerging field are closely related (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994).