

**RESEARCH IN THE MANAGEMENT OF LEARNING, CHANGE AND
RELATIONS: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE**

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BIBLIOGRAPHIC DATA AND CLASSIFICATIONS		
Abstract	<p>This note sketches opportunities for interdisciplinary research in management, and the distinctive contribution that might be made from a European perspective. It highlights a few major domains of research, conceptual issues, disciplines, and specific opportunities and needs in Europe. The domains of research considered are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the management of learning, innovation and change in organisations <p>and, related to that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the management of inter-organisational relations, alliances, social capital. <p>There are opportunities here for innovative combinations of some branches of economics (institutional economics, evolutionary economics, the 'competence view'), sociology (population ecology, social capital and social structure, social psychology) and cognitive science (theories of knowledge, learning and language, cognitive and evolutionary psychology). In these areas of innovative, integrative, theoretical/conceptual, interdisciplinary research, Europe has a comparative advantage over the US. US research tends to be more incremental, technical and narrow. The research indicated here requires outlets for publication that are more receptive to such work than the current journals of the Academy of Management.</p>	
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RESEARCH IN THE MANAGEMENT OF LEARNING, CHANGE AND RELATIONS: A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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January 2001

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Abstract

This note sketches opportunities for interdisciplinary research in management, and the distinctive contribution that might be made from a European perspective. It highlights a few major domains of research, conceptual issues, disciplines, and specific opportunities and needs in Europe. The domains of research considered are:

- the management of learning, innovation and change in organisations
and, related to that:

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There are opportunities here for innovative combinations of some branches of economics (institutional economics, evolutionary economics, the 'competence view'), sociology (population ecology, social capital and social structure, social psychology) and cognitive science (theories of knowledge, learning and language, cognitive and evolutionary psychology). In these areas of innovative, integrative, theoretical/conceptual, interdisciplinary research, Europe has a comparative advantage over the US. US research tends to be more incremental, technical and narrow. The research indicated here requires outlets for publication that are more receptive to such work than the current journals of the Academy of Management.

Domains of research: learning and relations

There currently is a surge of interest in research on knowledge and learning in organisations, and organisational change. This is related to changes in markets, technologies and institutions, in the 'new economy'. Competition has increasingly become a race to the market with new products. There is increasing complexity and change of products, due to increasing product differentiation. This 'radical' product differentiation is pulled by increasing prosperity, which yields a greater variety of wants. It is pushed by technological opportunities offered by ICT and by the need to differentiate products in order to escape from increased competition, resulting from lower transaction costs and globalisation. There is an increased speed of innovation and structural change in markets, due to globalisation, and in technologies and science, in particular information- and communication technology, but also in biotechnology and new materials. Under these conditions, firms have to learn and innovate at a higher pace, and to have a chance of winning races to markets they have to focus on core competencies. This entails that for other, complementary competencies they require collaborative relations with other firms. Increasingly, alliances are to be preferred over mergers and acquisitions, due to their greater flexibility, manageability, and variety of knowledge for the purpose of learning. This leads to an increased interest in the management of inter-firm relations and 'social capital'. Thus exigencies of the 'knowledge economy' and the 'network economy' are connected, in the link between the management of learning/innovation and management of inter-organisational relations (Nooteboom 1999a).

There are different types of innovation system. Anglo-Saxon systems are oriented more towards flexible integration and disintegration, with an emphasis on 'exit' (Hirschman 1970), while most European countries are more oriented towards network relations based on

‘voice’ (Nooteboom 1999b). Such relations require sufficient durability to recoup specific investments in joint learning and the build-up of trust, and may require a certain amount of exclusiveness to control spillover. However, relations can become too durable and exclusive, and thereby hinder rather than further learning and innovation. In other words, they may deteriorate into social liability rather than social capital (Leenders and Gabbay 1999). This trade-off between durability/exclusiveness and flexibility/openness is an issue for firms as well as governments, in their trade-off between competition and innovation policy. There are differences in this trade-off between different countries, in particular between the US and Europe. As a result, there are differences in innovation systems between the US and Europe. These are, in turn, related to differences in corporate governance (Nooteboom 1999c). It will be argued below that there are also differences in research perspective.

Conceptual issues

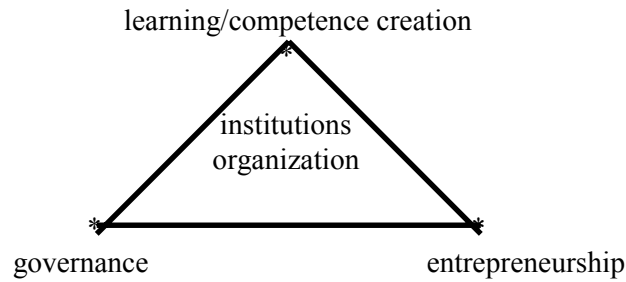
In the recent past, there has been a surge of interest in the ‘competence’ or ‘capability’ perspective of firms, that can be traced back to the work of Penrose (1959) and Richardson, in economics (see e.g. Foss and Knudsen 1996). A crucial feature of this perspective, which makes it attractive to management research, is that in contrast with mainstream economics it recognises that an essential feature of firms is the differences between, them, due to different capabilities being embodied in different organisational structures and cultures. This makes nonsense of the old economic notion of the ‘representative firm’. Competition is now seen not as operating on some given production function for a homogeneous product, but as the striving to be different, on the basis of firm-specific competencies. While transaction cost economics (TCE) pays some attention to bounded rationality and accepts uncertainty and the implications for incomplete contracts, it neglects competence and its development.

On the other hand, the competence view has too easily assumed that capabilities are firm-specific and inimitable also in the longer term, and have neglected issues of imitation and spillover. Also, as has been pointed out by Williamson (1999), the competence view has tended to neglect issues of governance: problems of hold-up and dependence in collaboration. There is a clear need to connect the competence and governance perspectives. For such a connection, governance theory has had to be transformed to take a more dynamic view, in terms of learning and competence development. Also, next to opportunism there can also be trust in relations, and that also had to be built in. This requires a perspective of ‘embeddedness’. From the perspective of networks and social capital, there has been a tendency to reject TCE completely. In my view that is a mistake: some crucial concepts of TCE are worth preserving (such as the notions of specific assets, the hold-up problem, certain instruments of governance, such as hostages, and bilateral and trilateral governance). A crucial question concerns the ability of firms to learn and adapt, and thereby escape from failure and ‘inertia’. This connects with theories of organisational learning in the business literature (for surveys, see Cohen and Sproull 1996, Meindl, Stubbard and Porac 1996). In particular, it relates to the question how firms can combine exploitation, to survive in the short term, and exploration, to survive in the long term (March 1991, Nooteboom 2000). This relates to theories of entrepreneurship. The literature on that subject has exploded in the last decade. Nowadays, entrepreneurship can hardly be neglected in business schools.

Summing up, we need an integrated theory of organisational learning, change and entrepreneurship which deals with both the selection function of markets and institutions and the adaptiveness of firms. This is related to the issues of governance, and the institutions underlying governance, indicated before.

Summing up, we need an integrated theory of organisational learning, change and entrepreneurship which deals with both the selection function of markets and institutions and the adaptiveness of firms. This is illustrated in figure 1.

Figure 1: perspectives



Research of learning and innovation in and between organisations requires theory of structural change in socio-economic systems. One source of inspiration is evolutionary theory, as in evolutionary economics (Nelson and Winter 1982), population ecology in sociology (Hannan and Freeman 1977, 1984), and evolutionary perspectives in organization (Tushman and Romanelli 1985, Gershick 1991, Romanelli and Tushman 1994, Burgelman 1996). One issue concerns the unit of selection. Nelson and Winter proposed the ‘routines’ in firms as the analogue of genes. How does this compare to other notions of units of process in firms, such as ‘standard operating procedures’, ‘performance programmes’ (March & Simon), ‘organisational scripts’ (Gioia & Poole 1984, Nooteboom 2000), and organisational grammars (Pentland and Reuter 1994, Pentland 1995)? It is useful, up to a point, to think of change in terms of the evolutionary trinity of variety creation, selection and retention. However, in human systems variety creation entails innovation, which entails learning, discovery, intuition, creativity. Retention entails communication. Selection is performed by markets and institutions, but those are in turn affected or even created (and partly socially constructed) by the units that are selected (firms). There is a complex relation between the selection environment and the units that are selected, indicated by the term ‘co-evolution’. This is mediated by language and communication, in entrepreneurship and political action. The issue is related to what in sociology is known as the problem of structure and agency: actions of agents are enabled and constrained by social, institutional structure, but they also (re)produce such structure (Archer 1995). Much conceptual/theoretical work remains to be done in this area. In the long run we will have to incorporate or develop appropriate theories of cognition, learning, language and communication.

Understanding of selection processes requires further understanding of institutions: how they operate and how they develop and change. This has been a long time issue in both the old institutional economics (e.g. Veblen) and in sociology. Recent scholars, such as Douglass North, are still struggling with these issues. Is an organisation an institution? Then how does it differ from, say, a legal system, which is certainly an institution. A distinction has been proposed between the wider institutional environment and, within that, more specific ‘institutional arrangements’.

Another even more fundamental issue concerns our basic view of people in their environment. Mainstream economics is based on ‘methodological individualism’: phenomena are ultimately to be explained on the basis of the behaviour and characteristics of individual people. Conversely, some sociology is based on ‘methodological collectivism’: the mental categories, including values and norms, on the basis of which people act, are inculcated by socialisation in some community. Clearly business scholars have to recognise both the influence of individuals and the influence on them from their social environment. Perhaps we can say that an alternative perspective, transcending or combining individualism and collectivism is to be found in an emerging perspective of ‘methodological interactionism’ (Nooteboom 2000).

Related to this is the fundamental notion of a firm or organisation. A business scholar will reject the older economic concept of a production function, and he will hesitate to accept

the notion that it is determined by transaction cost considerations, although that may be part of it. He is more likely to associate it with the notion of embedded competencies, and may endorse the view of the firm as a 'system of shared meanings' (Smircich 1983), 'focusing device' (Nooteboom 1999), 'collective mind' (Weick and Roberts 1993) or 'interpretation system' (Choo 1998).

Disciplines

Currently, there are interesting opportunities to tackle the conceptual issues, by combining and re-integrating insights from economics, sociology and cognitive science.

From economics we can use, as indicated, the competence perspective, old and new institutional economics, and evolutionary economics. Much of mainstream economics is not very helpful, for several reasons. One is that it still does not cope with radical uncertainty, which goes beyond mere 'risk' (where the assumption is that the set of outcomes and alternatives to choose from is closed). In fact, knowledge of alternatives for choice often follow rather than precede the choice of action. A second is that it assumes purely self-interested behaviour, excluding altruism. Another is that it is oriented towards efficient outcomes (equilibria) rather than underlying processes. This is unacceptable to the business scholar, because management can only intervene in processes, not in equilibrium outcomes. If that were possible, those would not be equilibrium outcomes. A basic point of attraction of the competence view and of evolutionary economics is that they take a process approach. However, this does not apply that we should shed mainstream economics altogether. There is still a host of basic concepts from economics, and in particular from industrial organization economics, that we can hardly do without. To name only a few: marginal costs, decreasing marginal returns, price elasticities, opportunity costs, substitutes and complements, entry barriers, sunk costs, I also believe that there is some use for game theory. It provides one of the few concepts for us to be precise about strategic interaction.

From sociology we can use, among other things, population ecology, resource based theory, structural network analysis, symbolic interactionism, ..

There is also an important link with cognitive science. There is a lot of talk of the 'knowledge economy', the 'learning' economy, organisation and region, and of 'communication', with surprisingly little use of the sciences that study those phenomena, such as cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, linguistics and semiotics, which have come together in 'cognitive science'. There is useful talk of 'tacit' versus 'codified' knowledge, 'procedural versus declarative knowledge' (Cohen and Bacdayan 1996), and 'absorptive capacity' (Cohen and Levinthal 1990). However, we should delve more deeply into theories of cognition and language to achieve a better understanding of the firm as a focusing device, system of shared meanings, collective mind or interpretation system. In particular, we need an understanding of both cognition and communication in order to understand the link between learning on the individual and on the firm level, and learning in interaction between firms. When we move into cognitive science we find that there also there are diverse perspectives. The perspective that I would favour is the 'situated action' as opposed to the 'computational-representational' perspective. That provides support for the perspective of 'methodological interactionism'.

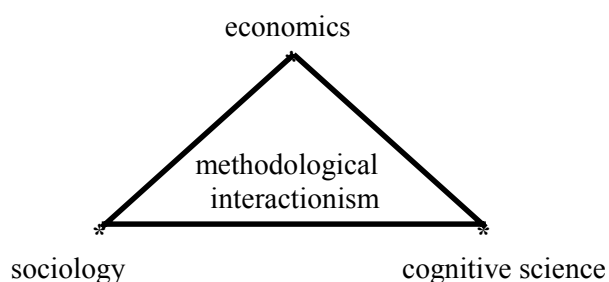
Currently we see economists rediscovering sociology, in their analyses of institutions, interaction and networks. We see sociologists rediscovering economics. We see both economists and sociologists rediscovering cognitive science. There is currently a tremendous waste of duplication, re-invention of wheels and a lack of utilization of complementarities. I give one specific example. In network analysis sociology has much to contribute by going beyond bilateral relations to triangles and the effects of network structure and positions in it: density, centrality, structural holes, structural equivalence. Such effects are relevant and are often ignored by network analysts coming from economics. On the other hand, sociologists tend to neglect issues concerning differences between network participants

(in capabilities and absorptive capacity, for example), spillover, competition. Both could profit by including each others' insights and methods.

I propose that EURAM should be expressly interdisciplinary to utilise the opportunities. Of course, this is a very tall order. As indicated, we are still a long way from a general theory of learning and structural change of organisations and institutions. Ultimately, we should not be satisfied with pasting together heterogeneous elements from disparate theories, in some syncretic, eclectic tangle, but aim to develop a new integrated behavioural science. I propose and predict that the principle of 'methodological interactionism' that I suggested before will form the cornerstone of that. That provides a framework for integrating new economics, sociology and cognitive science in a new behavioural science.

The relation between the disciplines is illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2: disciplines



Another important link is that with geography, which in studies of 'regional innovation systems' and 'learning regions' is also trying to come to grips with issues of learning, innovation, institutions, and knowledge exchange, in particular with a view to the role of location and distance.

A European perspective

I propose that for several reasons Europe has a better potential than the US (or Japan) for realising the ambitions indicated above. From many years of experience in publishing in a variety of journals, performing reviews for a variety of journals and going to a variety of conferences, I have a strong impression that generally the Americans are better than Europeans in technique, but the Europeans are better at more fundamental, theoretical conceptual innovation. Corresponding with this, editorial criteria in US journals are more oriented towards a quite strict, sometimes almost mechanical regime of hypothesis formulation, building incrementally on established results, with 'one specific point per paper'. In my view (e.g. based on reviews for AMJ) this sometimes leads to technically very strong and elaborate tests of somewhat trivial hypotheses. I don't want to suggest that I have no appreciation for superb technique. I think that it is very good that some journals focus on that (such as the AMJ). However, I think that there is also a need for a different orientation. There should also be room for more integrative, exploratory and conceptually bolder research. European journals tend to have more tolerance and appreciation for more complex, exploratory, theoretical/conceptual work, going beyond the limits of established practice. I think this reflects a difference in research capability. One illustration of a greater European open-mindedness for heterodox views is the fact that Nelson and Winter encounter more response to their evolutionary theory in Europe than they do in the US. I think that we should exploit our European comparative advantage. I think this advantage materialises especially in the areas of research discussed above, and in the need for fundamental conceptual/theoretical innovation that they entail. This may entail a need to also institute a corresponding journal, as an outlet for that research.

There are currently many research groups in Europe who are engaged in some part or another of the research programme outlined above. I give only a sample from my own personal, limited network.

1. The Max Planck Institute in Jena, currently under leadership from Ulrich Witt, with a focus on evolutionary and institutional economics, but also attention to organisational learning, innovation/diffusion, and entrepreneurship
2. The DRUID joint venture in Denmark between Copenhagen Business School and Aalborg University, also with studies of evolutionary and institutional economics, innovation and networks.
3. The results of an old EU programme EMOT (European Management and Organization in Transition), operate jointly by Bocconi and Manchester, with remains in activities concerning networks undertaken by Anna Grandori (Bocconi), Mark Ebers (Augsburg) et. al.
4. The European Association for Evolutionary Political Economy (EAEPE), active in subjects such as evolutionary and institutional economics, innovation/diffusion, learning, geography, developing economies .
5. The International Society for New Institutional Economics (ISNIE) has set up a committee for co-ordinating European activities. The focus here is on transaction cost economics.
6. EGOS, which I assume is known to all EURAM participants.

EURAM could connect with these initiatives.

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