

Factors Underlying Organizational Resilience in SMEs

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are faced with a double challenge: a turbulent environment and a lack of resources. To face this reality, SMEs are called to develop adequate organizational responses. Organizational resilience (OR) has emerged in recent years as an appropriate solution. Indeed, this concept has received particular interest from researchers. It has been described as crucial for the company on the same level as performance and efficiency. Studies on SME's resilience are relatively rare. Moreover, research in this area has been identified as an interesting area for future research. Hence the interest of this research which attempts to unpack the different determinants of resilience in the context of SMEs by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates the individual level, the organizational level and environmental factors to explain this resilience. The aim of this paper is to enrich the theoretical framework of organizational resilience, to broaden the framework of the study to a new context, namely SMEs, and to integrate the individual level, the organizational level and the environmental factors in a conceptual model.

Keywords: SME, organizational resilience, entrepreneur.

INTRODUCTION

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face a dual challenge: a turbulent environment and a lack of resources. To cope with this reality, SMEs need to develop appropriate organizational responses.

In recent years, organizational resilience (OR) has emerged as an appropriate solution. Indeed, this concept has received particular interest from researchers. This is reflected in the large number of studies that have been carried out. Resilience has been described as crucial for companies, on a par with performance and efficiency (Altintas and Broyer, 2009).

Studies on resilience in SMEs are relatively scarce (Battisti and Deakins, 2017; Conz and al, 2017). This research can be divided into three main areas: the first focuses on how the characteristics and capabilities of SMEs contribute to their resilience; the second gives importance to resilience at the individual level (the SME leader) and its possible link to organizational resilience, and the third focuses on the environmental factors that increase the resilience of these firms (Wishart, 2018).

Hence the interest of this research, which attempts to dissect the various determinants of resilience in the context of SMEs. On the basis of the above, it becomes legitimate to ask the following question:

“What are the determinants that contribute to the SME's organizational resilience?”

This paper, which is mainly theoretical, will therefore have the following objectives: firstly, to enrich the theoretical framework of organizational resilience, mainly in the field of SMEs and which constitutes an interesting area for future research (Annarelli and Nonino, 2016); secondly, to bring together the individual level, the organizational level and environmental factors by integrating these different determinants into a single conceptual framework. To do this, we will mobilize a theoretical framework based on organizational

resilience, individual resilience and contingency theory.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Organizational resilience (OR)

The use of the term resilience has spread to a number of different fields and contexts. It was first used in ecology to describe the recovery of ecological systems (Holling, 1973), and has subsequently spread to other fields, notably: organization (Horne and Orr, 1998; Hamel and Valikangas, 2003; McDonald, 2008; etc.). As a result, several definitions and typologies have been developed creating a diverse literature base (Burnard and al., 2018). The following table provides an overview of some definitions of resilience in the organizational context.

Table 1: Resilience in organizations' context

Auteurs	Nature de la capacité	Définition
Somers (2009)	Anticipation capacity	Resilience involves identifying potential risks and taking proactive measures (...) to ensure that an organization thrives in the face of adversity.
Danes & al. (2009)	Anticipation capacity	The resilience of family businesses refers to a 'stock' or 'reservoir' of individual and family resources that protects the family business from disruption and is characterized by the individual and collective creativity used to solve problems and get the job done.
Horne & Orr (1998)	Resistance and recovery capacity	Ability to absorb stress and change with minimum disruption.
Blanco, et Montes-Botella (2017)	Anticipation and resistance capacity	Ability to recover quickly, resist to shock and avoid impact.
Edgeman (2015)	Adaptation capacity	A firm's ability to renew itself through innovation, to change and reinvent itself by adapting its responses to political, social, economic and other shocks or challenges.
McDonald (2008)	Adaptation capacity	Resilience conveys the properties of being able to adapt to the demands of the environment and to manage the vagaries of the environment.
Morais-Storz and Nguyen (2017)	Anticipation and adaptation capacity	The ability to dynamically reinvent business models and strategies as circumstances change, to constantly anticipate and adapt to changes that threaten their earning power, and to change before the need becomes desperately obvious.
Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal (2015)	Anticipation and adaptation capacity	Resilience is the ability of an organization to anticipate and adapt to the environment.
Hamel and Valikangas (2003)	Resistance and adaptation capacity	A dual capacity for resistance and adaptation, opening the way to new horizons. These horizons concern an organization's ability to find new answers to new questions, rather than simply reproducing previously used organizational responses.
Chrisman, Chua and Steier (2011)	Capacity to anticipate, resist and adapt	An organization's ability to avoid, absorb, react to and recover from situations that could threaten its existence.

Ortiz-de-Mandojana and Bansal (2016)	Capacity to anticipate, resist and adapt	The ability of organizations to anticipate, avoid and adapt to shocks in their environment.
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Sources : (Conz and Magnani, (2020) ; Duchek, (2020))

The table below sheds light on the fact that the definition of OR is far from consensual among researchers. For some, resilience is reduced to a single capability: anticipation (to avoid a crisis), resistance (to absorb the crisis) or adaptation (ability to recover after the crisis). For others, the concept encompasses two capabilities, while others believe that resilience depends on all capabilities. The latter definition will be retained in this article, as we consider OR to be: firstly, the capacity of the organization to deal with disruption and unexpected events in advance (anticipatory capacity); secondly, the capacity to manage disruption and unexpected events if they occur (absorptive capacity); and finally, the recovery and restoration of the organization to its initial state or a new, more desirable state (adaptive capacity).

Organizational resilience and the SME's context

In the context of SMEs, it is widely accepted that they (by their very nature) are more vulnerable and sensitive to the vagaries of the environment (competition from large companies, rising costs, falling demand, dependence on a few customers, supply disruptions, etc.). Moreover, research has shown that SMEs suffer most in times of crisis and are the least prepared of all organizations (Ingirige and al., 2008), this vulnerability being linked to a lack of financial, technological and human resources (Vossen, 1998). Despite their weaknesses, some SMEs develop adequate organizational responses (Branicki and al., 2018). These SMEs can thus be said to be resilient.

Defining Organizational Resilience in SMEs

The study of SME resilience has only attracted the interest of researchers in recent years. An analysis of these studies reveals that they don't put forward a specific definition for SMEs. Indeed, researchers have largely drawn on definitions used in the context of large companies to define it. We therefore consider, in the context of this work, that OR for SMEs, like for large companies, is also the component of three capabilities: anticipation, absorption and adaptation. Anticipation refers to the company's proactivity. Resilience is the ability to withstand adversity and thus avoid a loss of function through anticipation mechanisms. Adaptation implies, on the one hand, effective and rapid action in the event of a crisis and, on the other, the development of learning and innovation mechanisms.

The capacity to anticipate

Different research adopts the view that the RO of the SME is largely dependent on its ability to anticipate. Within this framework, Conz and al. (2017) explain SME's resilience as the ability of a system to maintain its equilibrium and avoid shocks. Demmer and al. (2011) suggest that SME resilience is the anticipation of behavior and response to deep-seated secular trends that can permanently undermine core business stability. Similarly, Pal and al. (2014) define resilience as the ability to be ready and maintain superior organizational performance in times of crisis.

Research focusing on the ability to anticipate considers that SMEs must be proactive in the face of environmental hazards, and that this can only be achieved through the possession of a set of resources and the development of certain capabilities. Indeed, Brewton and al. (2010) and Danes et al (2009) define the resilience of family SMEs as the pool of individual and family resources that protects the family business against disruption and is characterized by the individual and collective creativity used to deal with problems.

In particular, Brewton and al. (2010) analyze the contribution of human, social and financial resources and the impact of changes in family structure and natural disasters on the resilience of family businesses. Similarly, Danes and al. (2009) study the survival of businesses following natural disasters and define the resilience of family businesses as a storage capacity that can be called upon when a disruptive event occurs. Both studies emphasize that resilience is about accumulating resources to sustain the family business through difficult times.

Absorption and adaptation capacity

It is clear that these two capabilities refer to the effective management of unexpected events so as to resist their disappearance. Much research on SMEs has equated the OR of the SME with absorptive capacity (resilience or robustness). Acquah and al. (2011) thus describe it as the ability to persist in the face of substantial change, remaining stable, resisting disruption and disaster. Jaaron and Backhouse (2014) also explain resilience as the ability to sense and absorb change. Dumitrascu and Dumitrascu (2016) also explain resilience as the ability to absorb severe shocks and impacts. Similarly, Ismail and al. (2011) define it as the maintenance of positive adjustment under difficult conditions and identify operational agility, defined as a firm's ability to react quickly in the face of turbulence, as a necessary element in the development of resilience. For their part, Dai & al. (2017) define resilience as the ability to withstand war-related stressors. Wedawatta & Ingirige (2012) point out that the resilience of SMEs enables them to limit the negative impact of major events on their business activities. Starr et al, (2003) and Huggins et al. (2014) describe it as the ability and capacity to withstand discontinuities. Finally, Duarte Alonso & Bressan (2015) describe SME resilience as system persistence and the ability to absorb change and disruption while maintaining the same relationship. This capacity is an imperative element to achieve resilience by resisting disruptions and trying to preserve the functioning of the business.

In addition to the capacity to anticipate and absorb, resilience also encompasses the capacity to adapt, i.e., to bounce back from the shock. Research, as in the case of the analysis of large companies, distinguishes between two types of rebound: the first to the state prior to the shock, and the second to a new state of equilibrium.

From this perspective, Bhamra and al. (2011) and Herbane (2015) highlight that SME's OR is about recovering, bouncing back from a shock and returning to the pre-disruption state. Linnenluecke and al. (2012) state that resilience is an organizational capacity to absorb the impact of a shock and recover from the occurrence of an extreme weather event. Carmeli and Markman (2011) define resilience as the ability to bounce back from setbacks. Tracey and French (2017) explain resilience as a company's ability to adapt when faced with external challenges, and to recover after a decline in performance. These studies, which describe resilience using the idea of 'bouncing back' or returning to a previous state of equilibrium, have their theoretical underpinnings in the resilience engineering perspective. According to resilience engineering, a system that has suffered a shock that alters its equilibrium at the time of the crisis will, in the post-crisis phase, return to its pre-existing organizational structure, i.e. as it was before it was affected by the unexpected event.

In addition to the research cited above, another group of researchers believe that rebound develops towards a better state than the previous one. Within this framework, Coates and al. (2019) define resilience as the ability of an organization to adapt to return to a stronger state after disruption. Alberti and al. (2018) define SME resilience when the event occurs as the ability to survive and compete successfully within the environment. Gray and Jones (2016) focus on the ability to adapt/survive and develop, or learn from the phenomena that occur to better prepare for future events.

Research has also identified various factors that explain the SME's OR. These will be developed below.

METHODOLOGY

As part of our exploratory literature review, we broadly followed the basic protocol for systematic literature reviews set out by Petticrew and Roberts (2006). This process includes a rigorous framing based on our research question, an initial delimitation of the field of research and the identification of tools for data collection and analysis.

The main objective of this literature review is to provide answers to our main research question: what are the determinants that contribute to the resilience of SMEs? The scope of this literature review is to identify all the factors that promote OR. This resilience is crucial for these entities, which make a significant contribution to the economic and social development of any country. Consequently, this literature review aims to explore existing research on the subject and synthesize knowledge to provide an in-depth understanding of these determinants.

To ensure the effectiveness of our research, we defined our initial field of investigation by establishing criteria for including or excluding references. These criteria included general information, such as the context and year of publication; methodological information, including the theoretical framework and research design, whether qualitative or quantitative; and documentary information, such as the type of document and the language used. We used recognized academic databases such as Scopus, Science Direct, Google Scholar and ResearchGate to collect the articles needed for our literature review.

The research was conducted in French and English. Relevant keywords such as ‘organizational resilience’, ‘SMEs’ and ‘determinants’ were used to conduct targeted searches in these databases. The search for determinants included articles published between 2011 and 2020. The number of citations for each article was also taken into account, giving an indication of the influence and relevance of the article in the field. Search terms were searched in titles, keywords and abstracts. Our panel of articles was divided into 4 types: Empirical papers, Theoretical papers and Literature reviews.

DETERMINANTS OF SME’ OR

These determinants can be classified into three categories of factors that promote OR. The first focuses on the organizational level of SMEs and the organizational capabilities that contribute to resilience. The second focuses on the individual level and the role of the SME entrepreneur or manager. The third and final category outlines the factors linked to the environment.

Organizational factors

Demmer (2011) distinguished two groups of factors linked to the organizational level. The first group is inspired by the context of large companies, and he identified five main factors that have already been verified in this context:

- Sharing internal knowledge ;
- Sharing external knowledge ;
- The identification of new options and opportunities, facilitated by integration into customers’ value chains;
- Outsourcing innovation;
- Continuous renewal and optimization through: the principles of total quality management, Lean and state-of-the-art technologies and equipment in general.

The second group is perfectly suited to the SME context. Demmer has focused on an entrepreneurial

strategic planning process, investment in improving the innovative capabilities of human resources, and a flexible structure that facilitates rapid decision-making in response to customer and market requirements.

Gunasekaran and al. (2011) also referred to the flexible organizational structure in addition to other factors, including: the management style that encourages innovation, the adoption of information and communication techniques (Internet, e-commerce, enterprise resource planning, etc.) and the adoption of internationalization strategies.

For their part, Ismail and al. (2011) stress the importance of going beyond the 'feeling and experience' approach to decision-making in the face of environmental hazards, which generally characterizes SMEs, and calling on strategic thinking through the development of strategic and operational agility, in order to create a state of 'strategic readiness' that fosters resilience.

Other determinants of SME's OR inspired by large firms, have been highlighted by Tortenson and Mattila (2014), including: financial resources in the form of cash flow and liquidity, as well as appropriate budgetary control and strong financial reserves, diversification into new product segments: market development and diversification strategies through innovative product launches and the use of additional sales channels to penetrate new markets or customer segments.

At the end of the analysis presented above, we can say that the researchers who have studied the organizational determinants SME's OR largely agree on the fact that the SME context does not differ much from that of large companies and that the resilience capacities are largely the same despite the difference in means.

We can therefore put forward the following proposal:

P1: organizational factors such as innovation, strategic planning, routinization, etc., contribute to SME's OR.

Individual factors

From the outset, research into organizational resilience has consistently emphasized the pivotal role of the individual. To this end, and in the context of resilience engineering, Hollnagel (2008) considers that human beings are active players and assets that are necessary for systems to function properly. The human factor (as individuals and/or groups) plays a central role in the resilience of any system (Hollnagel, 2006). McDonald (2008) argues that a system can only be resilient if it reconciles stability and flexibility. This flexibility, he continues, can only be achieved through the role of the individual. Like IR researchers, Richemont (2003), who has studied the resilience of socio-economic systems, refers to the role of employees' individual and collective capacities in strengthening the flexibility of companies, which is necessary for resilience. More recently, Lengnick-Hall and Beck (2009) explain that the actions and interactions between individuals in the organization underpin the emergence of the company's resilience capacity.

In the context of SMEs, a review of the literature highlights the predominant role of the entrepreneur, to the extent that some authors personalize this type of structure in relation to the entrepreneur (Julien & Carrier, 2002). Performance and resilience depend largely on the actions and behavior of the entrepreneur or manager. Research has focused on the entrepreneur's social capital and social skills (Baron & Markman, 2000), the entrepreneur's behavior (Powell & Baker, 2011; Bamiazi & Kirchmaier, 2012; Conz, and al. 2017), entrepreneurial mindset (De Vries & Shields, 2006; Doern, 2016) and individual entrepreneurial resilience (Ayala & Manzano, 2014) as determinants of OR.

The entrepreneur's individual resilience

The study of individual resilience (IR) revealed that researchers have not agreed on a single definition of the concept. Some have considered it to be a personality trait and characteristic, while others believe that it can be acquired through life experiences.

Overall, researchers agree that IR is based on individuals' positive emotions, resistance and adaptation, so that resilient individuals are able to remain optimistic and hopeful, and even to improve when faced with challenges. Resilience must therefore involve two essential conditions: exposure to a context of adversity that corresponds to a strong threat or trauma, and positive adaptation (Bernard and Barbosa, 2016).

These two conditions explain the use of IR theory in this work. Entrepreneurs operate in increasingly competitive and uncertain environments. They frequently have to deal with disruptive conditions, which have an impact on their ability to integrate, construct and reconfigure resources (Schepers and al. 2021).

The entrepreneurship literature has identified several sources of IR, including those set out in the Connor and Davidson (2003) scale, ingenuity, audacity, optimism (Manzano and Ayala, 2013; Ayala and Manzano., 2014) and finally perseverance (Markman and al., 2005; Crick and Crick., 2016). Altintas (2018) defines them as follows: for ingenuity it is the set of resources, skills and knowledge available to the entrepreneur in order to control the situations of adversity they face. Boldness is linked to self-control in the face of adversity. Entrepreneurs must be bold and fight to achieve their objectives. Optimism is the ability to maintain a positive attitude in the face of difficult circumstances. Perseverance is characterized by the ability to see the positive side of problems, to believe that goals can be achieved and to see oneself as a strong individual.

Individual resilience and SME's OR

Despite the diversity of studies on resilience in entrepreneurship, there are few studies on the impact of the entrepreneur's psychological resilience on the SME's OR. Our literature review enabled us to identify a number of interesting studies, which we will outline below.

Ayala and Manzano (2014), in their empirical study, test the hypothesis that an entrepreneur's resilience is correlated with business growth and find a positive association. They find that resilience has predictive validity and that entrepreneurs who score high on resilience characteristics are likely to run a successful business that grows over time. Doern (2016), in a study of the impact of unexpected events on small businesses in London, argues that the mindset of the owner is at the heart of a resilient business.

DeVries and Shields' research (2006) argues that flexibility, motivation, perseverance and optimism are behaviors that contribute not only to individual resilience but also to the resilience of the business as a whole. In this way, the link between the individual resilience of the entrepreneur and the resilience of his organization is put forward.

Branicki and al. (2018), through a qualitative study, investigated how entrepreneurial resilience affects SME OR, identifying four key factors: the entrepreneur's social ties, resourcefulness, autonomy and high control power and finally, comfort with uncertainty. However, the authors distinguish entrepreneurial resilience from individual resilience.

In short, it can be said that entrepreneurs with resilience skills are able to act in the face of adversity and have a greater propensity to act than individuals who lack them, who are easily discouraged by crises, setbacks or potential challenges. They are prepared to work hard to achieve their goals, adapting to change to take advantage of the new situation while maintaining a positive attitude. The skill of resilience can

therefore be seen as an asset that individuals can call on in times of stress.

The behavior of the resilient entrepreneur is subsequently reflected positively in the results of his company through performance, success and OR. Our conclusion is in line with the work that maintains that IR has downstream behavioral consequences.

In the light of the above, the following proposition can be put forward:

P2: The entrepreneur or manager plays a major role in the SME's OR through his individual resilience.

Environmental factors

It is widely accepted that the success of SMEs is inevitably limited by the opportunities and threats presented by the environment in which they operate (Covin & Slevin, 1989; Entrialgo and al., 2001). The above is supported by the foundations of contingency theory. Contingency theory has a long tradition in entrepreneurship research (Linton, 2014).

The interest in the influence of environmental factors on the SME's OR is due to their strong dependence on these factors. SMEs are dependent on the (local) system in which they are embedded. Their resilience is highly dependent on the resilience of this system as a whole (Pal and al., 2014; Gunasekaran and al., 2011). Various studies have highlighted the impact of the environment.

In this context, Conz and al. (2017) found a positive relationship between cluster resilience and the resilience of the SMEs in the cluster. For his part, Herbane (2019) showed the role of location in strengthening the RO of SMEs. He finds that SMEs can derive a number of benefits from proximity has other organizations. These include: Potential logistical and commercial advantages from proximity to suppliers and customers; knowledge diffusion and imitation of successful firms that are geographically close (Camison and Villar-Lopez, 2012); and acquisition of relevant information about the general market and competitors' activity in particular (Wong and Aspinwall, 2004). Other researchers emphasize the importance of incubators as a particular form of localization. These incubators help to improve the absorptive capacity of start-ups based on new technologies (Patton, 2014).

On the basis of the above, we can say that location is not only the place where current and potential resources are located, but also an important factor in determining vulnerability or resilience.

In addition, other non-academic studies (for example; RSA, 2015) mention the importance of networking, government support (in the form of grants, exemptions and other benefits) to help SMEs overcome adversity.

External support can also take the form of coaching and training. In this regard, Gray and Jones (2015) find that the introduction of an organizational development and learning programme focused on collaboration and coaching can have a positive impact on the resilience of individual entrepreneurs. Gunasekaran and al. (2011) also argue for senior management training interventions to keep these individuals up to date with technological advances in particular, as SMEs tend to be cautious in adopting new and unfamiliar technologies.

On the basis of this analysis, the following proposals can be made:

P3: Environmental factors moderate the relationship between organizational factors and SME's OR.

P4: Environmental factors moderate the relationship between individual factors and SME's OR.

CONCLUSION

OR has attracted the interest of researchers in recent years, this interest being motivated by the difficult context in which companies are evolving and which continues to worsen. Despite this craze, this research has mainly been developed in the context of large companies, while the SME context has been relatively neglected (Battisti & Deakins, 2015; Conz, and al., 2015), which is why it has been identified as an interesting area for future research (Annarelli & Nonino, 2016).

This paper follows this approach by attempting to unravel the determinants that contribute to strengthening the SME's OR. The literature review first facilitated the definition of the concept. This definition doesn't differ from that used to define the large companies' OR. A conceptual model was then developed by combining the various factors identified in the literature. This model provides a deeper understanding of each of the factors and offers additional insights into how to respond to environmental change in an appropriate manner. This model encompasses three research proposals: P1, which concerns organizational determinants; P2, which, based on IR theory, puts forward the role of the entrepreneur or manager; and P3, which draws on contingent theory to explain the moderating role of the environment.

Although we believe this study provides valuable information, further research is needed to expand on existing knowledge. The aim of this study was to develop a provisional conceptual framework. Consequently, empirical work is still required to examine the research hypotheses. In order to test these hypotheses, the literature offers valid and reliable measurement scales.

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