

Capturing the Complexity and Ambiguity of Academic Fields: Determining Consensual Definitions for Small Business Research, Entrepreneurship and Their Shared Interface

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Abstract Small business management and entrepreneurship are clearly related phenomena but certainly not synonymous. We seek to capture and disentangle this complex relationship between both fields by employing a large-scale survey of small business and entrepreneurship scholars and a content analysis of published research from both areas, from which we derive an implicit consensual definition of each field and the interface between them. Our findings suggest the presence of a relatively strong common bond within the fields that enables researchers to reflect multiple perspectives, while still maintaining each field's distinctiveness.

Keywords Academic field • Content analysis • Definition • Entrepreneurship • Small business

1 Introduction

Small business and entrepreneurship research are undoubtedly related domains. To judge by the volume of published articles, conference contributions and the number of endowed professorships and chairs both fields are flourishing and knowledge of them progressing (e.g. Katz, 2008; Kuckertz, 2013). However, the rapid advances in small business and entrepreneurship research are accompanied by ongoing definitional, conceptual, and methodological challenges (e.g. Davidsson, 2003; Gibb, 2000; Grant & Perren, 2002; Wiklund, Davidsson, Audretsch, & Karlsson, 2011). When scholars describe the attributes of their respective fields, they commonly use terms like *fuzzy*, *fragmented*, and *open to varied interpretations*. The multidisciplinary character of both fields and specificity concerns within the domain of management sciences (Bruyat & Julien, 2001; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990) make definitions problematic (Davidsson, 2003).

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E.S.C. Berger, A. Kuckertz (eds.), *Complexity in Entrepreneurship, Innovation and Technology Research*, FGF Studies in Small Business and Entrepreneurship,

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-27108-8_20

Broadly agreed definitions for the domain of small business, entrepreneurship research, and the interface between them, which can be seen as the foundation of any framework, are still lacking.

Small business and entrepreneurship research seem clearly distinct from each other only on a surface level, since their adjacent boundaries have become indistinguishable from each other. Such blurring of boundaries presents a challenge to scholars working in both (comparably young and rapidly expanding) fields. As every entrepreneur starts small, the question might be raised as to whether entrepreneurship research could simply be a subdomain of small business research, or viewed from another perspective, perhaps small business research should be viewed as residing in the domain of entrepreneurship research. There is a substantial need for discourse and reflection on the essential nature of both fields and their interface. We seek to close this gap by addressing the following research questions: What is the essential nature of small business and entrepreneurship research, and what is the nature of their interface? Answering those questions will involve attempting to disentangle the close relationship between both fields and establishing a foundation for a broadly agreed conceptualization of both research domains that will contribute to the legitimacy and prosperity of both fields.

When a field is fragmented and its boundaries blurred, it is legitimate to ask scholars what they perceive to be the defining elements of their field, since ultimately, it is the community of researchers that must share a common view of what defines their paradigm (Bruyat & Julien, 2001; Kuhn, 1962). To address this problem, we followed a procedure suggested by Nag, Hambrick, and Chen (2007) and content analyzed published research to disentangle the relationship between small business management and entrepreneurship by conceptualizing consensual definitions of (a) small business research, (b) entrepreneurship research, and (c) the interface between both fields. We do not aim to impose rigid or closed definitions since to do so might harm the future development of both fields given the dynamic and multidisciplinary character of both domains. Instead, our definitions are intended to reflect scholars' latent perceptions of what currently constitutes their field.

To achieve this objective, we conducted a multiple-stage analytical process. As a first step, we asked a large panel of entrepreneurship and small business scholars to read 248 abstracts of articles appearing in leading small business, entrepreneurship and management journals and to evaluate the degree to which specific articles seemed to be a small business article or an entrepreneurship article. Building upon the article categorization, we identified the distinctive lexicon of each field using automated text analysis software. Finally, we constructed the implicit consensual definitions of small business and entrepreneurship research as well as their shared interface from the views of the research community. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications of our analyses for the field and proposing further applications and extensions of our research.

2 Past Efforts to Define the Fields

First, in order to recognize hierarchical structures in the organization of scientific knowledge, we follow accepted convention and differentiate terms like *phenomenon*, *field* and *discipline* as they are often used interchangeably (Zahra & Newey, 2009). By *field*, we mean aggregated areas of study populated (or even dominated) by several key theories that relate to a certain phenomenon (e.g. entrepreneurship or small business) and which inform scholars about the core questions that shape the boundaries of that field. Fields, in turn aggregate to *disciplines*, which share similar objectives to fields, only at a higher level of aggregation. Naturally, disciplines (e.g. economics, psychology etc.) co-evolve through research and the evolution of institutional structures such as cross-field publications or cross-field conferences.

2.1 Small Business

In the domain of small business research, there is as yet no broadly accepted definition of the field. Instead, scholars usually refer to quantitative or qualitative definitions of the small business phenomenon to conceptualize the very nature of their field (see Table 1). When it comes to quantitative attempts to define the concept, the definition is usually reduced to the question of how small a business needs to be to qualify. Most scholars follow policy makers in their classification of small businesses (e.g. the European Union or the U.S. Small Business Administration). The size standards usually include quantitative criteria such as number of employees, sales or balance sheet totals. However, there is no broadly agreed quantitative definition of a small business (Storey, 1994) whereas the appropriateness of the selection and setting of these criteria for research practice is itself subject to discussion (Curran & Blackburn, 2001; D'Amboise & Muldowney, 1988; Peterson, Albaum, & Kozmetsky, 1986).

Relying on quantitative definitions is convenient and appears to be objective and transparent. However, applying quantitative criteria is associated with major drawbacks. Most importantly, quantitative definitions do not inform researchers about the essential building blocks of their field, so gradually add to the impression of small business research as a research context. Moreover, size standards are dependent on specific sectors, and therefore pose challenges for researchers trying to draw generalizable conclusions. Finally, these small business definitions fail to help delimit small business research, because they give rise to tautological definitions along the lines of small business research being concerned with researching small-sized businesses.

Definitions that go beyond size to incorporate qualitative attributes to describe the nature of the small business phenomenon are scarce. Scholars usually refer to the Bolton Committee's Report on Small Business (1971, as cited by Storey, 1994). According to the committee's economic definition, small businesses must satisfy

Table 1 Small business and entrepreneurship definitions related to their field or phenomenon

	Small business	Entrepreneurship
Field		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● [Entrepreneurship research investigates] the creation of new organizations (Gartner, 1989) ● [Entrepreneurship research explores] (1) why, when, and how opportunities for the creation of goods and services come into existence; (2) why, when, and how some people and not others discover and exploit these opportunities; and (3) why, when, and how different modes of action are used to exploit entrepreneurial opportunities (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000)
Phenomenon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A small business venture is any business that is independently owned and operated, not dominant in its field, and does not engage in any new marketing or innovative practices (Carland, Hoy, Boulton, & Carland, 1984) ● [Criteria for a small firm; distinguishing it from a large firm] Small size, management centralization, low level of specialization, an intuitive or informal strategy, an uncomplicated or unorganized internal information system, a simple external information system (Julien, 1997) ● [Small firms must satisfy three criteria] (a) having a relatively small share of their market place, (b) being managed by owners or part-owners in a personalized way and not through the medium of a formalized management structure, and (c) being independent, in the sense of not forming part of a larger enterprise (Bolton Committee, 1971) ● [Characteristics of a small firm that distinguish it from a large firm] Uncertainty, Innovation, Management and Evolution (Wynarczyk, Watson, Storey, Short, & Keasey, 1993) ● A business in which there is no public negotiability of common stock, and a business in which the owners must personally guarantee any existing or any planned financing (Osteryoung & Newman, 1993) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Entrepreneurship is an act of innovation that involves endowing existing resources with new wealth-producing capacity (Drucker, 1985) ● Entrepreneurship is a process by which individuals-either on their own or inside organizations-pursue opportunities without regard to the resources they currently control (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990) ● Entrepreneurship is a process of making changes; doing something different, thus creating wealth for the individual and adding value to society (Kao, 1993) ● Entrepreneurship is a way of thinking, reasoning, and acting that is opportunity driven, holistic in approach, and leadership balanced (Timmons, 1997) ● Entrepreneurship is about how, by whom, and with what consequences opportunities to bring future goods and services into existence are discovered, created and exploited (Venkataraman, 1997) ● The entrepreneurial process can be conceptualized as the creation and extraction of value from an environment (Anderson, 2000)

three criteria: (a) having a relatively small share of their market, (b) being managed by owners or part owners in a personalized way and not through the medium of a formalized management structure, and (c) being independent, in the sense of not forming part of a larger enterprise. There has been considerable criticism of this definition. For instance, one of the Bolton Committee's quantitative criteria is that a small business might have 100 employees, a characteristic that would certainly militate against it being managed in a personalized way.

Following the Bolton Committee's economic definition, more recent efforts to describe the phenomenon have predominantly been concerned with the question of how to distinguish small businesses from their larger counterparts (Julien, 1993; Wyncarczyk et al., 1993). Torrès and Julien (2005), for instance, claim that small businesses could be distinguished from larger enterprises based on a number of traits such as centralized management, a low level of labor specialization, intuitive and short-term strategies or a focus on the local market. To extend the criticism of Curran (2006), these qualitative definitions fail to illuminate the specific relationship with entrepreneurship, because most of the suggested attributes would apply equally to the field of entrepreneurship.

2.2 *Entrepreneurship*

Examining past efforts to define the field of entrepreneurship reveals an enormous diversity (see Table 1) in the scope of definitions and in the way people understand and convey the notion of the phenomenon (Gartner, 1990). While an agreed-upon definition may serve to unite the field, research activity seems to fall under different approaches, each with its own focus of attention and underlying set of beliefs (Cunningham & Lischeron, 1991; Davidsson, 2003). This is particularly challenging as the resulting studies, albeit useful, may cover only limited aspects of the phenomenon while underlying values and assumptions can infiltrate the field.

Various definitions of the phenomenon are grounded implicitly or explicitly on the entrepreneur as the primary definitional unit. Entrepreneurship is then seen as the outcome of an entrepreneur's actions, characteristics and attributes (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990). Definitions of this kind are often too vague and/or cover just a portion of the field. To elucidate, for instance, Anderson (2000, p. 91) defines entrepreneurship as the 'creation and extraction of value from an environment'. Definitions following this pragmatic perspective, alongside various conceptualizations, predominantly account for the multidisciplinary and very fragmented character of the field but at the expense of informing us what the research domain of entrepreneurship is really all about, and how it might differ from that of small business research.

The prominent definition of Shane and Venkataraman (2000) extends this pragmatic view and puts greater emphasis on the concept of opportunity as the defining feature of entrepreneurship research. Regardless of the advances in entrepreneurship research, the very nature of opportunities makes the definition difficult

to operationalize. In particular, the opportunity view could be criticized for being too vague to be informative for entrepreneurship researchers (Davidsson & Tonelli, 2013; Zahra & Dess, 2001). Moreover, relying on the opportunity construct does not shed sufficient light on conceptual differences between entrepreneurship and the domain of small business since the idea of exploiting opportunities in essence applies to any active participant in any market, including entrepreneurs as much as small business managers. Nonetheless, the opportunity view may arguably represent the best effort to date to delineate entrepreneurship as a distinct scientific field (Davidsson, 2003).

Alternatively, scholars argue that entrepreneurship research should be studied from a process perspective where definitions center around the formation of firms or organizations (Gartner, 1989). Increasing the emphasis on new firm formation facilitates the transfer into research practice since it can be measured more conveniently than the identification, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities. However, this view is not universally accepted either. Shane (2012) argues that firm formation can also be undertaken by people in existing firms or through market mechanisms. Besides, while the opportunity view is criticized as being too broad and vague, the alternative perspective is criticized for being too narrow to cover the full dimension of entrepreneurship research (Davidsson, 2003).

2.3 The Interface of Small Business and Entrepreneurship

Scholars from both fields migrate back and forth between the research domains and/or their parent disciplines, attend joint conferences, and publish in the same journals. These shared structural foundations may also nurture conceptual communalities that are in turn reflected in the nature of the interface between both fields. However, until recently, scholars have not attempted to describe the nature of this interface. To our knowledge, there is neither a definition nor a research agenda for the interface between small business and entrepreneurship research.

A contributing factor to this circumstance might be the absence of a widely accepted definition for the field of small business research. As mentioned earlier, scholars replace this vacuum by conceptualizing their very own qualitative or quantitative definition of a small business that in most cases depends on their individual research context (Storey, 1994). When we turn to definitions describing the small business phenomenon, we find distinctive lexical and definitional elements across these definitions such as *small size*, *independent ownership*, and *not dominant in its field*. However, most of these criteria to describe a small business could equally be applied to entrepreneurial activity. Indeed, despite their potential usefulness to delineate small businesses from their bigger counterparts, they do not inform researchers about the relationship with the field of entrepreneurship.

As mentioned before, relying on the opportunity view (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), as the best effort to date to define the field of entrepreneurship does not shed sufficient light on the relationship to small business research either, because it

implicitly includes small businesses when they are concerned with the exploration and exploitation of opportunities to create future goods and services (Davidsson, 2003). Consequently, opportunities may serve only as a distinct lexical element for entrepreneurship research that can also be found in many definitions of the phenomenon alongside terms such as *creation process* and *individuals* but not as a distinct definitional element per se that informs researchers about the essential nature of their field and exactly how it relates to small business research.

Apart from the evident lexical differences, both fields clearly merge into one another and their interface has become indistinguishable. It is unclear what are the essential building blocks of each field, where the boundaries between them lie, and more importantly, how each field might enrich the other. This study asserts that establishing the essential building blocks of both fields and defining their shared interface is essential to ensure rigor in research and facilitate theory building. Doing so may ultimately help research in each field to deliver its full potential. Moreover, the intersection of academic fields provides an important forum for creative theory building (Zahra & Newey, 2009) and one that has to date been neglected mainly because of the absence of broadly agreed definitions.

The challenge in defining the field of small business management and entrepreneurship and the interface between them lies in ensuring that any definitions are not too restrictive to reflect the multidisciplinary and fragmented character of the fields. At the same time, a suitable definition should be precise enough to illuminate the nature of the topics and the differences between the field in question and its neighboring domains as well as their parent disciplines. The current research addresses these issues by enquiring of the research community which topics relate to the specific domains. The scholars' answers should help to establish the exact nature of small business and entrepreneurship research, and identify which aspects should be exclusively located in each particular field.

If, as we anticipate, small business and entrepreneurship scholars share an implicit (and perhaps even explicit) consensus on the scope of their respective fields, the relationship between both domains will be exposed. Despite varied theoretical and methodological approaches, and despite the absence of any agreed definition, scholars can be expected to have a broadly shared understanding of what their field encompasses. This implicit understanding can be used to impute consensual definitions of small business management, entrepreneurship, and the interface between them.

3 Data and Method

3.1 Overview of Method

Identifying the unique vocabulary of small business and entrepreneurship research and their adjunct intersection required several steps. First, we developed an online survey including 248 randomly selected titles and abstracts of studies published in

leading small business, entrepreneurship and management journals. Scholars from both fields were asked to classify the titles and abstracts according to the degree to which they deemed each title and abstract to be a small business article, or an entrepreneurship article. Next, we used the panel's ratings to categorize the articles as small business, entrepreneurship, their interface, or neither entrepreneurship nor small business. Using text analysis software, we content analyzed all 248 titles and abstracts to identify the frequently recurring, distinctive vocabulary. Some 25 words appeared in small business titles and abstracts significantly more often than in non-small business titles and abstracts, 28 appeared more often in entrepreneurship studies than in the alternative titles and abstracts and 21 terms were equally rated small business- and entrepreneurship-related and therefore assigned to the shared interface. Finally, the authors worked together to assign the distinctive vocabulary to specific categories based on conceptually related words that contribute to forming the implicit consensual definition of each field and the interface between them.

3.2 Identifying Relevant Texts

The initial step was to generate a pool of articles by randomly selecting from the leading small business, entrepreneurship and management journals selected on the basis of their 5-year impact factor thereby excluding journals with a focus on a subspecialty. Those journals were International Small Business Journal (ISBJ) ($n = 50$), Journal of Small Business Management (JSBM) ($n = 50$), Journal of Business Venturing (JBV) ($n = 50$), Entrepreneurship: Theory and Practice (ETP) ($n = 48$), Academy of Management Journal (AMJ) ($n = 25$) and the Journal of Management (JOM) ($n = 25$) from the volumes for 1991–2011. The aim of the sampling was to ensure a balance between small business and entrepreneurship journal articles. We included management journals as a reference point allowing for statistical analysis due to the distinct lexicon of the field. The 20-year time span broadly covers the fields' research domains, and avoids the problem of overemphasis on the research of a more limited era, therefore mitigating the risk of cycles and momentary fashions. The selected approach to determining the pool of articles to be coded offers several benefits. First, including management articles mitigated rater fatigue or annoyance, which we felt, would have occurred if raters had been asked to rate only small business and entrepreneurship articles. Second, by adding management articles as a reference point, raters were required to make choices that were relatively more discriminating. As a result, the raters' evaluations of the extent to which they deemed articles small business- and entrepreneurship-related, and in turn our extraction of the distinctive lexicon, can be considered relatively conservative.

3.3 *Selecting the Panel*

We then identified a potential panel by selecting 450 researchers at random from a database compiled by the first author that lists 3500 entrepreneurship and small business researchers who have presented their research at one of the major academic conferences such as the Babson College Entrepreneurship Research Conference or the International Council for Small Business (ICSB) World Conference.

The 450 scholars selected were invited to participate by email and sent a link to a survey. Eleven email addresses proved inaccessible but the action generated 138 useable responses [equating to a solid response rate of 31 % (Baruch, 1999)], which in turn provided 2449 individual ratings.

The panel was diverse in terms of career stage (26 % were professors, 25 % associate professors, 18 % assistant professors, 7 % postdoctoral researchers, 20 % doctoral candidates and 4 % had a different academic status). In terms of primary area of research interest, 73 % reported that to be entrepreneurship, 17 % reported small business and 10 % another research interest. To test for a potential bias between respondent groups, we compared the mean ratings of the 20 most frequently rated titles and abstracts and discovered only one significant difference at the 5 % level suggesting the difference was random. The panel was evidently well acquainted with small business and entrepreneurship research and able to draw on considerable experience, which averaged 11.9 years (*SD* 8.5).

3.4 *Classifying the Texts*

Each panelist was given access to a web-based survey containing the titles and complete abstracts of 248 randomly generated articles. All the formatting was removed to avoid font style, layout, or design influencing the raters' decisions on the applicable field. Each panelist was asked to rate the titles and abstracts on two separate four-point scales; one for small business and one for entrepreneurship: 1 = clearly not small business (SB)/entrepreneurship (E) article; 2 = probably not an SB/E article; 3 = probably an SB/E article; 4 = clearly an SB/E article. A randomization process ensured that each of the 248 articles was rated ten times on average (*SD* 3, *Min*: 3, *Max*: 16). The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for the field of small business of 0.60 ($p < 0.001$) and 0.66 ($p < 0.001$) for entrepreneurship (Nag et al., 2007; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) indicates the panelists' ratings correlated closely.

The mean ratings offer a scale of the degree to which an article was deemed SB or E. Such an approach, however, would have the unnecessary and unfortunate result of drawing distinctions between every increment of the scale, including between articles with mean ratings of, say, 1.2 and those of 2.0, which clearly was not the intention. Instead, we used a categorical distinction, treating all articles with mean ratings above 3.0 as SB (a total of 77 articles) or E articles (94 articles)

Table 2 Coding of selected examples of article titles

Article type	Mean ratings SB/E	Article titles
Coded as clearly SB	3.7/2.1	Empirical evidence of banking relationships for Spanish SMEs (Iturralde, Maseda, & San-Jose, 2010)
Coded as clearly E	1.8/3.6	The role of entrepreneurship clubs and societies in entrepreneurial learning (Pittaway, Rodriguez-Falcon, Aiyegbayo, & King, 2011)
Coded as I	3.4/3.6	Growth momentum in the early stages of small business start-ups (LeBrasseur, Zanibbi, & Zinger, 2003)
Coded as miscellaneous	1.9/1.6	UK Export performance research: review and implications (Wheeler, Ibeh, & Dimitratos, 2008)

respectively and those with mean ratings greater than 3.0 for SB and E as the interface (I) between both domains (14 articles). The categorization process is illustrated in Table 2, which offers examples of the titles of several articles and the panel's ratings.

An overview of where the classified abstracts were published is provided in Table 3. This overview reveals the essential nature of the journals in our sample.

Interestingly, small business topics seem relatively rare in the classic entrepreneurship journals such as JBV and ETP, whereas the classic small business journals such as ISBJ and JSBM seem to serve a bridging function between the fields by publishing a substantial number of entrepreneurship articles alongside those with a primary focus on small business research. The relatively high number of articles published in JBV and ETP classified as being neither entrepreneurship nor small business (32 % and 23 % respectively) can be ascribed to studies primarily addressing questions around strategic concepts, indicating that these journals serve a bridging function as well, but rather in the direction of the strategic management domain.

3.5 *Extracting the Distinctive Lexicon*

To elicit the distinctive vocabulary of small business and entrepreneurship research, we conducted a computer-aided content analysis of titles and abstracts using NVivo software. Compared to surveying keywords or even whole articles, analyzing titles and abstracts concisely presenting the main points of a study represents an efficient way to identify the distinctive lexicon of small business and entrepreneurship research. The limitations on the number of keywords set by journals means that analyzing them would have produced unreliable results, and the resources required to analyze whole articles would be prohibitive (Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009).

Following the procedure suggested by Nag et al. (2007), we decided to focus on individual words because the alternative of examining entire phrases, word groups or word relationships has obvious drawbacks. For instance, phrases such as *venture*

Table 3 Journals and classification of articles

	Small business journals		Entrepreneurship journals		Management journals	
	ISBJ	JSBM	JBV	ETP	AMJ	JOM
Percentage of purely SB-articles	52	58	10	13	—/—	4
Percentage of purely E-articles	30	22	52	58	4	—/—
Percentage of Interface articles	10	10	6	6	—/—	—/—
Percentage of other articles	8	10	32	23	96	96
<i>n</i> = 248						

capital, *opportunity recognition* and *entrepreneurial orientation* are commonly used within both domains, but predetermining these phrases would have led to significant bias in our analytical procedure. Besides the biased a priori judgment, the great number of possible word combinations inhibits systematic and proper analysis. Scrutinizing individual words minimizes these biases and we therefore chose it as our analytical approach.

Our content analysis yielded over 42,000 words. To make this large body of text analytically tractable we imposed multiple restrictions on the words we would include in our analysis, but in a way that would not bias the results. First, we excluded duplicates, proper nouns, prepositions, articles, numbers, and certain common descriptors. Next, we consolidated all variations of a root word (for example finance, financial, financed) leaving 1696 unique root words remaining. Then we excluded all words that appeared fewer than ten times among all our abstracts. This was our most significant restriction, but the intention was to establish an essential and distinctive lexicon. This analytical procedure yielded a total of 469 unique root words, or lexemes, which became the basis for our analysis.

The next step identified words that were far more prevalent in those abstracts coded by our raters as small business (ratings SB > 3), entrepreneurship (ratings E > 3) and the interface (ratings SB and E > 3) than in abstracts rated as neither small business nor entrepreneurship (SB or E ≤ 3). For each word, we calculated the biserial correlation between (a) the number of times the word appeared in an abstract and (b) whether the abstract was coded SB, E, I or miscellaneous. A total of 25 words appeared in small business abstracts with significantly greater frequency (*p* < 0.05) than in non-small business abstracts, 28 in entrepreneurship studies (*p* < 0.05) and 21 at the interface of both fields (*p* < 0.05).

3.6 *Imputing the Implicit Definitions*

This inductive exercise was undertaken in an iterative manner. First, we developed tentative categories consisting of conceptual clusters of words derived from our text analysis individually for each field and their shared interface (Nag et al., 2007). For example, in the field of entrepreneurship, several words were associated with

individuals (e.g. entrepreneur or founder), some referred to growth (e.g. development, drive or improvement), some dealt with creation (e.g. start, new or build), while others could be attributed to other tentative categories. The full list of the categories for each field and the interface between them is provided below.

Next, we turned to existing definitions to identify conceptual elements recurring when scholars define the phenomenon and/or their field. By relying on past efforts to define the phenomena and/or field and comparing them to our tentative conceptual categories, we were able to identify the major elements in the implicit, consensual definition of each field and their shared interface. Whenever possible, we used the conceptual nomenclature from existing definitions, but at the same time, we did not want to be constrained by prior definitions. Finally, the authors collaborated to assign the remaining words of each field and their shared interface to their respective conceptual categories, paying particular attention to definitional fit and coherence within each category. To ensure parsimony and to maintain simplicity, we developed as few definitional elements as possible, so that every word could be assigned to just one category, although they could also be related to additional categories. Moreover, if the meanings of words were at all ambiguous (e.g. change, growth, etc.), we turned to their specific context before assigning them to a specific category or labeling a definitional element to avoid misinterpreting the terms. By relying on the context in which a specific word most frequently occurred, we were able to make more fine-grained decisions in our attribution and labeling procedure.

4 Results

4.1 *Small Business Definition*

Analysis of the results on small business research produced 25 distinctive words, which were arranged in four definitional elements. Consequently, we were able to devise the following definition for the field incorporating its distinctive vocabulary:

Small business research explores how a) management practices b) for small firms c) can help overcome barriers to internationalization, innovation or commercialization d) resulting in organizational change.

The first definitional element, ‘management practices’, as shown in Table 4, is signified by words such as ‘establish’, ‘implement’, and ‘adopt’ which refer to the use of relatively deliberate, planned initiatives whereas ‘skills’, ‘personality’ and ‘orientation’ can be attributed to leadership as a means to initiate organizational change. The second element of the small business definition, ‘for small firms’ specifies the scope of application whereas, as imputed from the distinctive lexicon, ‘size’ remains critical for the field of small business research. The third definitional element, ‘can help overcome barriers to internationalization, innovation or

Table 4 Distinctive vocabulary of small business research

Distinctive words	Word frequency	Correlation of word count and categorization	Definitional elements (“Small business research explores how...”)
Management	97	0.22**	...management practices...
Ethics	23	0.13*	
Orientation	20	0.14*	
Personality	16	0.13*	
Skills	10	0.16*	
Firm	171	0.20**	...for small firms can help...
Business	148	0.37**	
SME	70	0.39**	
Ownership	62	0.26**	
Size	45	0.31**	
Enterprise	21	0.15*	
Manufacturing	19	0.22**	
International	38	0.18**	...overcome barriers to internationalization, innovation or commercialization...
Innovation	35	0.14*	
Export	34	0.19**	
Barrier	12	0.18**	
Marketing	10	0.16*	
Markets	10	0.13*	
Change	58	0.14*	...resulting in organizational change.
Establish	18	0.13*	
Internal	17	0.15*	
Adopt	15	0.18**	
Implement	11	0.16*	
Decline	10	0.13*	
Intensity	10	0.15*	

Boldface words formed the conceptual clusters of words; the remaining words were added in a second step with particular regard to coherence and definitional fit

**p ≤ 0.01; * ≤ 0.05

commercialization’ addresses common challenges faced by small businesses such as expanding internationally, innovation management, or the commercialization of products and services, which is signified by words such as ‘marketing’, ‘markets’ and ‘export’. The final element of the definition, ‘resulting in organizational change’, comprises terms such as ‘change’, ‘decline’, ‘intensity’ and ‘internal’ that are devoted to the inbound impact management practices have on their firm.

4.2 *Definition of the Entrepreneurship Field*

The analytical procedure identified 28 unique words for the field, which led us to create the following definition for entrepreneurship research:

Entrepreneurship research explores how a) individuals b) on the basis of opportunity c) effectively organize d) any e) growth-oriented f) creation process.

The first definitional element, ‘individuals’, as shown in Table 5, is represented by words such as ‘entrepreneur’, ‘expert’ and ‘founder’ who are at the same time the key actors and focal unit of analysis in entrepreneurship research. We also included ‘psychology’ in this element since its very nature is clearly related to individuals. In the second element of the definition, ‘on the basis of opportunity’, we assembled words such as ‘potential’ and ‘return’ which are commonly applied attributes of opportunities. Moreover, we included ‘need’ due to it being closely related to this element.

The third definitional element, ‘effectively organize’, pertains to the goal-oriented way entrepreneurs assemble and arrange resources. This element consists of terms such as ‘importance’, ‘key’ and ‘specific’, each of which indicate that the resources in use are scarce and have to be arranged economically. The fourth element, ‘any’, indicates a potentially broader context of entrepreneurship. In particular, the terms ‘EO’ and ‘culture’ could be attributed to corporate entrepreneurship (Kollmann, Kuckertz, & Stöckmann, 2009) whereas ‘sustainability’ could be predominantly linked to the domain of social entrepreneurship (Kuckertz & Wagner, 2010).

The fourth element, ‘growth-oriented,’ conceptualizes the key objectives or outcomes of interest in the field; words such as ‘development’ and ‘improvement’ align with this definitional element. Finally, the sixth element, ‘creation process’, contains words such as, ‘new’ ‘create’ and ‘build’ that each reflect the emergence of something that did not previously exist.

4.3 *The Interface of Small Business and Entrepreneurship Research*

To capture the form of the interface between small business and entrepreneurship research, we arranged the 21 distinctive words in three definitional elements, resulting in the following definition for the boundary-spanning space between both fields:

The interface of small business and entrepreneurship research explores a) which resources, skills, abilities, competences, and cultural factors b) support growth strategies c) in small firms.

The first definitional element, ‘resources, skills, abilities, competences, and cultural factors’ is devoted to the resources and capabilities entrepreneurs and

Table 5 Distinctive vocabulary of entrepreneurship research

Distinctive words	Word frequency	Correlation of word count and categorization	Definitional elements (“Entrepreneurship research explores how...”)
Entrepreneur	374	0.57**	...individuals...
Founder	41	0.15*	
Psychology	11	0.15*	
Expert	10	0.14*	
Opportunity	42	0.24**	...on the basis of opportunity...
Potential	27	0.13*	
Need	24	0.17**	
Return	20	0.13*	
Importance	54	0.16*	...effectively organize...
Effective	16	0.13*	
Specific	15	0.13*	
Key	14	0.15*	
Goal	10	0.14*	
Sustainability	21	0.14*	...any...
Culture	15	0.15*	
EO	10	0.14*	
Growth	109	0.13*	...growth-oriented...
Development	86	0.24**	
Capture	17	0.14*	
Become	14	0.13*	
Improvement	13	0.13*	
Drive	10	0.14*	
Venture	172	0.22**	...creation process.
New	98	0.19**	
Process	72	0.15*	
Create	53	0.30**	
Start	24	0.14*	
Build	13	0.17**	

Boldface words formed the conceptual clusters of words; the remaining words were added in a second step with particular regard to coherence and definitional fit

**p ≤ 0.01; * ≤ 0.05

small business managers use to implement and support their growth strategies, as is shown in Table 6.

Apparently, cultural factors are important, signifying the importance of internal and personal adjustment to growth and to an increasingly complex organization. The second definitional element ‘support growth strategies’ refers to words such as ‘international’ and ‘orientation’ implying means and initiatives tailored to the firm and directly linked to ‘growth’ aspirations. Finally, the focus of attention and primary level of analysis in the interface between small business and entrepreneurship research is the ‘small firm’.

Table 6 Distinctive vocabulary of the interface of entrepreneurship and small business research

Distinctive words	Word frequency	Correlation of word count and categorization	Definitional elements (“The interface of small business and entrepreneurship research explores. . .”)
Ownership	25	0.19**	. . . which resources, skills, abilities, competences, and cultural factors. . .
Behaviour	15	0.18**	
Skills	13	0.17**	
Culture	13	0.20**	
Competence	12	0.14*	
Person	12	0.15*	
Resource	11	0.16*	
Requirement	10	0.15*	
Ability	10	0.15*	
Human	10	0.22**	
International	42	0.28**	. . . support growth strategies. . .
Strategy	32	0.21**	
Growth	24	0.22**	
Sales	17	0.25**	
Support	15	0.18**	
Orientation	12	0.16*	
Start	10	0.13*	
Business	47	0.22**	. . . in small firms.
Small	36	0.34**	
Industry	11	0.21**	
Company	10	0.16*	

Boldface words formed the conceptual clusters of words; the remaining words were added in a second step with particular regard to coherence and definitional fit

** $p \leq 0.01$; * ≤ 0.05

5 Discussion and Implications

This research revealed that small business and entrepreneurship research are clearly related but distinct areas of research. This study employed a community of researchers to shed light on the relationship between both fields, since those researchers constitute and shape the nature of their field and have an implicit (or even explicit) understanding of what constitutes their research domain. Based on the distinctive lexicon of each domain, we were able to impute consensual definitions for small business and entrepreneurship research and also for their shared interface, in other words, the boundary-spanning space where both fields potentially enrich each other. We did not aim to impose rigid or closed definitions since to do so might have harmed the future development of both fields, given the dynamic and multidisciplinary character of both domains. Instead, our definitions are intended to reflect scholars’ latent perceptions of what really constitutes their

field. Taken together, the three definitions clarify the distinctive domains of both areas of research and illuminate how the two fields are interrelated.

Kuhn (1962) asserted that a scientific community does not need a unifying paradigm to exist, but it does need a shared identity. Our research contributes to an understanding of what constitutes the identity of the field of small business and entrepreneurship research. Despite the fact that scholars active in both fields have diverse but complementary conceptual lenses and tools, their assessments of the fields' implicit definitions correlated to a significant extent, suggesting that there is a relatively strong common bond within each field which, in turn, partly explains the rapid advances in both domains.

Despite the absence of a widely accepted definition for the field of small business research, scholars exhibited a profound understanding of what shapes their field. In this regard, the consensual definition of the field differs fundamentally from the qualitative and quantitative efforts used to conceptualize the small business phenomenon. This is because it represents the way the community of researchers thinks about their field, rather than the way they should, or might, or want to think about the field. Thus, the originality of small business research lies in both its phenomena and its research objects. Accordingly, the consensual definition of small business research might represent a first attempt to further conceptualize the essential building blocks of the domain.

The small business definition, based on the distinctive lexicon of the field, reveals the field of small business research apparently to be more problem focused and addressing a number of common challenges faced by small businesses. The field is evidently able to absorb and benefit from a variety of approaches to framing and exploring small business issues. This problem-oriented view of small business research shifts the current perception of the field as a research context encompassing any business satisfying certain size criteria (SMEs to the same degree as entrepreneurial ventures) to one of a proprietary research agenda primarily concerned with overcoming firm-specific barriers. This change in perspective might not only lead to enhanced theory building but also strengthen the legitimacy of the field of small business research. Moreover, the definition will help scholars shed light on unexplained phenomena within the field, enhance the quality of research and prevent that small business research is marginalized as only a research setting.

The consensual definition of the field of entrepreneurship consists of six elements, each with several sub-elements. The definition covers the field in a very broad way, allowing for inclusion of phenomena such as social entrepreneurship or corporate entrepreneurship beyond more traditional perspectives on entrepreneurship. Each component can be examined in various ways, so providing fertile ground for research. The current research shows scholars' latent perceptions of the field of entrepreneurship research include the opportunity view (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000) to the same degree as the firm formation view (Gartner, 1989). Therefore, the consensual definition bridges both perspectives, perhaps contributing to resolving the ongoing dispute within the field. Moreover, the consensual definition extends both views by introducing growth orientation as a key defining feature of

entrepreneurship research. Evidently, individuals start, operate and exit their own businesses for a variety of reasons apart from maximizing economic returns (Shepherd, Wiklund, & Haynie, 2009). However, all entrepreneurial ventures whether a necessity or opportunity driven firm (Kuckertz, Berger, & Allmendinger, 2015) experience some growth (either intentionally or unintentionally) particularly at the beginning when assembling and allocating their resources.

Following Zahra and Newey (2009), we believe that the intersection of scientific fields provides an important forum for creative theory building as it helps uncover new phenomena that challenge existing boundaries of fields and disciplines, and can also generate new ones. According to our analysis, scholars perceive the relationship between small business and entrepreneurship research as a sequence. In other words, entrepreneurship research primarily covers the initial phase whereas small business research is predominantly concerned with issues arising at a later stage. Naturally, the boundaries between the fields are fuzzy, and duplications remain, but those may be particularly useful for the accumulation of knowledge.

As a first step to conceptualizing the shared interface, we have been able to define the nature of this boundary-spanning space. Conceptualizing the interface might help scholars discover further research opportunities. Our analysis identified numerous conceptual elements that permit the exploration of a wide array of theoretical and practical issues related to both domains. Apparently, when entrepreneurship and small business research meet, the entrepreneurial idea is utilized in a positive way to help small businesses achieve growth.

The proposed consensual definitions are based on retrospective data. Nonetheless, they represent scholars' current perceptions on small business and entrepreneurship research and give some indication of where both fields are heading. For the field of entrepreneurship research, we anticipate the emergence of new concepts besides entrepreneurial orientation, sustainability and culture. Those new concepts might shape the very nature of the field as well as our future perception of it. Unlike small business research, which apparently borrows concepts predominantly from the traditional management domain, the field of entrepreneurship may extend the entrepreneurial idea to other unconventional fields resulting in new or modified concepts (e.g. entrepreneurship as an instrument of personality development or entrepreneurship in primary and support activities in a firm's value chain beyond entrepreneurial marketing or entrepreneurial finance). For small business research, we believe that the existence of concepts such as marketing, internationalization and innovation within the distinctive vocabulary of the field signals a clear dependence on traditional management practices, however, as seen by our analysis, not at the expense of risking the distinctive identity of the field. Nonetheless, the field may benefit from increased research efforts on the internal processes of small businesses where organizational change actually happens.

6 Future Research

This study suggests several opportunities for future research. First, the relationship between small business management and entrepreneurship research could be examined from other angles. We based our analysis on the lexical distinction revealed in article abstracts in leading small business and entrepreneurship journals. Future research could complement our findings by contrasting both fields based on other meaningful criteria such as methodology, applied concepts, or underlying theories, assuming the availability of suitable source materials in sufficient quantity (Bort & Schiller-Merkens, 2011; Dobusch & Kapeller, 2013). Moreover, we examined only those journals with the highest 5-year impact factor, excluding less influential academic journals and other publication channels (Fülbier & Weller, 2011). Future research might incorporate those additional sources.

Our objective was to disentangle the relationship between small business management and entrepreneurship; therefore, we cannot draw any conclusions on how both fields differ from or relate to other academic fields and disciplines. The limits of the current research mean a second research avenue opens: the methodology might be used to disentangle the relationships between small business management and/or entrepreneurship and other academic fields such as innovation management or strategic management. Our study not only sheds light on the nature of both fields and their shared interface, but also offers an analytic roadmap with the potential to clarify the relationships between other academic disciplines or research domains as well.

Finally, further research could replicate our assessment in the future. In particular, tracking changing perceptions of both fields over time seems to be a promising avenue. As mentioned before, the fuzzy and fragmented character of both fields might result in an altered scope and essence for either or both. In a similar vein, in order to arrive at the consensual definitions, we had to omit words that appeared only rarely. Therefore, analyzing which words emerge, how perceptions evolve, and how implicit consensual definitions change over time could offer valuable insights.

7 Conclusion

The current research used content analysis to identify consensual definitions for small business and entrepreneurship research as well as to identify the interface between them. Scholars from both fields are linked by a fundamental implicit understanding of what their fields are really all about. Therefore, distilling the essence of small business and entrepreneurship research and disentangling their relationship not only illustrates the latent perception held by the community of researchers, but also contributes to a profound understanding of how transfer and mutual exchange works between both fields. The definitions proposed here are

therefore an important building block that will help both fields to cohere, maintain momentum, and shape their identity.

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