

LEARNING FROM CRISIS: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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Learning from crisis: a systematic literature review

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Abstract

The recent economic crisis has revived the interest on the reactions to the recession pursued by the entrepreneurs. Understanding how to act in troubled times becomes an asset which is vital for the firm survival, and to the future competitive advantage after the economic recovery. This papers reviews the state of the art on the firms' reaction to economic crisis and on the firms' ability to learn from previous events. The study aims at identifying the main trends and findings in this research field. Based on the Scopus and Web of Science indexes, the systematic review of the literature is carried out on the sample of 38 papers, by investigating the objectives, geographical coverage, methodologies and results. Consequently, most important gaps in knowledge on the learning from crisis research have been identified and most promising topics are described.

Keywords: organizational learning; crisis; economic recession
JEL codes: D83, L22, L25

1. Introduction

Both the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the recent Chinese stock market crash, which clearly affects the world economy have led to increased interest in studies which analyze the survival and performance of enterprises in the troubled times. Within this framework, a special attention is given to the well-known concept of organizational learning (Fiol & Lyles 1985; Simonin 1997). The proponents of such approach indicated that the past experience of the company is one of the most important sources of organizational learning (Nunamaker, Weber & Chen 1989; Garvin 1993). Consequently, the current economic crises create a promising natural experimental environment, allowing to investigate whether the enterprises are able to cope better with

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these external shock, taking the advantage of their former experiences with past recessions.

The topic of organizational learning considered within the learning from crisis framework has obviously gained increased attention in the recent period, however this strand of research is still fragmented, and scattered across various disciplines and fields of study. Consequently, there is a need of aggregation and arrangement of this heterogenous theoretical and empirical findings. Our paper fills this gap by presenting the results of the systematic review of literature on organizational learning in the context of crisis. Based on the sample of 38 articles indexed in Scopus and Web of Science, we describe the main theoretical approaches, methods and findings in this strand of research.

The structure of our paper is the following: first, we describe the methodology of our study. Then we describe the results of the systematic literature review, classifying the papers by their type (conceptual, empirical, literature review), aims of the study, methods and main findings. The last section concludes, presenting the unexplored topics and most promising avenues for further research.

2. Methodology

We follow the steps of Aliaga-Isla and Rialp (2013) and carry out a systematic review of literature which links organizational learning with the economic crisis. This method allows to produce an unbiased summary of scientific production in a given field of study; moreover it allows to replicate the results and to extend them in a future research. We start with the establishment of research criteria for our literature review. We decided to include academic production indexed in Web of Science (henceforth: WoS) and Scopus databases. We investigated only research articles published in peer-reviewed journals, thus excluding monographs, conference reports, research notes and reviews. This choice was motivated both by the importance of articles as the main source of current academic knowledge, and the need of choosing more homogenous sample for analysis. We acknowledge that reliance on journals with the Impact Factor only is

questionable in the social sciences, and therefore we have also included journals with SCImago Journal Rank (SJR indicator), which are listed on Scopus database. We have included only the papers written in English language. We included papers published up to 2015, and the study has been carried out in February 2016. In order to compensate for possible bias caused by delays in publishing by some of the journals and/or delays in inclusions of these papers in WoS or Scopus databases, we have run a supplementary search on Google scholar for year 2015, to identify papers in press without being attached to specific issue. Still, the results for 2015 should be treated with some reservation.

For literature search in WoS and Scopus databases, a set of alternative keywords have been used, including such combinations as: "organizational learning and crisis", "learning from crisis", "business learning and economic recession" and "organizational learning and economic recession". The first screening process included the investigation of the abstracts, which yielded 44 articles. Then, the second screening procedure was adopted, which aimed at more detailed analysis of the abstract, introduction and conclusions sections. After the second phase, 6 articles have been dropped as irrelevant for our study: 2 of them were research notes, the other 4 did not include a precise concept of organizational learning, although it was mentioned in the abstract and/or keywords. Therefore, the final sample consists of 38 articles. After a careful investigation of each content, the database in excel has been created, containing variables such as type of the article (empirical, conceptual or literature review), methods and techniques (qualitative/quantitative approach, information on sample selection and research technique), object of analysis (single company, group of enterprises or sector) and summary of findings. The results of literature review are presented in the following section.

3. Results of literature review

Publication venues and authorship

The description of our data-set is provided in table 1, which presents information on the journal where the paper has been published, authors and year of publication. The 38 papers included in our analysis have been published in 33 journals. Only 3 journals have published more than one paper on this topic: Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management (Elliott 2009; Chekkar-Mansouri & Onnee 2013), Long Range Planning (Carmeli & Schaubroeck 2008; Sosna, Trevinyo-Rodríguez & Velamuri 2010) and Management Learning (Smith & Elliott 2007; Colville, Hennestad & Thoner 2013). The number of authors who have published more than one paper about organizational learning and crisis is also very modest, and includes 3 academics, all of them from the UK. The first one is Dominic Elliott from University of Liverpool (Elliott 2009; Elliott & Macpherson 2010), then Denis Smith from University of Glasgow who co-authored 2 papers with Elliott (Elliott & Smith 2006; Elliott & Smith 2006), and finally Brahim Herbane from De Montfort University (Herbane 2010; Herbane 2014).

[Table 1 in Appendix]

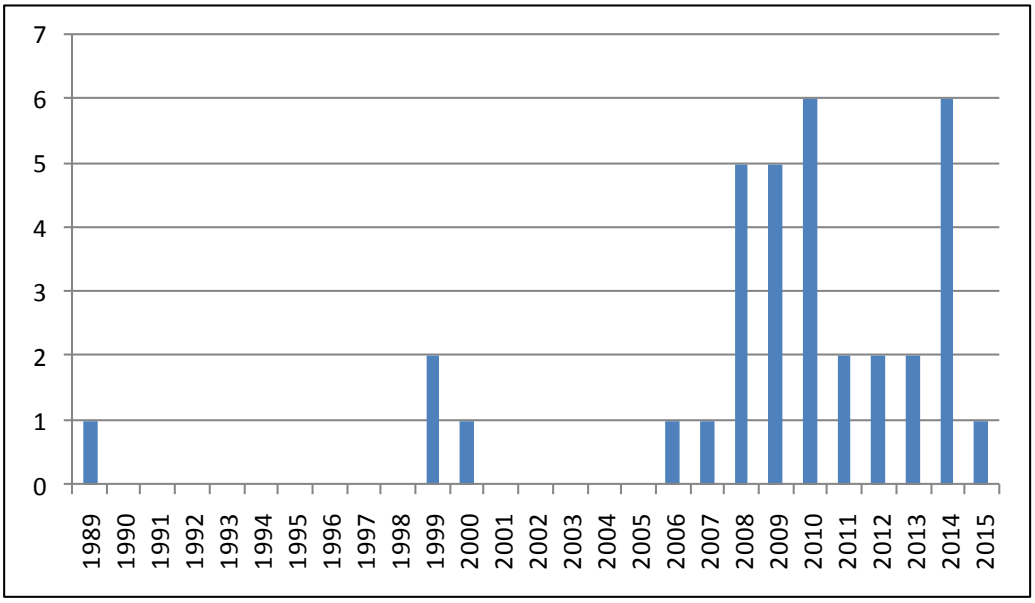
Another important point which should be considered is the relatively small number of authors per paper. Out of 38 papers included in our analysis, 17 articles (45 per cent) are authored by only one person. This result is against the common trend in international academic community, in which the role of research team and scientific collaboration is becoming increasingly important (Wuchty, Jones & Uzzi 2007). In the case of the papers from Business and Economics, indexed in the WoS in 2006-2010 period, the share of single-authored papers is mere 6 per cent, while 62 per cent of the papers are written by 3 or more authors (Ossenblok, Verleysen & Engels 2014). All these findings allow us to formulate the conclusion that the research on learning from economic crisis is still on a very early stage of the development, which is demonstrated by relatively high dispersity and fragmentarity of research production.

Coverage by geographical locations and the unit of analysis

Most of the studies included in our analysis have been made in the North Western Europe, namely in the UK (Elliott 2009; Elliott & Macpherson 2010; Elliott & Smith 2006; Herbane 2010; Herbane 2014) followed by Scandinavian countries (Colville, Hennestad & Thoner 2013; Deverell 2010; Pal, Torstensson & Mattila 2014; , Rerup 2009; Wallo, Kock & Nilsson 2012). This is rather a surprising finding, as in this region the recovery from Financial Crisis 2007-2009 was relatively faster than in the Southern Europe, which is represented by mere 2 papers (Italy – Cucculelli and Bettinelli 2015, and Spain – Sosna, Trevinyo-Rodríguez & Velamuri 2010). Traditionally for business studies, a lot of attention has been paid to Northern America (Desai 2014; Iren, Reichert & Gramlich , 2014; Lalonde 2010; Latham 2009; Marsen 2014; Miller & Littlefield 2010; Wang 2009; West 2008), albeit most of these papers were rather conceptual and exploited case studies as an illustration for theoretical reasoning. Only one article investigates the process of organizational learning in Asia, namely in India (Tewari 1999). Other important regions as Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA– with notable exception of Israel, cf. Carmeli & Schaubroeck 2008), Sub-Saharan Africa, Australia and Oceania are not represented.

The most typical object of analysis was the behaviour of individual enterprise (Roux-Dufort & Metais 1999; Chekkar-Mansouri & Onnee 2013; Colville, Hennestad & Thoner 2013), public organization (Elliott 2009; Deverell 2010), or the group of enterprises (Pal, Torstensson & Mattila 2014), investigated with case study method. In some occasions this method was enriched with the longitudinal dimension (so-called longitudinal qualitative data), including such techniques as in-depth interviews, document analyses and participant observation (Rerup 2009). Less often the attention has been paid to entire industries or sectors, as in the case of woolen knitwear industry in India (Tewari 1999), banking sector (Iren, Reichert & Gramlich 2014), software industry (Latham 2009) and even such exotic as soccer industry (Elliott & Smith 2006). Finally, the analyses included the behaviour of specific types of enterprises such as SMEs (Herbane 2014) or family firms (Cucculelli and Bettinelli 2015).

Figure 1. Number of papers indexed in WoS and Scopus by year of publication



Source: Own elaboration.

Most of the articles included in our analysis (29 of 38, i.e. ca. 75 per cent) have been published after 2007, thus the effect of Financial Crisis 2007-2008 is evident. There are only few older papers, published before 2000s. The earlier paper in our dataset is the study of Nunamaker Jr,, Weber and Chen (1989). In this conceptual paper the authors link for the first time crisis management with organizational learning. They develop a theoretical model, stressing the importance of post-crisis activities of the enterprises, which are usually aimed at evaluation of the organizational performance and possible revision of crisis-management processes. Ironically, none of the newer papers in our sample has cited this paper, which demonstrates almost total detachment of the research on organizational learning from 1980s with the current one. However, this discontinuity in research can be easily explained by technical deficiency of the databases: the paper authored by Nunamaker Jr and associates (1989) comes from pre-digital era, therefore the document is available only in scanned version. This means that the description of the article in WoS and Scopus is very rudimentary, and the choice of limited combinations of keywords facilitates its omission while performing the literature search. On the other hand, the only article from 1980s which is regularly cited in our sample is

the paper written by Nystrom and Starbuck (1984), which was not found during our literature search in Scopus and WoS due to different set of keywords. Its longevity can be attributed to the fact that one of the authors posted the paper on open-access repository, thus making it freely available to academic community.

Still, we can observe actually two distinct waves of research on organizational learning and crisis. The first one can be observed in 2008-2010 period, and most of these papers are either conceptual or empirical, but both explorative in nature. This means that in the case of conceptual articles the authors tend to propose new concepts and framework (f.i. Brockner, & James 2008; Wang 2008; Lalonde 2010;) instead of developing coherent and complete models or theories. On the other hand, such empirical papers usually relied on small samples (mostly case studies, f.i.: Deverell 2010; Herbane 2010) and qualitative techniques like semi-structured or in-depth interviews with key actors (Wang 2009). There were also some hybrid studies, which combined empirical approach (usually a case study) to provide illustration for a specific conceptualization (Elliott 2009). Thus, these studies mostly suffered from limitations of the early research on a given topic, mostly the lack of sound data which is a strong barrier for quantitative approaches. Two exceptions need a closer attention in this regard. The first one is the study of Carmeli and Schaubroeck (2008) who analysed how learning from previous failures helps organisations to be better prepared for crisis. Based on the relatively large sample of 106 Israeli companies, they have found some support for the hypothesis of learning from failure as a facilitator of coping with the upcoming crisis. Still, their data-set was collected using snowball method, which introduces a bias for the representativeness of the companies included in the sample. The second paper authored by Latham (2009) presents the results of the study carried on the sample of 137 entrepreneurs from software industry. The sample was gathered via e-mail survey and the response rate was satisfactory, thus the results can be generalized over the entire population of the enterprises from this sector. Yet, the organizational learning is only considered in the margins of the study, as author compares the reaction of start-ups and established firms (the latter being able to learn from past crises). Finally, the only literature review for this period needs a closer attention. The study carried by Pretorius (2008) is an extensive (the list of references includes 91 items!) review of more general

topic – the scientific literature on failure. A subsection 9.2 of this paper includes a short overview of the learning from failure research for 2000s period, which is a good supplement to our literature review.

The second, most recent strand of literature on learning from crisis starts in 2011. This group of papers is dominated by empirical articles (7 out of total 14), followed by conceptual (6 cases) and one literature review (Pittaway & Thorpe 2012). The trend of using qualitative approaches is still visible, including mostly of case studies. Such research projects yielded contrasting results: while Chekkar-Mansouri and Onnee (2013) find no evidence for organizational learning in the behaviour of French bank Société Générale during crises in 1988 and 1999, some evidence that supports the learning from crisis hypotheses is found in the study of Colville, Hennestad and Thoner (2013) on Norwegian soap manufacturer Lilleborg and in the study of Wallo, Kock and Nilsson (2012) on a Swedish industrial company. Still, the novelty in this period is the dominance of papers using quantitative approaches (Desai 2014; Cucculelli & Bettinelli 2015; Herbane 2014; Iren, Reichert & Gramlich 2014). Only one of this papers investigates precisely learning from crisis hypothesis, by adopting organizational learning as a dependent variable and past crisis experience as independent one. Cucculelli and Bettinelli (2015) analyze the behaviour of family firms in Italy, taking the advantage of a large and representative sample of family firms (2722 firms, a telephone survey). They have found limited evidence for organizational learning – this process is visible only in the case of CEO turnover. Moreover, the new manager has to be from the controlling family in order to enable organizational learning. On the other hand, Desai (2014) finds some evidence for organizational learning, but in a very specific environment (the US air-traffic control system).

In the case of most recent conceptual papers a good example is the contribution of Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer (2014). Their theoretical approach is much more advanced that in the case of the previous wave of research, as it is preceded by extensive literature review. They introduce the concept of learning in crisis (LiC) by merging two strands of literature: the one on the crisis management and organizational learning. Thus, their contribution to field of knowledge is substantial as they bridge those two distinct areas of study within one theoretical approach. Their definition of

learning in crisis is the following: “Learning through crisis by engaging dynamically with the unknown and developing new understandings, by experimenting with existing knowledge to improve actions and negotiations with emotions, attitudes, and behaviors in response to forces shaping learning and crisis” (Antonacopoulou and Sheaffer 2014, p. 6). They adopt a holistic and more dynamic view on organizational learning within the framework of a crisis, stressing its nonlinearity and complexity. This theoretical approach offers definitely a new, fresh perspective on empirical research on this topic, although its applicability is mostly restricted to qualitative studies.

4. Conclusions

Our paper aimed at identifying the main findings on learning from crisis, based on a systematic literature review. Our study suggests that this strand of research is still in an early phase of the development and therefore there are many unexplored topics. The most obvious candidates for further investigations are the studies which would include the so far missing geographical locations, such as Greece, Portugal or Ireland in Europe, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina, not to mention the South East and Eastern Asia. Additionally, there is a clear need for international comparisons in order to capture potential country-specific variations in the processes of organizational learning within the recession framework. In this aspect, it would be particularly interesting to investigate closer the possible impact of nation-specific cultural characteristics, using for instance the well-known Hofstede (1993) framework of cultural dimensions. The way the crisis is perceived might and should be influenced by the cultural factors, and the subsequent organizational learning processes can also become affected by them.

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Appendix

Table 1. List of papers by journal

Journal	Articles
Advances in Developing Human Resources	Wang (2008)
Disasters	Lalonde (2010)
Engineering Management Journal	West (2008)
Entrepreneurship & Regional Development	Pittaway & Thorpe (2012)
European Journal of Training and Development	Wallo, Kock & Nilsson (2012)
Futures	Cucculelli &.Bettinelli (2015)
Group & Organization Management	Elliott & Macpherson (2010)
Industrial Management & Data Systems	Wang (2009)
International Journal of Banking	Iren, Reichert & Gramlich (2014)
International Journal of Technology Intelligence and Planning	Weitzman & Chermack (2013)
International Small Business Journal	Herbane (2010)
Journal of Business and Technical Communication	Marsen (2014)
Journal of Business Communication	Veil (2010)
Journal of Business Ethics	Spitzeck (2009)
Journal of Business Venturing	Cope (2011)
Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management	Elliott (2009); Chekkar-Mansouri & Onnee (2013)
Journal of Management Information Systems	Nunamaker Jr, Weber & Chen (1989)
Journal of Management Inquiry	Antonacopoulou & Sheaffer (2014)
Journal of Management Studies	Elliott & Smith (2006)
Journal of Organizational Change Management	Barnett & Pratt (2000)
Journal of Production Economics	Pal, Torstensson & Mattila (2014)
Journal of Small Business Management	Latham (2009)
Long Range Planning	Carmeli & Schaubroeck (2008); Sosna, Trevinyo-Rodríguez & Velamuri (2010)
Management Learning	Smith & Elliott (2007); Colville, Hennestad & Thoner (2013)
Organization Science	Rerup (2009)
Public Management Review	Deverell (2010)
Public Relations Review	Miller & Littlefield (2010)
SAGE Open	Herbane (2014)
South African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences	Pretorius (2008)
Strategic Organization	Desai (2014)
Technological Forecasting and Social Change	Roux-Dufort & Metais (1999)
The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science	Brockner & James (2008)
World Development	Tewari (1999)

Source: own elaboration.