

Problem choice – entering or abandoning a research agenda, an investigation from specialists' point of view about an under-researched field in business administration

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ABSTRACT

This study is intended to comprehend the motivations behind researchers' choice to enter or abandon a field of study, the problem choice. Therefore, we examine research on an under-researched, yet important field in management, the organizational decline, as an extreme case for study. Based on a literature review and on a qualitative analysis of forty-one short surveys with renowned authors, conducted by e-mail, we conclude that organizational decline research is still both a current topic and further is needed. The evidences suggest that authors tend to enter a field due to intrinsic and internal motivation or external regulatory motives. The choice to stay or branch in the field of study is determined by intrinsic motivators, while the choice to leave the field of study is determined by extrinsic motivators.

Keywords: problem choice; research priorities; research motivation; publish or perish

1. INTRODUCTION

As researchers we have different motivations to research and publish our works. One motivation is the pressure for publishing, mainly for tenure purposes or to accomplish metrics of institutional performance (Armstrong, 1997). Other motivation may reside on personal accomplishment, as the dissemination of knowledge (Bedeian, 2004; Miller, 2006) or the validation of our articles and ideas through the peer review process (Miller, 2006; Acedo et al, 2006). On top of it all, publishing, especially in well-ranked journals, contributes to increasing our reputation as scholars, which is crucial to the researcher career (Bedeian, 2004). These motivations influence how researchers select their research problems, or fields, this selection is therefore called “problem choice” in the sociology of science literature (Neff, 2014).

The current higher education framework poses a dilemma to the researchers: should they publish on topics that are easier to publish, or should they publish on topics they are personally more motivated to work on, but are more prone to rejection? This decision rules the choice of the research agendas, the problem-choice. This is a topic that is not as extensively researched as the previous studies to understand motivation to conduct relevant research (Neff, 2014). Most studies assume a general acceptance of the complexity of internal and external motivations (Zuckerman, 1989), since Merton's work (1938), and do not consider classical approaches of social psychology to motivation (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In this paper we scrutinize the researcher's problem choice motivation to follow a specific research agenda. Objectively, we intend to analyze what are the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for a researcher to enter, or leave, a certain research agenda, theory, theme or topic. To understand and analyze the problem choice of researchers, we selected a relevant research theme with low research rate, considering the absence of papers from the mainstream business/management journals, trying to understand the diminished scholarly interest on the topic. The selected theme is organizational decline, because despite its importance, it is not extensively studied (Serra, Almeida & Ferreira, 2013). Nonetheless, due to the relatively small interest of the academy on organizational decline, some academic authors have published mostly in books targeted at practitioners (e.g., Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Collins, 2009). These factors make organizational decline a good research object to understand problem choice, since it has the rather rare condition of being an important, yet under-researched field.

In this paper we use the organizational decline topic to understand the problem choice, and the researchers' motivation to enter, stay, or leave a field of research. Methodologically, we use a qualitative approach. We first conducted a citation analysis to identify who were the most relevant scholars studying organizational decline and we then endeavored in surveying, with open-ended questions, by e-mail forty-one scholars that have published major contributions to the field. The analyses expressed in this paper are largely qualitative and we reproduce the scholars' opinions concerning their motivation for research and pertinence of the theme. This paper assists in understanding why some topics rise to the top of the research agenda, while other topics seem to drop out of the agenda. For young scholars, especially those at the early stages of their careers, it is useful to understand where and why they should put their efforts into.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The problem choice

Taking a step back into the foundations of the contemporaneity of a research area leads us to question how and why do scholars chose their research themes, their motivations and interests (Zuckerman, 1978; Ziman, 1987): the problem-choice. Problem-choice is related to "all the actions and considerations to enter into intentional pursuit of scientific research" (Ziman, 1987: 95). How researchers select their research problems and agenda is a problem discussed, but not enough, in sociology of change literature (Neff, 2014).

2.2 Factors influencing problem choice

The selection of problem choice is an important issue influenced by a number of different factors. In his seminal paper, Polanyi (1962) stated that researchers select their research problems following their curiosity guided by an 'invisible hand'. He, as well as Merton (1938) and Zuckerman (1978, 1989), point out internal and external motivations as the roots for problem choice. These factors influence the decision of entering or leaving a field (Avital & Collopy, 2001), and the effect of these factors change depending on the characteristics of the researchers, for instance, influencing differently early and later entrants (Debackere & Rappa, 1994). However, most research focuses extensively in internal factors affecting problem choice (Fisher, 2005), leaving external factors out of the equation.

Academic freedom is acknowledged as one of the pillars of higher education's legitimacy. But external factors, from agendas posed by the academic community (Henkel, 2005), or promoted by institutional factors pressuring the universities (Cronin, 2012), exert a strong and growing influence on the researchers' problem-choice (Neff, 2011).

The very academic community acts as an external factor influencing problem choice. There are fields and situations that do not or not always follow a previous paradigm (Fischer, 2005) forcing researchers to move to another paradigm or to build on more recent research. Problem choice may be based on the need to fill a theory gap or to test and build on previous findings. In strategic management, for instance, the acceptance and emergence of the Resource-based View theoretical approach contrasted the predominant view of Industrial Organization (Porter, 1980), changing the problem choice of researchers towards a new paradigm. On the other hand, there is the example of research in Medicine. In most areas of Medicine, prior findings largely influence subsequent studies, instead of dominant paradigms, bringing a fast-paced external factor to the researchers' problem choice.

The researchers' choice of what to research is likely influenced by internal and external factors (e.g., Cole & Cole, 1973; Zuckerman, 1978; Gieryn, 1978; Ziman, 1987). The main decision affected is whether to enter, stay, or leave a field of study (Avital & Collopy, 2001). According to Avital and Collopy (2001), some authors consider the cognitive factors as the most influential in guiding researchers' choice, or the strength of social processes, such as

competition for funding, recognition and rewards within the research community (see also Hagström, 1965). Other authors consider that external factors, as government or business interests might be more influencing, as government financing (Debackere & Rappa, 1994). Avital and Collopy (2001) noted the following factors to enter or leave a field of research (Table 1).

Table 1. Factors influencing researchers' decision of entering or leaving a field

Enter the Field	Leaving the Field
1. Intellectually compelling nature.	1. Slow progress in solving technical problems.
2. Lack of other promising research topics.	2. Lack of funding.
3. Availability for funding.	3. Diminished interest among other researchers.
4. Potentiality of financial rewards.	4. Rapid progress in alternative areas.
5. Potential recognition by peers.	5. Opinions of leading researchers unfavorable.
6. Dissatisfaction with a previous research agenda.	6. Negative opinion of research supervisor.
7. Positive opinions of leading researchers in the field.	7. Lack of financial rewards.
8. Success of other researchers in the field.	8. Diminished intellectual challenge.
9. Opportunity to build a commercial enterprise.	9. Increase of financial cost in conducting the research.
10. Opportunity to solve an important societal problem.	10. Research theme overcrowded.
	11. Difficulty in keeping with new developments.

Source: Adapted from Avital and Collopy (2001).

Although Avital and Collopy (2001) provide a very reliable set of factors, many other aspects may drive the decision to conduct research in a certain field. For instance, the large majority of the research universities in the US and Europe have a tenure and promotion evaluation procedure – which is also becoming a trend in many other countries – fundamentally supported on the assessment of the quantity and quality of their faculty' research output (Konrad & Pfeffer, 1990; Lane et al., 1990; Im & Hartman, 1997; Kotlik et al., 2002). Thus, faculty in these schools are more likely to focus on doing research that is publishable on the top journals, and focus on research themes that will more likely render them tenure. Hence, it comes at little surprise Creswell's (2002) remark on the importance of taking into account the career goals when choosing a research theme.

The impact and contribution to practice might, at least in some instances, motivate engaging in some research arenas. Kilduff (2006: 252) noted that “the route to good theory leads not through the gaps in literature but through an engagement with problems in real world”. Mintzberg (2005: 356) complemented stating that “choose our theories according to how useful they are, not how true they are”. However, applying Anne-Will Harzing's “publish or perish” rationale, some research areas are risky enough as to detract scholars, and perhaps more notably the young scholars, from pursuing those research paths. For instance, it is possible that research on organizational decline requires using theories that are either less “sexy”, less used, or resorting to lenses that differ from the usual explanations of success and growth. This seems consistent with the argument of Alveson and Sandberg (2011) that most research tries just to fill gaps of prior research and rarely challenges the existing knowledge.

2.3 Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and problem choice

Social psychology studies evolved on a quest to explain the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: the effect of rewards on motivation (DeCharms, 1968; Deci, 1971; Scott, 1975); the negative influence of external rewards on intrinsic motivation (Lepper, Greene & Nisbett, 1973); the interaction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Calder & Staw, 1975); and punishment by rewards (Kohn, 1999). The research on motivation is also studied in organizational sciences, approaching topics like the influence of rewards (Pierce & Cameron, 2002) to personal motivation (Frei, 1997), the relation of motivation and knowledge transfer (Osterloh & Frei, 2000), the integration of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and reviews of the theme (Bè nabou & Tirole, 2003; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Deci and Ryan (1985) developed the self-determination theory (SDT, Figure 1), debating the relevant role of extrinsic motivation, as there are many varieties of extrinsic motivation. Some undermine motivation and others are agents to action, as intrinsic motivation exists within individuals, it might be triggered or not, depending on the type of external motivation. In other words, SDT states that social and environmental factors facilitate or undermine motivation, as motivation is an inherent propensity, it can be catalyzed rather than caused (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

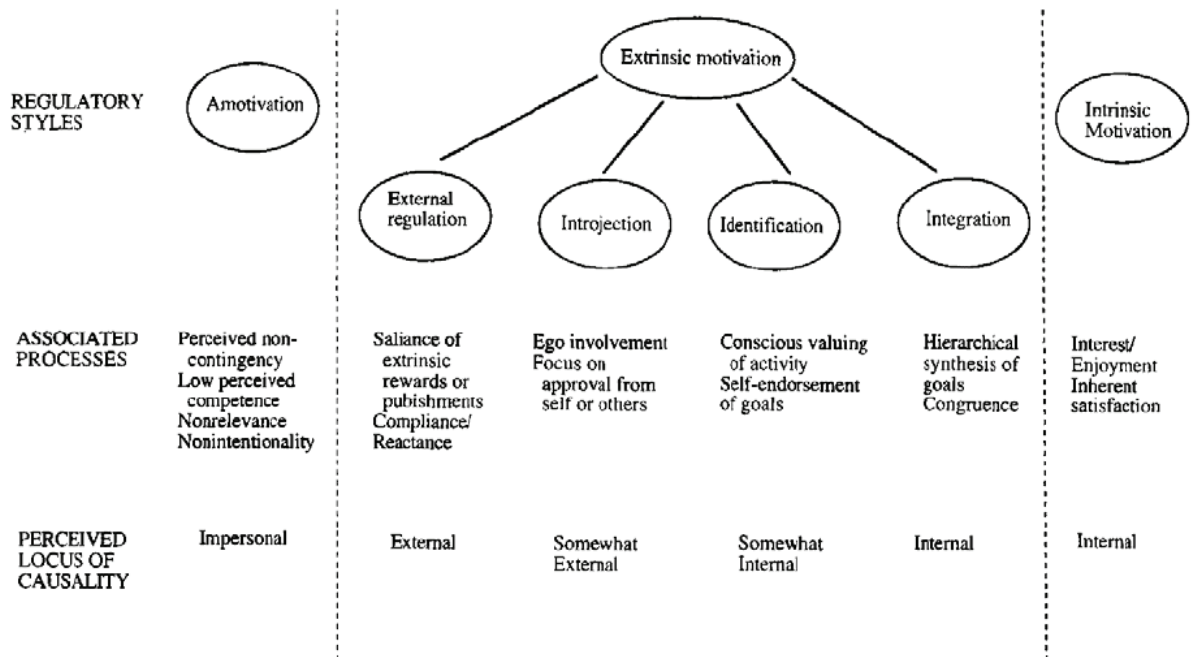


Figure 1 – Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation taxonomy (Deci & Ryan, 1985)

Figure 1 presents OIT taxonomy of different types of motivation. Motivation may vary from the amotivated state in the left to the motivated state in the right. Motivation may be caused from not recognizing value in an activity (Ryan, 1995), the lack of belief that the activity will lead to a desired outcome (Seligman, 1975), or not feeling competent to perform the activity (Deci, 1975). Moving to the right, the taxonomy presents various types of motivation, reflecting different degrees of autonomy or self-determination: *external regulation*, when the activity is performed to satisfy an external demand or to obtain an external reward; *introjected regulation*, when the activity is performed under pressure to avoid guilt, or anxiety, or to ego and pride purposes; *identification*, when the activity is performed because it is considered important; *integrated regulation*, when it is related to values and needs considered important (almost intrinsic motivation).

Observing Figure 1 we may induce that the internal and external pressures for problem choice presented in the previous sections, may influence in different ways the researcher motivation. For example the *amotivation* may be considered for researchers that quit the investigation task, dedicating exclusively for teaching or to administrative tasks because feel incompetent to do and communicate their research. *External regulation* can be present when the researchers just produce their papers in order to get the tenure, a typical problem of productivism. *Introjected regulation* may happen when the researchers do their work for field recognition or fame. *Identification* should arise when during their research the researcher recognizes the important of the task for progress or for someone. *Integrated regulation* may be present when the researcher is motivated to solve a problem that is close to his or her values, for example to solve a question of his or her religious community. Finally, *extrinsic motivation* is present when the researcher does it for his own pleasure and enjoyment of answering questions for curiosity and personal interest.

3. METHOD

Our study is intended to understand the researchers' motivations to enter or abandon a research field in business management, contributing to the problem choice literature, an often neglected theme for the researchers of the field. To achieve this goal, we first identified and selected an important topic in business management, considered to be important and not enough researched, using bibliographic information from reputed authors. Then, we performed a bibliometric test to confirm the insufficient volume of research on the topic. With these initial results, we were able to identify the main authors of the field in order to survey them, inquiring their motivation to enter or abandon the research topic.

3.1 Selecting the topic

To select the topic, we decided to consider an extreme-case. An extreme-case is a case that lies far away from the standard situation (Gerring, 2007). The selected extreme-case topic is organizational decline. Organizational decline studies the causes, effects and actions related to the decline of organizational performance that may lead to failure (bankruptcy or other forms of organizational death), or turnaround. Although being a very important topic, organizational decline has been an under-researched by the academy as Whetten (1980) pointed in the 80's and Serra et al. (2013) pointed recently.

3.2 Authors selection and under-research evidence

In this section we intend to identify the most important articles, and authors, in organizational decline, as well as the fact that it is an under-researched field. We thus assessed the research published in 18 leading business/management journals (Harzing, 2010). The search in these 18 journals was performed using ISI Web of Knowledge Internet portal (<http://webofknowledge.com>).

We followed three steps for the selection of the sample:

- (1) The journals selection.
- (2) Eight keywords were searched in each journal using the "topic" option at ISE Web of Knowledge Internet portal on the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the articles: decline (with the variations organizational decline and performance decline), decay (with the variations strategy decay, performance decay and organizational decay), bankruptcy, failure (with the variations business failure and organizational failure), turnaround, retrenchment, and longevity and life cycle.
- (3) For each article identified we analyzed the title and abstract to guarantee that the content of the article matched to the theme. We identified a list of 104 articles on decline and used the authors of these papers to define a list of possible scholars to survey.

3.3 Survey protocol and questions

The survey was conducted by e-mail. From the initial list of 132 authors that (co) authored at least one of the identified papers, 39 agreed to participate¹. Mostly, these were scholars in the fields of strategic management, organizational theory and population ecology. The survey protocol stated, after an introduction where we identified the specific articles of the author, the following questions:

(1) We are trying to understand the authors' motivations to study decline and why they stopped doing it. (2) We are trying to know your motivations for the articles you published on the topic. (3) Whether you consider that decline is still an interesting topic in these troubled days?

After receiving the answers, even with the direction of the partially open questions used for the survey, we coded the answers and perform a content analysis to understand the challenges and issues in a particularly difficult research topic that deals with an unpleasant past of the organizations. The motivations were classified either as internal or external factors (Cole & Cole, 1973; Zuckerman, 1978; Gieryn, 1978; Ziman, 1987), as well as for the type of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

4. RESULTS

As shown in Table 3, from 31,218 articles published in the entire available online database of the journals (Table 3), we initially found 631 articles. After the selection, reading articles and abstracts, the final sample comprises the small amount of 0,33% of the total articles of the journals related to organizational decline, only 104 articles. We identified 132 authors from the 104 articles, from which, 39 responded the e-mail. The respondent answers are presented in the results of next item.

Table 3. Selected articles

Journal	Period available	Total articles published	Articles on decline	% in the journal	% of sample
Strategic Management Journal (SMJ)	1980/2011*	1554	13	0,84	12,50
Long Range Planning (LRP)	1968/2011*	2465	11	0,45	10,58
Journal of Management Studies (JMS)	1966/2011	1449	10	0,69	9,62
Organization Science (OS)	1990/2011	906	10	1,10	9,62
Journal of Business Research (JBR)	1973/2011	2814	9	0,32	8,65
Journal of Business Venturing (JBV)	1987/2011	755	8	1,06	7,69
Business History (BH)	1958/2011	907	7	0,77	6,73
Business History Review (BHR)	1956/2011*	884	6	0,68	5,77
Journal of Management (JM)	1983/2011	893	5	0,56	4,81
Management Science (MS)	1954/2011	4782	5	0,10	4,81
Harvard Business Review (HBR)	1922/2011	6295	5	0,08	4,81
British Journal of Management (BJM)	2000/2011	401	3	0,75	2,88
Organizational Dynamics (OD)	1972/2011	872	2	0,23	1,92
Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences (CJAS)	1992/1996*	128	2	1,56	1,92
Academy of Management Journal (AMJ)	1958/2011*	2098	2	0,10	1,92
Administrative Science Quarterly (ASQ)	1956/2011	1280	2	0,16	1,92
California Management Review (CMR)	1958/2011	1888	2	0,11	1,92
Academy of Management Review	1983/2011	847	2	0,24	1,92

(AMR)

Total	31,218	104	0,33	100
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Source: data collected from ISI web of knowledge. Computations by the authors.

4.1 Authors' surveyed answers

The economic context is a strong influencing factor on decline research. Interestingly, all these interviewees associated scholarly interest to the real economic context and the empiric, or anecdotal evidence of declining firms. Most consider it as a timely topic, now that the European and the US economy are not fairing as well.

Table 4. Evidence of organizational decline relevance, causes and consequences

Statement [author]	Importance	Causes
I would hypothesize that researchers are turning to the topic again, now that the American economy is again in bad shape. [David Whetten]	Timely topic	Economic problems in US
I continue to believe that organizational decline is an important phenomenon, worthy of theoretical and empirical attention. This is particularly true in the current era, when economic stagnation is enhancing the incidence of organizational decline in many countries. [William McKinley]	Need of theoretical and empirical attention Timely topic	Economic problems in many countries Increase of organizational decline
...of course the field is still very relevant, just look at the failure rates of firms in all countries. [Arent Greve]	Always important	Failure rates of companies
I think it may be more important today than it was in the 80's and 90's. After years of inflated growth, so many organizations and other economic entities (like cities and countries) now will have to adapt to long-term declining environments. Success or failure depends on how these entities respond to the reality. Contraction should not be equated with failure. [Dean Ludwig]	Timely important Long-term and generic effect	Economic problems Need of adaptation
The focus on decline does appear be popular during periods of economic decline. My own take is that the topic is pretty much exhausted. We have a theory with empirical support for how decline occurs and its path toward eventual demise. So unless there is something that challenges our current thinking about the process or consequences of decline, I don't see resurgence in this area of research in the near future. [Robert Wiseman]	Timely popular Consider exhausted on current thinking	Economic problems

Nonetheless, other scholars point for a possible exhaustion of the topic. Robert Wiseman, for instance, stated that "The focus on decline does appear be popular during periods of economic decline. My own take is that the topic is pretty much exhausted. We have a theory with empirical support for how decline occurs and its path toward eventual demise. So unless there is something that challenges our current thinking about the process or consequences of decline, I don't see resurgence in this area of research in the near future". Wiseman then argues that organizational decline is being studied using the same theories and arguments that are used for studying organizational growth and success. Jamal Shamsie also argued that decline is a broad topic that has been studied using many mainstream theories such as the resource-based view.

4.3.1 Authors' motivations to start studying the topic

To many scholars the external context did matter as initial motivation that was largely influenced by the US recession at the time. However, we should point out that it is not the economy per se that mattered but the effects held on individuals and firms' decreased performance. For instance David Whetten remarked:

“It was recession that US firms faced during that time. Irrespective of its “causes” it lead organizations to do things that at the time we as organizational scholars had no way of conceptualizing, e.g., massive downsizing.”

T. D’Aunno had a similar initial motivation:

“I first studied decline in the early 1980s because there was a recession in our country and, importantly, the auto industry in the state where I lived and worked (Michigan) was hit very hard by the economic downturn. So, decline was an important topic and one that we could feel locally.”

Raymond Zammuto felt the effects of the poor economy on education and delved into it, especially seeking to uncover what it took to manage declining organizations:

“Education, like many other US industries in the early 1980s, was confronted with a period of slow to negative growth and colleges and universities were finding it difficult to cope. One study we did showed that over 400 US colleges and universities closed their doors during the 1970s. In contrast to this reality, the vast majority of organizational research focused on success and little was known about managing in organizations facing decline.”

Many other motivations came into play for deciding to focus on decline. The personal reasons, including the proximity or direct contact with organizational decline situations, as Richard D’Aveni “my father worked for Sears from 1950 to 1970, responsible to open new stores in New England. Then started to close” or Dean Shepherd’s “because my father’s family business failed”.

An intriguing issue, or a gap identified in the extant literature, were also triggers. For example, Arjen van Witteloostuijn stated that “Some organizations perform well, and others do not. All organizations experience changes in performance, and all organizations will ultimately fail. Trying to understand the drivers of these processes is intriguing”. Arent Greve was also intrigued “I got interested in decline because I saw that several very promising firms, some of them even got entrepreneurial prices, and others were considered stars, outstanding firms, but after some years, lots of them got into serious crises, and several disappeared.” And, Ludwig noted “I originally studied the problem because I was a member of a religious order that was losing membership.”

As the topic of declined gained momentum, the pioneers others joined, sometimes just to have an opportunity for joint work with a Professor (or being supervised), as well as influenced by their work. D’Aunno was very explicit on this:

“I wanted to work with Robert Sutton, who was a fellow doctoral student at the time. He was interested in decline and his interest influenced me too. We wrote 3 articles together on various aspects of decline (one of which you cite below). Also very important: Kim Cameron was a senior professor at our School at the time, and we were influenced by his work too. Of interest: my main mentor, Richard Price, started to study ways to help people find jobs at this time.”

Table 5. Authors’ initial motivation

Statements [author]	Motivations for research	Internal or external factor	Motivation type
In the 1980s, the American economy was struggling, and lots of companies were in trouble. This prompted researchers to address the topic. [Donald Hambrick]	Recession of US firms	External	Extrinsic – Identification
My reasons to study decline is because it was a big deal in 1980s. Management decline study was a big issue. It was still a young subject for research, with lots of things to be written about. This was the topic of my dissertation with Hambrick as dissertation supervisor. Also, as a person motivation, my father worked for Sears from 1950 to 1970, responsible to	Important research	Internal	Extrinsic – Identification
	Dissertation topic	External	Extrinsic – External Regulation

open new stores in New England. Than started to close. [Richard D'Aveni]	Personal Motivation	Internal	Extrinsic – Integrated Regulation
My motivation for studying decline was an opportunity to do research on declining enrollments and revenues at US colleges and universities with the newly formed Organizational Studies Program at the National Center for Educational Management Systems in 1981. Kim Cameron was the program director, David Whetten was a member of the advisory panel. [Raymond Zammuto]	Important researchers	Internal	Extrinsic - Identification
I started working on this topic, as stated in the paper to which you refer below, because my father's family business failed. [Shepherd, D.]	Personal motivation	Internal	Extrinsic – Integrated Regulation
My original incentive for studying this topic was to understand an educational system (school district) in the US that was declining at the time. [Zehava Roseblatt]	Personal motivation	Internal	Extrinsic – Integrated Regulation
I originally studied the problem because I was a member of a religious order that was losing membership. But my interest was more general — I felt there was too strong of an equation of success with growth in most organizations. [Dean Ludwig]	Personal motivation Research gap	Internal Internal	Extrinsic – Integrated Regulation Intrinsic
I got interested in decline because I saw that several very promising firms, some of them even got entrepreneurial prices, and others were considered stars, outstanding firms, but after some years, lots of them got into serious crises, and several disappeared. [Arent Greve]	Important firms going into decline (intriguing)	Internal	Intrinsic
I have always studied “organizational failure” as the dual of “success.” And in my paper “Death hurts but it isn't fatal...” I look at the complementarities between “private” and “public” knowledge and the diffusion of knowledge created by innovative companies that have since failed. At a more macro level (industry/product level), I think that we have studied diffusion of innovations a lot, and paid significant attention to the “creative” part of “creative destruction.” However, we have not examined issues related to the “destruction” part of creative destruction. [Rajshree Argawal]	Failure as dual of success (intriguing) Research gap	Internal	Intrinsic
What got me interested in the topic and led to the 1992 article that you cite below was the Hambrick and D'Aveni ASQ article, “Large Corporate Failures as Downward Spirals.” The thing that I found most intriguing in this article was their finding that significant differences in the finances of firms that fail versus firms that survive were observable as much as ten years before eventual failure. [Larry Stimpert]	Other article/author influence	Internal	Intrinsic
Regarding the fact that recently I have not done any work on decline, the reason is very personal rather than substantive. Actually my work on it in the first place was a function of my affiliation was a Hopper Rosenblatt were both at Washington University in St. Louis. Since that time she has moved back to Israel and I have moved Florida and we have not collaborated on anything. [Walter Nord]	Working with a colleague.	Internal	Extrinsic - Identification

4.3.2 Authors' abandonment reasons and topic influence in their further research

Confirming the aforementioned idea that the topic increases when it is externally salient, in this case, in times of crisis and almost did not exist during periods of economic expansion, a significant number of researchers halted their research with the recovery of the US economy after the 1990s. Notwithstanding, this was not the only reason. Abandoning other topic research was due to such motives as moving to administrative positions, to other schools and countries, changing research subject for new interests, being part of another group of research, tenure requirements, among others. Table 6 summarizes some statements.

Table 6. Evidence of scholars' actual research and motives to move to other fields

Topic	Statements [<i>author</i>]	Internal or external factor	Motivation type
Moved to other topics/branched out	"I have not stopped -- just branched out. See my books the Icarus Paradox (1990) and Managing for the long run (2005) and my articles Architecture of simplicity, etc." [Danny Miller,]	Internal	Intrinsic
	"I did write a few papers on downsizing. Gradually I became interested in a related topic, but in the organization behavior (not theory) area - job insecurity." [Zehava Rosenblatt]	Internal	Intrinsic
	"At the time that I was writing about decline, I also became very interested in institutional theory. My attention shifted to institutional theory and I continue to do work with this theory to this day." [Thomas D'Aunno]	Internal	Intrinsic
	"I got out of that field simply because I needed external financing for research, and didn't get any for that topic, however, I got lots of financing for other types of studies, particularly in technology development and social networks, here of course. I reconnected to the problem of decline and crises, because I didn't do research in only excellent firms, needed some comparisons. Lately, I have also done research on high reliability organizations and their vulnerability." [Arent Greve]	External	Extrinsic – External regulation
	"I continue to be very interested in the topic, and try to read new articles that appear on the subject. It is interesting how the focus of scholars' work changes over time. While I continue to be interested in the topic of decline, my own published research has been primarily in other areas, including corporate strategy and diversification and corporate governance, etc." [Larry Stimpert]	Internal	Intrinsic
	"My dissertation topic was turnaround. I have an AMJ article on the topic from that dissertation. I have then gone on and down an SMJ piece on the same topic. It is still an interest of mine but really have simply moved onto other topics." [Garry Bruton]	Internal	Intrinsic
Shifted research topic but still studying decline in other subjects	"I prefer to do ground-breaking research, doing the initial conceptual development and measurements, and then let others flesh out the research stream. So I published papers on job insecurity and organizational decline, and then moved on to other areas of interest. I no longer work on organizational decline. My current work focuses on cities in decline, and also national economies in decline. In the United States, we are undergoing a massive shift in demographics, and a deadlocked political system that cannot deal with the growing problems. If you are interested in those topics I can have my assistant send you a DVD that explains the dynamics of city and national decline." [Leonard Greenhalgh]	Internal	Intrinsic
	"I would say that I just got interested in other things, but themes from my research on decline persist throughout my writings, organizational effectiveness, leadership, how good managers have to do the dirty work, and the issue of dealing with failures. I think that the label has gone away, but research still continues.	Internal	Intrinsic

	My new book, Good Boss, Bad Boss has a chapter on doing the dirty work that is very much shaped by my old decline research, and I wrote the HBR in 2009 which could very much be called a decline piece. The thing I wonder is whether the topic has faded, our just the word.” [Robert Sutton]		
Continue working on decline	“I’m still interested in the topic and have a working paper with a failure mechanism in the theoretical model.” [Stewart Thornhill]	Internal	Intrinsic
	“I have not stopped doing research in this area. In fact one of my papers is coming out in the next issue of Academy of Management Journal.” [Dean Shepherd]	Internal	Intrinsic
	“I never stopped working on these issues. E.g., I am currently working on a series of papers on managerial control loss. Attached is my CV, where you will find many examples of work on organizational performance, broadly defined (hence including decline and exit)” [Arjen van Witteloostuijn]	Internal	Intrinsic
	“I have not stopped studying it, and will continue to be working, and directing some graduate student dissertations, on the topic.” [Rajshree Agrawal]	Internal	Intrinsic
Recovery of the US economy	“Basically, once the US economy took off again, US scholars, like myself, lost interest in studying organizational decline. As you would expect I see a resurgence of interest lately.” [David Whetten]	External	Extrinsic – Identification or Introjected Regulation
	“As the economy got better, through the 1990s and 2000s, there was simply less interest in troubled companies.” [Donald Hambrick]	External	Extrinsic – Identification or Introjected Regulation
	“I think the primary reason that research on decline declined was the improvement in the US economy during the 1990s. Who wants to read about organizational decline and death in an age of organizational prosperity?” [Raymond Zammutto]	External	Extrinsic – Identification or Introjected Regulation
Research on decline was secondary	“The purpose of my 2003 Org Science paper on Oticon wasn’t to study decline per se. Rather, it was to direct attention to the neglected costs of organizational strategies of building dynamic capabilities by emulating market organization (“internal hybrids”). A part of the argument was to reinterpret a famous episode of a firm (i.e., hearing-aids producer Oticon) where a particular internal hybrid had in fact “declined” -- for reasons of transaction costs accumulating.” [Nicolai Foss]	-	
Job changes - took administrative position at the university	“I stopped doing research on it for two reasons. First, I became very interested in other topics, most notably global strategy. Second, I became a Dean and had much less time for research.” [Carl Zeithaml]	Internal External	Intrinsic Extrinsic – External Regulation
	“Since then I returned to Israel, where the educational system is centralistic, and decline was not a relevant topic. It is becoming a very relevant topic in business, of course, given the economic crisis in the world (relatively less severe in Israel). To my opinion, the most interesting thing to explore is the unique feature of decline, those that are not just the reverse of growth.” [Zehava Rosenblatt]	External	Extrinsic – External Regulation
	“I did not continue my research in this area because I left academia for a few years and picked up other research when I returned. Today, my life is fairly busy	External	Extrinsic – External regulation

with administrative responsibilities, and I do not have a great deal of time to do research and writing. I still think it is a very worthwhile—and timely—topic.” [Dean Ludwig]		Amotivation
“I moved into an administrative position some 15 years ago and have not done as much research on this and other topics in the past several years.” [Mark Mone]	External	Extrinsic – External Regulation

4.3.3 Reason for an important topic be under-researched

The scholars interviewed had varying perspectives albeit with some common threads. Several scholars interviewed noted the bias towards success and growth, or positive research, and avoiding themes that are unattractive or have a negative connotation. For instance, Philip Bromiley clearly stated that “It is part of the heavy bias in strategy towards trying to tell firms how to be successful”. Jeffrey Pfeffer, whose research is at least indirectly tied to organizational decline, noted:

“One way of thinking of this is the following: Jim Collins wrote a book about how organizations get into trouble in terms of performance - sort of how they go off the rails. I think it is his best book. It sold the worst. People want to hear “good news,” and study “positive things” (there is, as you know, even a field of positive psychology which is growing rapidly). That's why no one wants to study decline, or at least one interpretation for this.”

The criteria for publication and the evolution of the disciplines may also have an influence on what scholars study. As disciplines mature and theories become more established, research tends to become both more theory-driven, show the contribution to theory, instead of simply being oriented by phenomena, and heavier in statistics. Some scholars mentioned in this regard that research is increasingly theory-oriented and converging to dominant theoretical approaches, which poses some hazards for organizational decline research. It is interesting to note William McKinley’s remark on this:

“The reason that some scholars may have abandoned organizational decline research is that organization studies has become very theory-oriented in the last twenty years, so that if a particular topic is not perceived to advance a dominant theory, it loses interest for scholars. I personally do not subscribe to this style of work, and I believe that theory and research should be phenomenon-oriented. However, if scholars believe that they will attain additional publications and prestige by promoting abstract theory that is remote from phenomenological foundations, they will certainly do so. I cannot speak for other decline researchers from the 1980s and 1990s as to whether this has been a motivation for moving away from decline research, but I do think it is a trend that has affected organization studies generally.”

Robert Sutton pointed that studying decline may clash into definitional issues. There is no precise definition of what is decline. In fact, several scholars interviewed questioned what is decline and suggested that thinking about decline we may actually find multiple lenses and phenomena, including exit, divestitures, downsizing, bankruptcy, and others, as noted by Sutton. Other scholars noted that they did not study organization decline itself but rather that decline emerged when delving into other topics. Joel Baum, for example, commented having recently revised organizational ecology where there are several topics related to organizational decline. Robert Sutton and Vinit Desai argued that maybe the field has been studied all these years under other “names and forms”. Hence, some scholars raise the possibility that decline has been studied albeit with other names. For instance, population ecology scholars consider it part of the extant work on the field. In this regard, Robert Burgelman noted:

“I don't know why there is an apparent reduction in research on organizational decline. My own interest in organizational decline is related to the study of “strategic business

exit” in the context of the intraorganizational ecology of strategy making. ...The paper on “*Let Chaos Reign, Then Rein in Chaos ...*”, SMJ, 2007 (co-authored with A. Grove) is an attempt to explain the role of the intraorganizational ecology of strategy-making in coping with nonlinear strategic dynamics, and to link the intraorganizational ecology of strategy-making framework to insights about conditions for continued adaptation articulated in complexity theory.”

The scholars’ opinions may thus be categorized into three broad areas: one related to the theme itself, the second to the research practice and the third to external features, as it is possible to see in Table 7.

Table 7. Is organizational decline an under-researched theme?

Statements [<i>author</i>]	Reason for lack of research	Internal or external factor	Motivation type probable effect
Organizational decline has not been adequately examined by organizational scientists, because they are preoccupied with organizational growth and its consequences. The emphasis on growth reflects actual organizational conditions and the prevailing ideology in our society. [<i>David Whetten</i>]	Prevalent focus on growth	External	Extrinsic – <i>External or introjected regulation</i>
In my opinion, it is part of the heavy bias in strategy towards trying to tell firms how to be successful. You should be warned that I think much of current research in strategy relies on very poor theory. (I published a book called Behavioral Foundations of Strategic Management, which deals with this). [<i>Philip Bromiley</i>]	Focus on successful firms Poor theory in current research	External	Extrinsic – <i>External or Introjected Regulation</i>
Decline is potentially useful to study is a kind of negative thing. Taboo, I do not think that you have reviewers that would be favorable to have the papers published. I stop writing because exhausted the database. It was time to study another dataset of decline. The cost would be too high to have it. [<i>Richard D’Aveni</i>]	Negative theme Difficulty and cost of data	Internal External	Amotivation Extrinsic – <i>External Regulation</i>
I got out of that field simply because I needed external financing for research, and didn't get any for that topic. [<i>Arent Greve</i>]	Difficulty in research funding	External	Extrinsic – <i>External Regulation</i>
I imagine that researchers stopped studying decline when the US economy began to grow again in the mid-1980s. In fact, since the mid-1980s, the US economy continued to grow, until, of course, the 2008 collapse. [<i>Thomas D’Aunno</i>]	Economy recovered	External	Extrinsic – <i>Identification or Introjected Regulation</i>
Perhaps it has not received more attention because: (1) definitional issues, and (2) it is part of many concepts such as bankruptcy, life cycles, growth, etc. [<i>Ken G. Smith</i>]	Difficult to define Other related themes	External	Extrinsic – <i>External Regulation</i>
Actually to the contrary, I am still working in the area. We have a JoM review article on the topic going as well as new empirical research. We think it is tough to keep going because the stream has been fragmented and largely atheoretical. [<i>David Simon</i>]	Fragmented and largely atheoretical	External	Extrinsic – <i>External Regulation</i>

5. DISCUSSION

The results enable us to propose the framework presented in Figure 2. Problem choice motivations to enter or stay in a topic are different from the motivations to abandon and not to enter, in general. We found two different motivations to enter or stay in the topic: motivation for the problem; personal motivation. To abandon, also two different kinds of motivations: the need or will to change; the difficulties that pressure the researchers to change. When the researchers decided to abandon, they usually move to related fields or a field using the prior knowledge from the topic, or they move to a different topic. We will discuss each point in detail.

At the left side of our framework we have the identified motivations to “enter” or “not to enter” in the field. Motivation “not to enter” is usually due to amotivation, for lack of interest or for not believing that the results could be reached, or due to extrinsic factors that undermine the motivation. In this case *external regulation* or *introjected regulation* factors as the impossibility to have financing, to access data or research far from the mainstream.

Motivations to “enter” the field are intrinsic, or extrinsic, but in this case, *identification* or *integrated regulation*. These extrinsic motivators are facilitators for the intrinsic motivation. For example, the motivation to study a field because you are close to the problem, or suffer the effect, is a strong motivation. Also, if you receive others influence, for example when you enjoy to work with a friend, or have the desire to work with a supervisor, or is positively influenced by his opinion.

At the right side the motivations to “stay or branch” and to “abandon”. The motivations to “stay or to branch” are intrinsic. For example, the emergence and importance of a problem means it is something that is rising and with a strong effect. The research gap in this case indicates a interesting and until not enough researched field. Both motivators either for curiosity, for the desire to contribute, may be considered intrinsic and strong motivators.

The motivations to “abandon” the field. The need or desire to change may be considered intrinsic or extrinsic, depending on the situation. The change to an administrative function or to another university, are predominantly extrinsic – *external regulation* or *introjected regulation* - usually, as it is commonly related to financial and power rewards. The lost of interest is intrinsic as the researcher would move to another field because he found another topic more interesting to research, for example. However, the difficulties are negative motivators.

External regulation and *introjected regulation* are undermining agents of motivation. They are predominantly extrinsic motivators that inhibit the researchers to move on. For example, the difficult to access data and funds because the topic in negative or else, or deals with companies that do not exist anymore. If the topic is out of the research mainstream, it would be difficult to attract researchers. As stated by Mckinley, Mone & Moon (1999), the work will receive attention when is different from the extant research, but connected with literature mainstream. Both situations are bad for the progress of the knowledge as researchers feel pressured for the need to “publish or perish”. But even abandoning the field researchers, when moving to related topics continues to use partially the motivations that incentive them to enter the research in the topic.

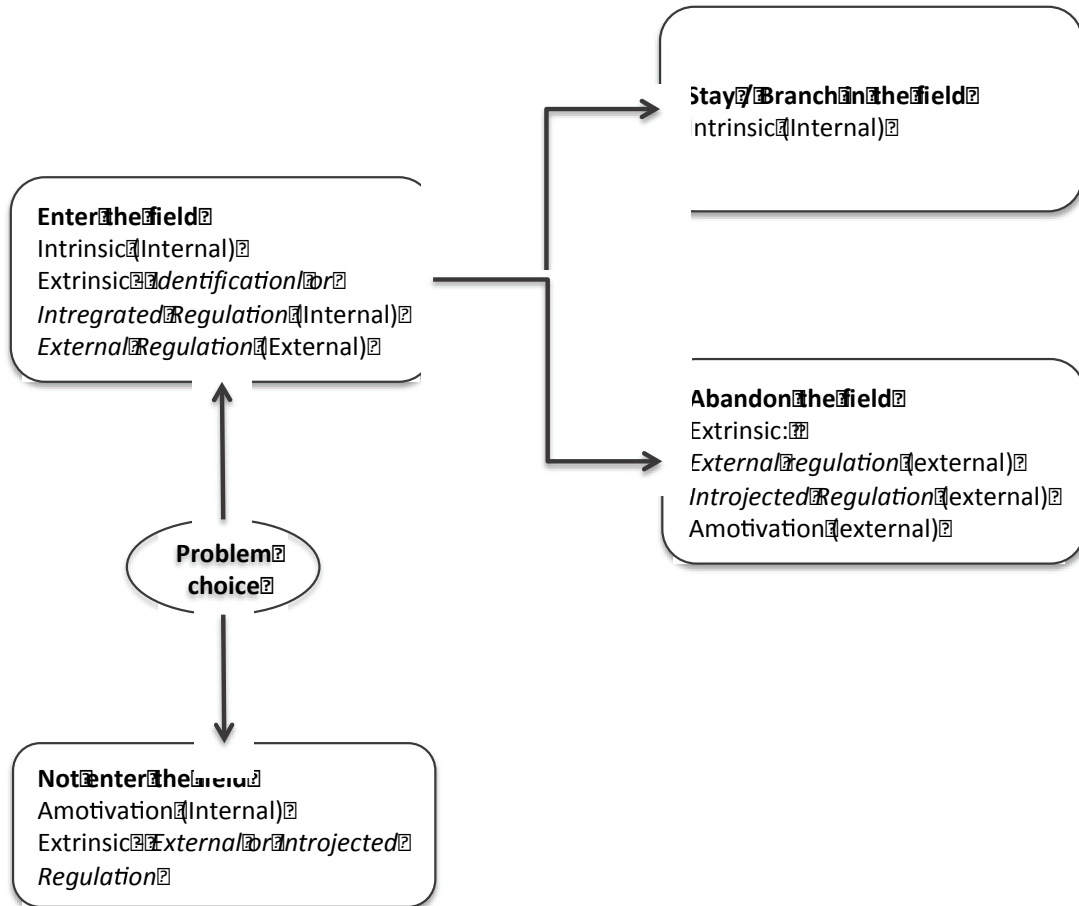


Figure 2. Problem choice motivation – why and how.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

To conclude, external factors have a significant impact in researchers' motivation. They are triggers to “enter” in the field when the types are closer to the intrinsic motivation side at the Ryan and Rice (1985) taxonomy presented, or, *identification* or *integrated regulation*. The initial motivation to “enter” is transformed to intrinsic motivation for the researchers that “stay or branch” in the field. But, researchers abandon the field when they are susceptible to extrinsic motivator types from the left side of Ryan and Rice (1985), closer to amotivation, as *external regulation* and *introjected regulation*.

The findings from our work call for the attention for better policies either from the state organs regarding financing and other research incentives, as well as for the internal rules at the universities. It is also calls for more diverse channels for research publication, as well, for more data and information bases available for the researchers.

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