



International Entrepreneurship research (1989–2009): A domain ontology and thematic analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the domain of international entrepreneurship (IE) research by thematically mapping and assessing the intellectual territory of the field. Extant reviews show that the body of IE knowledge is growing, and while notable contributions towards theoretical and methodological integration are evident, the field is described as phenomenally based, potentially fragmented and suffering from theoretical paucity. Premising that IE is positioned at the nexus of internationalization and entrepreneurship where entrepreneurial behavior involves cross-border business activity, or is compared across countries, we identify 323 relevant journal articles published in the period 1989–2009. We inventory the domain of IE to provide a relevant and comprehensive organization of its research. This involves examining the subject matter of IE research, and inductively synthesizing and categorizing it into major themes and sub-themes. In so doing, we offer a reliable, ontologically constructed and practically useful resource. From this base, we discuss the phenomena, issues, inconsistencies and interim debates on which new theory in IE may be built and research may be conducted. We conclude that IE has several coherent thematic areas and is rich in potential for future research and theory development.

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1. Executive summary

This article responds to criticism that research in international entrepreneurship (IE) is fragmented, inconsistent and lacking in unifying paradigms and theory. We counter that such criticisms are often the result of efforts to evaluate a new scholarly domain by summarizing a field's theoretical elements (e.g. data, variables, constructs, hypotheses) in a de-contextualized manner. However, theoretical elements alone do not signify theory nor do they necessarily reveal evidence of theory development, particularly when they are divorced from the phenomena they represent. If it is accepted that the process of theory development is gradual and incremental, criticisms of IE are provocative but perhaps premature since as a domain, IE is little over two decades old. This suggests that an awareness of the inconsistencies, issues and nature of the phenomena under study, and the surrounding interim debates are fundamental to the development of theory and paradigmatic unity.

To support and advance theorizing in IE, the primary purpose of this article is to inventory and organize the subject matter of the domain to construct a repository of extant thought on which new theory and models may be built and incremental adjustments made. The review follows a fully systematic and replicable process involving the search, inductive thematic analysis and ontological organization of the literature. The scope of the review is 1989 to 2009 inclusive and commences with the definitive early paper by McDougall (1989) that distinguishes international from domestic new ventures. Search and exclusion criteria are

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drawn from field definitions (McDougall and Oviatt, 2000; Oviatt and McDougall, 2005), and the procedure follows best practice in management literature reviews. The thematic analysis of the literature and procedures for classification and organization are informed by approaches in qualitative research in psychology and ontology.

The resulting review consists of 323 articles classified into three major types of IE research: A) Entrepreneurial Internationalization, B) International Comparisons of Entrepreneurship and C) Comparative Entrepreneurial Internationalization. This typology was constructed by ontologically grouping and classifying fifty-one first-order themes that were derived from the reviewed articles. Type A research includes thematic areas in which the primary focus of each paper is concerned with: Venture Type, Internationalization, Networks and Social Capital, Organizational Issues and Entrepreneurship. Type B research has three main thematic areas consisting of Cross-Country and Cross-Cultural comparisons of entrepreneurship and studies which compare both. Type C research is the most recent to emerge and consists of studies that compare entrepreneurial internationalization across countries or cultures.

Our discussion is sequenced to follow the emergent structure of the domain of IE. For each major type of research and the thematic areas within, we identify and discuss important issues and inconsistencies, and identify observations, alternative arguments and debates relevant to future theoretical development. We also delineate research questions and opportunities for each of the three major types of research.

Overall, the review offers a number of contributions to current and future researchers in IE. These include: 1) replicable methodological protocols, 2) a thematic map providing a visual guide to the structure of the field, 3) a set of ontological tables for each of the three major types of IE research that detail theme descriptions, first- and second-order themes and major thematic areas together with a chronology of their emergence, and 4) a complete list of authors by thematic area and study year. We conclude that while the domain may have no unifying framework to date, our thematic map and ontology show that the domain is diverse but growing in coherence in several thematic areas. Rather than suffering from theoretical paucity, we contend that the intellectual territory of the domain presents rich potential with many clearly indicated avenues for theoretical development. Our intention for this article is to provide a preliminary structure and classification of the IE domain as a foundation for the future development of the field and a basis on which further debate and alternative views may build.

2. Background

After more than two decades of development, recent reviews have criticized research in international entrepreneurship (IE) as fragmented, inconsistent, lacking unifying paradigms, and hindered in development by its phenomenological basis (Keupp and Gassmann, 2009). Coombs et al. (2009: 31) suggest that "...a theoretical paucity summarizes the present state of research [in IE]". Both reviews argue that IE needs unifying theoretical and methodological frameworks and approaches. We suggest that calls for paradigmatic unification are often the result of efforts to evaluate a new scholarly domain against the normal science process of development as described by Kuhn (1996). Typically, such efforts summarize a field's theoretical elements (e.g. data, variables, constructs, hypotheses) in a de-contextualized manner. However, theoretical elements alone do not signify theory (Sutton and Staw, 1995) nor do they necessarily reveal evidence of theory development across a domain. We also believe that, when divorced from the phenomena they represent, such reviews may not provide compelling evidence of a field's consistency or coherency. Furthermore, we reason that reviews focused on the end-product (e.g. a unified paradigm or causal model) bypass the preliminary and interim processes of theorizing; processes described by Weick (1995: 389) as "...activities like abstracting, generalizing, relating, selecting, explaining, synthesizing and idealizing." In Weick's view, theorizing is as important as fully fledged theories, and it involves an incremental process. Consequently, while we do not refute assertions that the IE domain may be fragmented and lack unifying paradigms as the end-products of the normal science process, we counter that it is equally important to understand its phenomena, issues and inconsistencies, as these constitute interim debates in theorizing.

Since IE is a young field with a rapidly accumulating body of knowledge on complex phenomena, we see a need for a comprehensive review, synthesis and organization of its subject matter. This motivates our thematic analysis and inventory of the domain. Inventory reviews compile extant thought, track its development, and help to identify assumptions and misconceptions (LePine and Wilcox-King, 2010). For example, since authors may be inconsistent in naming the phenomena they study (Zahra et al., 1999), an inventory review can help identify and illuminate such inconsistencies for debate, and challenge scholars to address issues in different ways. Consequently, our aim is to construct a repository of extant thought on which new theory and models may be built and incremental adjustments made (Corley and Gioia, 2011; Weick, 1995), thus providing a utility to facilitate future theorizing.

Starting from the premise that the IE domain cannot be regarded as amorphous (Giamartino et al., 1993), our goal is to explicate and organize the subject matter. From this base, we discuss the phenomena, issues, inconsistencies and interim debates that characterize IE's development, and identify areas for future research. We conduct a systematic review that involves an inductive approach to theme identification and ontological organization. The resultant thematic map and domain ontology are constructed through a process of interpretation and representation in which the information we study remains contextualized (Saab and Fonseca, 2008). We take an ontological approach in an attempt to reach, and then share, a common understanding of the structure of the domain. This is done to underpin future analysis and theory building, and to facilitate the sharing and reuse of meaningful information (Chandrasekaran et al., 1999; Noy and McGuinness, 2001; Saab and Fonseca, 2008). We anticipate that our review will benefit extant researchers in IE and new entrants to the field.

We now present our method, including its scope and analytical procedures. This is followed by our results, including observations on the literature and areas for future investigation. This leads to a more general discussion and our conclusions regarding IE as a field.

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