

## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

### **Masaryk University**

**Faculty**

Faculty of Economics and Administration

**Procedure field**

Business Economics and Management

**Applicant**

Mag. Dr. Eva Born

**Applicant's home unit, institution**

Department of Corporate Economy, Faculty of Economics and Administration, Masaryk University

**Habilitation thesis**

Towards Organizational Resilience: Development of Skills for Coping with the Unexpected

**Reviewer**

em. o.Univ.-Prof. Dkfm. Dr. Gerhard A. Wührer

**Reviewer's home unit, institution**

Institut für Handel, Absatz und Marketing, Johannes Kepler Universität

Review of the habilitation thesis:

“Towards organizational resilience: Development of skills for coping with the unexpected”

by

Eva Born

## A. Review of the habilitation thesis

### 1. Introductory remarks

On November 25<sup>th</sup> 2019 I was asked by Mrs. Nikol Zachovalova on behalf of Prof. Tomas Urbanek, chair of the habilitation committee if I would like to review the habilitation thesis of Dr. Eva Born. On the same day I expressed my consent, thanking for the honour of being invited by your esteemed Masaryk University to act in the reviewing process. On December 17<sup>th</sup> I have been informed by Mrs. Zachovalova that I am officially appointed (letter from Prof. Urbanek, 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2019 referring to Masaryk University Directive No. 7/2017, Section 7, subsection 7 and 8)) as a thesis reviewer in the habilitation procedure of Mrs. Mag. Dr. Eva Born in the field of Business Economics and Management, held at the Faculty of Economics and Administration, Masaryk University, Czech Republic. For the review the habilitation was downloaded from following address: : <https://www.econ.muni.cz/inet-doc/1258232>.

I will base my review of the habilitation thesis and the scholarly merits of it according to following criteria: a) Content of thesis: relevance and innovativeness of the chosen topic, conceptual and theoretical framework, scholarly context of the work, methodological approach, quality and accuracy of findings, implication of results for further development or research/practice and b) formal structure of work.

### 2. Assessment of scholarly merits

#### a) Content of thesis

Relevance and innovativeness of topic: The author develops the topic with the statement that "...experts regularly fail when caught by surprise ,.." (p.13) where on the other side complexity implies increasing reliance on the skills and knowledge of experts. The surprising situation where experts fail may be innovative contexts, crisis situations, or even when working on routine tasks. As there is considerable amount of research on the management of such situations, which the author clearly works out, there is surprisingly little knowledge on the antecedents of the ability of individuals,

groups or organizations to cope with the unexpected. In citing several most recent articles the author underlines her introductory claims of the innovativeness of her studies. The habilitation thesis aims to develop an exploratory theory of "...how surprise can be consistently and successfully 'tamed'." (p. 14). She introduces the importance of exaptation of routines for new uses in new situations. Her examples are drawn from several fields of science and state that the exaptation in the context of routines remains unexplored. So her justification to study the phenomenon of organizational resilience are well based (p. 14) and the research questions posed: a) what are the relationships between expertise and other forms of knowledge to explain the occurrence and application of skills in circumstances of surprise, and b) which conditions have to be existing to develop such skills within organizations provide a sufficient scientific incentive and background for further investigation. The innovativeness of the chosen topic is also underlined by the research findings presented in den various sections of the empirical study and appendices.

Conceptual and theoretical framework: The course of reasoning the author charts considers several important landmarks. What she deems necessary is a review of current literature in the field of organizational resilience, where the definition of sensemaking and its impact on coping with unexpected events play a vital role. Next, the conception of skills development for expertise are thoroughly considered, in addition to this the limitations of the existing approaches. She expands the traditional domain of knowledge by referring, introducing and explaining the Representation-Knowledge-World (RKW) model. Starting from that conceptional background she moves into the design of the study by studying the development of skills in the military profession, where the development of skills enables officers to cope and act even in highly volatile, novel, or surprising situations where crisis is immanent (p. 14). The following proposed model links variants of skills and their development to modes of dealing, coping, and behave with and within unexpected events and their potential outcomes for organizational resilience. A pivotal point in the argumentation is again the RKW-model as an argument that common employee training and development are not sufficient to succeed in insufficiently analogous situations. In detail the conceptual framework rests on four main pillars (pp. 15 – 32). They are: organizational resilience (pp. 16 - 19), sensemaking (pp.19 – 21), skills development and expertise (pp. 21 – 25),

meta-knowledge and the role of the RKW-model (pp. 26 – 32). In that respect the author reviews the relevant literature and develops a genuine and precise way the four cornerstones of her conceptual argumentation. As necessary she gives more consideration to the part-phenomenon of sensemaking and the RKW-model. In total by content and reflexions the points are well set. To underline the potency of the RKW-model she also critically reflects the deficiencies of existing approaches e.g. behaviourism (see pp. 26 – 32) and exemplifies the important structures and processes of the RKW-model.

Scholarly context of the work: The author observes the scholarly context of her thesis quite well. She cites the relevant pieces of the development of the scientific domain, critically acknowledges the importance and contributions others have developed in the field. By doing this she demonstrates that she lets the reader know in what particular situation she is positioning her work. She clarifies the motivation for the specific questions she is asking and gives credit to others who have done work in domain related fields. She does not pepper her writing with unwarranted praise or completely irrelevant and unnecessary citations, everything is done in a courteous way towards other scholars. That deserves the appreciation of the reader and reviewer.

Methodological approach: To enter the empirical field and carry out her research approach the author turns to the field of the military. Her argument is that the goal of carrying out an empirical investigation of the organizational conditions and behavioural patterns to study the uncanny ability to successfully deal with and even thrive in environments characterized by high volatility, ambiguity and risk might be found in a military setting (p. 33). It is normally outside the scope of ordinary management and allows the investigation of perspective data that might be averaged across large generalizable categories. In adding to this the author states that military following “mission command tactics” might be best suited to be studied and observed (p. 34). To follow her argument the research arena is well set, and the respondents for the semi-structures interviews well chosen (p. 34). The argumentation and emphasis for the methodology which supports the Grounded Theory (GT) approach is comprehensible as at current stage of theory development large scale quantitative studies are too early. Which by the way once again underlines the innovativeness of the thesis. She

exemplifies the different steps she wants to go from first order categories detected in the interviews to second-order concepts which are then constructed and have their roots in the first-order categories. Second-order concepts seek to explain the phenomena at hand (p. 36) based on theoretical considerations.

Some comments to the data sources. The collection process is done very diligently as it starts with open-ended pilot interviews, backed up by archival data, reports, articles, book documents and material used in training and exercise. By doing this the in-depth understanding of the matter is supported and additional insights provided. Not only that, it is also possible for the researcher to triangulate the study findings and gain additional proof or rejection of supposed or hypothesized structures and processes (p. 37). The three-level data collection and analysis follows a careful development. It is supported by qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA) which allows the creation of custom codes and coding of statements. In addition, the linkages between nodes and overlaps can easily established. Inter-coder agreement checks were performed to substantiate the findings. They are presented in Appendix 3 with the results of the analysis of the first and second order codes. The express experiences which are described by the respondents unexpected, surprising and response requiring. The derived second-order categories lead to a model which connects the variants of training and behavioural patterns that support coping with and managing of unexpected events. To provide intersubjective traceability for the interested reader the author describes and discusses extensively the different types of surprise as stated by the military interviewees (p. 39). A typology of surprise is developed and contains the substance of the events of surprise (p. 42). The types frame the different events and the consecutive actions taken. A thorough analysis covers the examples of training with the important outcomes like automatized action, background knowledge necessary for reflection, and socialization (pp. 47 – 54). Special attention in the interviews is given also the communication style which preserves identity and cultural awareness. In this sub-chapter the author enlarges the background knowledge of action in surprising events and how it stabilizes the decision making supports of the action system and expands the options space (pp. 57 – 65). The ongoing analysis of the interviews identifies two types of drills (pure drill and exaptative drill) and two types re-actions (automatized action and reflective exaptation) dealing with surprise (p. 67-69). The

detailed analysis and illustration needs fitting findings together. The author does this innovatively with the application of the RKW-model and its four components as visualized in figure 4, p. 71. The bridging sub-chapter 3.6 “A model of relationships between types of skill development and dealing with surprise” (p. 69) is well set and allows the reader an understanding of the approach towards a theory of skills development for coping with surprise. In that chapter the connection between the specific structures and process of the RKW-model is filled in with empirical evidence drawn from the categories and second order concepts (p. 74 – 82). Here the author demonstrates extensively how she follows the scientific standards of methodology and the leading structures of the conceptual approach outlined in chapter 2.

Quality and accuracy of findings: Qualitative research is as demanding as quantitative studies. Deep and insightful interaction with the data are a prerequisite for the generation of GT. In addition to that the author develops an imaginative insight to make sense of the data and generate understanding and theory. To secure the quality and accuracy of the findings the author uses a structured approach, uses computer-based software to standardize the extraction, categorization and linkage process of the transcribed interviews. The author’s consultation of the literature and the intersubjective traceability of the research findings provided, add to the overall quality and rigorousness of the approach which deserves to be merited.

Implication of results for further research/practical application: The implication and application are jointly covered in the in the sub-chapter 4.2 “Developing complex knowledge for coping with surprise” and 5 “Discussion and conclusion”, the former sub-chapter serving as reference for the later. It highlights the underappreciated role of drill for dealing with unexpected situations, differentiating between pure drill and exaptative drill. The former creating also some understanding of behavioural explanation of re-action, enhancing pure training with background knowledge leads to exaptative drill. Exaptative drill is extremely effective at facilitating and coping with unexpected situations. It is to follow the suggestion of the author, that “...incorporating explanatory background knowledge about why and how rules and learned behaviour were created into training programs can be of vital importance for successfully coping

with surprise.” (p. 84) This finding deserves further scholarly investigation and reinforces the need for additional research in other than military settings.

b) Formal structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of five chapters with sub-chapters. After the ‘Abstract’ with keywords: organizational resilience, coping with the unexpected, skills development, expertise, military, it starts with 1) Introduction: novel interpretation of expertise (pp. 13-14), develops in 2) Conceptual framework the basis for the following study (pp. 15-32), which is demonstrated in 3) Empirical study: coping with the unexpected in the Austrian military (pp. 33-71). Moves on to 4) Towards a theory of skills development for coping with surprise (pp.71-82). 5) Discussion and conclusions summarize the theoretical and empirical findings and discusses their implications (83-84). References in part 6, list of figures in part 7, list of tables part 8 and appendices in section 9 complete the 110 pages of the thesis structure. The important parts of the thesis are illustrated by diagrams and tables which support the understanding of the argumentation and course of idea development, and conceptual conclusions. As such the structure of the thesis is adequate to the research intentions.

**B. Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)**

- 1) Transferability of the research findings to other fields of organizational application. Which context specific factors have to be considered and take care of?
- 2) How should or could the research approach be adapted to be used in other than military settings?

**C. Conclusion**

The habilitation thesis entitled “Towards Organizational Resilience: Development of Skills for Coping with the Unexpected” by Eva Born **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Business Economics and Management.

Date:

14.1.2020

Signature:

A large black rectangular redaction covers the signature area, obscuring the name of the reviewer.