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The emergence of entrepreneurship as an academic field: A personal essay on institutional entrepreneurship

Howard E. Aldrich*

Department of Sociology, Campus Box 3210, Hamilton Hall, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599 USA

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ABSTRACT

The academic field of entrepreneurship research has grown from groups of isolated scholars doing research on small businesses to an international community of departments, institutes, and foundations promoting research on new and high-growth firms. Growth has produced increasingly systematic and interconnected knowledge and growing numbers of knowledge producers and knowledge users share core concepts, principles, and research methods, and a handful of highly cited scholars have emerged as thought leaders within research subfields. The field is increasingly formalized and anchored in a small set of intellectual bases, although there are also some signs of differentiation and fragmentation. Using an institutional theory perspective and drawing upon my experience in the field, I explore six forces creating the institutional infrastructure. First, social networking mechanisms have created a social structure facilitating connections between researchers. Second, publication opportunities have increased dramatically. Third, training and mentoring has moved to a collective rather than individual apprenticeship model. Fourth, major foundations and many other smaller funding sources have changed the scale and scope of entrepreneurship research. Fifth, new mechanisms have emerged that recognize and reward individual scholarship, reinforcing the identity of entrepreneurship research as a field and attracting new scholars into it. Sixth, globalizing forces have affected all of these trends. I conclude with some thoughts about the consequences of these developments with regard to the giving of practical and timely advice to entrepreneurs, the effects of American hegemony on choices of research topics and methods, and the possible loss of theoretical eclecticism.

1. Introduction

Since the late 1970s, the academic field of entrepreneurship research has grown from groups of isolated scholars doing research on small businesses to an international community of departments, institutes, and foundations promoting research on new and high-growth firms. As documented in the paper by Landström et al. (2012), such growth has produced increasingly systematic and interconnected knowledge. Growing numbers of knowledge producers and knowledge users share core concepts, principles, and research methods, and a handful of highly cited scholars have emerged as thought leaders within research subfields (Reader and Watkins, 2006; Teixeira, 2011). Landström and his co-authors characterize the field as increasingly formalized and anchored in a small set of intellectual bases, although there are also some signs of differentiation and fragmentation (Landström et al., 2012).

How can we explain the evolution of this field? Landström and co-authors point to the role of individual scholars as entrepreneurs who have explored interesting new research opportunities, but systematic change on such a sweeping scale did not result solely from individual actions. In adding to their explanation, I would emphasize the significant role of institutions and institutional entrepreneurship as responsible for much of the observed change. By "institutions," I mean patterned behavior infused with meaning by normative systems and perpetuated by social exchanges facilitated by shared cognitive understandings (Greenwood et al., 2008). By "institutional entrepreneurship," I mean collective action by many people who jointly – via cooperation and competition – create conditions transforming institutions (Aldrich, 2010). Thus, I view the evolving system described by Landström and co-authors as an institution that has evolved within a context of institutional entrepreneurship involving collective action by countless numbers of scholars, groups, associations, organizations, and agencies.

The development of the entrepreneurship field has much in common with the more general process underlying the growth of scientific/intellectual movements (SIM), as described by Frickel and Gross (2005) and I will draw on some of their ideas throughout my essay. A SIM is a collective effort to pursue research programs and projects while overcoming resistance from others in the scientific/intellectual community. SIMs try to produce and distribute

* Tel.: +1 919 962 5044; fax: +1 919 962 7568.
E-mail address: Howard_Aldrich@UNC.edu

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knowledge, go beyond existing ways of approaching problems, and defeat opposition from others by taking organized collective action. They are embedded in specific historical circumstances and may attempt to alter the boundaries of existing scientific/intellectual fields.

Three "theoretical presuppositions" for the analysis of SIMs noted by Frickel and Gross (2005) are particularly relevant to the emergence of entrepreneurship as a field. First, the popularity of an idea rests not only on the extent to which it is scientifically valid, but also on social processes that institutionalize particular ways to pursue that idea. Thus, I will point out the specific organizations and actors involved in the growth of the field. Second, the ultimate shape of a SIM is contingent upon the historical circumstances within which it emerges. I will explicitly identify the eras in which specific activities occurred. Third, the wider cultural and political environment critically affects the emergence of a SIM. I will note the historical circumstances in the societies in which entrepreneurship emerged as a field.

My analysis focuses primarily on developments in the United States, but I will also refer to international developments to show that change was global, rather than occurring only in one nation. I focus on the social structure of the field, rather than its intellectual content. Intellectually, not only are there distinct subgroups but also evidence of trends toward narrower specialization over time (Reader and Watkins, 2006; Teixeira, 2011). I highlight the forces creating the institutional infrastructure that have created a set of research specialties, nested within a larger scholarly community, in which highly cited scholars at least recognize one another's names, although they may work closely only with a small subgroup. They may, in fact, disagree sharply with people who work in other subgroups.

I begin with a review of the paradox of scientific progress, noting the tension between science as a competition between individuals for scarce rewards versus science as a community of inter-subjectively shared understandings about how we gain valid and reliable knowledge about the world. I then identify six trends and the forces of institutional entrepreneurship that help explain them. I conclude with some thoughts about the consequences of these developments for the future of the entrepreneurship research community.

This is a personal essay, based upon observations and reflections regarding my participation in the development of this research community. Thus, as someone who was an active participant in many of the events I describe, I have an insider's knowledge. However, because my major affiliation throughout this era was with a sociology department, and not a business school, I believe I can cast a somewhat impartial eye on what occurred. I have been critical of theory and methods in entrepreneurship research on several occasions, especially with regard to the relative neglect of historical and comparative research and an overemphasis on studying that which can be quantified, and I have argued strongly for a more global perspective and for more ethnographic and process-oriented research. Throughout this essay, I will try to make my own views as clear as possible.

2. The paradox of scientific progress

Scientists gain recognition and prestige by virtue of their personal accomplishments, whereas scientific disciplines advance via collective action and collaborative work. Of course, as Merton (1968) noted, already well-known scholars benefit disproportionately when they publish with lesser known collaborators. Over the past century, institutional practices have emerged, across all disciplines, facilitating this process. Some practices are governance mechanisms that inhibit extreme egoism, whereas others are processes that facilitate the diffusion of knowledge and research collaboration. As I describe developments in the field of entrepreneurship, I will identify and explain other institutional mechanisms promoting change.

Campbell (1994) noted that a central dynamic in science is the "struggle for citations." Rather than competing for wealth and power, scientists compete for recognition from their peers. This competition could lead to extreme individualism, but personal interests are partially held in check because scientists must fit into a larger community of scholars, if for no other reason than to have their work replicated and validated. Moreover, the scale of modern scientific work is such that large projects are almost always carried out by teams, rather than solo scholars. Being published, winning awards, and obtaining grants depend upon peer reviews, which are embedded in a larger institutional structure to which individual scholars must adjust.

Landström and his co-authors found that the core scholars in entrepreneurship have made impressive careers and are heavily anchored in mainstream disciplines, mostly at American universities. These scholars have had long careers, during which they learned the shared cognitive understandings of their fields and were socialized into the field's normative system. Their description of the entrepreneurship research community depicts the field cohering around a core set of scholars, research themes, and supporting organizations, although there are important intellectual differences across subfields and many ongoing substantive controversies. Many of those differences stem from scholars' diverse disciplinary roots. For example, Landström and his co-authors identified a subgroup that could be characterized as focusing more on individual characteristics and entrepreneurship as a problem in decision-making, for which the Shane and Venkataraman (2000) article on opportunity recognition was a significant milestone. In contrast, many in the more sociologically oriented subgroup that includes me are interested in macro–level analysis and organizational theory and trace their roots to Stinchcombe's (1965) classic article.

Concomitantly, based on her analysis of more than 1000 articles published between 2005 and 2010, Teixeira (2011) noted that although entrepreneurship has emerged as a cohesive field, there are signs of "fragmentation and specialization, reflected in the emergence of a number of subject specialties, namely those related with family businesses and innovation, technology and policy." The papers in this special issue of *Research Policy* show the extent of differentiation between studies of innovation, science and technology studies, and entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, I believe that the overall coherence of the field has been made possible by processes of institutionalization, although they are far from complete.

3. Trends in scientific work over the past half-century

As an emerging scientific field, the growth of the knowledge base in entrepreneurship has been shaped by four general trends in the sciences, and they have set the context for the emergence of similar phenomena within entrepreneurship. First, the natural sciences have moved away from the old "cottage industry" style of solo academics conducting research in semi-isolation and have moved toward a team-based model. A study of team formation in several scientific disciplines during the 20th century noted a number of developments: teams became larger, standards became more universalistic, and team formation was strongly influenced by prestige (Guimerà et al., 2005). Teams became larger, in part, because the scale on which research was conducted was beyond the capabilities of solo investigators. Judgments of competence were increasingly based upon shared universalistic standards and the publicly visible consequences of research projects. Universalistic standards made it