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Research Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/respol

The social structure of entrepreneurship as a scientific field

Hans Landström^{a,*}, Gouya Harirchi^b

^a Sten K. Johnson Centre for Entrepreneurship, Lund University, PO Box 7080, S-220 07 Lund, Sweden

^b Open Innovation in Science Research and Competence Center (OIS Center), Ludwig Boltzmann Gesellschaft, Nussdorfer strasse 64, A-1090 Vienna, Austria

ARTICLE INFO

JEL classification:

I23
M0
O39

Keywords:

Scientific fields
Entrepreneurship
Innovation
Scholarly community
Networks

ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship as a scientific field has grown significantly, irrespective of the measures used. In this article we raise the question: How can we understand the evolution and success of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field? In particular, we focus on the social structure of entrepreneurship scholars to explain (1) how they are becoming integrated into larger scholarly communities and (2) how they differ from the way scholars integrate within the field of innovation studies. Based on a unique database and responses from 870 entrepreneurship scholars, we demonstrate that entrepreneurship can be regarded as a phenomenon-driven field bound together by a shared communication system and social interaction rather than strong theoretical influences, i.e., a social scholarly community. We identify two broader social communities; one embedded in entrepreneurship conferences that includes a rather eclectic group of entrepreneurship scholars, and another related to entrepreneurship journals and entrepreneurship economics, characterized by a stronger domain orientation. In contrast, scholars in innovation studies tend to be more theory-driven and are bound together by their disciplinary and theoretical background, i.e., an intellectual scholarly community.

1. Introduction

The concept “entrepreneurship” has become a catch-word: politicians and policy-makers regard entrepreneurship as a solution to a range of societal problems, while in academia entrepreneurship has grown significantly and can be regarded as a successful and prosperous scholarly field. Entrepreneurship is taught at universities all over the world, university administrators talk about “entrepreneurial universities”, entrepreneurship research has increased significantly and a large body of literature on different aspects of entrepreneurship can be found. In this article we will explore the question: How can we understand the evolution and success of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field? Many studies have analysed the cognitive aspects of the evolution of the field, for example by employing different forms of bibliometric analysis to synthesize the knowledge and methodologies used (see e.g., *Special Issue of Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 2006). However, even if we can assume that entrepreneurship is influenced by “exemplary research”, i.e., by those scholars who produce interesting research and attract others to build on their work (Aldrich and Baker, 1997), the field is not only shaped by those leading the cognitive development, but also by the social development of the field and the large number of scholars who read and cite the same literature, attend the same conferences, collaborate in joint projects, co-author articles and create social networks (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Cetina, 1999;

Whitley, 2000).

Very little is known about the social structure of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field. There may be different reasons for this lack of attention to the social aspects of entrepreneurship. One main reason is that entrepreneurship did not emerge as a scholarly field due to a mandate to understand the phenomenon “for its own sake” – in a Humboldt model of research – but as an issue of importance for society with great practical and political relevance (Audretsch, 2014). As a consequence, entrepreneurship attracted scholars from many different disciplines and became a highly multidisciplinary field, leading to a very fragmented scholarly community, which makes it difficult to identify a well-defined group of scholars interested in entrepreneurship.

When it comes to analysis of the social structure of scholarly fields, Jan Fagerberg and Bart Verspagen conducted a pioneering study entitled “Innovation studies – The emerging structure of a new scientific field”, published in *Research Policy* in 2009. In their study, they showed that innovation studies consist of a large number of (small) groups of interacting scholars and that these groups are brought together in several “cognitive communities” characterized by a specific combination of scholarly inspiration, meeting places and journals. The largest of these cognitive communities, the Schumpeter crowd, could be regarded as the core of innovation studies and the “mainstream” of the field. Fagerberg and Verspagen’s study (2009) is not only interesting as a pioneering study focusing on the social structure of scholarly fields.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Hans.Landstrom@fek.lu.se (H. Landström), Gouya.Harirchi@lbg.ac.at (G. Harirchi).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2018.01.013>

Received 2 March 2017; Received in revised form 14 January 2018; Accepted 15 January 2018
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Entrepreneurship and innovation studies are often regarded as tightly interlinked phenomena and necessary ingredients for creating growth and industrial renewal in society (Braunerhjelm et al., 2010). Thus, we can assume that entrepreneurship and innovation scholars are socially interlinked and collaborate in order to develop and disseminate knowledge on the dynamics of the economy. Therefore, it can be of interest to compare the social structure of entrepreneurship and innovation as scholarly fields.

Inspired by the Fagerberg and Verspagen (2009) study we explore the social structure of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field. We propose that the field of entrepreneurship is composed of a large number of individual scholars, united in broader scholarly communities by a common scientific outlook and a shared communication system. The aims of the study are (a) to explain how entrepreneurship scholars are becoming integrated into a larger community (and even creating a “discipline”), and (b) to compare the scholarly fields of entrepreneurship and innovation (based on the study by Fagerberg and Verspagen, 2009) and explain their similarities as well as the differences between them.

The article is structured as follows. In Section 2 we present a historical review of the evolution of entrepreneurship as a scientific field, followed in Section 3 by a literature review of social aspects of scholarly communities, which concludes with propositions that will be discussed in the rest of the article. Sections 4 and 5 present the survey of entrepreneurship scholars, where we will outline the methodology of the study and describe the community of entrepreneurship scholars. Our propositions are explored in Section 6 and compared with the scholarly community of innovation in Section 7. Finally, in Section 8 we draw conclusions and discuss the future development of the entrepreneurship field.

2. The evolution of entrepreneurship as a scientific field

Scientific knowledge has grown significantly in recent decades and many research fields have witnessed a huge increase in the number of scholars, conferences and published articles. Entrepreneurship is no exception and it could even be argued that compared with many other research fields, it has exhibited tremendous growth. In this section we will provide a historical review of the evolution of entrepreneurship. In our interpretation of the history of entrepreneurship we will use a model developed by Hambrick and Chen (2008), in which they argue that emerging research fields follow an institutionalization process including three overlapping phases: (1) differentiation of the field from existing fields, (2) resource mobilization to ensure a critical mass of scholars and control of the necessary resources, and (3) legitimacy building in the eyes of the academic establishment.

2.1. The roots of entrepreneurship studies

Although the function of entrepreneurship is as old as the existence of exchange and trade between individuals (Landström, 2005), it was not until the emergence of economic markets during the Middle Ages and the writing of Cantillon (1755/1999) that the concept gained interest among different authors. However, this initial discussion quickly came to a halt with the introduction of classical economic theory (Smith, 1776/1976), which laid the foundation for analysis of the way the market economy functions and resulted in the entrepreneur more or less disappearing from economic theory for a considerable period.

During the early twentieth century, entrepreneurship could be regarded as a fairly marginal topic in some mainstream disciplines such as economics, economic history, sociology and psychology (Landström and Benner, 2010). The development of our knowledge can mainly be attributed to individual scholars, of whom Joseph Schumpeter is probably the best known economist with an interest in entrepreneurship (Schumpeter, 1912, 1934), but also economists such as Knight (1921) and representatives of the Austrian School of Economics, for

example, Mises, Hayek and later Kirzner (1973). In the 1940s a number of scholars anchored in economic history (e.g., Landes, Gerschenkrone and Redlich) began to take an interest in entrepreneurship and subsequently scholars from psychology and sociology contributed to our knowledge on entrepreneurship, of whom McClelland (1961) is probably the best known.

2.2. The evolution of entrepreneurship studies

The marginalization of entrepreneurship in mainstream disciplines may be partly explained by the limited interest in society – economic development was associated with mass production, where large-scale systems and big corporations were seen as superior in terms of efficiency. However, in the 1970s and 1980s the societal context gradually changed in many Western societies, not least in the US (Carlsson et al., 2009), where a number of institutional reforms were introduced (e.g., the Bayh-Dole Act and a deregulation of financial institutions). In addition, several technological breakthroughs were emerging (e.g., DNA and the microprocessor), a globalization of the economy took place, two oil crises triggered uncertainty about large corporations’ ability to create jobs and dynamics in society, and not least, entrepreneurship and industrial dynamics evoked strong political interest from politicians such as Ronald Reagan in the US and Margaret Thatcher in the UK.

2.2.1. Differentiation

The changes in the economy triggered an interest among scholars from different fields who started to conduct studies related to entrepreneurship and small business, thus entrepreneurship gradually started the journey towards becoming a field in its own right. Many pioneering studies on entrepreneurship emerged that focused on (1) the discovery of this “new” phenomenon, for example, pioneering empirical contributions by Birch (1979) on job creation, Brusco (1982) on “industrial districts” and regional development in Italy, Acs and Audretsch (1990) on the innovative role of new and small businesses, and (2) scholarly contributions that differentiated entrepreneurship from mainstream disciplines, for example, scholars claimed that existing fields were ill-equipped to focus on the changes occurring in the economy (Baumol, 1968; Casson, 1982).

These early achievements provided an intellectual foundation for the incorporation of entrepreneurship and small business into different research projects, and many scholars from different fields (particularly various subfields of management studies) entered this promising field of research. These studies also contributed to the successful differentiation of the field from other disciplines – promoted by the media and by policy-makers’ view that a better understanding of entrepreneurship can help to solve various societal problems, by for example, creating new jobs, new companies and industries, as well as advancing regional development. As a consequence, legitimacy for entrepreneurship was anchored in “external” stakeholders (e.g., practitioners, policy-makers and politicians).

2.2.2. Mobilization

Mobilization is a major factor within emerging fields in order to attract a larger group of scholars and gain control over the resources needed for collective action (Hambrick and Chen, 2008). In the 1970s and 1980s, the research community was fairly fragmented and individualistic – the evolution of the field depended on individual initiatives. However, several initiatives were taken to stimulate communication between scholars in this fragmented and individualistic research community, for example, through the initiation of professional organizations (e.g., the Entrepreneurship Division of the Academy of Management, 1986, the European Council for Small Business, 1988), as well as the launch of academic conferences (e.g., the UK Small Firms’ Policy and Research Conference, 1979, the Babson College Entrepreneurship Conference, 1981, Research on Entrepreneurship Conference, 1986), and the launching of scientific journals (e.g.,

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