

Improvisation and Emergent Strategizing

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Abstract:

This paper synthesises the conceptualisation of improvisation within the frameworks of emergent strategizing and sensemaking. In doing so, it explores how the arguments offered in literature present an important role for considering the role of improvisation in strategy making, with particular attention to its significance in understanding emergent strategizing and sensemaking. Through a synthesis of the literature we show that emergent strategizing, sense making and improvisation, working in harmony, provide a powerful combination, particularly when developing strategy in fast moving industries. Although encouraging improvisation through planning is problematic, understanding the role it can play, and is playing, in creating the strategic future of an organization suggests that in certain contexts strategy needs to be malleable to unfolding improvised decisions.

Introduction

Improvisation has been part of jazz and theatre for decades, however, in the last 20 years it has entered the management, and particularly the strategy, world. This is for a range of reasons not limited to managers a) adapting to a fast paced and turbulent environment (Cunha and Cunha 2006; Hodgkinson et al. 2016), b) managing crises (Eriksson and McConnell 2011), c) building capability (Pham and Jordan 2006), and d) enabling strategic renewal (Crossan 1998).

Recently, some have argued that improvisation is a vital consideration in strategy development (Hodgkinson et al. 2016) further blurring the lines of planning and execution (Cunha et al. 2012) and arguing it can increase competitive advantage (Perry 1991). However, little attention has been paid to the significance of improvisation for a particular form of strategy development namely emergent strategizing and how improvisation along with sense making, can provide important benefits to strategy *making*. This is important because sense making and emergent strategy provide powerful means of supporting decision makers in times of turbulence and acknowledging and capitalising upon the contribution of improvisation within this realm could provide useful insights. This paper seeks to synthesise the conceptualisation of improvisation within the frameworks of emergent strategizing and sensemaking.

The paper thus explores how the arguments offered in the literature present a role of improvisation in strategy making with particular attention to its significance in understanding emergent strategizing and sensemaking. We commence with a brief examination of the emergence of the concept, including an assessment of the several definitions that add value to the discussion. This examination touches on the genesis of the concept and its transfer to organizational science, as well as considering the research methods used to assess its role in management. This is followed by a consideration of the implication of improvisation in strategy, with a particular emphasis on emergent strategizing. The relevance of emergent strategizing leads on to a consideration of improvisation in sensemaking. We conclude by arguing that emergent strategizing, sense making and improvisation, working in harmony, can provide a powerful combination when developing strategy, particularly in fast moving and turbulent industries. We also consider the significance of improvisation for strategic change.

The Genesis of Improvisation

The concept of improvisation dates back as far as the 1920's, with Follett's "Creative Experience" (Follett 1924) about the creative interaction process experienced in groups, and Whitehead's book

called “Process and Reality” (Whitehead 1929), but until the 1950’s very few research papers addressed the phenomenon, particularly within the context of organization studies.

Inevitably researchers understand the concept of improvisation in different ways depending on their perspectives, epistemologies and field of work. Improvisation has been understood through a wide array of lenses including sociology, psychology, organizational learning (Crossan and Sorrenti 1997; Miner et al. 2001; Vendelo 2009), organizational creativity (Amabile and Pratt 2016; Anderson et al. 2014), personal experience (Fisher and Barrett 2019), memory (Moorman and Miner 1998), innovation (Kamoche and Cunha 2001; Kyriakopoulos 2011; Moorman and Miner 1998), marketing (Slotegraaf and Dickson 2004), project management (Leybourne and Sadler-Smith 2006; Leybourne 2009), technology (Weick 1995), structure (Weick 1995; Weick 2001), and strategic management (Floyd and Woolridge 2000). Others have sought to present an overview of the developing view of improvisation in the organizational field (Cunha et al. 1999a; Cunha et al. 2017; Hadida et al. 2015).

Whilst the above list depicts a wide range of benefits, the following views of improvisation, taken from outside the organization and management literature, seem particularly useful in the context of this paper. For Tyler and Tyler (1990) it is “the negation of foresight, of planned-for, of doing provided for by knowing, and of the control of the past over the present and future” (px). Powers sees improvisation as “the extent to which [meaning is] invented by the people immediately involved in a relationship” (Powers 1981:289). Sharron’s well quoted view is that improvisation, is an “immediate and spontaneous ... process of creation” (Sharron 1983:224), and Erickson, within a context of education saw it as a “... strategically adaptive action” (p161) “... making new kinds of sense together in adapting to the fortuitous circumstances of the moment” (Erickson 1982:166). Reviewing these definitions highlights key phrases particularly when considering improvisation in the context of strategy namely: the negation of foresight, decision making embedded in performance, immediate, rapid, and spontaneous decisions and creative action.

During the period 1996-1998 the field rapidly developed. In 1996 Crossan, Lane, Kluss and White published “The Improvising Organization: Where Planning Meets Opportunity” in which they looked at how theatre actors and jazz musicians improvised and what it means if transferred to organizations (Crossan et al. 1996). This paper kicked-off the ‘improvisational phenomenon’ in management literature. Just one year later Eisenhardt (1997) followed with her essay called “Strategic Decisions and All That Jazz”. A year later Weick (1998) wrote his influential essay “Improvisation as a Mindset for Organizational Analysis” in which he too uses the vehicle of jazz improvisation as a way to “improve on how we talk about organizational improvisation” (p543). Strategy making and improvisation were being seen as a potential powerful partnership.

Unfortunately, despite these articles, improvisation is still very often misunderstood, and thus the concept has little if any influence over organizational behaviour and surprisingly given the instability of markets, even less in terms of its role in influencing strategy. Managers predominantly understand strategy as a prescriptive, a priori, process possibly due to the fact that adopting an improvisation approach might indicate that things are not being properly managed. Without allowing for improvisation managers often forgo real opportunities for their business because there is *this* plan to adhere to and incentives coupled to it. The loss of such opportunities might have been avoided by encouraging a more flexible technique - by improvising within an emergent strategizing environment. Where improvisation can enable strategy to meet the demands of a continually changing world in practice it can be powerful (Eisenhardt 1997).

Detecting improvisation and determining exactly how to adopt and measure it in an organizational context is not an easy task, and thus only a few studies have been carried out. The difficulties with measuring improvisation in organizations might be the reason why the concept has not become more widely researched, particularly by those focusing on quantitative methods in the social sciences. Many researchers have ‘relied’ on model developing, mostly using grounded research techniques. Inductive research, for example those researchers looking at phenomenology, incorporates meaning and human interest (Ramanathan 2008) to a wider context which, in turn, might allow an understanding of the

impact of improvisation on organizational strategy and yet this too is rare. Thus, the potential to be gained by adopting an improvisation approach is not fully explored, developed or realised.

A developing understanding of improvisation in organizations

Crossan et al.(1996) state that “managers did not feel bound by their original plan; they were prepared to work with the situation they faced – in other words, to improvise” (p24) and “action is taken in a spontaneous and intuitive fashion” (Morgan et al. 1983:59). Eisenhardt sees improvisation as “... organizing in such a way that the actors both adaptively innovate and efficiently execute” (Eisenhardt 1997:2). Weick sees improvisation as “rooted in the word ‘proviso’ which means to make a stipulation beforehand, to provide for something in advance, or to do something that is premeditated. By adding the prefix ‘im’ to the word proviso, as when the prefix ‘im’ is added to the word mobile to create immobile, improvise means the opposite of proviso. Thus improvisation is seen as dealing with the unforeseen; it works without a prior stipulation; it works with the unexpected” (Weick 1998:544). In Weick’s view, images of improvisation, often associated with jazz, describe this lack of prior planning as “composing extemporaneously, producing something on the spur of the moment” (p544). However, Weick’s essay is guided by Berliner’s definition: “improvisation involves reworking precomposed material and designs in relation to unanticipated ideas conceived, shaped, and transformed under the special conditions of performance, thereby adding unique features to every creation” (Berliner 1994:241). Thus rather than creating something from scratch, industry recipes (Spender 1989), organizational recipes, and fragments of strategy can be combined and recombined depending on the circumstances.

Other authors defined the phenomenon as “fabricating and inventing novel responses without a pre-scripted plan and without certainty of outcomes; discovering the future that [action] creates as it unfolds” (Barrett 1998: 605). For Hatch (1997:181) it means “intuition guiding action upon something in a spontaneous but historically contextualized way”. (Berniker 1998:583) interpreted it as “becoming acting managers” and Mirvis (1998:587) understood it as “make things up as they go along.” Finally, Peplowski (1998:560) talks about “deliberately painting [yourself] into corners just to get out of them”. These authors reinforce the notion that improvisation might be seen as the lack of planning.

The transition of improvisation from behavioural to organizational sciences did not alter the definitional framework, rather, what started to become clearer within organizational environments, were two things. First, there has to be something on which to improvise, where there might be a plan upon which variations are built (Orlikowski and Hofman 1997; Weick 1999). This view returns to Berliner’s notion of reworking. And secondly, improvisation can provide an answer to managers seeking an organizational answer to environmental instability and uncertainty. Both of these findings are relevant to strategy making in turbulent times.

In the last 20 years or so investigations moved on in the direction of examining improvisational facets. Kamoche argues that the balance between structure and flexibility is necessary, and he vouches for improvisation to manage the contradicting demands of control and creativity faced by organizations in highly competitive environments (Kamoche and Cunha 2001; Sawyer 1999, 2000). Miner et al. (2001) found “a variety of improvisational forms and the factors that shaped them [...] led us to refine prior definitions of improvisation and view it as a distinct type of real-time, short-term learning” (p304). Vera and Crossan (2005) researched collective improvisation in teams creating “...behavioural change going beyond the individual to the team and, ultimately, to the organization” (p203). Moreover, when Leybourne (2006) looked at improvisational working practices when implanting strategic change, he found ‘emerging best practice’ led to motivation and happiness with the workforce.

Hadida et al. (2015) observed that “the cumulateness of organizational improvisation research remains low,” (p438) and that existing taxonomies of organizational improvisation tend to focus on a single metaphor, jazz. Potentially suggesting that this was a myopic view. Hadida et al. (2015) see three reasons for this, a) the inseparability of jazz and improvisation in people’s minds, b) jazz

representing the most complicated example of improvisation and thus legitimating it for organizational complexity, and that c) improvisation “begins from a certain structure, which frames it without caging it” (p444) and therefore showing parallels to organizational circumstances. Nevertheless recent studies continue to use jazz as a reference point, for example Fisher and Barrett (2019) use the performing arts to compare and contrast their collected accounts of the experience of improvising in organizations.

When further exploring improvisation’s contribution to organizations, Cunha et al. (2014) build on Berliner’s (Berliner 1994) and Weick’s (Weick 1998) typology of degrees of improvisation by trying to articulate the established dimensions of spontaneity and creativity with the case of power. These writers suggest that “different contexts of action produce different types of improvisation” (Cunha et al. 2014:359) and that “The role of improvisation in innovation within organization theory has been over-exposed; by contrast, the connection between improvisation and power and politics has been under-considered” (p359). Thus, they introduce four types of improvisational contexts: *Adhoc*, a spontaneous response to unexpected events (spontaneity and creativity is high), *Covert*, local informal reaction to status quo (spontaneity is low, creativity is high), *Provocative*, an attempt to challenge some organizational practice (spontaneity is high, creativity is low) and *Managed*, a skill, trained and managed, to respond in real time (spontaneity is low and creativity is low). Recognising these different manifestations might aid in the ‘management’ of improvisation and its contribution to strategy.

Improvising is a cognitive concept of impromptu acting. It includes planning and deciding while taking into account the circumstances, and thus possibilities, of the moment to create a new reality either in order to adapt to a surprising situation (because that situation might not have been anticipated) and/or to create something new where time plays a relevant role. Furthermore, it derives from an individual or a group and has the power to influence the direction of the whole organization. It has, as such, potential power for organizational change, particularly strategic change in uncertain environments.

Improvisation, strategy, and emergent strategizing

Writers such as Weick (Weick 1995, Weick et al. 2005) or Mintzberg (1994) have expressed their reserve concerning strategic planning and the danger of over reliance on analytical tools for the determination of the organizational future. For Weick 2001:345) “a little strategy goes a long way. Too much can paralyse or splinter an organization”. Both theorists belong to a school of researchers who emphasize the value and importance of experience, action and learning. This to a degree resonates with Cunha, Clegg and Kamoche (2012) for whom “the idea of strategy as practice may be taken quite literally, given that there is no such a thing as improvisation in the absence of action” (p268). However, Weick is of the view that thought precedes action. Bridging this gap “between the utopia of the mind... and the realism of experience... falls squarely into strategy-as-practice research” (Jarzabkowski and Kaplan 2015:537). They also suggest “examining not only specific tools or actors, but also the rich interactions within which people and things are engaged in doing strategy work” (p537).

Thus, linking improvisation to organizational change and through that to strategy making, particularly emergent strategizing (Mintzberg and Waters 1985), provides the opportunity to exploit organizational potential and manage changing environments. But, it also links improvisation to sensemaking to reveal the factor of empowerment as a source of motivation and human interaction. Where organizational members are faced with different situations to those initially planned for, the act of sense making is necessary to determine how best to adapt the strategy to meet the new circumstances. The outcome is a proposition that segments the organization into elements of stability and elements of variety – continuity and change - in need for organizational attention to explain improvisation within its organizational context, but also to show that improvising can serve as a tool to exploit the organizational universe of existing variation and variety that nurtures best practice and competitive advantage.

Building on the research examining improvisation's contribution to organizational behaviour, strategic management researchers have begun to explicitly explore the contribution of improvisation to strategy. This has centred on "Organizational improvisation: what, when, how and why" (Cunha et al. 1999a) categorizing the conceptual evolution of improvisation into three stages or epochs. In the first stage "apart from fueling interest in the topic, [was] the translating of jazz performance elements into the organizational arena" (p301) - companies were provided with lists of competencies and abilities to apply improvisation to an efficient degree. The second stage focuses on "using anecdotal and empirical evidence... emerging second-generation authors develop formal definitions and test, mostly using grounded theory, propositions that aim at surfacing triggers and elements of the phenomenon in organizational settings" (p301). This approach built a more solid ground for a positivist research approach. During that period a more general definition of the concept focusing on the temporal distance between conception and execution seemed to be shared by all the key writers. The third stage saw a comeback of the first stage, with authors criticizing the temporal definition of the phenomenon as being too limited, however they still failed to provide a more valid one (Cunha et al. 1999).

"Compare the improvisational model of strategy development with the more traditional scripted model. In the latter, the company seeks to craft the best possible plan so that it can be handed off for a predetermined course of execution involving a predictable set of events and a specific final goal." "The improvisational model throws out the script, brings in the audience, and trust the actors to be unpredictable - that is, to innovate. Innovation has an inherently improvisational aspect." (Kanter 2002:76)

Improvisation and emergent strategizing

Mintzberg introduced the concept of emergent strategy in 1972 (Mintzberg 1972) and later defined it as "a pattern in a stream of decisions" (Mintzberg and Waters 1985:257). Mintzberg & Waters do not focus on any process in their concept but 'emergent strategy' indicates an active process and thus "might be better named 'emergent strategizing'..." (Eden and van der Heijden 1995:331). Eden and Ackermann (1998) state that "by emergent strategizing we refer to a process, a stream of actions that are not random but form a pattern... It is this detectable pattern in a stream of actions in the continuing cycle of sustaining relationships with those who have a stake in the organization, adapting and reacting to the environment, negotiating ways of doing this, and being opportunistic, that can be called emergent strategizing" (p21-22).

Emergent strategizing incorporates improvisational behaviour – sometimes referred to as being opportunistic. "The modifications that are implied by the organizing model are continuous, small-scale modifications that cumulate into a steady updating of the organization" (Weick 1979:247). Lindblom (1959) talks about 'muddling through' and Quinn 1980) about 'logical incrementalism'. Being without an emergent strategy is impossible: i) all organizations have a 'way we do things around here', patterns of working, and an embedded culture, each of which determines a particular strategic future for the organization; ii) the environment is continuously changing so that "no operation extends with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the main body of the enemy" (attributed to Field Marshal Helmuth Von Moltke in the mid-nineteenth century). Improvisation is necessary for successful strategizing. If the strategy is implicit, if it is a result of patterns of action, the strategy is embedded in the culture, "the way we do things around here" and "in the head of managers as they take courses of action in relation to their 'world-taken-for-granted'" (Eden and Ackermann 1998:22). Managers are seen as acting with an implicit perception of an appropriate direction for the organization and, because of that, problem solving finally resembles more 'firefighting' on a day to day basis.

Emergent strategizing and culture

In uncertain environments searching for quick solutions to issues and knowing, or assuming that things can and will change fast, might well stimulate managers to reinforce ties with their team to exploit their suggested alternatives. In doing so, they might connect in the form of a "collective mind"

(Weick 2001:262). In such a scenario the implicit understanding of an organization's direction might be shared through its commonly experienced conversations and culture, and its members empowered to act and to follow 'a path' without an explicit plan but rather through improvising. Managers start "acting thoughtfully" (Weick et al. 2005:413) and improvisation leads to novel solutions (Fisher and Amabile 2009).

Acting thoughtfully is preconditioned by sensemaking. When an organizational member intends to do something, his or her action is either triggered by shared beliefs or a cue related to a frame of reference mutually agreed upon a priori. Eden and Ackermann (1998:16) acknowledge the importance of a framework noting that: "having a framework to guide decisions helps relieve the stress of too many options, too many possible ways of acting and thinking". They argue that managers develop a capability to act quickly, without paralysis by analysis, and yet the actions are informed by a framework of previous thinking, actions which in turn inform future thinking and action. A cyclical effect. Another way of considering this behaviour is that managers may start to use their intuition, which Crossan (1998:593) defined as "a rapid processing of experienced information." In this sense action, based on intuition, works like improvising.

Strategic decisions result from complex negotiations in which power of those individual groups and their members become a major factor. Often those negotiations deliver an emergent strategy not deliberately intended initially by the involved participants (Ackermann and Eden 2011; Crozier and Friedberg 1979; Mintzberg 1994). If we see improvisation as a cognitive act from stakeholders trying to enhance the deliberateness of the emergent part of organizational strategy and action (Crossan and Sorrenti 1997; Mintzberg and McHugh 1985; Perry 1991), improvisation might play its strongest role as a tool of opportunistic organizational adaptation. Isenberg (1987:92) is supportive of this rational and sensible way of working because "...the ability to remain focused on long-term objectives while staying flexible enough to solve day-to-day problems and recognize new opportunities."

What can we learn so far about improvisation within the sphere of culture? First, we start to understand the critical role that *culture* plays as a foundation for improvising as well as for the emergent strategizing environment in which improvisation plays a role. And second, we recognize that negotiations of power might be influenced by improvisational activities, making improvisation a sensible way of strategizing. As Weick puts it "To look for enactment [...] is to listen for verbs of enactment" (2001:233), "to understand improvisation as strategy is to understand the order within it" (p351).

We understand that culture is both, implicit through the shared assumptions no member of an organization usually asks about but instead just perceives and absorbs every day, and explicit through what we see and what happens around us – a form of sensemaking. Culture is so powerful because its purpose is to emit stability and trust for us to serve as a frame of reference in which we can act. As Crossan (1997) argues, trust leads to commitment and without commitment risks will not be taken. However, when employees take risks, they also make more mistakes thus an improvisational culture requires an acceptance that mistakes will be made – again demanding a particular organizational culture.

We have suggested that we understand improvisation as a part of emergent strategizing and that both concepts are grounded in culture of the organisation - the missing link (which has been touched upon already as it is inextricably entwined) is the concept of sensemaking.

Improvisation and Sensemaking

Sensemaking is about stability; it is about the need to "structure the unknown" (Waterman 1990:41) and it "begins with the basic question, is it still possible to take things for granted?" (Weick 1995:14). If the answer is no then new mindsets and skills are required and "when environmental change is rapid, diverse skills and beliefs are the solution, not the problem" (Weick 2001: 351). However,

Claxton 1984) suggests that individuals in organizations have a desire to be consistent, comfortable, confident and competent. Working in an unstable environment compromises those four C's. The same is true when improvising (Crossan et al. 1996; Crossan 1998; Morgan et al. 1983). People do not have control over the unexpected.

It is important to stress the difference between interpretation and sensemaking for improvisation. "Individuals are not seen as living in, and acting out their lives in relation to, a wider reality, so much as creating and sustaining images of a wider reality, in part to rationalize what they are doing. They realize their reality by 'reading into' their situation patterns of significant meaning" (Morgan et al. 1983:64). Thus, as Weick suggests sensemaking matters because "it highlights the invention that precedes interpretation ...it implies a higher level of engagement by the actor... [whereas]... interpretation connotes an activity that is more detached and passive than the activity of sensemaking" (Weick 1995:14). This implies that when people interpret data during improvising, they 'include' making sense of their situation by 'reading into' it 'super-ordinated' significant meaning and then take action. The feedback to their action is learning.

However, this feedback process may mean that people receive answers they did not expect, which triggers a need for further explanation, "...interpretation, or meaning, is attributed to surprises... it is crucial to note that meaning is assigned to surprise as an output of the sensemaking process..." (Louis 1980:241). This scanning – interpretation – learning cycle is a feedback loop that provides new collective insights (Weick 2001:245) on which they act again. Sensemaking is "the reciprocal interaction of information seeking, meaning ascription, and action," (Thomas et al. 1993: 240) it includes scanning – interpretation – action (thus learning). This continuous learning cycle where there are ill-structured problems emanating from surprises demands what Dorfler and Ackermann (2012) refer to as the need for intuitive insight (creating a solution that entail new knowledge). It is a process of creativity. Simon describes intuition as "analyses frozen into habit" (Simon H. A. 1987:63), and Weick suggests "condensed expertise" (Weick 1995:88).

Weick sees action as where sensemaking starts: "how do I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Weick 1979:133). Thus, improvisation is central to sensemaking, it delivers the action from which data is produced and interpreted within a larger frame of reference: "action shapes cognition" (Weick 1995:12) which, in turn, guides improvisational activities.

What is important here is that we have to take the environment as it is, however, we have to also constantly 'read the signals'. The *environment* matters as input for an improvisational process. When members of a group lose their comfort 'zone', defined by the four C's, they have to make sense of their situation by other means in order to keep or regain their stability, their faith in what they do. This is the case in fast moving organizations where they may not ever reach that comfort zone or those experiencing seismic shifts. In an emergent strategizing environment there is no clear signpost, people have to make sense from what *is* there. The mechanisms "include the standards and rules for perceiving, interpreting, believing, and acting that are typically used in a given cultural setting" (Sackmann 1992:33), thus *culture* once again becomes immensely important. It draws a frame within which members *have to* feel comfortable to act. This in turn resonates with Mead's observation that society precedes mind (Weick 1995:107) Whereas for Feldman (1989) it is a process "for organizational members to understand and to share understandings about such features of the organization as what it is about, what it does well and poorly, what the problems it faces are, and how it should resolve them" (p19).

The immediate periphery, the organizational *group*, starts to play a central role in sensemaking because people have to share and reflect their observations and sentiments, "sensemaking in organizations is about words in action" (O'Connell 1998:205). It is this process of reciprocal exchange that generates trust among group members, or as Crossan et al. 1996) put it, "...when you relinquish control of a situation, and you do not know exactly where you are heading, you must have trust in your fellow team members and in the process. Reciprocation is a critical ingredient in developing trust. It requires that you are able to give, receive, and acknowledge information and cues" (p32). This argues

that there is no good improvisation without trust, trust is a basic ingredient for sensemaking and improvisation and furthermore relates to culture. The research of Fisher and Barrett (2019) shows that without an appropriate context and culture, being an improviser can be a very stressful experience.

There are some important observations about group dynamics to add here. We have seen that action is learning. Every ‘scanning – interpretation – action/learning’ cycle thus is a small win in the sense of Weick (2001:433), “from a psychological perspective, small wins make good sense”. Small wins are significant contributions to individual and group stability and ultimately for the organization, “underlying all transformational change are incremental changes in thinking at the individual level” (Crossan et al. 1996:31). It is precisely those small wins that are central for improvising.

Groups crafting their own stability also create reliability and thus reduce errors which are part of instability and are unavoidable but essential, for learning. It is worth noting the self-fulfilling prophecy which argues that good sensemaking leads to improvisation and reinforces confidence: “If they live by their wits, take risks, and improvise, then just that intensive effort to make things work can prevent some errors. Because they can make do and improvise, they essentially create the error-free situation they expected to find. What they fail to see is that their own committed efforts, driven by faith in the system, knit that system together and create the reliability which up to that point existed only in their imaginations” (Weick 1987:122).

The important point for the group in relation to the environment is that it gathers sense and stability. It starts to operate like a ship’s crew in a rough sea because it works together so well, the ship starts to feel ‘stable’ in the sense of a socially constructed world (Weick 1995:154), what is moving is the sea. The group is in command, scanning the horizon and steering their ship. Once more the concepts of trust and culture play a part.

In such a context the role of the leader is undeniably demanding because it would suggest that they have to adapt their style to an improvising situation (Ancona et al. 2007). While the leader is eventually responsible for the team and its executions, improvising requires deciding while acting. Thus, the focus is more on rich information exchange within the team *including* the leader. Underlying this interaction is an agreement of beliefs within the cultural framework of the organization, between the leader and the team from which members become enacted and reassured that their leader is supportive. The leader blends in as a ‘primus inter pares,’ getting ‘out of the way’ of members’ actions, taking the role of an observer and an enabler. Importantly, members have the feeling when to involve their leader depending on how the situation develops. This strengthens the trust between those involved. It allows members to genuinely promote their stance. Thayer (1988; in Weick 1995: 10) argues that it is of importance, that “...The leader is a sense-giver. The leader always embodies the possibilities of escape from what might otherwise appear to us to be incomprehensible, or from what might otherwise appear to us to be a chaotic, indifferent, or incorrigible world – one over which we have no ultimate control.” So, “in short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story” (Weick 1995:61) and who else is better suited to tell that story than the leader. That the sense giving story is now open to being further developed. “In improvisation, actors develop stories in an incremental fashion, they feed off every subtle nuance or aspect to the situation, amplifying each one in a process that permits deeper exploration and more extensive development” (Crossan et al. 1996:31), and that understanding connects with emergent strategizing as they make the point “Story development closely relates to strategy development. Managers must ‘manage what is on the plate’ at a given point in time by focusing on small, anticipatory developments as in the technique of continuous improvement rather than making large, reactive decisions” (p32).

Crossan et al. (1996) emphasize the importance of personal skills when they state that “successful improvisation requires a strong skill base in traditional practice and performance skills. Indeed, the improvising journey is a more difficult one because of this reliance on both modes of learning – traditional and improvisational” (p30). What is needed is a clear intellect, a broad general interest, and openness to share, in short, a generalist attitude. Such minds make good use of sensemaking when ‘playing’. Because improvising enacts people and produces small wins, commitment and engagement

should result from their acting rather than be a prerequisite. “Emotional commitment to any course of action comes partly from having played with the ideas and alternatives.” (Eden and Ackermann 1998:71)

Summarising, Weick argues that the self needs to be stabilized to derive meaning out of the environment, this becomes core when arguing one’s stance in discussions with others and which in turn allows for making sense of other positions – again touching on the earlier point about negotiation and negotiating. The ‘lived experience’ is filtered through actual values and priorities coming from organizational culture and leadership with the purpose of imposing clarity for action. The enactment of the environment becomes a socially constructed world seen through the lens of ‘lived experience.’ This point potentially has adverse ramifications because it also can lead to strong policies and institutionalization: “many moves are improvisations. Faced with an event that calls for response, officials use their experience, judgment and intuition to fashion the response for the issue at hand – the response becomes a precedent, and when similar – or not so similar- questions come up, the response is uncritically repeated, soon what began as improvisation has hardened into policy” (Weiss 1980:401). To improvise one has to scan the environment, to listen to it and avoid trying to control it as we have seen in our discussion further above. Sensemaking is social because it affects and shifts perceptions when shared, and those common perceptions affect improvising. Further, it is ongoing which means that it is under constant change and supports scanning of the environment and an openness of mind. Finally, plausibility contributes to one’s socially constructed world; it becomes understandable and stable.

Stories can explain an outcome in hindsight, “they gather strands of experience into a plot that produces that outcome ...stories are inventions rather than discoveries” (Weick 1995:128). However, “because the story in the repertoire has a punch line, the connection between the old story and the new event raises the possibility that outcomes can be predicted, understood, and possibly controlled” (Sutton and Kahn 1987:272). This holds true for the improvisational concept, “the equivalent of emergent strategy in improvisation can be seen in the way actors develop story lines spontaneously” (Crossan 1997: 41). However, cultural aspects defer and rely much more on shared vision and values defining ‘a direction,’ incorporating implicit and explicit elements and thus ‘embedding’ and legitimate action. In an improvisational environment, the stability of a ‘world taken for granted’ is replaced by a ‘making sense of the situation’ behaviour. In the literature on emergent strategizing there is no specific mention of time constraints and/or complexity, something which is very much the case for improvisational environments. In other words, adding pressure starts to propel our ‘improvisation’ model. When this happens plans are created by acting, thus the strategy *is* the action – Weick’s ‘just-in-time’ strategy.

Improvisation and Strategy

If we take seriously the discussion above, then all organizations will encompass some aspects of improvisation which in turn will affect the future of the organization. If that is the case, then we need to understand the way in which improvisation affects the emergent strategy of the organization. Which in turn means we need to detect emergent strategizing. If we are not aware of the significance of the emergent strategizing on the future of the organization then we are unable to appreciate the blocks to strategically driven organizational change or the possibility of exploiting embedded improvising routines.

When seeking to understand improvisation it makes sense to employ some method to detecting emergent strategizing: “An examination of structural properties of embedded routines, actual procedures and processes in use – ‘the way we do things round here’ – and how they relate to formal and informal reporting and decision-making structures of the organization; and capturing theories in use – the wisdom, belief systems, around and about the organization that are the basis for action” (Eden and Ackermann 1998:81).

Attention to the significance of improvisation for strategy might imply that an organization is committed to a future that arises from deliberate emergent strategizing (in whole or part). Therefore, we conclude that there is a strong relationship between the concepts of an *improvising organization* and the concept of *emergent strategizing*.

Leybourne et al. (2014) detect strong links “to current emerging managerial themes relating to the breakdown of traditional planning models, and the shift from [sustainable] competitive to ‘transient’ competitive advantage” (p354) (see also McGrath 2013). This is an insight Weick suggested some years earlier: “if improvisation is treated as a natural form of organizational life, then we become interested in a different form of strategy than we have seen before... This newer form I will call a just-in-time strategy” (Weick 2001:352).

Cunha et al used scenario planning not as a planning tool but as a dialectic strategy building mechanism allowing organizations to “still plan” but without jeopardizing flexibility associated with informal coordination systems (Cunha et al. 1999b:4). This approach was later refined as improvisational scenario planning to allowing organizations to plan in real-time.

Thus, to conclude, emergent strategizing, sense making, and improvisation working in harmony provide a powerful combination when developing strategy in fast moving uncertain industries. Emergent strategizing and improvisation allow for creativity with the emergent strategizing aspect providing the structure through sense making and reflection. It allows for strategic renewal (Morgan et al. 1983) and encourages a process of ‘learning by doing’ (Pham and Jordan 2006). Improvisation can be regarded as a legitimate strategy in the face of adversity (Best and Gooderham 2015). For Weick (1995:36) improvisation is “about action” and enactment, “not about conceptual pictures”. Thus, a strong cultural organizational foundation in favour of individual enactment counteracts institutionalization, organizational culture and thus power and politics matter. Improvisation might need to be actively encouraged, demanding different leadership styles away from control to more open approaches. It also suggests being able to be innovative and open to change, alongside being reflective and learning. This learning feature facilitates adaptability and flexibility allowing the organization to be more agile. Encouraging improvisation through planning is problematic, but understanding the role it can play, and is playing, in creating the strategic future of an organization means that the strategy needs to be malleable to unfolding creativity.

The above comments suggest a research agenda that focuses on the role of improvisation in the emergent strategizing of organizations, particularly when exploring the emergent strategy of organizations operating in a fast-changing environment. As Fisher and Barrett (2019) note, improvisation in the performing arts is significantly different to that in organizations, and so it might help future research if it were to move away from the performing arts as the established reference point. They also make a strong case for adopting more “pragmatic views of knowledge and action, which de-emphasize plans and intentions” – a case supported by the position taken in this paper.

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