The evolution of the small business and entrepreneurship field: A bibliometric investigation of articles published in the *International Small Business Journal**

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Abstract

This article analyses the evolution of the small business management and entrepreneurship fields as reflected in articles published in its premier journal, the *International Small Business Journal*. It investigates the evolution of the fields through bibliometric examination of all 660 articles published between 1982 and 2012. While small business management has remained the main focus of the journal, there has been a significant growth in the number of articles focusing specifically on entrepreneurship. Also identified in this analysis are the rise of theoretical studies and the relative decline of descriptive work. Parallel to a clear improvement in the rigour of the articles published, the field of small business and entrepreneurship has relied on a multidisciplinary foundation which offers a diverse and multifaceted engagement. Despite this increasing diversity, it appears that small business and entrepreneurship have unique characteristics that distinguish this field from the broader economics and or management discipline.

Keywords

bibliometric analysis, entrepreneurship, evolution, history, research field, small business

Introduction

Over the past 30 years the fields of small business management and entrepreneurship have emerged as major areas of academic enquiry (Landström et al., 2012). Since its launch in September 1982,

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the *International Small Business Journal* (ISBJ) has evolved along with the overall growth in these academic fields. Once a discipline has reached a certain maturity, it is common for scholars to conduct reviews of the literature in order to assess the general state of the art (Ramos-Rodriguez and Ruiz-Navarro, 2004). In the case of small business management, the study of its intellectual structure is of particular relevance because the field is still seeking its own identity (Katz, 2008). For example, whether small business management should be a specific field of study, or just a subset of the broader domain of management that recognises the unique challenges facing smaller organisations, has been actively debated (Curran, 2006; Torrès and Julien, 2005).

Research into entrepreneurship has faced similar issues and it has been characterised as a diverse field of enquiry that is fragmented and in ferment (Gartner, 2001; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Zachary and Mishra, 2011). Additionally, both fields of enquiry have permeable boundaries that frequently overlap with each other. They are also in constant dialogue with other disciplines such as economics, strategic management, psychology and sociology (Curran and Blackburn, 2001). Further, there has been criticism of the research foundations on which the closely related fields of entrepreneurship and small business management have been built. This has included concerns over methodology (Bouckennooghe et al., 2007; Mullen et al., 2009), definition and measurement (Shane, 2012), focus (Zachary and Mishra, 2011) and relevance to policy and practice (Gibb, 2000; Rosa, 2013).

This article contributes to this discussion by addressing the question: 'How has the field of small business management and entrepreneurship research evolved, as reflected in articles published in its premier journal, the ISBJ?' It investigates the evolution of the field through a bibliometric examination of articles published from 1982 until 2012 using the text analytic software Leximancer. This tool performs automatic content analysis to make two determinations: the most frequently used concepts within a body of text; and more importantly, the relationships between these concepts. The approach provides unbiased results by performing associational analysis of textual data in a language-independent manner (Liesch et al., 2011; Smith and Humphreys, 2006). This longitudinal analysis shows the evolution of the intellectual structure within the field of small business management by mapping the themes and trends encompassed in the articles published in the ISBJ.

Different views on small business management and entrepreneurship

Global interest in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurship as key drivers of economic development grew rapidly throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The employment-generating potential of the SME sector in the USA, demonstrated in the Birch Report (Birch, 1979), stimulated similar studies and interests throughout the world (European Commission, 1993). This has remained a dominant paradigm, despite evidence that the contribution of SMEs to employment growth can be overstated at times (Davis et al., 1996). More recently, the World Bank reiterated the contribution of entrepreneurship and the SME sector to total employment and job creation in using a unique database comprising 99 countries (Ayyagari et al., 2011). The authors found that small firms (in particular, firms with fewer than 100 employees) and mature firms (in particular, firms older than 10 years) have the largest shares of total employment and job creation. In addition, small firms and young firms have higher job creation rates than large and mature firms.

Small business management

Although SMEs are the most common form of business worldwide, researchers have had difficulty in satisfactorily defining them and establishing small business management as a specific academic discipline (D'Amboise and Muldowney, 1988; Storey, 1994; Torrès and Julien, 2005). As Welsh

and White (1981) suggested three decades ago, ‘a small business is not a little big business’ – often it is also a business that is managed in ways that are fundamentally different from a large corporation. Therefore, it is important to examine the definition of a small business in order to delineate the field of small business management. Moreover, This can have practical implications for policymaking in the small business sector (Headd and Saade, 2008).

There are essentially two broad ways in which to define a business. The first is to focus on the quantitative aspects of the business. These are objective parameters that are relatively easy to define and measure. Some common quantitative variables used to categorise and sort businesses include the number of staff that work in the firm, the annual turnover that the business generates and the assets that the business owns. Most countries use quantitative variables to define small business. For example, in the European Union, the category of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises is made up of enterprises which employ fewer than 250 people, and which have an annual turnover not exceeding €50m and/or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding €43m (European Commission, 2005).

The second is to look at some qualitative or intangible characteristics of the firm. This is a useful mechanism for understanding how a small business is organised, how it operates and who manages it on a day-to-day basis. During the last 30 years, a number of qualitative criteria have been suggested as the key defining features of a small firm. For example, Schaper et al. (2014) suggest that in a general sense, a business is characterised by the following features:

- 1 it is independently owned and operated;
- 2 the owners contribute most, if not all, of the operating capital;
- 3 the main decision-making functions rest with the owners; and
- 4 the business has a small market share.

Therefore, small businesses are much more than small-sized business units. For this reason, many scholars have sought to identify the distinctive features of small firms (Curran and Blackburn, 2001; Julien and Marchesnay, 1998; Mugler, 2005). Because research in the field of small business management is fragmented, D’Amboise and Muldowney recommended that scholars ‘look for relationships and strive for a more global view – a gestalt that encompasses task environment, organisational configuration and managerial characteristics for each unit that is empirically studied’ (1988: 237). Over the past decades this stream of research led to development of the ‘small business concept’, which provides an understanding of the basic ways in which small firms operate: i.e. independently, with limited resources and with one or two key individuals taking most of the responsibility, risk and rewards in the project. As a result, small enterprises are much less able to influence their economic and regulatory environment than large enterprises: ‘Instead, they are much more likely to be opportunistic than larger firms and adopt a “random walk” approach to management practice, survival and business development’ (Curran, 2006: 206).

Nevertheless, we recognise that no classification system will ever be complete enough to cover all types of small business. Every firm is unique in some way. In the same vein, Torrès and Julien (2005) questioned the idea that all small firms adopt a specific management method, with the result that management specificity becomes a universal principle. Instead, they suggested a contingency approach to small business managerial specificity that would allow for definition of a validity framework for the thesis of small business managerial practice. In his comment on Torrès and Julien’s (2005) article, Curran (2006) noted that boundary problems of distinguishing small businesses from their larger counterparts should not be exaggerated, because these problems neglect how the actual size distribution of enterprises in most economic analyses mitigates the problem.

Entrepreneurship

The field of entrepreneurship has been equally difficult to define because it is a multifaceted phenomenon that spans many disciplinary boundaries (Brush et al., 2003; Busenitz et al., 2003). As a result, entrepreneurship is a rather changeable field of research, closely linked to disciplines such as management studies and economics (Landström et al., 2012). The focus of research into this field has varied greatly. For example, it has focused on the entrepreneur, the social network of the entrepreneur, the creation of new ventures, the creation of new product or service offerings, and sometimes the framework conditions of a whole country have been examined (Schildt et al., 2006).

One of the main obstacles to building a generic definition of entrepreneurship stems from the fact that until the late 1990s, most researchers defined the field solely in terms of who the entrepreneur was and what they did (Bruyat and Julien, 2001). The problem with this approach is that entrepreneurship involves linking two conditions: the presence of viable opportunities, and the presence of enterprising individuals. This has been described as the 'individual–opportunity nexus' (Shane, 2003). However, by defining the field in terms of the individual alone, early research in entrepreneurship generated incomplete definitions that did not withstand scrutiny (Vankataraman, 1997).

Much of the debate over the definition of entrepreneurship revolves around the factors considered necessary for entrepreneurship to occur. For example, Shane and Vankataraman defined the field of entrepreneurship as 'the scholarly examination of how, by whom and with what effects opportunities to create future goods and services are discovered, evaluated and exploited' (2000: 218). Thus, they suggest that entrepreneurship involves the sources and processes of discovery, the evaluation and exploitation of opportunities, and the set of individuals who discover, evaluate and exploit these opportunities. Along these lines, Wickham (2004) identified five factors for entrepreneurship to take place:

- 1 an individual;
- 2 a market opportunity;
- 3 adequate resources;
- 4 a business organisation; and
- 5 a favourable environment.

These five factors are considered to be contingencies: something that must be present in the phenomenon but that can materialise in different ways. The entrepreneur is responsible for bringing these contingencies together to create new value.

A bibliometric analysis undertaken by Schildt et al. (2006) revealed that research in entrepreneurship remains highly fragmented, perhaps reflecting the 'pre-paradigmatic' stage of the field. In addition, research findings appear to be non-cumulative, evidenced by the limited citations of prior published works in the areas canvassed in their analyses. Nevertheless, as Shane recently remarked in relation to the development of the entrepreneurship domain:

While debate still remains in many areas and some areas have seen more advancements than others, the field appears to have moved toward a consensus around the core idea that entrepreneurship is a process that depends on both opportunities and individuals. (2012: 18)

Small business management and entrepreneurship: two complementary fields

As the preceding discussion suggests, the academic fields of small business management and entrepreneurship share some similarities; however, they are not synonymous. They serve different economic functions and fulfil the ambitions of their founders and managers in different ways.

Table 1. Key features of entrepreneurship and small business management.

	Entrepreneurship	Small business management
Definition of the field	The process whereby an individual discovers, evaluates and exploits a business opportunity	The administration of a small, independent business venture
Firm size	Small, medium or large	Small to medium
Economic sector	Private, public or not-for-profit	Primarily private
Potential for growth	Significant; targets a large, global market	Limited; targets a local or regional market
Innovation	Significant; usually based on a new product, a new way of producing it or a new business model	Limited. Although a small business might be new to a locality, it usually delivers an established product or service
Key individual and strategic objectives	The entrepreneur: an individual who established and manages a business for the principal purpose of profit and growth	The small business owner-manager: an individual who manages a business for the principal purpose of furthering personal goals

Source: Adapted from Schaper et al. (2014: 96)

Carland et al. (1984) suggested that entrepreneurial ventures may be distinguished from small businesses on the basis of their growth potential, the level of innovation on which the ventures are founded and the strategic objectives of the individuals behind these ventures. As shown in Table 1, entrepreneurship is mainly about the creation and growth of a business venture, whereas small business management covers the daily management of a small firm.

However, the distinction between the two fields is not clear cut. Not all entrepreneurial ventures will necessarily show an obvious innovation, high growth potential or well-formulated strategic objectives. Many small businesses may exhibit such characteristics. In addition, many entrepreneurs start by creating a small firm that subsequently grows into a larger enterprise. Both entrepreneurs and small business owner-managers are required to be familiar with many of the same business concepts and to possess similar technical skills.

Although the vast majority of firms will never become high-growth companies or 'gazelles', the word 'entrepreneurship' has become more popular than 'small to medium enterprise' or 'small business' among many academics and policymakers. This is particularly the case since the 1990s. According to Gibb (1996), one possible reason is that the former sounds more attractive, and is more in keeping with image of business schools linked traditionally with the corporate world. Another, perhaps more intellectually appealing reason is that entrepreneurship is seen to extend beyond the routine operations of the small business owner-manager. Indeed, the entrepreneur may exist in all types and sizes of private, public and not-for-profit organisation. Gibb (2000) also noted that there were too many myths surrounding the fields of entrepreneurship and small business management that were leading to confusion and ignorance. They were perpetuated in the 'expanding mass of literature' and risked confusing government policies relating to these areas.

Method

Data collection

This study assembled all articles published in the ISBJ from the first edition in September 1982 to the December 2012 edition (volume 30, issue 8): a total of 140 editions. Excluded from

Table 2. Classification schemes for epistemological orientation of articles.

Orientation	Major focus
Theoretical/ conceptual	Developing propositions, hypotheses, or (cor)relations between theoretical constructs, based on a discussion of state-of-the-art literature; no new empirical material has been collected for this work
Theoretical/ exploratory	Developing propositions, hypotheses and (cor)relations between theoretical constructs, based on the examination of extensive, new empirical data
Theoretical/ predictive	Testing (refutation, confirmation) of propositions, hypotheses or (cor)relations between theoretical constructs, based on the examination of extensive, new empirical data
Prescriptive	Providing prescription (means, ideas, recipes for action) to practitioners that are instrumental in the realisation of some desired end, such as improved performance along some dimension
Descriptive	Reporting fact or opinion; no or limited intention of a theoretical or prescriptive contribution. Typically, descriptive articles do not encompass any hypothesis testing or proposition formulation

Source: Adapted from De Bakker et al. (2005: 294)

the analysis were compilations such as book reviews and editorials, in order to retain a focus on articles and research notes reflecting the emergence, maintenance and discontinuation of major themes in small business research. This provided a total population of 660 articles. The following information was compiled for each article: author(s), article title, geographic focus of the study, abstract, keywords, publication date, volume and issue. Each article was coded according to its epistemological orientation (i.e. conceptual, exploratory, predictive, prescriptive or descriptive) using De Bakker et al.'s (2005) classification scheme. This scheme was selected because it offers a systematic and parsimonious way to examine the epistemological evolution of the academic fields of entrepreneurship and small business management.

As shown in Table 2, this classification system suggests that articles can have, at the general level, either a theoretical, prescriptive or descriptive orientation: 'Papers make a theoretical contribution if they enhance the systematic understanding of some phenomenon at an abstract level' (De Bakker et al., 2005: 294). A further distinction is possible and useful for the theoretical orientation. First, it should be noted that a theoretical contribution may or may not involve collection of new empirical data. During the theory development process, logic replaces data as the basis for evaluation (Whetten, 1989: 492). Thus, conceptual articles do not rely on empirical data and typically aim to advance theory or the theory development process. Second, theoretical articles can be classified as predictive if they make use of data to confirm or refute hypotheses. Exploratory articles are the third possible type of theoretically-oriented submissions. They typically develop expectations about relationships between constructs. Articles make a prescriptive contribution if they provide means, ideas and recipes for action to practitioners about how to realise some desired end. Finally, descriptive articles aim to report data or opinion, as these might be interesting in themselves without the author making a noticeable attempt to contribute either to theory or practice.

In order to ensure consistency, the authors provided a third independent researcher with the data and classification system and requested them to code each article. The two authors then independently undertook the same coding process, compared notes and discussed discrepancies until they reached consensus over final classification of the data.

Data analysis

The statistical software package SPSS was used to examine the overall descriptive statistics relating to the articles. This required coding the articles using the categories outlined above. Then Leximancer software (see Version 4 manual at www.leximancer.com) was used to perform a content analysis. Leximancer is text mining software which can analyse the content of collections of textual documents and visually display the extracted information. This software helps identify, in a grounded fashion, what the main concepts are in a corpus and how they relate to each other. Content analysis can be done either as conceptual (thematic) analysis or relational (semantic) analysis. Leximancer does both, identifying concepts in the corpus and how they interrelate. Leximancer uses word frequency and co-occurrence counts as its basic data (Smith and Humphreys, 2006).

The Leximancer software applies empirically validated mathematical algorithms to examine the text and generate 'concept maps'. Within this software a 'concept' is a collection of words that are found together in the text and are associated with each other. Leximancer not only identifies how frequently these words occur, but it also tags them as containing a concept if sufficient accumulated evidence is found to suggest that they represent a distinct concept. Terms found in the text are weighted so that the presence of each word in a sentence contributes to the body of evidence to support the existence of a concept. Sentences or groups of sentences are tagged as containing a concept only if there is sufficient accumulated evidence above a given threshold. Once the final number of concepts is found, Leximancer generates a concept map. This displays the concepts as a set of clusters or 'themes' containing concepts that are associated with each other within the same pieces of text. The map output offers colour coding to show the relative importance or 'hottest' themes, as determined by the frequency of each concept contained within them.

Use of Leximancer in bibliometric analysis

Within the field of management the use of bibliometric analysis has grown, with increasing use of complex methodologies. This also has involved the analysis of journals. For example, Nag et al. (2007) examined the development of the field of strategic management through a two-stage analysis of *Strategic Management Journal* and other leading journals in the field. Their approach used computer-aided text analysis and logistic regression, and also involved a panel of academic scholars who helped to define the field of strategic management. De Bakker et al. (2005) used the text analytic Automap software to undertake their analysis of the 30-year history of the field of corporate social responsibility and corporate social performance. Landström et al. (2012) drew data from online bibliographic databases and a variety of analysis techniques, including use of Bibexcel software. Finally, Shafique (2013) conducted a bibliometric analysis of the innovation research literature, employing multidimensional scaling and principle component analysis techniques.

Cummings and Daellenbach (2009) and Liesch et al. (2011) used Leximancer to examine respectively the 40-year history of the journal *Long Range Planning* and the evolution of the international business field via the *Journal of International Business Studies*. The present analysis followed a similar approach, but was informed by the other studies cited above. All abstracts from the articles were extracted and placed into Microsoft Word documents. In the case of some of the earlier editions of the ISBJ, no abstract was provided, so this had to be constructed from a review of the article. Analysis of the data using Leximancer was undertaken in four stages. In the first stage all articles across the entire 30-year period were examined together to provide an overall picture of the journal. This allowed for examination of the data and review of the range of concepts found. Subsequent stages examined each of the three periods containing broadly a decade of publications.

Results

This section comprises two parts. The first part provides an overview of the three decades outlining keyword frequencies, the geographical focus of the articles and their epistemological orientation. The second part uses the abstracts as text inputs to perform an automated content analysis with Leximancer over three decades: the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Shown here are the concept maps that offer an overview of the main themes and concepts that emerged from the analysis. The concepts displayed in these maps represent a merging of particular words (e.g. networks, social networks, networking) into single concepts, providing a holistic overview of the main concepts and how they are related. Repeating the analysis for different timeframes allowed the study to see how the key concepts and maps changed over time.

Three decades in overview

After the first issue publication with five articles in September 1982, it became evident that the ISBJ was able to establish a foothold quickly in the market place, publishing about 20 articles and research notes per year on average in four issues. This publication frequency remained fairly stable from 1983 until 2004, when two additional annual issues were published, taking the total number of articles published to 30 per year. In 2012, the latest year under consideration for this analysis, a total of 41 articles and research notes were published. In order to provide an overview of the topics tackled in the ISBJ, an analysis of keyword frequency of the articles was completed, taking into account the keywords ‘small business’, ‘entrepreneurship’, ‘family business’ and ‘franchising’. These keywords were mutually exclusive in the database used within this study.

As a specialist small business journal, it could be expected that the ISBJ would focus on small business management and related topics. As illustrated in Figure 1, the examination of the keywords found that while small business remained a dominant area of focus over the past three decades, the fields of entrepreneurship, family business and franchising had begun to emerge. In particular the separate but related field of entrepreneurship has grown significantly. This is reflective of a wider trend in the field of entrepreneurship and small business management that has seen small business research diminish relative to the broader and more theoretical field of entrepreneurship.

It is worth noting that a minority of authors seem to have to use the terms ‘entrepreneur’ and ‘owner-manager’ interchangeably. For example, Verheul et al. (2002) aimed to investigate the existence of gender differences in entrepreneurship by taking male and female real estate brokers as a unit of analysis. In their article titled ‘Broadening the entrepreneurial perspective’, Mottiar and Ingle (2007) interviewed the owner-managers of small wooden furniture businesses with no evident innovation or growth attributes. Similarly, the adjective ‘entrepreneurial’ has been used at times as a fashionable way to position an article without delving into entrepreneurship or considering entrepreneurs as the present study defines them. For example, in a research note on ‘entrepreneurial networks’ Drakopoulou Dodd et al. (2002) reported findings from a study into the ‘personal contact networks of Scottish entrepreneurs’, but effectively drew on a sample of owner-managers in established small businesses.

A more in-depth analysis of the keywords was conducted, retaining one keyword per article which captured its overall focus or essence. This process involved examining the keywords, the article title and a review of its abstract. The initial classification was undertaken by three independent assessors. As shown in Table 3, this analysis revealed that initially the majority of small business-related articles were dealing with policy issues (23), human resources (HR) management (17), technology/information and communication technology (ICT) (17) and internationalisation (11).

Figure 1. Articles published by keyword topic.

Table 3. Overview of main topics based on keywords (no. of articles).

Topic	1982–1992	1993–2002	2003–2012
Small business	135	148	160
Policy	23	10	9
HR	17	16	11
Technology/ICT	17	7	15
Failure/churning	13	9	5
Internationalisation	11	12	14
Financing	7	9	19
Management/leadership	7	10	10
Strategy	7	21	18
Networks	3	7	12
Assistance/consultancy	6	10	8
Growth	4	4	14
Entrepreneurship	53	27	93
Entrepreneur's person	13	3	13
Self-employment	10	5	3
Start-up process	5	2	16
Assistance/policy	5	2	3
Financing	5	7	4
Economic development	5	1	1
Ethnic issues	5	0	5
Gender issues	3	1	5
Networks	1	2	12
Theory/methods	0	2	8
Franchising	2	15	7
Organisation	2	5	3
Performance	0	5	2
Family business	0	4	14
Succession	0	3	7

Note: One main keyword per article. Only the main categories of keywords are listed.

Figure 2. Geographic focus of the articles.

In the latest decade under observation, articles on financing (19) and strategy (18) took centre stage, while the number of articles on technology/ICT (17) and internationalisation (14) remained stable.

In the field of entrepreneurship, the number of articles dealing with various aspects of the entrepreneur as a person (e.g. characteristics, traits, motivation and behaviour) remained relatively stable (13), despite a drop in the 1990s (only three articles in this decade). In the 1980s a substantial number of articles dealt with self-employment (10), taking a labour market perspective and drawing on government statistics. This strand of research has almost disappeared in the past decade, while issues around the start-up process (16) plus networks and social capital (12) have become more prominent. The topics of organisation and performance clearly were dominant in the field of franchising. Most of the articles published in the new field of family business addressed succession issues.

ISBJ positions itself as an international small business publication, and this study's examination of the geographical focus of the articles published suggests that this is largely the case. As shown in Figure 2, it can be seen that Europe was the area from which the studies were most commonly drawn. This reflects the international nature of the journal and its location within the European Union rather than North America. Despite this, the number of articles from Australasia (e.g. Australia and New Zealand) has been substantial, along with articles from North America (e.g. Canada and the USA). However, although the ISBJ has a good cross-section of articles from around the world, it is still a largely European-centric journal.

In relation to methodology, the most common across all time periods was quantitative. However, the frequency of qualitative and mixed method approaches has grown. For example, in the period 1982–1992, 81 percent of all articles published were quantitative in nature, 18 percent were qualitative and 1 percent were mixed method. During the period 1993–2002, 68 percent of the articles were quantitative, 30 percent qualitative and 3 percent mixed method. In the period 2003–2012, 63 percent of all articles were quantitative, 29 percent qualitative and 7 percent mixed method.

Figure 3. Epistemological orientation of the articles.

Epistemological orientation

It can be seen from Figure 3 that much of the work published in the ISBJ in the first 20 years was descriptive in nature, as defined by De Bakker et al. (2005). This type of article typically focused on reporting fact or opinion, with little or no intention to offer a theoretical or prescriptive contribution. Although most of these articles would make reference to past studies in the field under consideration, no hypotheses were proposed or tested, and no propositions were formulated to make a contribution to the field from a theoretical perspective. However, this has changed in the past decade, with a major growth in the number of articles of a predictive nature, and a significant increase in exploratory articles. As noted above, the major focus of predictive articles is the testing of hypotheses or propositions using extensive empirical data. By comparison, the exploratory article is one that seeks to develop propositions and hypotheses using empirical data.

Altogether, this suggests a trend within the ISBJ towards more theoretically focused studies targeted at the development of the small business and entrepreneurship field as an academic discipline. This is in keeping with many other leading journals in the field of small business and entrepreneurship (Martinez et al., 2011; Rosa, 2013).

It is also noteworthy that only 12 articles were of a prescriptive nature, seeking to provide specific guidance to scholars or practitioners in order to improve performance. Linton and Walsh (2008) is one of the very rare prescriptive articles that offered guidance to business practitioners: specifically, a method to improve the opportunity recognition process. More commonly, prescriptive articles offered guidance to policymakers. Examples of this were Nooteboom (1983), who provided advice about trading hours in retailing, or Meredith (1984), who made a case about redirecting management education and training resources in the Australian context. Less frequently, prescriptive articles offered guidance to scholars. For example, Blackburn and Stokes (2000) developed a method for running effective focus groups to investigate business owners.

Key concepts over the entire 30-year period 1982–2012

The Leximancer analysis of all the ISBJ abstracts over the entire period from 1982–2012 generated a concept map displaying the concepts as a set of clusters or ‘themes’ containing concepts that are

Figure 4. Articles concept map, 1982–2012.

associated with each other within the same pieces of text. As shown in Figure 4, a dozen themes emerged. Each theme has been labelled in bold within the cluster. The size of the cluster denotes the number of concepts found within it, and the importance of the theme is displayed with the use of shading—darker levels suggest increasing levels of importance (as measured by the quantity of text references). Thematic clusters that overlap or are located together reflect close associations between the concepts that they contain. Dotted lines are provided between the concept descriptors (shown in *italics*), showing the associations generated by Leximancer.

Over the entire 30-year period, the most important themes emerging from the ISBJ were ‘companies, firms and enterprises’, ‘technology’, ‘development’ and ‘business’. It can be seen that the theme ‘companies, firms and enterprises’ was the most important over the three decades. This theme includes the concept of *firms*, which was associated with the concepts: *medium-sized companies*, *size*, *technology*, *innovation* and *performance*. This confirms the prevalence of small business (or firms) as a focal point in ISBJ history.

The theme 'technology' comprised concepts relating to the growth of firms and the application of innovation to achieve this growth. The 'technology' theme was closely associated with a lesser theme, 'industry', that dealt with specific industry sectors and the impact of technology and growth within them. This reflects the importance of various technologies (e.g. computer-integrated manufacturing, information systems, electronic communication, internet), which have been key drivers for innovation and growth in SMEs.

The theme 'development' contained concepts relating to the impact of small business on economic development within countries, and their importance to national economies. Also encompassed within this theme were concepts of *training* and *work*. The final most important theme was 'business', which contained concepts relating to *business activities* and their relationship with *entrepreneurship*. This theme was associated with the theme 'development' via the way in which business activities have been a key driver in economic development. It also was associated with the lesser themes of 'entrepreneurs' and 'venture'. The first of these relates to the entrepreneurial venture and its specific role within business. The second relates to entrepreneurs and their social capital building. The minor theme of 'support' was related to these two lesser themes, and contained the concepts of *capital* and how *support* for small business, entrepreneurs and start-ups enhances *success*.

The other lesser themes found in the overall concept mapping were 'management', 'use' and 'information'. The first of these contains the concept of *management*, which deals with the work of managers within small firms and was associated with the concept of *market*. This relates to the engagement of small firms and entrepreneurs within markets across a wide range of issues. The theme 'use' contains concepts relating to the managerial *process* and *knowledge*, *firm performance* and the role of *family* within business. The theme 'information' relates to management information.

The first decade: 1982–1992

There were 190 papers published in the journal during the period 1982–1992. As shown in Figure 5, 11 themes emerged from the Leximancer analysis. Again, the first and most important theme was 'companies, firms and enterprises'. The specific concepts within this theme were *size* and *manufacturing*, which suggest the dominance of studies focusing on small firms, and the sectorial approach taken in studying them. This dominant theme was associated with the minor theme 'significant', which related to the significance of findings within the data (e.g. 'The most significant finding...'). The second most important theme during this period was 'business', which comprised concepts associated with *work* and *training*, and the important role played by small firms and entrepreneurial enterprises in economic development. Also included in this theme were the concepts of *education* and *training*. This theme captures the many articles focusing on job generation and self-employment, which often have been seen as a catalyst for economic development. Along these lines, education and training were important variables considered to explain or increase self-employment and, more broadly, business activities.

Minor themes associated with the major theme 'business' were 'role' (e.g. the role of small business in the development of networks), 'retail' (e.g. small retailers), 'entrepreneurs' and 'needs'. This last theme comprised the concepts *support* (e.g. financial decision support for small firms), *system* (e.g. franchise system, expert system) and *needs* (e.g. capital needs, training needs).

Associated with the theme 'companies, firms and enterprises' were the themes of 'development', 'industry' and 'process'. The first of these is a dominant theme focusing on the concepts of *technology*, *market*, *management* and *management problems*, *entrepreneurship* and *use*. It can be seen that *use* was associated with the concept of *process*, and the minor theme 'process'

Figure 5. Articles concept map, 1982–1992.

also contained the concept of *information* as it relates to managerial and market *information*. This concept in turn links to the theme ‘export’, which comprises the concepts relating to how small firms engage in export markets. The theme ‘development’ also was associated with the theme

'business', linked via the concepts *entrepreneurship* and *work*. In addition, associated with the theme 'development' was the theme of 'industry', which comprised concepts relating to sectorial growth in industries and the creation of jobs and employment across different countries. These were dominant themes in the field of small business management in the 1980s.

Finally, the theme 'industry' included the concepts *sector* and *growth*, which in turn linked to the concepts *employment* and *countries*, which was linked to the concept *job* reflecting research relating to jobs. The theme outlines the industry perspective or sectorial approach often taken to study small firms and their impact on growth and job creation during this period.

The second decade: 1993–2002

There were 194 papers published in ISBJ during the second period, 1993–2002. As depicted in Figure 6, nine themes emerged for this period, of which the two most important were: 'companies, firms and enterprises' and 'management'. This confirms that small firms continued to take centre stage during this period. The theme 'companies, firms and enterprises' comprised similar concepts to that found in the 1980s period; however, there was a change in the inclusion of concepts relating to *data*, *sampling* and *evidence*, which reflect the emergence of more predictive and exploratory articles during this period. Associated with this theme was a minor one labelled 'relationship', which relates to the association between variables and other units of analysis explored in these studies.

The second most important theme within this period was 'management', which comprised concepts relating to support for small firms, the economic conditions under which these firms are managed, their performance and problems. Closely associated with this theme were those of 'growth' and 'enterprise'. The former encompassed concepts associated with the impact of management practice on firm growth, the development of conceptual models designed to explain or forecast growth of the firm, and the key factors likely to play a key role in offering potential to influence outcomes. The theme 'enterprise' contained concepts associated with the characteristics of entrepreneurial small business owners and their enterprises and was associated subsequently with the minor theme 'business', which contains concepts relating to small business development.

The theme 'business' was also associated with the third major theme labelled 'used', which encompassed concepts relating to the selection and development of markets by small firms, plus the future strategies that such firms might use to achieve a greater market share, overcome problems or secure major capital resources. The theme 'growth' was associated with the minor theme 'technology', which related to the concept of technology-based firms and their growth potential. The minor theme 'entrepreneurs' also emerged in this period, with the concept of venture as a mechanism for their behaviour.

The third decade: 2003–2012

In the third period from 2003–2012, 276 papers were published in the ISBJ. As shown in Figure 7, 11 themes emerged with a greater number of concepts and a higher level of complexity in the associations between them. Once again, the most important was 'companies, firms and enterprises', with concepts relating to *data*, *sampling* and *evidence* also playing prominent roles. Closely associated with this were the major themes of 'activities' and 'development', plus minor themes of 'family', 'relationship' and 'performance'.

The rise of entrepreneurship as a field of focus during this period is shown also in the importance of the theme 'entrepreneurial', containing concepts relating to entrepreneurs, their use of

Figure 6. Articles concept map, 1993–2002.

knowledge learned from activities, entrepreneurial ventures, venture capital and the social capital needed to launch a business venture. ‘Entrepreneurial’ was linked to four other themes: ‘model’ via the concept of *literature*, ‘entrepreneurship’, ‘role’ and ‘activities’. Since ‘model’ encompasses various concepts such as *literature*, *approach* and *empirical*, this suggests an increasing attention given to theoretical and methodological anchors in entrepreneurship articles.

The related theme ‘entrepreneurship’ reflects a distinction found within the literature of the theoretical concept of entrepreneurship, and the more concrete activities of *entrepreneurs* found in the concept *entrepreneurial*. This relates to the theme ‘role’, which comprises the concepts *role* (e.g. the role of SMEs) and *key* (e.g. key issues, key relationships, key questions). The latter theme is associated with the concept *important*, which is concerned with the importance of various factors likely to influence the business.

Discussion

An examination of the three time periods suggests that the dominant theme within the ISBJ over the past 30 years has been that of ‘companies, firms and enterprises’, which is to be expected in a journal focusing on small business. In the 1980s, the journal’s focus was predominately on business development and the role that small firms, particularly manufacturing firms, might play in boosting employment and the growth of industry sectors. In addition, there was a strong focus on business and education and training, with attention given to identifying the needs of SMEs, their system and support requirements. Moreover, processes able to help facilitate the management development of small firms and the information required to assist them in areas such as exporting were a key area of focus. In this period most of the articles published in the ISBJ were descriptive in nature, seeking to offer guidance to practitioners and professionals through the use of research.

During the 1990s the focus of the ISBJ began to change. Although the theme ‘companies, firms and enterprises’ continued to be of importance, greater attention was given to data, sampling and evidence, reflecting the increasing trend towards more predictive and exploratory articles. During this period, the management of small firms and the use of strategic and market assessments to achieve growth were the principle areas of focus. Also emerging was the role of technology, as well as the nexus between the entrepreneurial characteristics of small business owners and their management performance and business development.

Finally, during the 2000s, the overall complexity of the interrelationships between the concepts examined in the journal has increased. The ISBJ continued to focus primarily on the core theme of ‘companies, firms and enterprises’. However, there were increasing discussions about the activities needed to improve SME performance and development, with specific attention being given to innovation as a performance enhancer. These activities also involved the application of technology and the broader understanding and impact that such activities could have on economic development and growth. In addition, there was a more detailed approach towards entrepreneurial activities and the related models and roles underpinning these activities within established businesses.

This study’s examination of the keywords from articles published in the period 1982–1992 within the small business field found that the most common areas of interest were policy, HR, ICT, small business failure, churning and internationalisation. During 1993–2002 the focus in the small business management field shifted to strategy, with HR still in second place followed by internationalisation. Then from 2003–2012 the main areas of focus were financing, strategy, ICT, internationalisation and growth. Overall, the most noticeable area of decline has been the small business policy field, which has diminished steadily in terms of the total number of articles published. This reflects a shift away from policy and practice in ISBJ toward more empirical and theoretical work – a trend also found in other journals in the field (Rosa, 2013).

For articles focusing on entrepreneurship, the person of the entrepreneur remained the most common topic over the 30-year period. However, a noticeable shift of focus from the characteristics of the entrepreneur prevailed in the late 1980s (e.g. Stanworth et al., 1989) toward behavioural and process-related aspects (e.g. Westhead et al., 2009). Other common research topics in entrepreneurship included activities related to new business start-up, self-employment issues and business venture financing. All of these are common trends within the entrepreneurship field. For example, Landström et al. (2012) remark that much research into entrepreneurship since the 1980s has tried to illuminate the decision to become self-employed, and to understand the set of activities involved in the creation of new organisations.

In relation to the other sub-fields of family business and franchising, only a relatively small number of articles have emerged within the journal in the past three decades. In family business, there

were 18 papers recorded, of which four were published from 1993–2002, and 14 from 2003–2012. Most of these articles (55%) were focused on succession planning. Within the field of franchising there were 24 articles published in ISBJ. Two articles were published in 1982–1992, 15 during 1993–2002 and seven in 2003–2012. Of these articles, 42 percent focused on the organisation of franchising businesses, while 29 percent dealt with the performance of franchise businesses.

Conclusion

To sum up, the findings from this study suggest that while the main focus of the ISBJ has remained small business management, there has been a significant growth in the number of articles focusing specifically on entrepreneurship. Also identified in this analysis are the rise of theoretical studies and the decline of descriptive work, plus the relative absence of prescriptive articles targeted at the more applied end-user. Despite a clear improvement in the rigour of the articles published in ISBJ, it appears that development of the fields of small business and entrepreneurship as distinct academic domains remains a work in progress, and the two fields continue to be somewhat fragmented.

Although this study has only examined one journal, vigorous debates have emerged recently about the specific nature of entrepreneurship in mainstream journals, and recognition of the field as a distinct domain (e.g. Gartner, 2013; Shane, 2012; Venkataraman et al., 2012). Despite considerable progress over the past 30 years, the field of entrepreneurship has yet to stand as a unique domain and ‘to generate theories that explain things in other disciplines that scholars in those disciplines have not done previously’ (Alvarez and Barney, 2013: 156). Interestingly, similar debates have been largely absent in the field of small business management, which is characterised by even more fragmentation. This is illustrated by the predominance of descriptive articles in the 1980s and 1990s and the variety of topics researched. However, Grant and Perren (2002) have suggested that despite this diversity, which stems in part from the adaptation of external theoretical frameworks, the field of small business is dominated by a functionalist paradigm that pervades the elite discourse of research in leading journals. Functionalists typically take an objective view of reality, and are concerned with explaining how organisations and society maintain order.

The relative absence of prescriptive work and articles focused on policy issues within ISBJ may be indicative of what Miller (2007) describes as the ‘straitjacket’ that many top-tier journals place on authors, as they seek to cover topics that fit neatly within contemporary paradigms relating to popular theories and their development. According to Miller et al., academic careers demand publication in ‘A journals’, which ‘are increasingly placing straitjackets around the kind of research that will be published’ and such journals insist on ‘an explicit theoretical contribution’ (2009: 278). This was an issue raised by Corley and Giola, who noted these observations and a critical comment from one of their reviewers who stated: ‘Your narrative at times sounded like a practitioner rendition’ (2011: 29). While the present study’s data did not enable confirmation as to whether the ISBJ is guilty of imposing ‘straitjackets’ on its authors, the lack of policy and practice content in the leading entrepreneurship journals has been noted by others. For example, Rosa (2013) even suggested that the word ‘practice’ be removed from the title of the journal *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* due to the lack of practical or policy-related work, and the dominance of a quest for theoretical studies. It is important that researchers continue to build the foundations of theory and measurement within the small business and entrepreneurship domains – however, they should not do so at the expense of applications to policy and practice. To do so would risk the loss of relevance to actual business management.

We suggest several avenues to advance the field. First, instead of trying to build grand theories for small business and entrepreneurship, researchers could draw on a framework based on wisdom

rather than knowledge alone in order to develop strategic options for paradigm development in the field. For example, Watkins-Mathys and Lowe (2005) proposed a conceptual triad that is based on three interdependent criteria: 'process', 'pattern' and 'structure'. All three of these criteria are interdependent and necessary for understanding complex, living systems. In order to be relevant for small business, research in the field needs to examine the process of how such firms are managed, and whether there is evidence that their 'task environment' and approach to management is significantly different from that of larger firms (D'Amboise and Muldowney, 1988). In the same vein, Venkataraman et al. (2012) suggested the adoption of an 'entrepreneurial method' in order to move away from over-reliance on heroic individuals or faceless, economic and technological forces to explain entrepreneurship. Such an approach would allow small business and entrepreneurship scholars to draw on multiple epistemological and ontological perspectives without being trapped or bounded by a particular school of thought. To date, this 'entrepreneurial method' remains in its infancy, and has focused primarily on the process of entrepreneurial start-up and taken a conceptual or theoretical focus. Along these lines, Sarasvathy and Venkataraman have argued for entrepreneurship to be viewed as 'a large social force' rather than a 'sub-discipline of economics or management' (2011: 114).

Second, despite the growing interest in entrepreneurship-related issues, we would like to encourage scholars and policymakers alike to maintain small business as a key focus in future research. While there is no doubt that entrepreneurs play a crucial role in economic development, the majority of new business ventures will never become 'gazelles', and the individuals behind them do not seek to emulate Bill Gates or Richard Branson. Accordingly, as Watson remarked: 'However strong the need for entrepreneurialism, innovation, creative flair, there is going to be no less a need for skills of competent management' (1995: 44). Crucially, this will require scholars to increase their effort to develop a 'small business perspective' (instead of pursuing an elusive 'small business theory'). If the ambition is to provide knowledge in, rather than about, small business, then scholars have to go beyond drawing on a sample of SMEs to brand their research as 'small business'. By its nature small business management is an applied field, and the managerial methods developed for large firms do not necessarily apply to their operation. Therefore, there is a need to adjust the tools and theories borrowed from other fields and, most importantly, a need to develop hypotheses, interpret results and formulate recommendations from the perspective of small firms. To achieve these goals, scholars need to grasp the idiosyncrasies of small business, including size, the resources at hand, communication style, ownership structure and corporate governance, and to combine rigour with relevance.

This study has a number of limitations. While we feel that the analysis presented here has followed a robust method, the large number of articles published in the last 30 years of the ISBJ naturally means that not all the concepts present in the articles themselves could be discussed. Analysing full articles undoubtedly would have elevated some terms that do not feature in this study's counts and maps. However, as Cummings and Daellenbach noted, 'given that authors use titles, abstracts and keywords to highlight their article's key aspects, restricting our focus to these should still ensure that our analysis reflected their intended emphasis' (2009: 261).

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