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DANS REVUE DE L'ENTREPRENEURIAT 2022/HORS SÉRIE (VOL. 21), PAGES 48 À 54
ÉDITIONS ACADEMIE DE L'ENTREPRENEURIAT ET DE L'INNOVATION

ISSN 1766-2524

ISBN 9782382980101

DOI 10.3917/entre1.pr.0025

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-de-l-entrepreneuriat-2022-Hors%20S%C3%A9rie-page-48.htm>



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The influence of Howard Aldrich in entrepreneurship research

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1. Introduction

Howard Aldrich presented his thesis “Organizations in a hostile environment” at the University of Michigan in 1969, which was a time of great changes in many western societies, not least in the US, and a breeding ground for emerging fields such as the field of entrepreneurship. Over the past five decades, entrepreneurship as a scholarly field has grown significantly—from a small emerging “venture” in the 1970s to a global industry today, with thousands of scholars around the world who consider themselves entrepreneurship researchers and teachers (Landström, 2020).

The growth of entrepreneurship as a scholarly field has been characterized by extensive changeability over time (Cornelius *et al.*, 2006; Landström *et al.*, 2012) in which old topics fade out quickly and new ones constantly emerge. For example, the last decade has brought significant changes in society with regard to new forms of communication (e.g., Facebook), customization (e.g., 3D printing), online platforms (e.g., crowdfunding), etc., but also an increased interest in social and sustainable aspects of entrepreneurship—changes that to a large extent influence entrepreneurial activities in society. Entrepreneurship scholars have not been slow in keeping up with these societal changes, and new research opportunities and topics emerge all the time. As a consequence, the core scholars within the field have changed over time in the sense that they have been unable to maintain their “core scholar” status over the years—with the exception of Howard Aldrich. Aldrich is one of the very few scholars in entrepreneurship research who has constantly published in the field and whose works have been extremely influential over many decades of entrepreneurship research.

The aim of this article is to followup on the initial interview conducted with Howard Aldrich and presented in Landström (2012). The original interview elaborated on Aldrich’s academic career and his personal view of the “evolutionary approach” as well as the field of entrepreneurship. In this article we will focus our attention on his scientific works, both with regard to his entire scholarly production and his core works in entrepreneurship.

The information for the article was retrieved from his CV, obtained from his profile at the University of North Carolina¹. Citation data were obtained from Google Scholar, which included 241 works that have been cited at least once and the Web of Science (WoS) using Author Search^{BETA}, which provided 89 publications from the WoS Core Collection. A bibliometric analysis was conducted on the 89 articles using VOSviewer (Waltman *et al.*, 2010). More specifically, we employed co-occurrence analysis based on the clustering techniques of the VOSviewer, which are visualized via bibliometric networks. The co-occurrence analysis is based on keywords in the titles and abstracts, where the nodes in the network represent concepts, while the distance between them indicates their relationship. The relative size of the nodes shows the frequency of the keywords.

1. <https://sociology.unc.edu/people-page/howard-aldrich/>

2. Aldrich's scientific contributions

As it is shown in the original interview (Landström, 2012), Aldrich has been impressively persistent in his endeavour to develop his theoretical framework and in so doing has applied his approach in a large number of empirical settings within different fields. When making a co-occurrence analysis of common terms in Aldrich's scientific production it becomes obvious that he has dealt with a large number of issues and we can identify four distinct clusters of works (see Figure 1):

- Cluster 1 (blue): Includes a strong organizational focus in which organizational routines, learning and knowledge play an important role.
- Cluster 2 (green): Elaborates on the organizational environments, where concepts such as networks, context and environments are important.
- Cluster 3 (yellow): Addresses issues related to his evolutionary approach in the survival and growth of firms, but also firm strategy and firm performance.
- Cluster 4 (red): Includes a broad range of studies in entrepreneurship, for example, studies on gender issues, new ventures, entrepreneurial teams, family businesses, etc.

Figure 1. Co-occurrence of common terms based on the abstracts and titles of Aldrich's 89 publications from the WoS Core Collection

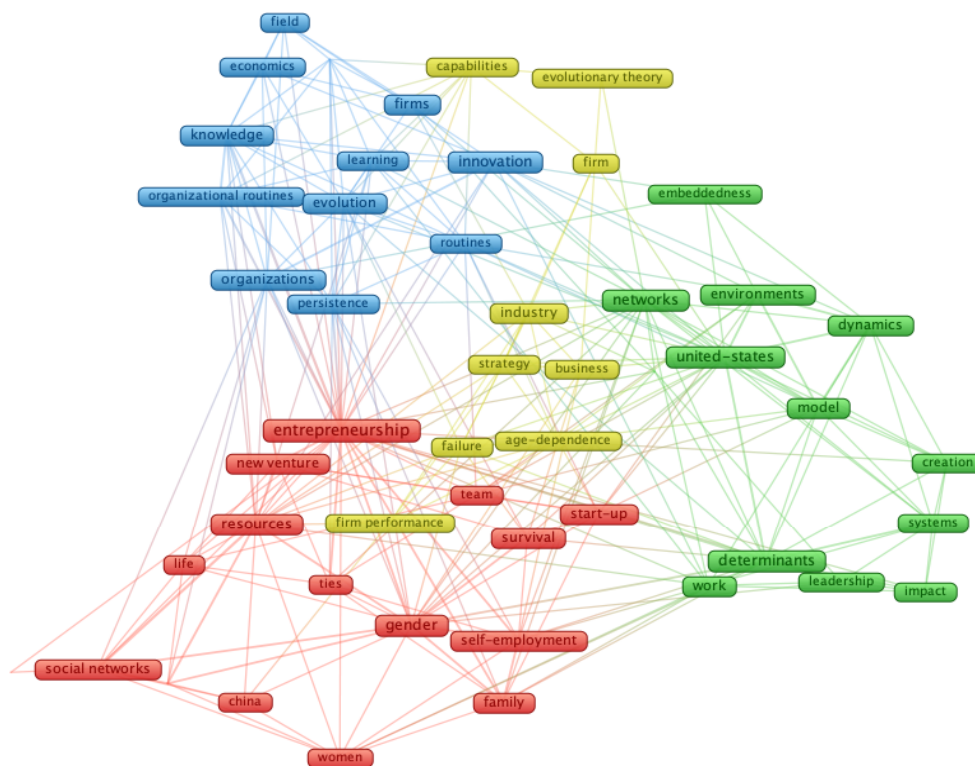
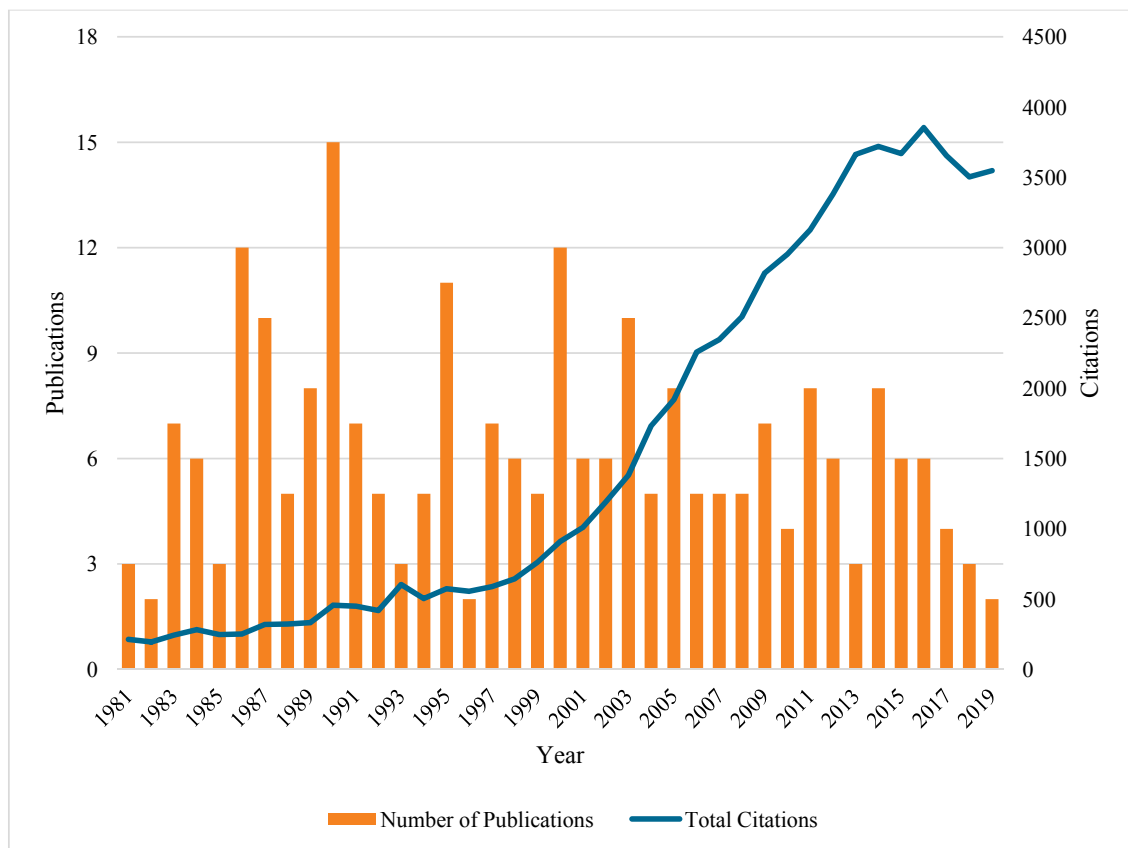


Table 1. Top-5 cited works in Aldrich's total scientific production

Rank	Publications	No. of citations
1	Stinchcombe, A.L., Social Structure and Organizations, (1965).	13
2	Meyer, J. W. and B. Rowan, B., Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony, (1977).	9
3	Nelson, R.R. and S.G. Winter, An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change, (1982).	8
4	DiMaggio, P.J. and W.W. Powell, The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields, (1983).	8
5	Reynolds, P.D. and S.B. White, The Entrepreneurial Process: Economic Growth, Men, Women, and Minorities, (1997).	8

Figure 2. Number of publications and citations over time (Source: Google Scholar)



In the interview with Howard Aldrich (Landström, 2012), he highlighted that his thoughts emerged during the 1970s in an era characterized by an explosion of evolutionary models in research, influenced by scholars such as Campbell (1969) and developed by Weick (1979) at the individual level and Hannan and Freeman (1977) at the industry level. It was an approach that

was also inspired by the Carnegie School (Simon, March and Cyert) and a view on economic change represented by Schumpeter (1934) and later by Nelson and Winter (1982). It becomes interesting to see, on this background, what works have inspired Aldrich the most in his writing. In Table 1 we present the top-5 works (excluding self-citations) cited by Aldrich in his total scientific production. The top-5 works represent some classical works in institutional (and evolutionary theory), but also entrepreneurship knowledge in terms of Paul Reynolds and Sammis White's book on the entrepreneurial process.

Finally, we can conclude that Howard Aldrich has been an extremely productive researcher (see Figure 2) and has published an average of 6.2 works per year over almost 40 years. Likewise, the quality of his research is impressive, with an average citation rate of 1,567 citations per year, with a h-index of 88 and an i10-index of 189 in September 2020. The top-cited works are his major books "Organization and Environment" (1979) and "Organization Evolving" (1999), as well as two influential works in entrepreneurship research, namely the article "Fools rush in" (1994) together with Marlene Fiol and his book chapter "Entrepreneurship through social networks" (1986) with Catherine Zimmer.

3. Aldrich's contributions to entrepreneurship research

Howard Aldrich is a sociologist who became interested in entrepreneurship in the mid-1980s when he was invited by Donald Sexton to write a chapter on social networks in Sexton's second state-of-the-art book on entrepreneurship "Art and Science of Entrepreneurship" in 1986. The chapter was written together with Catherine Zimmer and entitled "Entrepreneurship Through Social Networks". Since then, Aldrich's interest in entrepreneurial issues has continued and he is one of the most influential scholars within the field. In a bibliometric analysis of state-of-the-art books in entrepreneurship research (Landström *et al.*, 2012), in which core scholars within the field are invited to synthesize our knowledge on different entrepreneurial topics, it was shown that Howard Aldrich is one of the most productive researchers when it comes to publishing influential works in entrepreneurship research. Over the years he has published six works that are perceived as core works in entrepreneurship research (*ibid.*, p. 1162). Below we will elaborate on these core works:

- The evolutionary approach is a key contribution in Aldrich's scientific production and has influenced our thinking in entrepreneurship research. Howard Aldrich has outlined his approach in two core works that have been influential for entrepreneurship scholars. His first attempt to outline the approach was presented in his book "Organizations and Environments" published in 1979. The book has become well cited by entrepreneurship scholars, particularly when it comes to understanding how organizations change over time dependent on their fit to the particular context in which they operate. However, over the coming decades Aldrich continued to develop his thoughts and synthesized a lot of his thinking in his book "Organizations Evolving" (first edition published in 1999). In the book, Aldrich presents his evolutionary approach as a multi-level approach and uses a few concepts—variation, selection, retention and struggle—to understand a large number of entrepreneurial phenomena on different levels of analysis.

Over the years, Aldrich has applied his evolutionary approach on many different entrepreneurship issues and a couple of these contributions are perceived as core works within the field (Landström *et al.*, 2012):

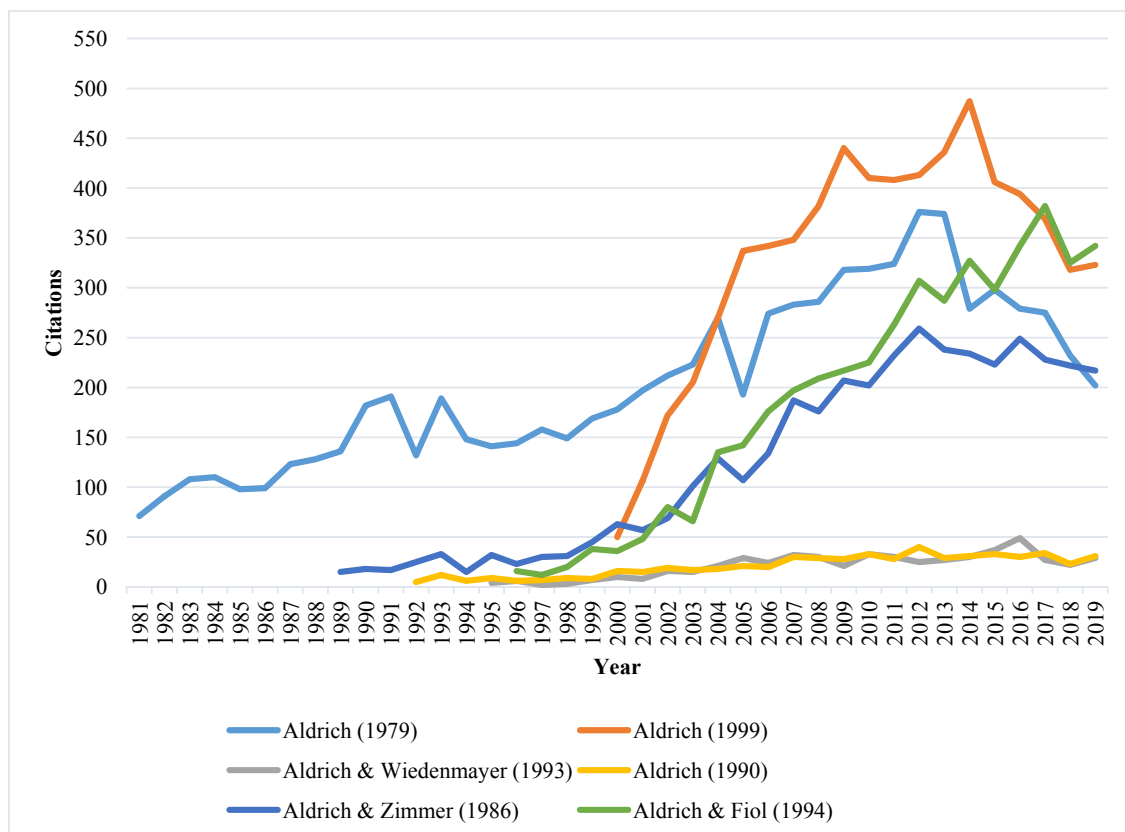
- In his contribution together with Catherine Zimmer in Sexton's state-of-the-art book in 1986, they elaborated on the struggle for resources and opportunities faced by

entrepreneurs in new ventures and the use of social networks in order to cope with these restrictions.

- Another core work in entrepreneurship research is an article written together with Marlene Fiol entitled “Fools Rush In? The Institutional Context of Industry Creation” (1994), in which the authors discuss the challenges experienced by early ventures in the formative years of new industries.
- Finally, Aldrich has published an article and a book chapter to understand the founding rates of new businesses on a population level—the conditions that affect the rate at which organizations are added to an existing population—represented in Aldrich (1990) and Aldrich and Wiedenmayer (1993).

These core works have been influential in entrepreneurship research—measured as the number of citations (see Figure 3). However, the two works on founding rates of new businesses (Aldrich, 1990; Aldrich and Wiedenmayer, 1993) have not been heavily cited by entrepreneurial scholars, but have been perceived by peer scholars as important works within the field. The articles were published during a period of change in the field of entrepreneurship research—when the field was changing from a “trait” approach towards a stronger process view in entrepreneurship research—and in which Aldrich contributed with his evolutionary reasoning on rates of new firm creation over time. Thus, these two works are perceived as important in this transition of the field of entrepreneurship towards a stronger process and behavioural focus in the research.

Figure 3. Number of citations of Aldrich’s core works in entrepreneurship



It is also interesting to note that the core entrepreneurship works seem to maintain their influence over time. This holds for the two books (Aldrich, 1979; Aldrich, 1999) in which he elaborates on his evolutionary approach in a more comprehensive way, as well as the two articles on social networks in entrepreneurship (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986) and on the creations of new industries (Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). Thus, it is obvious that Aldrich's evolutionary approach can be perceived as foundational knowledge in entrepreneurship research and by applying it he has touched upon some key issues in entrepreneurship.

4. Concluding remarks

In this article we have elaborated on the influence of Howard Aldrich on our knowledge in general and particularly his influence on entrepreneurship research. We made several reflections when conducting the analysis of Aldrich's scientific production. First, we are impressed by the "elegance" of the evolutionary approach developed by Howard Aldrich—he employs a few key concepts (variation, selection, retention and struggle) and using these concepts he has shown that it is possible to explain a large variety of empirical phenomena at different levels of analysis. Second, in times of significant changes in society as well as within the field of entrepreneurship research—new "hot topics" seem to emerge all the time (Landström and Harirchi, 2019) and scholars within the field of entrepreneurship appear to constantly identify new research opportunities—it is important to have scholars who are persistent and faithful to their ideas and research questions and in this way develop foundational and sustainable knowledge that can help us navigate the changeable world of entrepreneurship. Howard Aldrich is an excellent example of such a scholar!

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