

Survivorship as Emplacement: How Turbulent Environments Enhance Mastery over Adversity

SUMMARY

“I live in a country where you go to sleep when there is peace and you wake up and there is war...it’s been like this since I was born... What we do is expand our business. We have to adapt, we’ve been raised like this and we’ve got used to it.”

“For us, we’re not thinking of going anywhere. We have to struggle in this country.”

“So when they bombed the place, our roof exploded too... What did my father do? Nothing... You rebuild and continue. It’s a survival mode. So I asked him last year: what do we do if there was a civil war. He told me: [Son], during the civil war, when they bomb us, we hide. When they don’t, we work.”

For five decades, who, when and how organizations survive has been extensively studied. Survival is typically understood as a binary outcome: some organizations survive, others don’t. Survival analysis models the probability of exit within specific windows, for large longitudinal samples of organizations that share a similar set of risk factors. However, this approach tells us relatively little about the repeated survivors, who are often treated as right-censored cases once all the disruption settles. A handful of qualitative approaches have taken us one step closer by suggesting that survivorship is much more than a binary outcome, or a set of conditions that enhance firms’ chances of survival in response to specific events. Perhaps most intriguing to us, these qualitative studies open up the possibility that survival is not uniform, but rather survivors are differentially (re)shaped, even profoundly transformed, by the events they encounter, and each survivor may adapt differently to similar events, even when they share common contexts or conditions.

The possibility that survivorship is a complex and dynamic dependent variable has been gaining traction in organizational studies, international business and entrepreneurship. Each of these literature approaches survivorship from a different vantage point and together they open up a broader research interest in what survivorship means to different organizations. Because the issue of survival is particularly pressing in setting experiencing dramatic upheavals and/or recurrent disruption, we focus our research question on survivorship of organizations buffeted by multiple shocks. In contrast to surviving analysis studies that treat sequences of 0s as comparable outcomes, we are intrigued by understanding the subtler changes occurring from one event to the next. We would like to understand the nuanced influence of the broader context in which firms operate and the subtler interactions between firms and their contexts.

Using 16 longitudinal case studies of organizations operating in Lebanon from 1922 to 2014, whose founders, CEOs and/or general managers described as “survivors”, this study advances an inductive theory of survivorship in troubled settings. A complex country setting, Lebanon presents a unique and valuable context in which to study how organizations survive where adaptation has to recur, sometimes very frequently in an enduring politically turbulent environment. This special context helps us to understand survivorship at its extreme status in an environment of continuous crisis.

We extend a long and large literature on survival research on organizational studies and complement recent insights from international management and entrepreneurship in danger and conflict zones by suggesting that survivorship is not a one-time response but rather a progressive strengthening processes as organizations respond to repeated events punctuated periodically by specific proof of their new found strength. Using primary qualitative data gathered from 2012 to 2014, including in person

interviews with key protagonists, combined with archival sources including repositories and trusted media accounts we find that most narrative accounts of survivorship did not focus on the events per se, nor credit any of these events for specific changes in the business. Instead, events helped progressively hone one's sense of survivorship (what a survivor is and does when encountering these events). Our protagonists explained that they continuously and explicitly revised their ways of working so they could better anticipate and adapt to a widening range of disruptions.

Next, we reveal their understanding of survivorship as a progressive undertaking, punctuated by specific accomplishments that helped them prove unique strengths and amplified by strengthening processes that allowed survivors to make the most from any and all disruptions they encountered.

We then unpack survivorship by differentiating among four mechanisms we induced from the data. Protagonists listed emotional, rational, spatial and temporal reasons to stay, and explained how they renewed their commitment to this volatile context, despite the many external events outside their control. These reasons are not simply activated in response to specific events, but rehearsed regularly, so they keep underscoring one's survivorship in between and even in anticipation of future disruption. Survival thus emerges not only as a result of specific mechanisms of emplacement in relation to specific events, but also as a byproduct of the growing sense of emplacement that continues in between, not just in response to, specific events. We therefore propose a notion of survivorship as multi-dimensional emplacement, which enables business to continue not only in direct relation to specific disruptive events but also more broadly in relation to a continuously disrupted context.

Last, we explain how emotional, rational, spatial and temporal emplacement enhances survival beyond specific events by showing how protagonists continue to develop a greater sense of emplacement in preparation for staying and being successful in a context they fully expect will continue to present them with other, unexpected, and perhaps even greater challenges going forward. Paradoxically, the greater the turbulence encountered, the stronger the protagonists' reliance on any (often all) of these emplacement mechanisms.

When we entered the field we were torn between the predominant understanding of survival as an event-specific outcome and the emerging understanding of survivorship as a complex and context-specific undertaking. Our inductive analysis lent strong support to the latter, and revealed a multi-dimensional relationship between organizations and their context that continuously redefines them as survivors and progressively enhances their mastery over adversity. Our study thus contributes a new understanding of survivorship in troubled settings that brings context from the background to the fore. To our knowledge, this study is the first to show all four dimensions of how a firm relates to a context. We also contribute by showing that the tighter a firm's relationship to its (troubled) context, the better its odds of survival. Of course such tight relationships may become binding, and we find repeated evidence that firms stay even when it is not economically justified, and indeed they redirect their growth and use their profitability elsewhere to maintain at least a presence, and preferably a foci of operation in Lebanon. While on the surface this approach defies reason, it leverages unique competencies such as patriotism and persistence, and therefore helps firms make the most out of long-term emotional bonds. It also enables firms to respond quickly and stay focused on the present, without dwelling on past disruption or giving too much forethought to the next shock.

Understanding survivorship as emplacement in a context, a firm has grown deep in and multi-faceted bonds with, opens up new directions of research. Recent strides in international business and entrepreneurship take a fresh look at danger zones as litmus tests for old theories and laboratories where new practices emerge. Survivorship as emplacement is important because it speaks to ways in which one's mastery can improve beyond and independent of traumatic events. Once activated, the relationship with the context continues to expand the opportunity set an organization perceives, and quickens the pace at which one responds to those opportunities during and outside times of crises. In this way survivorship as emplacement provides organizations in turbulent contexts with an unconventional growth path, whereas adversity fuels their ingenuity.