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CALL FOR PAPERS

Strategic Improvisation and Turbulent Emerging Markets

Submission deadline – October 19, 2019

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The capacity for multinational enterprises (MNEs) to operate and adapt to fast changing and increasingly unpredictable environments can be considered a critical survival factor. In emerging industries or economies business firms tend to be confronted with significant resource limitations, challenging institutional environments sometimes marked by a high level of unpredictability, and in some cases, varied managerial techniques and new business models (Bloom et al., 2014; Gomes et al., 2015; Gustafsson et al., 2016).

Strategic improvisation represents an important but under-researched pathway open to firms to tackle such settings. Firms improvise when they begin taking action before knowing its final design, or when action patterns are not fully planned in advance. Instead, the design and execution of novel actions converge in time and in execution (Cunha, Miner and Antonacopolou, 2017; Miner, Bassoff and Moorman, 2001). *Strategic improvisation* thus refers to improvising in ways that shape core organizational issues such as mission, goals, or survival (Baker et al., 2003; Crossan et al, Cunha et al., 2016). It is often accompanied by bricolage, or the use of existing resources in novel contexts (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Although prior work has discussed strategic improvisation, it remains a nascent literature, and has not addressed its relevance to international markets. At the same time, work on emerging markets has not systematically addressed the relevance of strategic improvisation as an impactful tool. This special issue calls for addressing these gaps in ways that advance both theory and practice.

Strategic improvisation.

Strategic improvisation has been hypothesized to unfold in several ways. A firm can improvise a specific strategic action such as merger, acquisition or product market choice (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997; Gomes et al., 2011). It can take an unplanned action in

these domains, and design the new strategy on the fly (Baker, Miner and Eesley, 2003; Cunha, Miner and Antonacopolou, 2017). A firm can also choose an enduring improvisational style of strategizing for multiple domains and seek to develop capabilities to improvise (Gong, Baker and Miner, 2005). In less obvious cases, a firm may make a tactical change to seize an unanticipated opportunity, which leads to an unplanned new strategic direction (Baker et al., 2003). In spite of these interesting observations, we lack fine-grained theory and evidence about precisely when such varied strategic improvisation approaches occur, and when they have value. How does the organization synthesize strategic intention and unexpected opportunity (Perry, 1991) without harmful drift?

Scholars have proposed that improvisation in general can have a special value in turbulent contexts (Moorman and Miner, 1998; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997). However, improvisation research lacks deep probes into its actual occurrence and its impact at the strategic level and in a cross-national context. Moorman and Miner (1998), for example, found that contextual uncertainty reversed a negative impact of improvisation on product design during distinct actions within product development. The emerging market context offers a vital opportunity to explore more nuanced differences between both origins and outcomes of strategic improvisation. For example, even mature MNEs have to adapt when plans are rendered inadequate by rapid environmental change. In other contexts institutional factors, including the general norms for organizational behaviours, trigger improvisation that is not only seen as legitimate, but also believed to be effective. Research in different geographies, including India (Capelli, Singh, Singh and Useem, 2010) and Southern Europe (Aram and Walochik, 1996; Cunha, 2005) suggests that improvisation and bricolage vary across countries and is sometimes seen as a distinct capability. This raises important unresolved cross-country issues that should affect MNEs and indigenous firms' prosperity in entering or operating in emerging international markets. The challenges of digitalization also prompt the need to improvise in blurred new market spaces.

Emerging markets.

Many authors have noted that institutional conditions, political instability and challenges in leadership in some emerging markets may create distinct conditions related to contextual turbulence. Lack of maturity may in fact result from political and institutional factors in developing countries, or disruptive technological innovations in developed economies and fast changing industries (Gomes et al., 2015; Gustafsson et al., 2016; Ozcan and Santos, 2015). Emerging market turbulence is thus represented here as related to geographical and technological factors. If the environment is turbulent and unpredictable and the organisation's planning tools inadequate, strategic improvisation may potentially play a distinct role.

Management and international business research has argued convincingly that MNEs need to demonstrate higher levels of strategic flexibility (Bock, Opsahl, George and Gann, 2012; Sarala, Cooper, Junni and Tarba, 2014), agility (Cunha, Gomes, Mellahi,

Miner, and Rego, forthcoming; Doz and Kosonen, 2010; Junni, Sarala, Tarba and Weber, 2015; Weber and Tarba, 2014),) and adaptability (Cunha, 2005; Carmeli and Sheaffer, 2008; Carmeli, Jones and Binyamin, 2016). Strategic improvisation offers a potential tool to generate these organizational features. However we lack theory about exactly whether and how it will support valuable forms of each.

Conceptually, strategic improvisation contrasts with the related concepts like *Strategic Flexibility*, considered as the capacity to operate in dynamic markets that require constant adaptations in strategies, and continuous reconfiguration and redeployment of resources (Sanchez, 1995), with *Strategic Agility*, understood as the “continuous redirection and/or reinvention of the core business without losing momentum” (Doz and Kosonen, 2008, p. 14), and *adaptability*, defined as the ability to change or be changed to fit changed circumstances (Webster, 2017; Carmeli and Scheaffer, 2008). Current work on these constructs permits, although does not require, prior planning and to some degree honors strategic continuity in contrast with improvisation’s emphasis on unplanned novel action. Further, improvisation is a process. In contrast, flexibility, agility and adaptability are potential outcomes of firm processes. The relationship between the improvisation process and these feature outcomes represents one potential theoretical frontier invited by this special issue.

Further, strategic improvisational skills may also tie to flexibility, agility and adaptability in nonobvious ways in the emerging markets context. Once improvisational skills have been developed, for example, related firm adaptability may become institutionalised and constitute a distinguishing feature of an industry or sector (see also Uzo and Mair, 2014). Recent evidence suggests that:

- (1) there is a clear difference between the way European and Indian MNEs adapt their practices and strategies when operating in distant and turbulent environments like Africa (Gomes et al., 2015). These issues affect European firms operating in emerging markets, as well as firms in emerging markets seeking to operate in developed markets.
- (2) There is a clear difference between operating in traditional or emerging digital global markets, with digitalization transforming practices and raising the need to respond in face of blurred boundaries (Nambisan, 2017).

Overall, the strategic improvisation and the emerging markets literatures share a joint gap that this special issue will help fill, while advancing both theory and practice. Given the high levels of contextual challenges including organisational and environmental uncertainties, complexity and change in emerging economy contexts, the impact of strategic improvisation seems likely to be more pronounced than in the more mature environments.

These focal issues apply to general competitive factors and to specific theories about strategic improvisation, flexibility, agility and adaptability as discussed above. Factors affecting European firms customers and emerging markets as well as firms in emerging digital markets and European customers and firms will all be especially appropriate

submissions. Issues related to firms from any region of the world will be broadly appropriate, including MNEs from emerging Eastern European (EU or non-EU) countries. Studies investigating related boundary conditions (e.g. legal, institutional and competitive aspects) will be especially welcome.

Topics may include but are not limited to the following:

- How do managers cultivate effective strategic improvisation: Does this vary within in turbulent and volatile contexts such as emerging markets?
- How are international business models and strategies shaped by the challenges of organizational strategic improvisation?
- How valid are established business models for entering emerging *digital* markets?
- How might indigenous forms of knowledge (such as ubuntu in Africa and guanxi in China) facilitate or impede strategic improvisation or its links to useful organisational flexibility, agility and/or adaptation?
- How do factors such as culture and leadership impact the viability of organizational strategic improvisation?
- Under what circumstances does strategic improvisation unfold? Does it manifest itself at the individual, team or organizational levels? Does international/digital context affect these issues?
- To what extent can strategic improvisation serve as a means to reconcile or overcome competing institutional pressures?
- Are smaller domestic firms, especially indigenous emerging market Born-Globals, more capable of developing and benefiting from improvisation skills and strategic improvisation than large foreign MNEs? If so, why does this occur?
- Do MNEs from emerging markets exhibit higher levels of strategic improvisation than those from developed markets?
- What actions can managers in MNEs take and what type of behaviours can they foster in order to cultivate acceptable and appropriate levels of strategic improvisation? Does it necessarily link to organizational flexibility, agility, and adaptation, or can it have other value?
- How may emerging markets MNEs use strategic improvisation to reinforce their core competencies?
- How does firm strategic improvisation relate to other improvisational activity within the firm? Do the same factors influence the presence or outcome of both?

We expect the call to contribute to the understanding of organizational improvisation in the context of emerging markets and contribute to our understanding of the challenges of managing in emerging market contexts. It will also potentially challenge conventional wisdom about the nature of international business models, and generate new theory that is pertinent to this very exciting research context.

The timeline:

Initial submission deadline: October 19, 2019.

Making desk rejection decisions: November 16, 2019.

Sending received papers for review (First Round): November 18, 2019.

Notifying the submitting authors regarding status of their paper: February 2, 2020.

Revise & Resubmit (First Round) submission deadline: April 10, 2020.

Sending received papers for review (Second Round): April 25, 2020.

Notifying the submitting authors regarding the status of their paper: August 31, 2020.

Revise & Resubmit (Second Round) submission deadline: November 8, 2020.

Notifying the authors regarding acceptance/rejection of their paper: February 8, 2021.

All submissions should conform to EMR style guidelines:

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Anne Miner is an Emeritus Professor at the Wisconsin School of Business. Her publications tackle issues including organizational learning from failure, organizational improvisation, organizational adaptation, industry-level learning and technological evolution, and product development. Miner has served as associate editor of *Management Science* and of *Organization Science*, and served on the editorial boards of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *the American Sociological Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, and *Strategic Organization*. She has published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *the American Sociological Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Organization Science*, *Research Policy*, and *the Strategic Management Journal*, among other outlets. *The Technology and Innovation division of the Academy of Management in 2004 named her Scholar of the Year*.

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Johanna Mair is Professor for Organization, Strategy and Leadership at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin, Germany. Her research focuses on how novel organisational and institutional arrangements generate economic and social development. Mair is also the Distinguished Fellow at the Stanford Center on Philanthropy and Civil Society and Academic Editor of the *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. She is a Senior Research Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School and has held visiting positions at Harvard Business School and INSEAD. Her research is published in leading scholarly journals. She serves on the board of foundations and organisations and advises companies, governments and social impact investors on social innovation. Before earning her PhD in management from INSEAD, she was involved in executive decision-making in international banking. From 2001 to 2011, she was a member of the Strategic Management faculty at IESE Business School in Madrid. In 2008, the Aspen Institute recognised her as a "Faculty Pioneer" in Social Entrepreneurship Education.

