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# The Evolution of Entrepreneurship as a Scholarly Field

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# The Evolution of Entrepreneurship as a Scholarly Field

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#### ABSTRACT

Over the last 50 years, entrepreneurship as a scientific field has grown significantly – from a small emerging venture in the 1970s to a global industry today with thousands of people around the world who consider themselves entrepreneurship scholars. In this fast growing field there is always a risk that our history will get lost, with consequences in terms of lack of knowledge accumulation and understanding of the concepts and theories that we use in our research.

Research on entrepreneurship has a long history. In this review I will focus on the modern history of entrepreneurship research by describing and synthesizing the evolution of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field after the Second World War. The social and intellectual evolution of the field can be divided into five periods: the forerunners in mainstream disciplines, the formation of the field, the growth of entrepreneurship research, the golden era, and finally, the establishment of a scholarly field in its own right. Thus, to a large extent the evolution of entrepreneurship as a scientific

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field follows the path of Hambrick and Chen's model (2008) from marginalization of the topic in the Post Second World War period to differentiation, mobilization, academic legitimacy, and conversion of the field in the 2010s.

# 1

## Introduction

#### 1.1 A Historical Approach to Entrepreneurship Research

Scientific knowledge has grown significantly in recent decades and many research fields have witnessed a huge increase in the number of scholars, conferences, journals, and published articles. Entrepreneurship is no exception and it could even be argued that it has been tremendously successful compared to many other research fields. Over recent decades, entrepreneurship has become a catch-word. Politicians and policy-makers regard entrepreneurship as a solution to a range of societal problems. In academia, entrepreneurship has grown significantly. It is taught at universities all over the world, university administrators talk about "entrepreneurial universities" and a large body of literature on different aspects of entrepreneurship can be found.

Although entrepreneurship may be regarded as a fairly young scientific field, as an intellectual issue it has a long history – some pioneering contributions were published as far back as the 18th century. Since the pioneering writings of Cantillon (1755/1999), several individual economists such as the French Physiocrats (e.g., Quesnay and Baudeau), Austrian and German economists such as Carl Menger and Gustav Schmoller, early neoclassical economists, for example, Alfred Marshall, but not

#### Introduction

least, scholars such as Joseph Schumpeter, who elaborated on different aspects of entrepreneurship and industrial dynamics. In many cases the contributions were made by individual scholars anchored in mainstream disciplines.

However, entrepreneurship as an academic field in its own right began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s. In this historical review I will elaborate on the development of entrepreneurship as a research field by (a) describing the modern history of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field since the Second World War, and (b) synthesizing the development of the field in terms of the institutionalization of entrepreneurship in the academic system.

History is seldom something that can be described in an objective sense. Describing and analyzing history always involves selecting aspects and events. Therefore, it is important to stress that the history presented in this review is my subjective analysis of the evolution of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field. Having said that, I wish to emphasize that I have strived to anchor my argumentation in previous studies that have analyzed different aspects of the evolution of the field.

What can we learn from this historical review? First, to understand how entrepreneurship has become a successful and distinct scholarly field that is institutionalized in the academic system and to comprehend contemporary entrepreneurship research discussions are valuable for established scholars within the field, but especially for new entrants to the field (e.g., PhD students and scholars from other fields). Second, entrepreneurship is a changeable field and new research issues and topics emerge all the time. However, as in successful ventures in general, where favorable business opportunities tend to combine an opportunity focus with a resource orientation (Wiklund, 1998), it is not sufficient to identify new research opportunities unless they are securely rooted in previous knowledge. Historical reviews of the field may ensure stronger knowledge accumulation within the field. Finally, reflecting on the past will allow us to think ahead. This is particularly important in times of major changes in society, for example, increased digitalization that may revolutionize entrepreneurship in the future and thus the research within the field.

#### 1.1. A Historical Approach to Entrepreneurship Research

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The historical approach to entrepreneurship research is not new and this review should be seen in relation to previous reviews on the evolution of entrepreneurship research. For example, Hébert and Link have presented excellent reviews on the early contributions to entrepreneurship, mainly from scholars rooted in economics (1982, 2006, 2009), Swedberg (2000) on the social science view of entrepreneurship, Javadian *et al.* (2018) on classical articles in entrepreneurship, Landström (2005) on the pioneers of entrepreneurship research, and Landström and Lohrke's two volume work (2010, 2012) on the history of topical issues and classical works in entrepreneurship research. The development of entrepreneurship as a scientific field has also been discussed in several issues of the *Foundations and Trends in Entrepreneurship*, for example, Alvarez (2005) on theories in entrepreneurship and Parker (2005) on the economics of entrepreneurship.

Compared to previous historical reviews, the present work makes some unique contributions. It focuses on the modern history of entrepreneurship research – the evolution of entrepreneurship research after the Second World War – and less on the early contributions to entrepreneurship knowledge. In addition, most previous reviews elaborate on entrepreneurship knowledge development within individual disciplines such as economics, psychology, and social sciences, whereas this review takes a field-related approach and elaborates on the evolution of entrepreneurship as a scientific field. In this respect it takes a broader perspective, not only focusing on the intellectual development of the field – which is common in previous analyses – but also elaborating on the social aspects of the development of entrepreneurship research. Finally, the main conclusion in the review is that over time, entrepreneurship research has gained academic legitimacy and become more institutionalized in the academic system. In this analysis of the institutionalization process, the Hambrick and Chen (2008) model of an "admittance-seeking social movement" (p. 33) is used to explain the evolution of entrepreneurship towards an institutionalized academic research field.

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#### 1.2 Analysis Model

Sociology of science scholars have addressed a wide range of issues related to the evolution of new academic fields (Pfeffer, 1993). Hambrick and Chen (2008, p. 33) presented a model based on Merton (1973) to explain the emergence and growth of academic fields, comprising three overlapping phases: (1) differentiation; (2) resource mobilization; and (3) legitimacy building. For a new field to emerge, it needs to differentiate itself from existing fields, i.e., early proponents must demonstrate that some important phenomena cannot be adequately addressed by or fall outside the scope of existing fields, for example, by framing an agenda indicating that their existence will promote knowledge and even the advancement of society. Second, it is necessary to mobilize resources in order to ensure a critical mass of scholars who can derive energy from each other and secure control of the resources needed. Finally, an emerging research field needs to build legitimacy in the eyes of the academic establishment, and its scholars must demonstrate that they are qualified to spearhead this development. The phases are not assumed to follow in fixed sequences that typify the successful evolution of new academic fields, but may occur multiple times and in multiple directions. The model represents an assumption of an institutionalization process (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) of a new research field in the academic system.

However, Hambrick and Chen's model needs to be supplemented with regard to the later phases of a field's trajectory. Therefore, in order to understand the entire evolution of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field, I will add a fourth phase, which I term "conversion". Once a field has successfully traversed the early phases we can assume that it takes new paths in the evolution, for example, by creating a dominant approach (creating a hegemony) in research, dividing into subfields, or even decaying (Hambrick and Chen, 2008, p. 51).

Finally, Hambrick and Chen particularly focus on the social aspects of the evolution of the field (Hambrick and Chen, 2008, p. 52), although the evolution of a new scientific field consists of both social and intellectual aspects that interact with each other. Thus, it is important to add a discussion about the intellectual evolution of entrepreneurship

#### 1.3. The Road Map of the Review

|                        | Forerunners<br>in<br>mainstream<br>disciplines | Formation<br>of the<br>research<br>field | Growth<br>of<br>entrepre-<br>neurship<br>research | Golden<br>era of<br>entrepre-<br>neurship<br>research | Field<br>in its<br>own<br>right |
|------------------------|--|--|---|---|---------------------------------|
|                        | 1945 - 1980                                    | 1980s                                    | 1990s   | 2000s   | 2010s                           |
| Social evolution       |  |  |   |   |                                 |
| Differentiation        |  |  |   |   |                                 |
| Mobilization           |  |  |   |   |                                 |
| Legitimacy             |  |  |   |   |                                 |
| Conversion             |  |  |   |   |                                 |
| Intellectual evolution |  |  |   |   |                                 |

Table 1.1: Analysis model

as scientific field, including the way the concepts and the domain of entrepreneurship have been defined, the topics that have been developed as well as the methods and ways of reasoning that have been accepted within the field.

In the following, I will discuss the evolution process of entrepreneurship research since the Second World War, which I have divided into five time periods (see Table 1.1): (1) forerunners in mainstream disciplines (1945–1980), the formation period during the 1980s, (3) the growth of the field in the 1990s, (4) the "Golden Era" in the 2000s, and (5) the establishment of a scholarly field in its own right in the 2010s. However, the division into decades should not be seen in too strict a sense. The evolution of the field is, of course, not bound by the change of decade, and strictly limiting the descriptions to individual decades can lead to a loss of the ability to connect activities, events, and processes over time in the development of the field. However, the division into decades provides a reasonable structure to describe the evolution of the field, and at the same time a pedagogical method of illustrating the development.

#### 1.3 The Road Map of the Review

In the next section (Section 2) I will discuss different definitions of entrepreneurship and elaborate on the domain of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field. The historical review of entrepreneurship research

#### Introduction

starts in Section 3, in which I briefly present some early contributions to entrepreneurship knowledge. However, the focus of the present work is on the evolution of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field since the Second World War and some contributions from economic historians and behavioral scientists in the 1940s and 1950s will be presented in Section 4. Until the 1960s and 1970s, entrepreneurship was a fairly marginal topic in some mainstream disciplines and the knowledge contributions were made by individual scholars in different disciplines. However, from the 1980s onward, entrepreneurship emerged into a field in its own right. In Section 5 entrepreneurship as an emerging field in the 1980s is presented. A main characteristic of the 1980s was the large number of pioneering contributions made in entrepreneurship, and some of these contributions are presented in a separate subsection. This is followed by Section 6, in which the growth of entrepreneurship research in the 1990s is described. The 1990s was a decade of the building of the academic infrastructure of the field, which is elaborated on in a separate subsection. The 2000s could be regarded as the "Golden Era" of entrepreneurship research with major improvements in an intellectual as well as a social sense, discussed in Section 7. The period includes an extensive globalization of entrepreneurship research, and the history of entrepreneurship research in Europe and China is noted. Section 8 is devoted to the building of academic legitimacy and the establishment of a scholarly field in its own right during the 2010s, while the emergence of scholarly communities in entrepreneurship will be highlighted in a separate subsection. Finally, in Section 9, I will synthesize my findings and discuss the institutionalization of the field in terms of Hambrick and Chen's (2008) model of the emergence and growth of new academic fields.

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