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The Unattractiveness of Research on Organizational Decline

Research Article

Why is Academia Sometimes Detached from Firms' Problems? The Unattractiveness of Research on Organizational Decline

Fernando Antônio Ribeiro Serra[1]
Manuel Portugal Ferreira[2]
Isabel Cristina Scafuto[1]

[1] Universidade Nove de Julho, São Paulo, SP, Brazil
[2] Universidade Federal de Lavras, Lavras, MG, Brazil

ABSTRACT

We examined how scholars decide what they study, scrutinizing researchers' problem choice. We qualitatively analyzed a survey conducted by e-mail with 40 top management scholars on organizational decline in top-ranked journals. This topic appears to be neglected despite the real life evidence that the performance of firms is declining at an increasingly rapid pace. We conducted a content analysis of motivation to undertake, remain with, or abandon research. We found explanations for what researchers' study specifically related to concerns over tenure and promotion, difficulty in conducting research, and the general unattractiveness of 'negative' themes that lead scholars to avoid a research topic. We contribute to studies on problem choice in management research by explaining why relevant economic and societal research agendas are under-researched. Our findings indicate that motivation not to undertake is related to extrinsic factors. Motivations to remain are usually intrinsic. However, motivations to abandon may be intrinsic, in order to move on to another research project, or extrinsic, depending on the situation. It also serves as a warning that scholars may be paying excessive attention to mainstream theoretical approaches and topics, inhibiting the emergence of new ideas and detracting attention from phenomena that are important for teaching.

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

JEL Code: Nonadherent

INTRODUCTION

If Sir Isaac Newton had to publish a number of articles in top ranked journals to ensure tenure, would he have chosen dynamics (or Newtonian physics), optics, and mathematics for his groundbreaking contributions, or would he have pursued a more mainstream topic of the day? Would he have chosen a single topic on which to build his reputation? Although his genius might have led to groundbreaking discoveries, his choices of what to research had a profound impact on human development. In this paper, we address the overarching question of what drives researchers' decisions on what to consider to research in business and management, using the specific theme of organizational decline.

As researchers, we are driven by different motivations to conduct research and publish. One motivation is the pressure to publish, often for tenure or to guarantee the performance metrics imposed by the department or university (Davis, 2015). Other motivations may entail a sense of satisfaction or personal accomplishment (Elson & Broudard, 2012; Miller, 2006), including the dissemination of knowledge validated by the peer review process (Acedo, Barroso, Casanueva, & Galán, 2006; Miller, 2006). Perhaps primarily, publishing in well-ranked journals increases our reputation as scholars and aids career advancement (Bedeian, 2004; Davis, 2014). It is likely that these motivations and barriers to publish drive, albeit partially, how researchers select their research problems or what to study. In the literature on the sociology of science, this is known as 'problem choice' (Neff, 2014).

A researcher's problem choice will influence his/her career (Rzhetsky, Foster, Foster, & Evans, 2015). Research on problem choice usually focuses on explaining internal and external factors that influence the researcher's choice of what to research. The personal interests of researchers are classified as internal factors. Internal factors may include interpersonal relationships, including the personal enjoyment of collaborating with specific individuals and broader communities of scholarship (Pfirman & Martin, 2010; Roy et al., 2013).

Pressures from the environment are classified as external pressures (Fisher, 2005). In selecting what to research, scholars are influenced by external factors such as academic productivism (Kolesnikov, Fukumoto, & Bozeman, 2018), the influence of reviewers (Singh, 2003; Swanson, 2004) and editors (Radford, Smillie, Wilson, & Grace., 1999), and low acceptance rates in top tier journals (Sugimoto, Larivière, Ni, & Cronin, 2013). Other external factors are related to institutional factors from the university and the environment (Rhoten, 2003), and the availability of funding (Nicholson, 2007). All these and other external factors may be barriers to more risky and innovative research (Rzhetsky et al., 2015). They may inhibit personal interest in investigating important business and management phenomena that would challenge existing knowledge (Doh, 2015; Hambrick, 2007; Helfat, 2007; Miller, 2007).

Business schools are criticized regarding knowledge creation and knowledge distribution (Gibbons et al., 1994; Kieser, Nicolai, & Seidl, 2015; Tranfield & Starkey, 1998). 'Problem choice' affects knowledge creation (Evans & Foster, 2011; Foote, 2007), as well as the need to address important phenomena that should link theory and practice (Makadok, Burton, & Barney, 2018; Schwarz & Stensaker, 2014; Van de Ven, 2016) and the way we teach managers

(Mintzberg, 2004). If important phenomena are not studied due to the difficulties involved in doing so (Tihanyi, 2020), we will continue to fail to address them inside the classroom (Bower, 2008; Butler, Delaney, & Spoelstra, 2015; Mintzberg, 2004).

In this paper, to contribute to the ground level of problem choice, we scrutinize researchers' problem choice motivation with regard to their research agendas. We specifically analyze the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to adopt, maintain, or abandon a particular research agenda, theory, theme, or topic. Most studies assume a general acceptance of the complexity of internal and external motivations (Zuckerman, 1978), since the days of the work of Merton (1938), and do not usually consider classical approaches to human motivation (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b).

To understand and analyze problem choice, we selected the literature on 'organizational decline' as a relevant research topic (see, for instance, Collins, 2009; Damodaran, 2011; Hamel, 2012; McMillan & Overall, 2017; Whetten, 1980). This goes somewhat against the grain of mainstream research on growth that is prevalent in business and management journals (Serra, Pinto, Guerrazzi, & Ferreira, 2017). Despite the pervasiveness of organizational decline in countries, the extant research has not succeeded in explaining firms' failures (Garicano & Rayo, 2016). Organizational decline is not adequately explained by mainstream theories (McMillan & Overall, 2017). Organizational decline is a topic for phenomenon-driven empirical research that theories of management and organizations neither adequately predict nor explain. It is an important managerial problem that should be researched (Tihanyi, 2020).

In other words, the context of this study is a theme that has seemingly not attracted a great deal of interest from scholars, despite Whetten's (1980) call for additional research over 30 years ago. Therefore, organizational decline is a good research object when it comes to understanding problem choice, since it has the rather rare condition of being an important and yet under-researched topic (Serra, Ferreira, & Almeida, 2013). Methodologically, we used a qualitative approach. We first conducted a search of the literature to identify the most relevant scholars in the field of organizational decline. We then emailed a brief five-question survey to forty scholars that have published major contributions in the field in question. The analyses of their responses were based on interpreting and classifying the scholars' opinions concerning their motivation to study the topic, the reasons for abandoning it, and its pertinence.

This study makes a core contribution to academia by seeking to understand what scholars do and especially how they decide on their research agendas in management and business. This paper also makes a broader contribution, as it allows a better understanding of why some topics or themes are not studied as much as others are. Previous studies usually surveyed a number of authors, identifying the factors that influence their problem choice when it came to adopting or persevering with a topic. We delve deeper to gain a better understanding of why researchers make their decisions, and why they opt to study a certain topic. We may thus gain greater insight concerning why some topics or theories rise to the top of research agendas, while others appear to be forsaken. The choice of a research agenda may be a complex decision, as scholars struggle with pressures to publish that may (Carayol & Dalle, 2007), for instance, lead to choosing

research topics that are quicker and easier to publish, pushing important (but harder to research, controversial, or simply not mainstream) research topics to the periphery or abandonment (Rzhetsky et al., 2015). In many instances, these pressures also drive researchers away from topics that are of practical relevance to firms and to teaching. We therefore strive to call for a broader debate on how to encourage research on important topics, and to incorporate these topics into our teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Taking a step back to the foundations of the contemporaneity of a field of research leads to questions regarding how and why scholars choose to pursue a given research topic, and their motivations and interests (Ziman, 1987; Zuckerman, 1978). This is problem choice. According to Ziman (1987), problem choice is related to "all the actions and considerations to enter into intentional pursuit of scientific research" (Ziman, 1987, p. 95). How researchers select their research problems and agenda is discussed, albeit insufficiently, in the literature on the sociology of change (Neff, 2014). Problem choice is important, as it influences the impact of relevant research, such as content for teaching in the classroom (Tihanyi, 2020).

The traditional view of problem choice is rationalist (Gieryn, 1978; Zuckerman, 1978). The rationalist view assumes that researchers know the challenges and significance of the problems chosen before they begin their research. The problems are previously identifiable (Zuckerman, 1978) and shared by the community (Gieryn, 1978). Despite the predominance of this view, another less researched view is the cultural view of problem choice. In this view, problem choice will depend on the situation, including demands, problems, resources, and constraints (Fisher, 2005).

Another possibility is to understand problem choice from a psychological viewpoint. The psychology of science "fully appreciates and understands scientific thought and behavior ... we must apply the best theoretical and empirical tools available to psychologists" (Feist, 2011, p. 330). Motivational scientific interest is one of the possible avenues of research (Newcombe et al., 2009). In this work, we strive to understand what drives problem choice, considering researchers' motivation in their specific contexts.

What drives problem choice?

A number of factors influence problem choice. Polanyi (1962) noted that researchers are guided by their curiosity and an 'invisible hand.' Polanyi (1962), Merton (1938), and Zuckerman (1978, 1989) noted that problem choice is rooted in internal and external factors. Hence, the decision to adopt or abandon a topic (Avital & Collopy, 2001) depends on aspects such as the characteristics of individual researchers (DeBackere & Rappa, 1994). Nonetheless, most studies have looked into the internal factors affecting problem choice (Fisher, 2005), paying little heed to external factors.

Scholars' choice of what to research is likely to be influenced by internal and external factors (e.g., Cole & Cole, 1973; Gieryn, 1978; Ziman, 1987; Zuckerman, 1978). The main decision that is affected is whether to adopt, maintain, or abandon a topic of study (Avital & Collopy, 2001). According to Avital and Collopy (2001), some authors believe that cognitive factors have the most influence when it comes to guiding researchers' choices. Another influential factor is the strength of social processes, such as competition for funding, recognition, and rewards within the research community (see also Hagstrom, 1965). Other authors claim that external factors, such as government or business interests, might have a greater influence, as well as government funding (DeBackere & Rappa, 1994). Avital and Collopy (2001) noted a number of factors at play when researchers undertake or abandon a research topic.

The academic community itself acts as an external factor influencing problem choice. Although academic freedom is acknowledged as one of the pillars of legitimacy of higher education (Neave, 2002), some external factors, such as agendas (im)posed by the academic community (Henkel, 2005) or promoted by institutional factors pressuring universities (Cronin, 2012), exert a strong influence on researchers' problem choice (Neff, 2011).

There are topics and situations that do not, or do not always, follow a previous paradigm (Fisher, 2005), forcing researchers to move to another paradigm or build on more recent research. Problem choice may be based on the need to fill a theoretical gap or test and build on previous findings. For instance, in strategic management, the acceptance and emergence of the resource-based view contrasted with the then dominant view of industrial organization (Porter, 1980), shifting the problem choice of researchers toward a new paradigm.

For instance, the vast majority of research universities in the USA and Europe (and increasingly in many other countries) have a tenure and promotion evaluation procedure based on an assessment of the quantity and quality of publication records (Konrad & Pfeffer, 1990; Kotrlik, Bartlett, Higgins, & Williams, 2002; Pfeffer & Langton, 1993). Thus, faculties in these schools are more likely to focus on conducting research that is publishable in top journals and research themes that are more likely to render tenure. Therefore, Creswell's (2002) remark on the importance of taking career goals into account when choosing a research theme is hardly surprising.

Impact and contribution to practice might, at least in some instances, motivate engaging in some research arenas. Kilduff (2006) noted that "the route to good theory leads not through the gaps in literature but through an engagement with problems in the real world" (Kilduff, 2006, p. 252). Mintzberg (2005) complemented this notion by claiming that "we choose our theories according to how useful they are, not how true they are" (Mintzberg, 2005, p. 356). However, applying Anne-Will Harzing's 'publish or perish' rationale, some research fields are risky enough to dissuade scholars, and perhaps more notably young scholars, from pursuing these research paths. This appears to be consistent with Alvesson and Sandberg's (2011) argument that most research only attempts to fill gaps in prior research and rarely challenges existing knowledge. On the other hand, McKinley, Mone, and Moon (1999) argued that a theory attracts attention when it differs from the extant literature but is still connected to the established literature.

Miller and Neff (2013) argued that research agendas are mainly shaped by balancing the tension between the epistemic norms and normative concerns of a research community. "Knowledge is the epistemic norm of assertion — that we (epistemically) ought only to assert what we know or what we have sufficient warrant for believing" (Kauppinen, 2018, p. 14). The research community's epistemic norms are, unfortunately, at odds with the desirable social actions and outcomes — normative concerns (Bicchieri, 2017). The epistemic norms and normative concerns presented by Miller and Neff (2013), to a certain extent, correspond to the science values and political values shown by Meyer (2011).

All this extant research considering internal and external factors in problem choice can be related to motivation. Motivation is one of the leading research areas in psychology and has an important practical outcome, 'motivation produces' (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Self-motivation is as important to managers as it is to teachers (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b) and researchers (Milman et al., 2017). There is pervasive and accepted research considering two types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Intrinsic motivation is considered a desirable state. It "is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence" (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, p. 56), and can be related to some internal factors of problem choice. Extrinsic motivation "is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done to attain some separable outcome" (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, p. 60). It can usually be related to the external factors of problem choice.

Extrinsic motivation, however, cannot be considered a single construct. There is a continuum between a motivation, the distinct regulatory styles of extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation. These regulatory styles correspond to a specific locus of causality that can be considered internal or external (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Understanding the motivational effects on researchers appears to be important with regard to understanding how to reduce the tension between normative concerns and epistemic norms.

The influence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations on problem choice

To be motivated means "to be moved to do something" (Ryan & Deci, 2000b, p. 54). Ryan and Deci (2000a) proposed the self-determination theory (SDT). The authors presented distinct types of motivation considering the reasons or goals that lead to an action (Deci & Ryan, 1985). When dealing with motivations, the most basic, yet perhaps the most important, distinction is intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Intrinsic motivation refers to the will to do something because it is interesting and enjoyable, while extrinsic motivation refers to the will to do something because it will lead to a separate outcome. Although the study of intrinsic motivation is dominant (Ambrose & Kulik, 1999; Reinholt, 2006), the interaction between the two motivation classifications is indeed recognized (Amabile & Kramer, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b). Ryan and Deci (2000a) proposed a self-determination continuum showing types of motivation, reproduced in Figure 1.

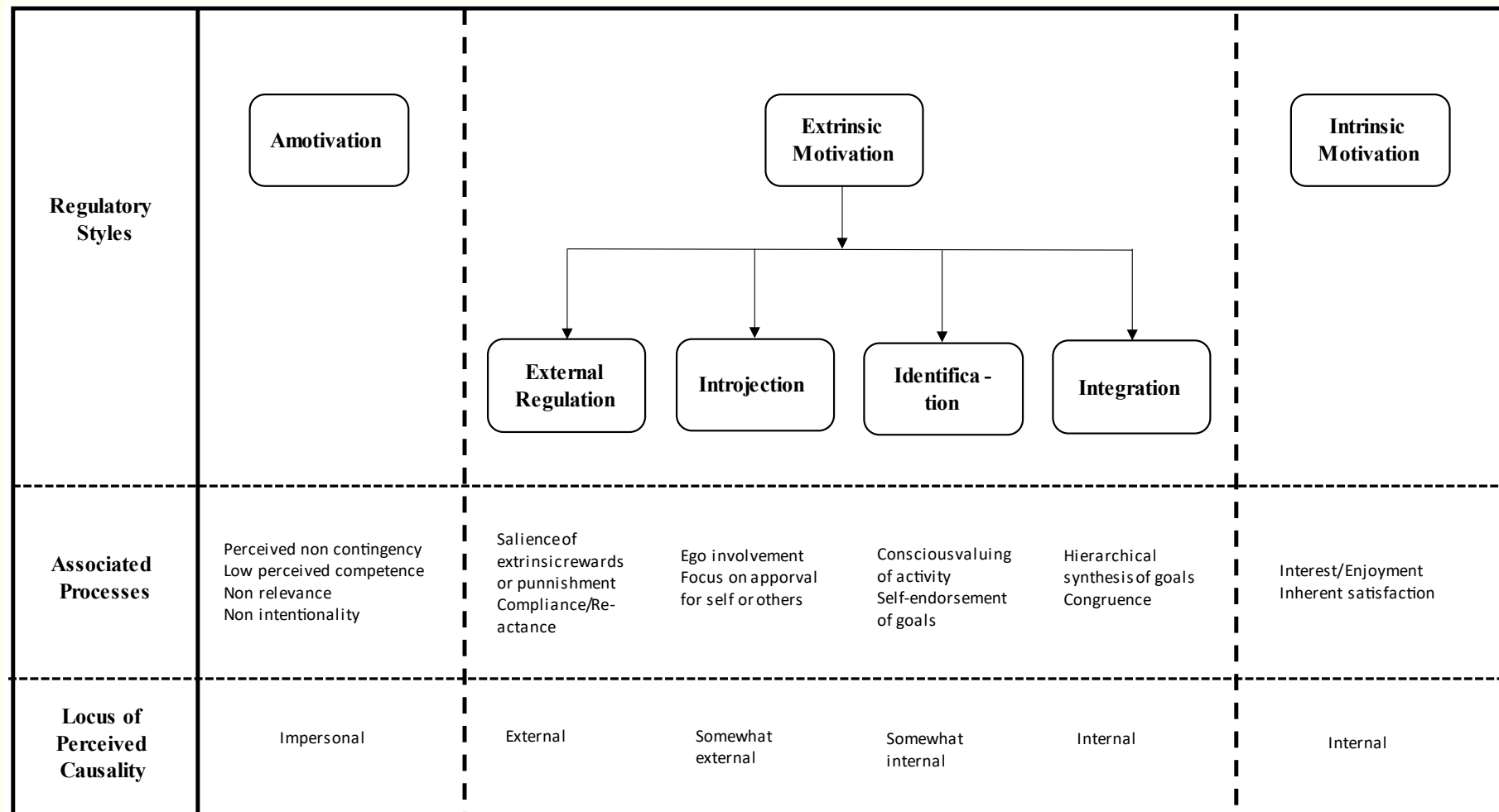| Regulatory Styles	Amotivation		Extrinsic Motivation			Intrinsic Motivation
		External Regulation	Introjection	Identifica-tion	Integration	
Associated Processes	Perceived non contingency Low perceived competence Non relevance Non intentionality	Salience of extrinsic rewards or punnishment Compliance/Re-actance	Ego involvement Focus on apporval for self or others	Conscious valuing of activity Self-endorsement of goals	Hierarchical synthesis of goals Congruence	Interest/Enjoyment Inherent satisfaction
Locus of Perceived Causality	Impersonal	External	Somewhat external	Somewhat internal	Internal	Internal

Figure 1. Determination continuum showing types of motivation.

Source: Ryan and Deci (2000b).

Motivation may vary from an amotivated state to a motivated state. Lack of motivation may emerge from not recognizing the value in an activity (Ryan, 1995), disbelief that the activity will lead to the desired outcome (Seligman, 1975), or not feeling sufficiently competent to perform the activity (Deci, 1976). Ryan and Deci's (2000a) taxonomy presented various motivation types, reflecting different degrees of autonomy or self-determination considering extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is classified according to the self-regulation style. Self-regulation depends on how people assimilate social values and extrinsic contingencies. Depending on this, people may transform personal values and self-motivations. The regulatory styles of extrinsic motivation are: external regulation, when an activity is performed to satisfy an external demand or to obtain an external reward; introjected regulation, when an activity is performed under pressure to avoid guilt or anxiety, due to egotism and pride; identification, when an activity is performed because it is considered important; and integrated regulation, when it is related to values and needs considered important (almost intrinsic motivation).

We may infer that the internal and external pressures concerning problem choice presented above might influence researchers' motivation differently. For example, amotivation may be the case for scholars that stop researching, dedicating themselves exclusively to teaching or administrative tasks. External regulation may be at play when researchers write papers to secure tenure. Introjected regulation may occur when researchers do their work for topic recognition or fame. Identification should arise when, during their research, researchers recognize the importance of the task for progress or to someone. Integrated regulation may be present when the researcher is motivated to solve a problem closely related to his values, for example, an issue that is important to his/her religious community.

Finally, intrinsic motivation is at play when researchers work for their pleasure and the enjoyment of answering questions to satisfy their curiosity and personal interest. We may observe that extrinsic motivation can be managed, and the more internalized it is, the closer it is to intrinsic motivation. External factors influence intrinsic motivation. Feelings of competence can be influenced by rewards, communication, and feedback. However, it should be accompanied by a locus of causality (Rotter, 1966; O'Brien, 1984). The more internal the locus of causality, the greater the perception of competence and autonomy, and vice versa (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Thus, external factors, even as tangible rewards, can negatively impact intrinsic motivation. Among these factors is the pressure for publication in business and management (Baruch & Hall, 2004). The pressure to publish in impact journals is especially more significant for researchers seeking tenure positions in North American universities, which may, for example, inhibit relevant research by practitioners (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2007), considering relevant phenomena (Doh, 2015; Hambrick, 2007; Helfat, 2007; Miller, 2007). Regardless of the importance of finding the normative context, epistemic norms inhibit research with social relevance (Miller & Neff, 2013) in business and management research (Scafuto, Serra, Guerrazzi, & Maccari, 2020).

Organizational decline as an important and under-researched phenomenon

The empirical setting for the study was composed of researchers that entered, and then remained in or abandoned a field of study (or research topic). To understand the researchers' motivations for adopting or abandoning a research topic we selected the research topic of organizational

decline, which has been acknowledged as an important phenomenon to study (Collins, 2009; Damodaran, 2011; Hamel, 2012; McMillan & Overall, 2017; Whetten, 1980). Organizational decline investigates the causes, effects, and actions related to declining organizational performance. Despite being an important topic (additional references in Table 1), with important gaps to research and possible contributions that would differ from the dominant research approaches, it has remained under-researched (Serra et al., 2013; Whetten, 1980).

Table 1

Selected bibliographic evidence of the importance of organizational decline

Reference	Subject
Whetten, D. (1980). Organization decline: A neglected topic in organization science. *Academy of Management Review*, *5*(4), 577-588. https://doi.org/10.2307/257463	Seminal article on organizational decline, calling for attention to the subject. The author also proposed a research agenda, teaching, and consulting activities.
Porter, M. (1980). *Competitive strategy: Techniques for analyzing industries and competitors*. New York: Free Press.	Most cited strategy book and reference from the 20th century, representing the industrial organization approach to strategy. One chapter is dedicated to declining industries.
Collins, J. (2009). *How the mighty fall: And why some companies never give in*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.	An entire book dedicated to the topic by the former professor from Stanford.
Williamson, P. (2003) Strategy innovation. In D. Faulkner & A. Campbell (Orgs.), *Oxford handbook of strategy* (pp. 319-346). Oxford: Oxford University Press.	The book chapter on strategy innovation argues the importance of the business failures of established companies.
McKiernan, P. (2003) Turnaround. In: A. Campbell & D. Faulkner (Orgs.), *Oxford Handbook of Strategy* (pp. 759-810). Oxford: Oxford University Press.	An entire chapter dedicated to the turnaround process of declining companies.
Hamel, G., & Välikangas, L. (2003) The quest for resilience. *Harvard Business Review*, *81*(9), 52-63. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2003/09/the-quest-for-resilience	The authors remark on the importance of companies' failure rates.
Tedlow, R. (2011). *Denial: Why business leaders fail to look facts in the face — and what to do about it*. London, UK: Portfolio Trade.	The author presents several cases of organizational decline from the threat-rigidity decision-making approach.
Damodaran, A. (2011). *The little book of valuation: How to value a company, pick a stock and profit*. New York John Wiley & Sons.	This valuation book also stresses the challenge of decline in the organizational lifecycle.
Mische, M. (2001). Strategic renewal: Becoming a high-performance organization. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.	This book claims there is a need for strategic renewal to cope with change and the risk of dying.

Organizational decline is a pervasive phenomenon, regardless of whether there is an environmental jolt (McMillan & Overall, 2017; Serra et al., 2017). The rate of decline and failure of companies is significant, even in a favorable economic environment (Torres, Serra, Ferreira, & Menezes, 2011). The search for phenomena such as organizational decline is essential for the progress of knowledge in business and management (Hambrick, 2007). Researching phenomena in this respect, however, presents significant challenges for researchers to choose it as a research problem (Miller, 2007).

METHOD

Sample selection

To determine the extent to which organizational decline has been studied, we searched 18 leading business/management journals (Harzing, 2010) to collect the articles published on the topic and retrieve information on their authors. All of the journals were considered top journals according to the Brazilian Qualis criteria for Business Administration. The journals were searched using the ISI Web of Knowledge based on three main procedures. First, we selected the journals. Second, we defined a set of fifteen keywords that were used to search each journal using the 'topic' option in the ISI Web of Knowledge portal. This option enables a search of the titles, abstracts, and keywords of the articles. The following keywords were selected considering previous articles published on organizational decline in a prior exploratory research using only organizational decline: decline, organizational decline, performance decline, decay, strategy decay, performance decay, organizational decay, bankruptcy, failure, business failure, organizational failure, turnaround, retrenchment, longevity, and life cycle. Finally, for each article identified we analyzed at least the title and abstract to ensure that the content of the article served our purpose. From the articles identified on decline, we composed a sample of possible scholars to survey.

The data are shown in Table 2. From the 31,218 articles published in the 18 journals sampled, we reduced the number of articles using the keywords to 214. After reading the titles and abstracts, we arrived at a final sample of 104 articles related to organizational decline, which is a mere 0.33% of the total number of published articles (list available from the authors). We identified 132 authors who co-authored the 104 articles, to whom we emailed a survey, obtaining a response rate of 30.3% (40 responses).

Table 2

Sample of articles

Journal	Period available	Total articles published	Articles on decline	% in the journal	% of sample
Strategic Management Journal	1980/2011	1,554	13	0.84	12.50
Long Range Planning	1968/2011	2,465	11	0.45	10.58
Journal of Management Studies	1966/2011	1,449	10	0.69	9.62
Organization Science	1990/2011	906	10	1.10	9.62
Journal of Business Research	1973/2011	2,814	9	0.32	8.65
Journal of Business Venturing	1987/2011	755	8	1.06	7.69
Business History	1958/2011	907	7	0.77	6.73
Business History Review	1956/2011	884	6	0.68	5.77
Journal of Management	1983/2011	893	5	0.56	4.81
Management Science	1954/2011	4,782	5	0.10	4.81
Harvard Business Review	1922/2011	6,295	5	0.08	4.81

Continues

Table 2 (continued)

Journal	Period available	Total articles published	Articles on decline	% in the journal	% of sample
British Journal of Management	2000/2011	401	3	0.75	2.88
Organizational Dynamics	1972/2011	872	2	0.23	1.92
Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences	1992/1996	128	2	1.56	1.92
Academy of Management Journal	1958/2011	2,098	2	0.10	1.92
Administrative Science Quarterly	1956/2011	1,280	2	0.16	1.92
California Management Review	1958/2011	1,888	2	0.11	1.92
Academy of Management Review	1983/2011	847	2	0.24	1.92
Total		**31,218**	**104**	**0.33**	**100**

Survey items and analysis procedure

The survey was conducted by email and sent to the 132 authors that (co)authored at least one of the papers. Forty scholars responded, who had (co)authored 48 of the 104 articles that were selected. Their responses were the object of our analyses (Table 3). The scholars have distinct research focuses, but some of them are strictly dedicated to the research of the organizational decline phenomenon. This difference in approach enabled us to compare their responses and triangulate our findings. To complement this process, we also examined the public curriculum vitae of each author to identify any interruptions and/or changes in their research subject.

Another aspect to note is that the sample was selected and restricted to the top 18 journals. Some authors are more productive than others or even unfolded their works for publication.

The motivation for this work was to understand the factors that influence whether to choose a relevant phenomenon or theme to research, considering the call from Miller (2007), Hambrick (2007), and Helfat (2007). All these authors questioned the need to research some phenomena that challenge existing knowledge that end up not being researched despite their importance. The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon in question (Hambrick, 2007; Serra et al., 2017) through the accounts of people with practical experience in the field. The way the sample was chosen and the triangulation of data minimized the extraneous variation of the phenomenon under study (Eisenhardt, 1989).

The survey assertions were focused on exploring the motivations to engage or disengage in researching a specific phenomenon rather than focusing on previous research predominantly considering the sociology of science. Following a brief introduction that identified the specific article(s), the survey items were related to the motivations for studying organizational decline, whether to continue or abandon the study, and the importance of the topic. We sent a personal email to the authors, with three open questions: (a) We are attempting to understand the authors' motivations to study decline and why they stopped doing so; (b) We are attempting to discover your motivations for the articles you published on the topic; (c) We are attempting to discover whether you believe that decline remains an interesting topic in these troubled times.

The responses were analyzed and coded to understand the challenges, issues, and scholars' motivations. To analyze the results, we followed Ryan and Deci's (2000b) framework (Figure 1). The responses were coded and classified, considering first whether the motivation was internal or external. We then classified the motivation as intrinsic (motivation or regulation), extrinsic (identification, introjected regulation or external regulation), and amotivation (Figure 2). We also classified the responses considering the importance of the phenomenon and the reason for the lack of research, motivation to undertake, remain with, or abandon the topic (Figure 3). This also enabled us to infer the authors' perceptions considering possible reasons not to engage in research. During the analyses, we compared the authors' responses considering their theoretical approaches, especially comparing organizational ecology and organizational research or the phenomenon of organizational decline through other lenses.

We followed the procedure followed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and used charts and tables to compare the responses, which were then organized. It was helpful to structure the responses by similarity, e.g., whether the motivations were internal or external, and the type of motivation. To guarantee the validity of the study both internally (in the development of the study, the validity of the process and the method) (Cho & Trent, 2006) and externally (in the results of the study) (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006), the authors jointly conducted a critical review of the responses and used iterative coding with MAXQDA software. Occasional disagreements were discussed and were included or excluded by consensus between the two authors.

Table 3

Authors' characteristics

Authors	No of articles	Journals	Theoretical approach
[AU01]	1	Management Science	Industrial organization and behavioral theory
[AU02]	1	Journal of Business Administration	Organizational decline and turnaround
[AU03]	1	Strategic Management Journal	RDT and resource allocation
[AU04]	1	Book	Organization life cycle and finance
[AU05]	3	Administrative Science Quarterly (2) Management Science	Organizational ecology
[AU06]	1	Strategic Management Journal	RBT
[AU07]	1	Management Science	Corporate life cycle
[AU08]	1	Strategic Management Journal	RBT
[AU09]	2	Administrative Science Quarterly Academy of Management Journal	Organizational decline
[AU10]	1	Organization Science	Organizational ecology
[AU11]	3	Administrative Science Quarterly Management Science Academy of Management Journal	Organizational decline Organizational decline and upper echelon theory Organizational decline and turnaround
[AU12]	1	Academy of Management Journal	Organizational decline and turnaround
[AU13]	2	Strategic Management Journal Journal of Management	Organizational turnaround
[AU14]	2	Management Science Administrative Science Quarterly	Prospect theory, behavioral theory of the firm of risk aversion Organizational ecology
[AU15]	1	Book	RDP
[AU16]	1	Academy of Management Journal	RBT
[AU17]	1	Book chapter	Organizational decline
[AU18]	1	Academy of Management Journal	Behavioral theory of the firm
[AU19]	3	Management Science Administrative Science Quarterly Academy of Management Journal	Organizational life cycle Organizational decline
[AU20]	1	Strategic Management Journal	Organizational decline

Continues

Table 3 (continued)

Authors	No of articles	Journals	Theoretical approach
[AU21]	1	Academy of Management Review	Organizational slack
	2	Academy of Management Review	Organizational decline
[AU22]		Strategic Management Journal	
[AU23]	1	Academy of Management Journal	TCT
[AU24]	1	Strategic Management Journal	Organizational ecology
[AU25]	1	Organization Science	Organizational decline
[AU26]	1	Academy of Management Journal	Organizational life cycle
[AU27]	1	Academy of Management Proceedings	Organizational decline
		Administrative Science Quarterly	Organizational decline and turnaround and threat
[AU28]	2	Academy of Management Journal	rigidity
[AU29]	1	Organization Science	Organizational decline
		Academy of Management Journal	Bankruptcy
[AU30]	2	Academy of Management Review	Organizational decline
[AU31]	1	Strategic Management Journal	Corporate restructuring
[AU32]	1	Administrative Science Quarterly	Organizational ecology
[AU33]	1	Academy of Management Review	Psychological literature
[AU34]	1	Organizational Science	RBT
[AU35]	1	Academy of Management Review	Organizational decline
[AU36]	1	Organization Science	Behavioral theory and legitimacy
[AU37]	1	Organization Science	Organizational decline
		Administration Science Quarterly	Organizational ecology
[AU38]	2	Strategic Management Journal	
[AU39]	2	Academy of Management Review (2)	Organizational decline
[AU40]	1	Organization Science	Organizational decline

Note. We should clarify that, despite the quantity of articles, only five of the authors did not publish articles that were part of a research project related to organizational decline. However, all five authors mentioned organizational decline in their research. It is worth mentioning that the focus of the work, using organizational decline as a phenomenon, was to understand the motivations for undertaking, remaining with, or abandoning research. Some quotes are more representative than others. Furthermore, some authors were working for their doctorate when they undertook their research, while others stopped researching due to external factors or because they switched to related or even different themes.

FINDINGS

Through an iterative process of analyzing the responses and the literature, we proposed an emergent process model of problem choice. To derive this model from the authors' responses, we organized them into a first-order group based on their similarities (first-order responses in Figure 2). These responses were related to the motivation to adopt or abandon the topic, and to the external influences related to the importance of researching the topic, or the reasons why the topic lacks research (second-order theme in Figure 2). These motivations were internal and external (third-order dimensions in Figure 2).

In analyzing the responses, we resorted extensively to excerpts from the interviews. First, we demonstrated the importance of the topic (organizational decline) and causes and effects, considering the specialists' experience. Second, we scrutinized why organizational decline has been an under-researched topic in organization studies from the perspective of the experts. Third, we assessed the scholars' motivations for studying decline.

First dimension: external motivational influence

The topic may influence the researchers' problem choice in two ways. The first is negatively, which may account for the lack of research on the topic. The second is positively, due to the importance of the research topic.

Reasons for lack of research

The participants had varying points of view regarding the lack of research, albeit with some common threads. Several scholars highlighted a bias toward success and growth, or positive research, and avoidance of themes that are unattractive or have a negative connotation. Issues such as decline or failure are negative, and success and expansion are positive. Moreover, the research topic, as a phenomenon, is reinforced by particular contexts. For instance, research on decline is likely to be abandoned during periods of economic growth.

The criteria for publication and the evolution of disciplines are also likely to have an influence on what scholars study. As disciplines mature and theories become more firmly established, research tends to become more theory-driven, with emphasis on the contribution to theory instead of simply being oriented by phenomena. They also become heavier in statistical terms. In this regard, some scholars mentioned that research is increasingly theory-oriented and converges toward dominant theoretical approaches. This poses some hazards for organizational decline research. In essence, research on decline does not have a single or unifying theory upon which to draw (e.g., Table 3).
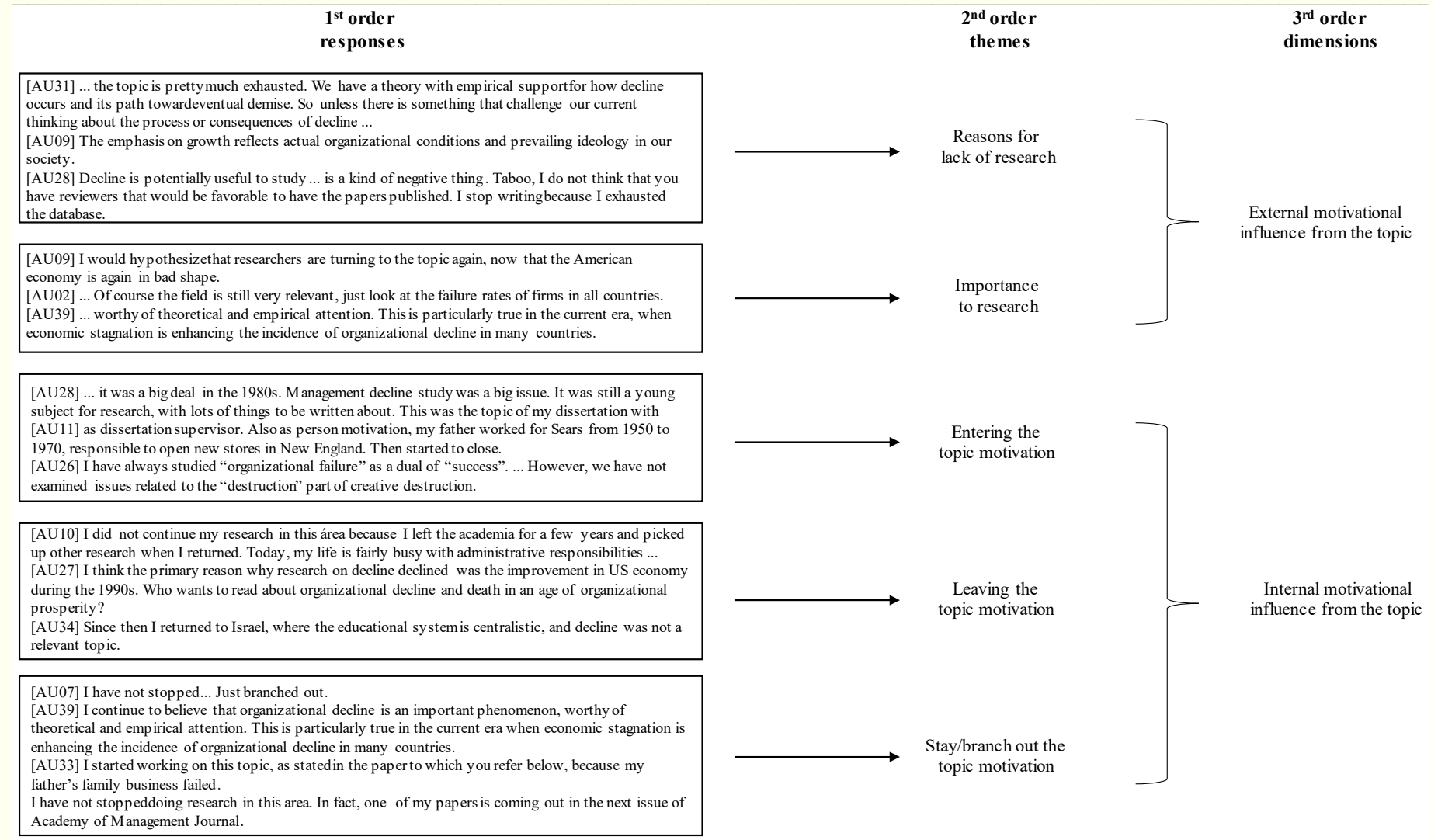
1ˢᵗ order responses	2ⁿᵈ order themes	3ʳᵈ order dimensions

[AU31] ... 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 challenge our current thinking about the process or consequences of decline ...
[AU09] The emphasis on growth reflects actual organizational conditions and prevailing ideology in our society.
[AU28] 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 I exhausted the database.

→ Reasons for lack of research

[AU09] I would hypothesize that researchers are turning to the topic again, now that the American economy is again in bad shape.
[AU02] ... Of course the field is still very relevant, just look at the failure rates of firms in all countries.
[AU39] ... 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.

→ Importance to research

External motivational influence from the topic

[AU28] ... it was a big deal in the 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 [AU11] as dissertation supervisor. Also as person motivation, my father worked for Sears from 1950 to 1970, responsible to open new stores in New England. Then started to close.
[AU26] I have always studied "organizational failure" as a dual of "success". ... However, we have not examined issues related to the "destruction" part of creative destruction.

→ Entering the topic motivation

[AU10] I did not continue my research in this área because I left the academia for a few years and picked up other research when I returned. Today, my life is fairly busy with administrative responsibilities ...
[AU27] I think the primary reason why research on decline declined was the improvement in US economy during the 1990s. Who wants to read about organizational decline and death in an age of organizational prosperity?
[AU34] Since then I returned to Israel, where the educational system is centralistic, and decline was not a relevant topic.

→ Leaving the topic motivation

Internal motivational influence from the topic

[AU07] I have not stopped... Just branched out.
[AU39] 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.
[AU33] I started working on this topic, as stated in the paper to which you refer below, because my father's family business failed.
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.

→ Stay/branch out the topic motivation

Figure 2. External and internal motivational influence data structure.

Despite being responsible for the phenomenon of organizational decline, the researchers who were interviewed indicated that business and management research has focused on growth and incremental contribution to the prevailing theory. This seems to indicate that the research focuses more on theory than on practical and social contributions.

The participants also pointed out that studying decline may lead to problems regarding its definition, as there is no precise definition of decline. Indeed, several scholars questioned the definition of decline and suggested that it could be viewed through multiple lenses and phenomena, including exit, divestitures, downsizing, and bankruptcy. In other words, to at least some extent, there is no typology of what decline entails, and much of the research on the topic tends to be either theoretically fragmented or lacking a unifying theory. Some scholars even speculated that decline has been studied under other names. Finally, some participants noted that they did not study organization decline itself. Instead, decline emerged while they were researching other topics.

Although studies of phenomena are desired for their possible contribution, in business and management, phenomena are complex and can be evaluated through multiple lenses, or even challenge existing theories. The challenges, both conceptual and methodological, are greater.

Table 4 includes additional statements. It is worth noting that regardless of the reasons, the majority of the participants agreed that this is an understudied topic. The most frequently presented rationales included such issues as focusing on decline being unattractive to funding agencies, difficulty in gaining recognition, and the topic being less attractive than targeting successful companies (which everyone else is studying). Other issues included difficulty in accessing data and methodologies. The fact is that standard databases, news, and broad reliable data on organizational decline are not available.

The scholars' opinions may thus be categorized into three broad areas: one related to the topic itself, the second to research practice related to the topic, and the third to external factors that do not stimulate research on the topic.

Table 4

Additional responses regarding the lack of research

Statements [author]	Reason for lack of research	Internal or external factor	Type of motivation probable effect
[AU09] Organizational decline has not been adequately examined by organizational scientists because they are preoccupied with organizational growth and its consequences. [AU25] In my opinion, it is part of the heavy bias in strategy toward trying to tell firms how to be successful.	Prevalent focus on growth and success	External	Extrinsic — External or introjected regulation
[AU02] … I needed external financing for research and couldn't get any for that topic. [AU34] … not having good and enough data. [AU28] … because I exhausted the database. It was time to study another dataset of decline. The cost would be too high.	Difficulty to research and to find research funding	External	Extrinsic — External regulation
[AU35] I imagine that researchers stopped studying decline when the US economy began to grow again ... In fact, since the mid-1980s, the US economy, until, of course, the 2008 collapse.	Economy recovered	External	Extrinsic —Introjected regulation
[AU18] … (1) definitional issues, and (2) it is part of many concepts such as bankruptcy, life cycles, growth, etc. [AU08] We think it is tough to keep going because the stream has been fragmented and largely atheoretical. [AU39] … organization studies have 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.	Theoretical challenges and more a phenomenon	External	Extrinsic — External regulation
[AU15] People want to hear 'good news,' and study 'positive things.'	Negative theme	External	Amotivation
[AU04] First, it is depressing. It is better to study organizations that are in the growth phase …		Internal	

Importance of the research topic

Most scholars (37 out of 40) argued that further research on decline is important and that organizational decline remains relevant and topical. Responses regarding the importance of the theme are shown in Table 5. The economic context is a strong influencing factor for studying decline. Indeed, it is interesting to note that all the respondents associated scholarly interest with the real economic context and the empirical, or anecdotal, evidence of declining firms. The phenomena in business and management research seem to attract researchers' attention, due to their importance and impact evidenced in environmental patterns or shocks.

Considering the responses, the external factors related to the topic led to extrinsic motivation effects through identification and integration in Ryan and Deci's (2000a, 2000b) continuum.

Table 5

Sample responses on the importance of studying decline

Statement [author]	Importance	Causes
[AU09] researchers are turning to the topic again …	Topical theme	Economic problems in US
[AU39] 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.	Need for theoretical and empirical attention Topical theme	Economic problems in many countries Increase in organizational decline
[AU02] … of course the topic is still very relevant, just look at the failure rates of firms in all countries.	Always important	Failure rates of companies
[AU10] I think it may be more important today than it was in the 80s and 90s. After years of inflated growth, so many organizations and other economic entities (like cities and countries) will now 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.	Topical Long-term and generic effect	Economic problems Need for adaptation

To illustrate and summarize the effects of the topic on the researchers' motivation to continue or abandon their research, Figure 2 shows the categorized responses regarding Ryan and Deci's (2000a, 2000b) taxonomy of human motivation considering external motivational influence.

Second dimension: manifestation of motivation

In addition to the aspects pertaining to the topic or other external or internal influences, other motivations may be linked to problem choice or to the decision to undertake or abandon the research in question.

Motivations to adopt the research topic: initial motivations

What were the initial motivations to undertake this research topic, given the hazards of data collection and treatment and the difficulties involved in publishing in top journals? Understanding motivations to undertake a topic of research may enlighten us as to how to promote additional research in difficult and challenging fields. Table 6 shows a sample of responses from the participants. It is worth noting that some scholars were actually interested in other topics, with organizational decline merely being a complementary perspective.

As shown by the responses, the external context did serve as the initial motivation to undertake this line of research, namely the US recession at the time. However, we should point out that it was not the economy per se but rather its effects on individuals and firms' lower performance during the recession that mattered. Other motivations, or triggers, were also at play, such as personal reasons, including proximity or direct contact with situations involving organizational decline. An intriguing issue or gap identified in the extant literature also drove the initial focus. As the topic of decline gained momentum, the pioneers were joined by other scholars that were sometimes only seeking an opportunity to collaborate with (or be supervised by) a certain professor.

Table 6

Authors' initial motivations

Statements [author]	Motivations for research	Internal or external factor	Type of motivation
[AU27] My motivation for studying decline was an opportunity to do research on declining enrollments and revenues at US colleges and universities … in 1981. [AU19] was the program director. [AU09] was a member of the advisory panel.	Important researchers	Internal	Extrinsic — Identification
[AU33] I started working on this topic … because my father's family business failed. [AU40] My original incentive for studying this topic was to understand an educational system (school district) in the US that was declining at the time. [AU10] I originally studied the problem because I was a member of a religious order that was losing its membership.	Personal motivation	Internal	Extrinsic — Integrated regulation
[AU10] I felt there was too strong an equation of success with growth in most organizations.	Research gap	Internal	Regulation Intrinsic
[AU02] I got interested in decline because I saw that several very promising firms, some of them even had entrepreneurial prices, and others were considered stars, outstanding firms, but after some years, lots of them got into serious crises, and several disappeared. [AU26] I have always studied 'organizational failure' paired with 'success.' … 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.	Important firms going into decline (intriguing)	Internal	Intrinsic
[AU20] 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. 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.	Other article/author influence	Internal	Intrinsic
[AU37] … 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 … [AU40] were both at ...	Working with a colleague	Internal	Extrinsic — Identification

Motivation to stay/branch out or abandon the research topic: Late motivations

Confirming the aforementioned idea that research emphasis increases when a topic is externally salient (in this case in times of crisis) and studied little during periods of economic expansion, a significant number of participants noted that they halted their research with the recovery of the US economy after the 1990s. Nevertheless, this was not the only reason. The topic was also abandoned for reasons such as moving to administrative positions, other schools and countries, changing the research subject for new interests, being part of another research group, and tenure requirements for publication. Some responses are summarized in Table 7. However, some researchers remained or branched out from the original research.

Table 7

Scholars' actual research and motives to continue or move to other topics

Topic	Statements [author]	Internal or external factor	Type of motivation
Moved or branched out	[AU40] I did write a few papers on downsizing. Gradually I became interested in a related topic, but in the field of organizational behavior (not theory) ... [AU35] At the time, I was writing about decline, I also became very interested in institutional theory. [AU19] I stopped studying decline mainly because the focus shifted toward downsizing … a variation of decline … Studying downsizing led me to identify differences between firms that declined after downsizing and those that flourished. [AU20] I continue to be very interested in the topic and try to read new articles that appear on the subject. … While I continue to be interested in the topic of decline, my own published research has been primarily in other areas. [AU12] My dissertation topic was turnaround. … It is still an interest of mine but actually, I have simply moved onto other topics.	Internal	Intrinsic
	[AU02] I got out of that topic simply because I needed external financing for research and couldn't get any for that topic. However, I got lots of financing for other types of studies. [AU06] I became very interested in other topics …	External	Extrinsic — External regulation
Shifted research topic but studying decline in other subjects	[AU30] I would say that Au30, but themes from my research on decline show through in my writings …	Internal	Intrinsic
Continue with decline	[AU34] I'm still interested in the topic and have a working paper with a failure mechanism in the theoretical model. [AU01] I have not stopped doing research in this field. [AU26] I have not stopped studying it, and will continue to do so …	Internal	Intrinsic
Recovery of the US economy	[AU09] Basically, once the US economy got back on its feet, US scholars, like myself, lost interest in studying organizational decline. [AU11] As the economy got better, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, there was simply less interest in troubled companies.	External	Extrinsic — Identification or introjected regulation
Job changes	[AU06] I became a Dean and had much less time for research. [AU10] 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 with administrative responsibilities … I still think it is a very worthwhile — and topical — subject. [AU22] 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 few years.	External	Extrinsic — External regulation

Figure 3 represents the emergent process framework of problem choice motivation derived from our findings. The framework describes the external motivational influences from the topic and the motivational manifestations to 'not enter,' 'enter,' 'stay/branch out,' or 'abandon' research.
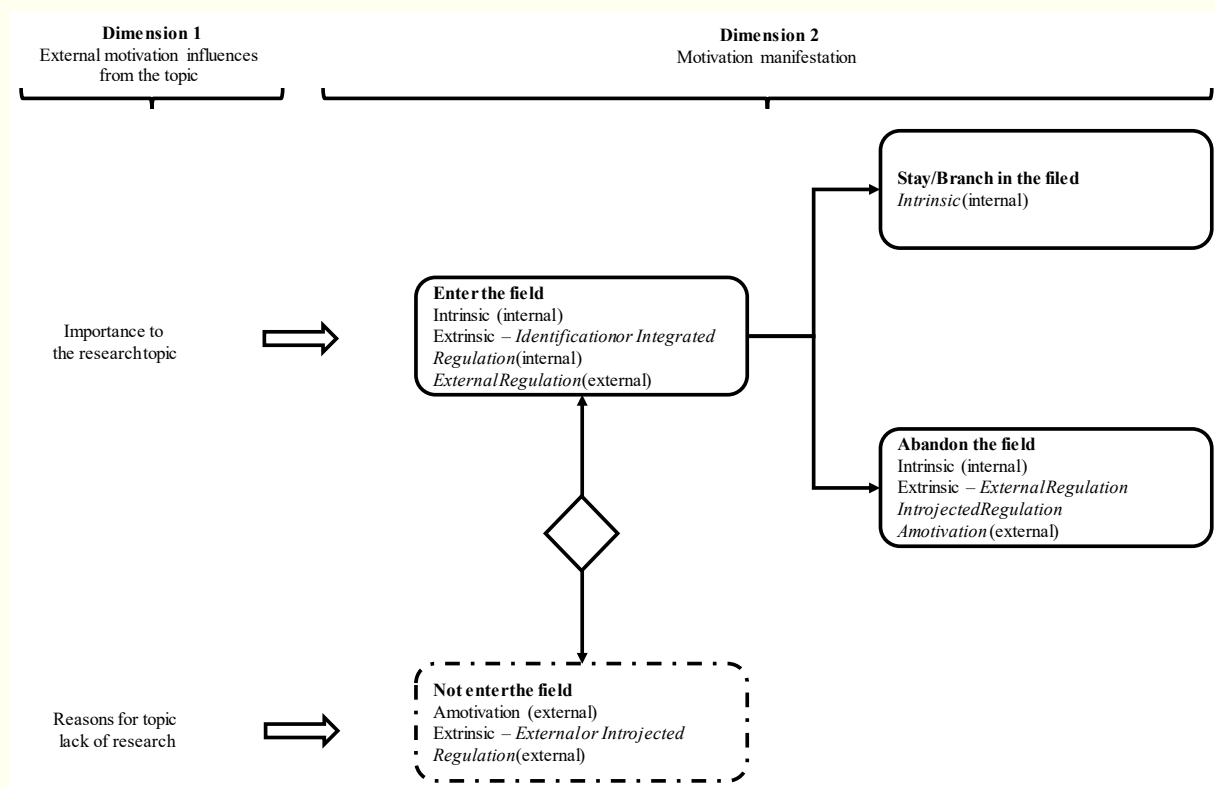
Figure 3. Emergent process framework of problem choice motivation.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we sought to understand researchers' problem choice (or the decision to undertake or abandon a research topic). We used organizational decline as the empirical context of the study, given the evidence that it is a pertinent but under-researched theme. We collected the responses of 40 scholars that participated in our study by email. In essence, we first established the relevance of the context (a relevant topic is likely to be studied more). We proceeded to investigate the participants' original motivation for researching a topic and, subsequently, their reasons for abandoning it. The findings enabled us to propose an emergent process model of problem choice motivation, as shown in Figure 4. Although we researched a specific phenomenon, due to the relevance of the phenomenon and the researchers who were interviewed, we inferred that the developed framework could be extended to business and management research in general.

In general, the problem choice motivations to undertake or remain with a topic are different from the motivations to not enter or abandon it, according to the authors' perceptions. We found two different motivations for undertaking or remaining with the topic: motivation for the problem and personal motivation. We also identified two motivations for abandonment: the need or will to change and the difficulties that pressure researchers to change. When the scholars decided to abandon a topic, they moved to a related topic, one in which they were able to

continue using prior accumulated knowledge, or a different topic. We will discuss each path in detail.

Another point is related to the classification of internal and external motivation. We prefer to discuss this in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are widely studied concepts (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b), but not in problem choice (Milman et al., 2017). They reflect, respectively, personal propensity to learn and discover, or the continuum between external control and self-regulation. Intrinsic motivation is at play when an individual performs an activity for his inherent satisfaction. Extrinsic motivation occurs when an activity is performed to attain a specific outcome. Unlike performing an activity that is enjoyable as in intrinsic motivation, there is an instrumental value in extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, 2000b).

On the left side of our framework (Figure 3), we identified motivations to undertake or not to undertake the topic. Motivation not to undertake is usually due to amotivation, lack of interest, or not believing that the results could be achieved. It is also due to extrinsic factors that undermine motivation. In this case, these factors were 'external regulation' or 'introjected regulation' factors, such as lack of funding (Miller & Neff, 2013) and access to data, or research far from the mainstream (Doh, 2015; Hambrick, 2007). However, this is related to the perception of the actual researchers of the topic. It should be confirmed through researchers that decide not to undertake research.

Motivations to undertake the topic may be intrinsic or extrinsic, but in this case, it was a question of 'identification' or 'integrated regulation.' These extrinsic motivators are facilitators for intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). A point in question is the motivation to study a topic due to proximity to the problem or because of its strong effects. Furthermore, the influence of other people (when a person enjoys working with a friend, desires to work with a supervisor, or is positively influenced by his opinion) is another motivating factor.

On the right side of the framework are the motivations to 'remain or branch out' and to 'abandon.' The motivations to 'remain or branch out' are intrinsic. For example, the emergence and importance of a problem means it is something that is gaining volition and having a strong effect. The research gap in this case indicates an interesting topic that has yet to be sufficiently researched. Both motivators may be considered intrinsic and strong, due to curiosity or a desire to contribute to the field.

The motivations to 'abandon' the topic have to do with the need or desire to change, and may be considered intrinsic or extrinsic, depending on the situation. Moving to an administrative function or to another university are predominantly extrinsic ('external regulation' or 'introjected regulation'). This is normally related to financial rewards and power. Loss of interest is intrinsic, as the researcher desires to move to another topic, for example, because he has found something more interesting to research. However, the difficulties involved are negative motivators.

'External regulation' and 'introjected regulation' are undermining agents of motivation. They are predominantly extrinsic motivators that inhibit researchers from moving on (Foster, Rzhetsky, &

Evans, 2015; Hoffman, 2015). A point in question is difficulty in accessing data and funds because the topic is or deals with companies that no longer exist (Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2016). If the topic lies outside mainstream research, it is difficult to attract researchers (Miller, Taylor, & Bedeian, 2011). As stated by McKinley et al. (1999), work will receive attention when it is different from extant research but connected to the mainstream literature. Both situations are bad for the progress of knowledge, as researchers feel pressured by the need to 'publish or perish' (Miller, Taylor, & Bedeian, 2011). However, even after abandoning the topic and moving to related topics, researchers continue to make partial use of the motivations that encouraged them to undertake their research on the topic.

A number of internal, and perhaps more notably external, factors motivate scholars to undertake, continue with, or abandon a topic of research. We argue that researchers are genuinely and positively motivated to adopt a topic but leave the topic aside mainly because of extrinsic motivations (Milman et al., 2017). This serves as an alert that focusing on mainstream theoretical approaches, as well as focusing less on phenomena, may inhibit the progress of business administration research and teaching, confirming the common view of the practitioners of existing research in the field (Scafuto et al., 2020). It is also an alert for policy makers and university executives of the need for a better understanding of researchers' needs and incentives.

This study raises further challenges for future research. There appears to be a movement in defense of phenomenon-based research (see, Bamberger, 2018; Doh, 2015; Krogh, 2018). Hence, additional studies are required, as well as a broad reflection on the relevance and importance of studying phenomena that are not well served by existing mainstream theories (Hackett, 2014; Scafuto et al., 2020). The present study raises questions regarding research practices and the abandonment of important topics due to a lack of financing and easy data access. It also suggests the need to understand public research funding and theme relevance.

Although some of the interviewees, at the time of the publication of their articles, were students or young researchers who worked with tenured professors, we believe that future research can explore the research challenge of young researchers (Miller, Taylor, & Bedeian, 2011).

Management research and practice is heavily influenced by research from developed countries (Caldas & Wood, 1997; Wood & Caldas, 2002; Wood, Tonelli, & Cooke, 2011). Research in emerging countries, as in Latin America (Aguinis et al., 2020), for certain phenomena is important (Doh, 2015). Future research could assess the difficulties of researchers from emerging countries in phenomena that are little researched by other researchers.

CONCLUSION

An important practical contribution of our work is that external factors can be managed, and extrinsic motivation may support intrinsic motivation. Problem choice itself is an understudied topic, despite the organizational and institutional pressures on researchers to publish. Therefore, understanding how they select what to study and publish is of relevance to academia. Future quantitative empirical studies could seek a better understanding of the magnitude of problem

choice and its impact on the relevance of research, teaching, and career progression. A limitation of this work is that it is an exploratory qualitative work considering the case of an important understudied topic. Another limitation is that we did not interview researchers that did not undertake the topic, relying on the perception of published authors.

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Authors' contributions 🔴CRT

1st author: conceptualization (lead), data curation (lead), formal analysis (lead), investigation (lead), methodology (lead), project administration (lead), supervision (lead), writing-original draft (equal), writing-review & editing (equal).
2nd author: conceptualization (supporting), formal analysis (supporting), writing-original draft (equal), writing-review & editing (equal).
3rd author: formal analysis (equal), methodology (equal), software (equal), writing-review & editing (supporting).

Authors

Fernando Antônio Ribeiro Serra*

Universidade Nove de Julho, Programa de Mestrado e Doutorado em Administração
Avenida Francisco Matarazzo, n. 612, Água Branca, 01156-050, São Paulo, SP, Brazil
fernando.antonio.ribeiro.serra@gmail.com
iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8178-7313

Manuel Portugal Ferreira

Universidade Federal de Lavras, Departamento de Administração e Economia
Aquenta Sol, 37200-900, Lavras, MG, Brazil

Instituto Politécnico de Leiria, Center of Applied Research in Management and Economics
Morro do Lena, Alto Vieiro, 2411-901, Leiria, Portugal
manuel.portugal.ferreira@gmail.com
iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4642-4605

Isabel Cristina Scafuto

Universidade Nove de Julho, Programa de Pós-graduação em Gestão de Projetos
Avenida Francisco Matarazzo, n. 612, Água Branca, 01156-050, São Paulo, SP, Brazil
isabelscafuto@gmail.com
iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6788-3325

* Corresponding author