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DOCTORAL THESIS
SUMMARY

Continuity and change, an answer to disruption in the context of
multiple embeddedness

The case of shipping industry, Japan

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Table of contents

List of abbreviations

List of figures

List of tables

List of exhibits

List of charts

1. Introduction
2. Overview
 - 2.1 The Industry
 - 2.2 The Firm
3. Theoretical background
 - 3.1 History matters
 - 3.2 Alliance capitalism
 - 3.3 The international Japanese Firm
 - 3.3.1 Institutional theory perspective
 - 3.3.2 Structural contingency theory perspective
 - 3.3.3 Control and coordination theory perspective
 - 3.3.4 Sensemaking and power theory perspective
 - 3.3.5 Drivers and inhibitors of JBG internationalization
4. Methodology
 - 4.1 Research paradigm
 - 4.2 Grounded theory
 - 4.2.1 Procedures
 - 4.2.2 Coding paradigm
 - 4.3 Workflow
 - 4.3.1 Housekeeping: researcher's prior inferences
 - 4.3.2 Build change into the processes: emergent research objective and research questions
 - 4.3.3 Similar researches and studies
 - 4.3.4 Applied sampling method
 - 4.4 Research reliability and validity
 - 4.4.1 Generalizability
 - 4.4.2 Reproducibility
 - 4.4.3 Evaluation
5. Data collection and analysis

- 5.1 External and internal validity
- 5.2 Data collection
- 5.3 Data analysis
- 6. Discourse: development and findings
 - 6.1 Development
 - 6.1.1 Embedded operating model
 - 6.1.2 Metamorphosis
 - 6.2 Findings
- 7. Conclusions and research contribution
 - 7.1 Conclusions
 - 7.2 Contribution to the body of research
 - 7.2.1 Contribution to multiple embeddedness theory
 - 7.2.2 Contribution to sensemaking theory
 - 7.2.3 Contribution to power theory
 - 7.2.4 Contribution to structural contingency theory
 - 7.2.5 Managerial implications
 - 7.2.6 Limitations of study, call for further research

Bibliography

Appendix: Interview Guide

Keywords

Grounded research, multiple embeddedness, organizational sensemaking, micro-processes, mechanisms of continuity and transformation

Introduction

Business groups: economically and socially construed networked organizations characterized by complex and uninterrupted adaptation to their environment, are known to resist change as their intertwined linkages and dependence on a narrowly defined set of institutional structures lock them in a state of inertia. The business groups' longevity and economic power contradicts this, and so far, no research has been able to account for this paradox. To help answer this question, the study's objective is to discover

- how the business group form of organization succeeds in managing sustained disruptive changes
- how a specific institution within business groups enables and/or inhibits responses to disruptive changes in the environment
- what kind of change mechanisms there are at the individual and the organizational levels

The objectives above are prompted by gaps in theory, methodology and managerial practice.

Theory

From a theoretical perspective, business groups represent the paradox of embeddedness which the current theory is unable to explicate. The embeddedness theory stipulates that complex networked organizations are unlikely to survive in a global environment, amid increasingly frequent disruptions as their intertwined linkages lock them in a state of inertia. Business groups, - interdependent conglomerate organizations with extended and multiplex, socially and economically construed business networks, have been highly

successful in promoting efficiencies and on-going adaptation processes by “social and economic functioning through mutual cooperation within highly cohesive, closed and secure relationships”. This embeddedness, on the other hand, exposes firms to external shocks by insulating them from external pools of knowledge. In addition, the assurances of embeddedness together with the path dependence of these long-standing relationships, result in a lack of appetite for change. This study is seeking to close this gap in theory of embeddedness and contribute to a better understanding of business groups’ inherent change mechanisms.

Methodology

Business groups’ boundaries make these difficult to approach for group-outsiders, and this accounts for the lack of understanding about their organizational mechanisms a great deal. Studying business groups calls for an understanding oriented emergent approach for various reasons:

- The objective of the study is the discovery of change processes in a field with no pertinent body of research available.
- Organization is viewed as a historically and culturally embedded construct. As a social construct, organization has a high tacit dimension that is difficult to explore with the positivist quantitative approaches.
- Management as a social process is guided by tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is enacted, but is not “not codified, written down and stored” (Partington 2000). Understanding oriented studies codify tacit knowledge and transform this into actionable insights.
- Business groups are both economically and socially construed networks. Their

organizational mechanisms have a high tacit dimension laden with taken for granted meanings and shared understandings that positivist approaches fail to explicate.

As tacit meanings are arrived at through an intimacy with the subject, the coping and change mechanisms of business groups would continue to be little understood due to lack of access to them. An opportunity offered to fill this methodological gap when a business group agreed that I conduct semi-structured interview-based research with their colleagues.

Managerial practice

Twenty countries contribute over 80% to the worldwide (nominal) GDP (IMF Statistics, 2019 October). The group form of corporate organization dominates in ten of these countries and can be observed in an additional three on this list. In terms of geographic coverage, business groups are prevalent in Asia, South America, Africa, South and East Europe and to a certain extent, North Europe.

Due to the high social component of group organizations, their organizational processes bear a high tacit dimension. This poses a challenge for both group insider and outsider parties when communicating and/or coordinating with each other. While research exists on the macro and meso-level organization of business groups, little is understood about their coordinating and adaptive mechanisms at the individual level.

The case is supplied by a Japanese business group (JBG) in the shipping industry's bulk cargo segment. Both Firm and Industry share the characteristics of multiple embeddedness, exclusivity and long business cycles and, as an extreme case, this lends

itself well for examination and theory building.

Methodology

Phenomenology is appropriate to explain reality as one constructed by the actors' interpretation of their conditions and recreated by the researcher's analytical work. Here, reality is constituted by empirical data: behaviour observations, interviews, retrospections, documentary records. For this reason, grounded research was conducted under a social constructivist epistemological stance. The grounded researcher shall free the discovery from bias, while at the same time recognizes that assumptions are as much constructed as are inherent; these cannot be abandoned. I wanted to acknowledge the grounded researcher's point of view when constructing hypotheses. In this study, hypothesis shall mean an inference on the part of the researcher: the passing of beliefs from one form to another as one gives rise to the next "by some habit of association" to carry it forward (Pierce, 1893). Accordingly, I took count of my prior assumptions and observed these as they changed over the discovery process.

Consistent with this line of thought, I conducted the theoretical review in the planning, analytical and abstraction phases of the research. In the planning phase, the review helped develop and refine the research concept and acknowledge the extant body of theoretical frameworks. First, I wanted to understand networked organizations, most notably those from the East Asian Confucian culture zone. Then I narrowed down the search to Japanese business groups (JBG). To best understand institutions, I visualized behavior in context. I looked for an environment that was most likely to stimulate the organization and produce visible processes and notable interactions. I hypothesized that contact with group outsiders would yield the best results for the growth opportunities and challenges inherent

in these interactions. This context would also illuminate if and how the organization takes advantage of new knowledge. The context of internationalization was appropriate as an extreme case of “contact with outsiders”.

Concurrently, I explored the internationalization approaches JBG pursued to discover the mechanisms that drove and/or inhibited this endeavour. I found that studies on JBG internationalization focused on specific behaviors e.g., mode of market entry, knowledge creation, sales strategies etc. I noted that explanation was lacking for the reasons behind these behaviors. The planning phase theoretical review accounted for internationalization’s embeddedness in the market players’ institutional environment and opened a more differentiated view on the drivers for / obstacles to these behaviors. As I was looking for cues to discover JBG mechanisms that drove and inhibited internationalization, it became clear, that it was not internationalization per se that defined the member-outsider / growth-risk conflicts that would explicate the organizational growth / obstruction mechanisms. The organizational mechanisms were driven by the internal Core – Periphery conflict – and set in motion by external contact. For this reason, I updated the research objective at the inception stage of the analysis, and moved it to an abstraction higher than internationalization, to organizational resilience by responsiveness to changes. The conceptualization of the interviews brought forward new lines of thought. All the interviews supplied instances of sensemaking and emphasized the role power had in determining the participants, their actions/interactions and environments, in allocating the resources, the responsibilities and in providing for change mechanisms. In light of this, I conducted a deferred theoretical review on sensemaking theory, sensemaking in international business theory and power theory to sharpen conceptualization and to find sources that supported or

contradicted findings.

The interview data were processed with narrative analytical methods. According to the narrative analytical assumption, people tell stories with a purpose: to make sense of their life. I started with thematical analysis to study content, then followed with a structural analysis to see how the composition form underlined and/or refuted the content. Under the stance that stories were embedded, therefore multi-voiced and co-constructed, I then continued with a dialogic/performance narrative analysis to capture situated context: to understand the micro-processes of coordination and decision-making. This then explicated the organizational change mechanisms.

Conclusions

The study finds, that the default JBG modus operandi is the state of equilibrium of a complex, closed network and both survival and renewal mechanisms are complex and incremental adaptation to the host environment.

Confucian philosophy supplies the organizing mechanism via membership - embeddedness, biased power relations and path dependence. The positive and negative dimensions of these constructs balance each other to maintain the status quo. The status quo is affirmed further by path dependence, the philosophy that prioritizes experience over the ambiguity of change. The change enabling constructs are built in the organizing mechanisms but, suppressed by the Confucian dominant logic's preference for equilibrium over fluctuation, assurances over risk; these do not get activated internally. The built-in enablers get activated by external stimuli from significant outsiders, serendipitous stimuli from random outsiders and macro-environmental shocks beyond

embedded controls. Stimuli from powerful embedded contacts are significant, therefore dominate among the triggers. These have the potential to either enrich and/or invigorate an organization's knowledge pool or to isolate and develop it in the self-serving interests of dominating embedded contacts. When the external stimuli target the right keys and are strong and/or painful enough, the enabling constructs may override the inhibitors. Once the enabling mechanisms are activated, JBG's high tacit environment provides a safe zone for sensemaking to take place and to override inhibitors by securing the right amount of buy-in for the initiative to pass. Sensemaking succeeds by formal adoption of new knowledge by top management. Implementation then takes over by sense-giving in a top-down manner regarding action, systems and processes. Rank and file's pre-disposition to be aligned with organizational goals in terms of adhering to directives provides for a reliable roll-out of initiatives. For this reason, the JBG renewal mechanism is incremental adaptation to the embedded environment, both in times of evolution and in times of revolutions.

Contributions to theory and managerial practice

Contradicting the theory of embeddedness, findings testify that incremental improvements are effective amid disruptive changes, provided these find the right organizational target mechanism to recalibrate. Second, not refuting the premise that multiple embeddedness tends to isolate organizations from external knowledge flows as a result of their trust in and/or reliance on their vast proprietary internal knowledge pools and consequent difficulty in recognizing and/or absorbing & leveraging new knowledge; the findings demonstrate that complex closed embedded networks do adopt and integrate external knowledge flows effectively when the organization has a high motivation in

opening to external knowledge flows, and when new knowledge is channeled via powerful external stakeholders, is triggered by fortuitous third party encounters or initiated by powerful macro-economic shocks.

As for sensemaking theory, the findings reveal that embedded vertical networks achieve efficiencies and perform adaptive / renewal routines by sense-giving: via shared meanings, standardized processes and built-in change mechanisms. It is noted, that sense-giving discourages agentic behavior by suppressing sensemaking at the lower organizational hierarchy levels. Dialectically, the study finds that grass-roots sensemaking does take place in the JBG's vertical organization when certain fortuitous conditions are present. Once this instance occurs, the high tacit organizational context shields participants during the political sensemaking as they are securing sponsorship.

As for contribution to power theory, there is a body of literature that recognizes the interrelated nature of power and sensemaking. Power is defined from a variety of perspectives, but none express explicitly its inherent sensemaking aspects. This study undertook to fill this gap and formulated power in the Foucauldian tradition as an embedded and productive construct. Power in this study is defined as the process of imposing one's definition of affairs over other men in order to get things done by mobilizing institutional, ideological and discursive resources and is expressed in acts, narratives and beliefs that are shaped by what people take for granted, accept and reject.

As for structural contingency theory, the findings verify that in order to succeed in a new environment, the firm needs to address internal and external organizational constraints.

JBG addressed the internal organizational constraints by sense-giving in two distinct manners: incrementally and by (partial) decoupling. The business model change precipitated by the consolidating market was managed by adaptation. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, rendered the fundamentals of JBG organization, i.e. membership, group-think; physically impossible and resulted in a partial decoupling. As for decoupling from external organizational constraints, the findings demonstrate that disconnecting from the existing knowledge base is not meaningful as long as this is continuously updated, diverse and relevant knowledge. The narrowly defined customer and partner bases and the dearth of potential new opportunities imply that, if not external decoupling per se, diversification is an option.

The findings have managerial implications in terms of operating design, knowledge management, intra-organizational dialogue, stakeholder management, human resources management. The study underscores that vertical organization bolstered by a cohesive culture and standardization creates operating efficiencies for routine and/or long-cycle business. In ambiguous and fluctuating environments, vertical organization inhibits coordination and grass roots sensemaking capabilities by centralizing authority and resources. Rephrased from a cost perspective, vertical organization creates efficiencies in scale: by standardization and efficiencies in quality assurance: by delegating standardized action. Vertical organization is a cost driver, however, in terms of under-used HR capabilities and infrastructure, redundant communication flows, and more directly, in terms of lost opportunities that is not necessarily mitigated by long business cycles.

From a market interfacing point of view, the findings testify that business model

changes can be introduced without redesigning operations. Not anticipating the impact of business model changes on operations puts a strain on resources and undermines competitiveness. Practical experience shows that a whole-scale overhaul of complex operations is little feasible. This study underlines that realigning micro-processes: communication and resource allocation patterns, is effective.

As for knowledge management, new knowledge meaning change, innovation and creativity; the embeddedness of the construct means that “change” is more likely to be recognized, adopted and adapted when endorsed by a socially and/or organizationally central figure. It is the organization’s market interfacing cells that are the most perceptive of environmental cues and changes. When market interfacing means occupying a peripheral position, the likelihood decreases for the external cues to be recognized, adopted and integrated by the organization. Power bias is, therefore, an impediment to new growth. As witnessed in the case, realigning power in favor of the Periphery empowers it to introduce and find sponsors for new knowledge. This allows the organization to learn from the source without delay or lags in understandings, absorb up-to-date and relevant knowledge and take action promptly. While short of allocating decision-making autonomy, this is a performance incentive and enabler without requiring major changes in systems or processes.

I am closing with implications on talent acquisition and management. To be prepared for any tail event or as-yet unknown future challenge/opportunity, organizations select competent problem-solvers with a flexible mind-set and the ability to execute without supervision. This highly skilled talent pool is then performing routine work, exposing a

gap between potential and achievement. This invites a flurry of diagnostic questions for HR regardless of sector or industry. A few examples among these - How to manage the expectations of essential but underused talent? How to define achievement? How to avoid counter-selection?

Closing thoughts

The company that provided the case operates in a closed and tight-knit industry, therefore the triggers that generated renewal were straightforward and acute. This clarity in context, dynamics and impact-response lent itself very well for the purpose of this study. In other industries, the stimuli may be more diverse and/or nuanced for complex organizations to feel threshold pain and to develop adaptive measures in a timely and/or adequate manner.

The JBG institution is equipped with the mechanisms to anticipate external stimuli and to act on these. For an organization to act on environmental stimuli, it largely depends on management sensemaking capabilities, which capabilities may vary from one conglomerate to another, to one time – one management team – one instance of successful sensemaking/sense-giving in the life of one organization to another. Further empirical studies are called for to enrich and validate the results of this study. The high social context and content of business groups renders these ideal subjects to study political sensemaking: the “story-telling organization”.

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