IMPROVISATION: ADDRESSING THE STRUCTURE / AGENCY DUALITY IN MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to position organizational improvisation as a new and emerging research topic in research on management and organizations. To this end, we argue that improvisation integrates the structure and agency foci that the management literature has adopted by interpreting action and structure as being mutually constituted.

Management research has mostly focused on design and implementation of structures of prescribed roles, rules and procedures in organizations [Pfeffer, 1997 #213]. However, a growing number of authors have consistently been advocating a focus on employee action as a way to ensure organizational flexibility [e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989 #66; Mintzberg, 1990 #408]. This argument has recently gained momentum because of the interpretation of time as the core competitive factor in most industries [see Eisenhardt, 1998 #253; Paich, 1993 #858]. Instantaneous action and employee empowerment are seen as more important than enforcing structure and employee compliance. Organizational improvisation started as another set of management practices to foster action [Perry, 1991 #106], but as it was developed through empirical research and theorizing, it emerged as a concept that could integrate the ‘structure’ and the ‘action’ approaches to management and organization [see Cunha, 1999 #196]. In improvisation, structure and action are mutually constituted. Structure is both the medium and the outcome of improvisational action.

MANAGEMENT AS ENFORCING STRUCTURE

Research on organizations has adopted an objectivistic view of management throughout most of its history [Weick, 1998 #26]. As a consequence, this literature has
focused on the study of organizational structure. This research sees organizational
structure as the medium that translates managers’ intentions into employees work
practices [Covaleski, 1998 #313; Adler, 1996 #580]. Organizational structure – shorthand
for prescribed roles, rules and procedures – embodies managers’ explicit and tacit
knowledge about their organization and its environment. This structure is defined as a
core feature of employees’ everyday experience at work. Employees use their
interpretation of prescribed roles, rules and procedures to enact their everyday practices
[cf. Rosenthal, 2004 #1586]. Most research on organizational structure sees this process
of appropriation (i.e. using the interpretations of prescribed roles, rules and procedures to
enact practices) as canonical: employees appropriate their organization’s structure as their
managers intended. Structure is thus defined as a constraint on employees’ behavior
[Dandeker, 1990 #1426; Brown, 1978 #1249].

This literature allows for departures from prescribed roles, rules and procedures
[e.g. Roy, 1960 #267]. However, these deviations from structure are used to strengthen
the case for embodying managers’ intentions in their organization’s structure to shape
employees work practices. This research showed that when deviating from their
prescribed roles, rules and procedures, employees are actually contributing to the
reproduction of this structure in two ways. One is by embodying their own practices in it
to ensure compliance with prescribed roles and goals [Blau, 1996 #724; Blau, 1955
#1540]. The other is by enacting a set of practices that allow them to vent out the tensions
resulting from continued compliance with menial rules and procedures [Burawoy, 1979
#977]. An organization’s structure is thus described as external to managers and
employees. Employees’ local adaptations do not challenge managers’ ability to embody
their intentions in prescribed goals, roles, rules and procedures. Instead, they add to it, keeping changes hidden from managers and thus allowing the organization’s structure to remain mostly unchallenged.

These studies argue that as organizational contexts and markets become increasingly competitive and complex, managers need to design structures that are flexible enough to cope with this complexity [Simons, 1990 #1591; Miller, 1994 #388]. Designing roles, rules and procedures is no longer a one-time task. It is a recurrent one. Under this approach, a flexible organization is thus one that managers can steer at their own will through the whitewaters of highly competitive markets [Levinthal, 1997 #830]. Not one where the lower levels of the organization are empowered to address environmental challenges and opportunities [cf. Edelman, 1999 #571]. Prescribed roles, rules and procedures still mediate the relationship between managers and employees even in complex environments by embodying managers’ knowledge and intentions. The difference was that now managers need to be able to recognize the need to change these elements of their organization’s structure. Employees are still seen as complying with these changes in structure as management intended.

MANAGEMENT AS FOSTERING AGENCY

In the 80s and the 90s, management research added a focus on action to the focus on structure that had guided the majority of previous studies on organizations. This focus on action was motivated by an interpretation of increased competition as a call for faster adaptation to environmental threats and opportunities [Miller, 1997 #377; Hendry, 1996
Abmurgey, 1993; Porras, 1987]. There were three major differences between this focus on action and the focus on structure.

First, focusing on action meant that the responsibility for addressing environmental challenges and threats passed from managers to employees. Employees are best able to address environmental threats and opportunities within short time spans because they are the closest to the organization’s boundary [e.g. Adler, 1992]. Research on time based competition shows that this proximity to the environment allows employees to detect threats and opportunities before the time window in which they have to be addressed closes [Tyre, 1994]. Employees also have the ability to act on environmental challenges and opportunities within narrow time frames because they are those with the local knowledge necessary for such action [Argyris, 1993; Nonaka, 1991]. This knowledge is often tacit. It rests with employees and can only be codified and shared with others at much cost. In organizations dealing with fast-changing environments, work practices are therefore shaped locally, not globally.

Second, and consequently, managers’ role was no longer to enforce compliance with structure but instead to foster deviation from it [Stohl, 2001; Beer, 2000; Anderson, 1999]. In fast-changing, complex environments, structure is a barrier to the levels of innovation, flexibility and adaptation that organizations require to hold their competitive position, let alone improve it. Action-centeric management research thus frames organizational structure as a barrier to flexibility. By doing so, it changes managers’ role from the stewards of structure to its opponents. Managers’ role in fast changing environments is to protect their employees from the constraining nature of
prescribed roles, rules and procedures so that employees are able to innovate on their work practices to address environmental threats and opportunities.

Finally, managers’ role was more about action and interaction because designing structure was not enough to foster employee initiative [Dutton, 2001 #1569; Tushman, 1996 #621]. Research on management in fast-changing, complex environments shows that managers are more successful in fostering employee initiative through their own action than they were through the design of prescribed rules, roles and procedures [Ford, 1999 #1275; Kotter, 1990 #344]. This literature has identified three tasks for managers seeking to foster employee initiative. The first is to create ambitions ‘stretch goals’ – goals that are difficult but achievable have been found to be a powerful trigger of employee initiative [Carroll, 1970 #1576; Wilkins, 1983 #1266]. The second task is to eliminate as much of their company’s prescribed roles, rules and procedures as possible. Research on organizations in fast-changing contexts argues that the efficiency gain from prescribed roles, rules and procedures were outweighed by the losses in flexibility incurred by prescribing any element of employees’ work practices [Downs, 1966 #432; Gouldner, 1954 #670]. The third task is to become agents of change themselves. Managers in these organizations not only create the conditions for their employees to address environmental challenges in short time frames [e.g. Kidder, 1981 #1329]. They also attempt to address such challenges themselves.

All of these practices shared a similar view of the process through which managers shape employees work practices. When managers seek to make their organization more flexible and adaptive they enact a set of practices to shape employees’ actions directly, be it by creating and sharing a vision or by putting forth their own
initiatives. Structure no longer mediates the relationship between managers and employees. That would risk bringing the organization to a pace slower than that of its environment.

Action-centric management research thus took an agency view of organizations. It was managers’ actions, not their organization’s structure, which shaped employees work practices. There was an important similarity between this view and the structure-centered approach to management assumed that employees appropriated prescribed roles, rules and procedures as managers intended. The action-centered approach to management assumed that employees appropriated managers’ actions as managers intended.

MANAGEMENT AND IMPROVISATION

The structure-centric approach to management sees the action-centric approach as unsystematic and inefficient. The action-centric approach to management sees the structure-centric approach as inflexible and ineffective [for a lively debate between these two approaches see Mintzberg, 1991 #407; Mintzberg, 1990 #408; Ansoff, 1991 #406; Ansoff, 1994 #405]. As we interpret it, the debate between these two views bounds two poles of a duality. On the one hand, the structure-centric approach represents an objectivist view of management and organizations. Under this approach, structure is an objective feature of organizations which acts as the major constraint over employees’ behavior. On the other hand, the action-centric approach represents a subjectivist view of management and organizations. Under this approach structure is a social construction which can be willed away. Work practices are not the outcome of any features of the
organization. Instead, they are a consequence of the interaction between managers and employees.

None of these two approaches is satisfying. The objectivist approach glosses over employees’ everyday adaptations at work. The subjectivist view glosses over the role of action in reproducing organizational routines and structural properties.

Our approach here is to follow other attempts to reconcile objectivism and subjectivism in social theory [Bourdieu, 1990 #1462][Giddens, 1986 #591] and in some fields of organization studies [Barley, 1986 #718; DeSanctis, 1994 #223; Orlikowski, 1992 #1001] and treat these two approaches as opposite ends of a duality. Our contribution is to bring the objectivism-subjectivism duality down from the process of building theory to the practices that managers and employees enact when dealing with fast-changing, complex environments. To this end we want to highlight the role of improvisation as a set of practices that integrate the structure-centric approach with the action-centric approach.

Improvisation can be defined as the conception of action as it unfolds drawing on available resources [Barrett, 1998 #2;Crossan, 2005 #1498;Cunha, 1999 #196;Hatch, 1997 #90;Kamoche, 1998 #23;Vera, 1999 #252]. This definition of improvisation establishes a relationship between structure and action. Improvisation is first and foremost a practice, a practice conceived in the present, not planned in the past. It is not a routine, nor is it an outcome of prescribed rules and procedures. It is action conceived as it unfolds [Weick, 1993 #38]. Improvisation, however, differs from the action-centric view of management because its definition underscores the role of structure as both the medium and the outcome of improvisational action.
Improvisation’s emphasis on the conception of action invokes a notion of action that goes beyond the local enactment of practices. Improvisation is a learning process, albeit one grounded in action. This evokes a potential of reproduction through which improvisation can become part of an organization’s collective memory of routines [Miner, 2001 #846]. The definition of improvisation above also emphasizes the bricolating nature of improvisation. This part of the definition of improvisation underscores that action requires resources to be enacted. This seems to be a subtle difference with the conception of action in action-centric views of organization, but it is an important one. This element of the definition of improvisation points to the role of structure in improvisational action. Structure provides the resources that agents draw on when enacting their everyday practices and it is through the pool of resources available to improvising employees that managers guide their action [Machin, 1996 #98; Orlikowski, 1996 #102; Berry, 1986 #40].

Research on improvisation in organizations unfolds the relationship between action and structure that this definition outlines. These studies show that in improvisation, action is tightly entwined with structure because action is a localized phenomenon [Johnson, 1984 #24]. Agents improvised within a specific set of local conditions constituted by the situation they are facing, the local resources they have available to address it, and the minimal set of rules put in place to coordinate that action [Brown, 1997 #11; Weick, 1993 #43].

The structure defined by these three elements – the situation at hand, resources and rules – allows agents to improvise practices to address unexpected challenges while
making sense of those challenges. This structure thus not only shapes practice, it is also shaped by practice.

The law of the situation

Research on improvisation in organizations sees improvisation first and foremost as a response to a threat or an opportunity. Improvisation is not an everyday, routine set of practices. When improvising, agents are reacting to a set of local conditions that they interpret as a challenge [Peplowski, 1998 #105]. This challenge or situation structures improvisation in three ways: it triggers improvisation, it provides a goal for improvisational action, and it provides feedback on agents’ improvisations. Improvised practices, however, also shape the challenge that agents are facing. This challenge is socially constructed by agents as they act on it and agents’ improvisations shape the very challenge they are facing [Weick, 1987 #605].

Research on organizational improvisation sees agents as having two types of experiences in organizations. On the one hand, most situations faced by agents are expected and planned for, if not routine. The practices that agents enact to address these situations are derived from the organization’s prescribed procedures [Crossan, 1997 #21]. On the other hand, there are some challenges that agents face for which there is little if any precedent. When facing such situations, agents need to improvise, to enact novel practices that cannot be prescribed by the organization [Barrett, 1998 #2]. Improvisation is thus enacted in response to exceptional situations, not in the course of everyday work. Exceptional situations trigger improvisations, but not as external circumstances that agents need to deal with. Indeed, research on organizational improvisation sees agents’ experience in organizations as a continuous pragmatic engagement with their
organization and its context [Orlikowski, 1991 #602]. As the durée of their experience in
the organization unfolds, agents interpret some experiences as challenges that need to be
addressed and others as lacking the importance or visibility to motivate action.
Improvisation’s pragmatic take on organizational experience suggests that this
interpretation is not accomplished through analysis and discourse, but instead through
action and practice. Events that require action and improvisation are thus those which
agents act on as threats to be addressed or as opportunities to be taken advantage of [see
Berger, 1991 #271].

When interpreting specific events as exceptions requiring improvisation, agents
are also enacting their interpretation of what the norm for their organization’s
performance is [Suchman, 1987 #1495]. This norm shapes agents’ improvisations in two
ways. Norms exert a teleological pull over agents, maintaining the motivation to
improvise [cf. Georgiou, 1973 #322]. While agents interpret their organization’s
performance to be short of this norm, they will interpret their current situation as
requiring improvisational action. This teleological pull is what Follett [, 1940 #157: 52]
called “the law of the situation” – a label that she used to describe employees’ intrinsic
motivation to act when facing a situation that they socially constructed as a challenge to
their organization. Research on improvisation has shown that this norm does not only
motivate improvisation but also shapes the specific practices that agents improvise
[Lanzara, 1983 #190]. As agents act on threats and opportunities, their improvisations
will allow them to learn more about the situation they are facing and the effectiveness of
specific tactics to address it. Agents incorporate this learning as they conceive their
improvisational practices as action unfolds, not only through a more sophisticated
understanding of the situation they are facing but also by a more skilled enactment of their improvisations. This process, however, is not one of balancing feedback in which agents develop an increasingly accurate picture of an external situation. It is one of reinforcing feedback in which agents’ improvisations shape the situation they are facing [Orlikowski, 1996 #102]. Agents practices are thus both constituted and constituting of the situation they mean to address.

Scaffolding on available resources

Resources are the second structuring element of improvisation. Resources shape improvisation by bounding the material possibilities of action [see chapters in Heath, 2000 #697]. The improvisation literature, especially the organizational literature on strategy, interprets resources as the people and the technology that an organization has available to support specific projects [Mintzberg, 1985 #100; Perry, 1993 #400]. In improvisation, resources are defined more strictly to mean those material artifacts that agents have immediately available to enact improvised practices. Early research on improvisation interpreted resources as both enabling and constraining improvisation. Resources are enabling in the sense that improvisation requires some kind of material support to embody action and they are constraining because when improvising agents only had access to a limited set of resources. The popularity of the jazz metaphor in the literature of organizational improvisation accentuated the interpretation of material resources as constraining [Lewin, 1998 #48]. In jazz improvisation, the role of resources is attributed to musical instruments. These instruments are described as having a limited set of uses but, more importantly, they are used to argue that improvisation in organizations required highly skilled agents just like improvisation in jazz music required
highly skilled players. The use of alternative metaphors such as music improvisation in
gestalt therapy and empirical research on organizational improvisation showed that
although skilled users of complex resources are apt improvisers, so are unskilled users of
simple resources [see Kamoche, 2003 #1636]. These studies allowed to sharpen the role
of resources in structuring improvisation. Resources shape improvisation by offering a
scaffold. Resources allow agents to embody the impromptu tactics they conceive as
action unfolds [Hutchins, 1996 #1510]. Resources also scaffold the memory and
cognitive tasks that agents carry out when improvising [Lave, 1988 #687]. The metaphor
is that of a set of LEGO blocks or a painter’s tools (paint, brushes, canvas). These
resources foster creativity, imagination and innovation by embodying ideas, allowing
them to take a material form. More importantly, research on improvisation has shown
that material resources scaffold this process. The point is that improvisation is a very
demanding cognitive task because agents not only need to come up with solutions to what
are often complex problems but they need to do so as their own action unfolds. Resources
allow agents to delegate some of the cognitive complexity of improvisation to material
artifacts [Clark, 1997 #627; Maturana, 1988 #1133]. Finally, resources also structure
improvisation through agents’ use of material artifacts to scaffold their interpretive
processes. As research on boundary objects has shown, agents seldom improvise directly
on their experience. Instead, they improvise on representations of that experience. These
representations simplify agents’ interpretation process by providing a selected view of
experience, but by doing so they hide some features of that experience thus closing sets
of alternative interpretations [Cooper, 1992 #561].
The literature on improvisation has yet to fully develop the role of local resources in scaffolding improvisation, but it has at least hinted at many of these issues. In fact, the literature on improvisation has suggested that the resources that are most fitting to improvisational activity share three features [Cunha, 1999 #196; Berry, 1986 #40]. They are familiar to agents either because of their simplicity of because of agent’s training, they can be used to address multiple challenges and they can be used in multiple ways. Research on the role of artifacts in cultural consumption suggests that users are the sources of these properties of the resources they use [Certeau, 1988 #590; DeSanctis, 1994 #223]. The features and the functions of resources remain open until they are used. When using resources for improvisation, employees are interpreting them in practice. They are enacting a meaning and a purpose for their available resources through the material instantiations of their improvisations. The properties of each resource do not congeal instantaneously in their first few uses. Instead they sediment through time. As resources get used repeatedly for the same purpose and in the same way, the interpretation of their features diffuses and sediments. Resources thus structure improvisation but they are, at the same time, structured by improvisation.

The rules of improvisation

Most research on organizational improvisation defines rules as the core element of structure in improvisation, rules harness agents’ creative process, guiding it towards the challenge faced by their organization [Kamoche, 2001 #632; Hedberg, 1976 #152; Barrett, 1998 #3]. Rules play two distinct roles in organizational improvisation. First, rules foster improvisational activity. Here rules are constituted by a set of norms
which create a context favorable to improvisation. Second, rules scaffold the coordination of improvisational activity by providing a minimal structure required for coordination.

Research on organizational improvisation has consistently drawn on jazz improvisation as a metaphor. This is especially the case as far as rules are concerned [see Hatch, 1999 #85]. The norms necessary to foster improvisation, according to the management literature on this topic, were drawn from the occupational culture of jazz musicians: a bias for action, an aesthetic of imperfection and a disposition for formalization.

By a bias for action, we mean the assumption that action is better than contemplation and reflection when learning about and acting on any challenge faced by the organization. In jazz improvisation, creating new music while playing it is considered to be a superior type of composition when compared to writing music outside a stage performance [Berliner, 1994 #7]. In organizations, this bias for action means foregoing the deeply held assumption that any challenged faced by the organization should be met with a two-step planning and implementation process [Miller, 1994 #299].

The mainstream literature on management argues that when an organization is faced with a new challenge, managers need to decide on a course of action and design its implementation process. Only then should the organization act on this challenge and even so stick to the course of action laid out by managers [Nutt, 1983 #1069]. Inversely, the literature on improvisation argues that reflection and planning do not allow the organization to learn enough about the challenges it faces. To learn about a threat or an opportunity, agents need to act on it so that they can build a grounded and actionable mental model of the challenge they’re facing [Church, 1999 #319].
To create a bias for action is to substitute the assumption that action is the best approach to deal with and act on a challenge for the assumption that the best approach for this purpose is a two-step planning/implementation process. According to research on improvisation, the norm of privileging reflection in action over abstract contemplation and planning depends on what Weick calls an “aesthetic of imperfection” [Weick, 1999 #32]. An aesthetic of imperfection is a norm that values errors positively. This is a central norm in the in jazz improvisation. In jazz, mistakes made while improvising are not only free from sanction from colleagues and audience, but are actually rewarded when treated as a challenge for further improvisation [Bastien, 1991 #123]. In organizations error has been traditionally frowned upon. Errors waste resources and they can jeopardize a company’s competitive position [Ginzberg, 1981 #596; Starbuck, 1988 #901]. The literature on organizational improvisation, however, sees errors as a symptom of learning. If organizations are not making errors they are not acting on threats and opportunities, at least not to al level that ensures their competitive position [Sitkin, 1992 #111]. Moreover the literature on organizational improvisation argues that errors provide learning opportunities, not only about the challenges that the organization is facing but also about the organization itself [Lave, 1991 #688]. Having an aesthetic for imperfection then not only creates the condition for a bias for action but also allows agents to adopt a learning stance in organizations.

The final norm needed to foster improvisation is a disposition for formalization. This is the element that distinguishes improvisation from action-centric approaches to organizations. The difference is that the latter approach is satisfied when once action addresses once action addresses a threat or an opportunity whereas the former is not
satisfied until improvisation gets formalized either as an routine or as increased learning about the organization and its context. In jazz, improvisation can become part of the standard repertoire of songs. Even those improvisations that do not, allow players to learn more about their instruments, their fellow players, about the practice of improvisation and about themselves [Bastien, 1988 #4]. Research on improvisation in organizations argues that improvisation has the same advantages for individual learning. However, the differences between the cooperative occupational culture of jazz musicians and the more individualistic culture in organizations make collective learning and the routinization of improvisations more of a challenge [Hatch, 1998 #92]. Although research on this process in organizational improvisation is still scarce, the few studies available have found that improvisation follows a ‘population’ dynamic in its diffusion and routinization: as improvisations get used, they gain visibility and become part of the tactics that employees have available when enacting their practices as actions unfold [Cunha, 2003 #1637; Barrett, 1998 #2]. The specific process through which this visibility is obtained has not been subjected to empirical scrutiny, but authors have theorized a link between the visibility of the challenge an improvisation addressed and the visibility of an improvisation itself [e.g. Tyre, 1999 #921].

Organizational improvisation differs from the action-centric approach to management because of its focus on structure. Indeed research on improvisation not only discusses how to foster an improvisational approach to organizational challenges but also how to coordinate improvisation as it is enacted. Here too the literature on organizational improvisation draws heavily on the jazz metaphor [e.g. Bastien, 1995 #227]. The
elements of the structure that coordinates improvisational activity are: a minimal structure and swift trust.

At the core of organizational improvisation is a minimal structure of coordination [Kamoche, 2001 #632; Hedberg, 1976 #152; Brown, 1997 #11]. The purpose of this structure is to foster improvisation and to ensure that it is applied to the challenges that managers deem most relevant. In jazz improvisation this minimal structure consists of a song’s rhythm. Jazz musicians have free reign to improvise as long as they keep the tempo and the rhythmic structure of the song [Barrett, 1998 #3]. Research on improvisation in organizations has shown that similar practices help improvisational activity in some organizational processes such as new product development. In organizations, rhythm and pace are created by interim objectives attached to rigid deadlines [Brown, 1997 #11]. Deadlines allow managers to create the temporal pressure that fosters improvisation. Having interim objectives helps employees materialize those improvisations before the time window available to deal with a challenge closes.

The second element necessary to coordinate improvisation is the establishment of swift trust among agents [Meyerson, 1996 #343]. Among the three coordination mechanisms available – power, price and trust – trust has been shown to be the most favorable for improvisational activity [e.g. Jarvenpaa, 1999 #65]. Trust allows action to be coordinated when performance is ambiguous. Both price and power require performance to be easy to assess [Ouchi, 1980 #411]. The creative and centrifugal nature of improvisation makes both the effectiveness and the efficiency of improvisation very difficult to measure. Moreover, the aesthetic of imperfection that grounds improvisation is not compatible with bureaucracy or market-based coordination forms. Instead, this
aesthetic requires a set of norms that not only allow errors but also welcome them as form of learning [Orr, 1990 #155]. These norms are only compatible with a coordination mechanism where agents do not exert peer surveillance. Improvisation, however, also requires cognitive complexity which can only be achieved by having a weak culture. One that does not share the same values and beliefs about the organization, one that does not share the same values and beliefs about the organization and its environment. This preempts the clan-based organization that is often described as necessary for trust. Instead improvisation relies on swift trust as a coordination mechanism. A trust that is developed while improvising as action unfolds, grounded on similar local experiences [cf. \McAllister, 1995 #210]. In improvisation, this is helped by the heightened level of emotions that agents experience when improvising [Eisenberg, 1990 #76].

Research on improvisation in organizations treats this set of rules as an outcome of managers’ design process, and thus as external to agents. We need to draw on the use of improvisation in social theory to understand how agents participate in the reproduction of the minimal structure that shape their improvisational activity. Giddens’ [1986 #591] structuration theory is the most popular framework for such explanations in the literature on organizations. According to Giddens [1986 #591], agents reproduce the minimal structure that grounds their improvisation by drawing on its elements when improvising. An aesthetic of imperfection only exists in the sense that it structures agents improvisations while agents act in a way that welcomes errors as a source of learning. Deadlines only shape agents’ improvisations as long as agents ascribe importance to them by acting based on an interpretation of these points in time as being of consequence to their experience in their organization. It is through this subtle but fundamental process
that the rules that constitute the process of improvisation are reproduced by improvisation itself as it unfolds.

In summary, improvisation is a duality that incorporates objectivist and subjectivist views on managerial practice. When improvising agents draw on available resources, to address a specific situation, following a set of minimal rules. However, as they improvise agents shape the situation they are facing and reproduce their interpretation of resources and rules. Improvisation is thus first and foremost an action-based concept, but one that focuses on structure as both its medium of constitution and its outcome. It constitutes a new and emerging topic in management and organization whose contribution is to bring the integration between subjectivist and objectivist approaches, from the process of theorizing on organizations, to the process of managing organizations.