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# Linking personal turbulence and creative behavior: The influence of scanning and search in the entrepreneurial process<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on image theory and integrating literatures on shocks to the system and displacement, we propose that personal turbulence (i.e., rapid, unusual, agenda-setting events) enhances entrepreneurs' creativity both directly and through the mechanism of scanning and search. We conduct multiple studies to develop and validate a scale for personal turbulence and to test hypotheses. Results from the main study of 108 entrepreneurs suggest that negative turbulence has a more potent influence on creativity than does positive turbulence. Further, scanning and search partially mediates the relationship between negative turbulence and creativity, and fully mediates the effect of positive turbulence on creativity.

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## 1. Introduction

Creative and novel behaviors are the lifeblood of entrepreneurship (Ward, 2004). Creativity is defined as the generation of novel and useful ideas, products, services, processes, procedures, or solutions (Amabile, 1983; Perry-Smith, 2006). In order to be creative, an individual needs to think flexibly, see things through a different lens, and combine products or services that seem unrelated (Amabile, 1983). Therefore, creativity emanates primarily from cognitive and motivational processes within individuals. Indeed, a large body of research has demonstrated that cognitive processes and intrinsic motivation are important drivers of creativity (e.g., Shin, Kim, Lee, & Bian, 2012).

Intellectually rooted in the traditions of psychology, most of the current theory and research on creativity focus on utilizing the cognitive and motivational processes to understand why some individuals are more creative than others. However, unplanned or turbulent events occurring outside entrepreneurs' immediate control have been given much less attention to explain this discrepancy. Defined as rapid, unusual and agenda-setting events experienced in an individual's life that may potentially impact entrepreneurial dynamics (Tang, 2010), personal turbulence may prompt the individual to venture away from a given life path (Bird, 1989; Shapero & Sokol, 1982). Understanding how entrepreneurs increase their own creativity by channeling these turbulent events may be as important as understanding how their

cognitive processes enhance their creativity. Although a relatively neglected topic within the entrepreneurship and creativity literature, personal turbulence has been suggested to account for emergence of new ventures (Shapero & Sokol, 1982), intention to start a new business (Krueger & Brazeal, 1994), and opportunity recognition (Tang, 2010). On the basis of the predominant impact of personal turbulence on various crucial aspects of the entrepreneurial process, we contend that personal turbulence will also offer a promising lens for gaining insights into entrepreneurs' creativity.

The view that individuals' personal turbulence can be redirected toward creative performance is consistent with shocks literature's emphasis that jarring events can initiate a psychological reanalysis of the individual's images and eventually lead to behavioral change. The current research draws on insights from the image theory (Beach, 1990) and integrates literatures on "shocks to the system" (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) and displacement (Shapero & Sokol, 1982) to incorporate this critical missing element (i.e., personal turbulence) into creativity models. The core premise of image theory is that human behavioral change is guided by three different types of images: value, strategic, and trajectory images (Beach, 1990; Mitchell & Beach, 1990). Building off of image theory, a *shock* refers to a particular, jarring event that initiates the psychological analyses and may lead to quitting (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Shocks can lead to a reevaluation of the individual's value, trajectory, and strategic images, and affect individual behavior when an image violation occurs (Beach & Mitchell, 1987). Mounting evidence demonstrates that shocking events can precipitate employee turnover (e.g., Lee & Mitchell, 1994), job search, and intention to repatriate (Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010). Although substantial advances have been made in the general understanding of images and fit, theoretical and empirical attempts to extend image theory and shocks to the

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system literature in the specific context of entrepreneurs' creativity are conspicuously missing.

We test a theoretical framework of the relationship between personal turbulence and creativity for entrepreneurs. According to this model, personal turbulence enhances creativity both directly and through the mechanism of scanning and search. Further, negative turbulence has a more potent effect on creativity than does positive turbulence. By doing so, we make three unique contributions to the creativity and entrepreneurship literatures. First, capitalizing on the learning forum of image theory and shocks literature, we discuss and extend research on creativity by examining the critical role of personal turbulent events, and offer recommendations for using this new knowledge to enhance creativity. Our perspective goes beyond previous research on creativity, which has focused on the study of cognitive processes *within* individuals. The identification of positive and negative personal turbulent events complements the creativity models to help us better understand the way events *outside* individuals' control enhance creativity. Second, we contribute to the entrepreneurship literature by introducing the image theory and by demonstrating how different types of turbulence, as shocks to the system, can benefit entrepreneurs' creative behaviors. Finally, we extend the utility and applicability of image theory and shocks to the system literature by illustrating a role for both positive and negative turbulence in the entrepreneurship context.

## 2. Theory and hypothesis development

### 2.1. Image theory and shock to the system

Image theory suggests that people are constantly bombarded with new information that could lead to potential behavioral changes (Beach, 1990). Yet oftentimes people remain unaware of new information because work, home, and family routine prevents individuals from noticing alternative possibilities. In addition, people tend to search for, and be sensitive to, evidence that indicates the new information is consistent with their existing knowledge base (Beach & Mitchell, 1987). Although people are more likely to reject new information, they may accept new information or options. Such behavioral change is guided by three different types of images: value, strategic, and trajectory images (Beach, 1990; Mitchell & Beach, 1990). An image refers to a "desired end state that occurs at different levels of abstraction" (Hollenbeck, Ilgen, Phillips, & Hedlund, 1994: 594). These levels are hierarchically arranged so that the desired end state at a lower level feeds and informs the desired end state at a higher level (Hollenbeck et al., 1994). The *value image* reflects an individual's guiding beliefs, principles, and standards that define the individual, and lies at the foundation level. The *trajectory image*, the second level image, refers to the set of aspiring goals that motivates and directs an individual's behavior. The *strategic image* captures the individual's strategies and tactics to achieve the goals. As individuals create and rely on these images to organize their thinking and direct their actions, in order to accommodate new information or an option, a particular value, goal, or tactic may be changed (Beach, 1990).

Grounded in image theory, a shock to the system is defined as "a very distinguishable event that jars employees toward deliberate judgments about their jobs, and perhaps, to voluntarily quit their job" (Lee & Mitchell, 1994: 60). Shocks to the system will cause the individual to pause and think about the meaning or implication of the event in relation to his or her current situation, and force people to notice "readily available opportunities" (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Shocks can lead to psychological reappraisal of the individual's value, trajectory, and strategic images. If an individual's values, goals, and strategies for goal attainment do not fit with those reflected in the shock, an *image violation* will occur (Beach & Mitchell, 1987). Such image violation can lead to the individual's reexamination of the three images (i.e., mental deliberations) and possible engagement in a new course of action. Thus, although people's behavior typically stays the same, shocks

experienced can shake people out of a steady state (e.g., inertia), prompt individuals to challenge their well-worn paths, discard the status quo, and behave differently (Lee & Mitchell, 1994).

### 2.2. Personal turbulence

Building off of the literature on displacement (Shapero, 1975; Shapero & Sokol, 1982), personal turbulence refers to "unusual, rapid, and agenda-setting events" experienced in one's life that may potentially impact entrepreneurial dynamics (Tang, 2010: 472). Personal turbulence can be positive or negative. The process of change in an individual's life path is conceptualized in terms of vectors, or direct forces that keep the individual moving in a specific direction (Shapero & Sokol, 1982). Most people follow a given path in their lives by the sum of vectors composed of jobs, family situations, and inertia. However, significant and turbulent events may take place that prompt individuals to make a major shift in a given life path (Krueger & Brazeal, 1994). These turbulent events are immediate, powerful, and may "push" or "pull" an individual into a new direction. As a result, the individual will consciously venture away from the given life path (Bird, 1989; Shapero & Sokol, 1982). Although personal turbulence may be positive or negative, "vector summation" suggests that the combination of both positive and negative forces constitute most primary changes in an individual's life path (Shapero & Sokol, 1982).

Along the same lines, the "Hagenian displacees" (Dana, 1995: 63) become entrepreneurs because "the channel in which creative energies will flow depends in part on the degree to which other possible channels are blocked" (Hagen, 1962: 241). For example, minorities would find compensation for their inferior social status in entrepreneurial achievement. Entrepreneurship is also found to be linked with withdrawal of social respect (Hagen, 1962). This finding is supported by a case study which identifies withdrawal of status respect (rather than simple lack of status) as triggers of entrepreneurial activities for displaced Hinduized aristocracy in Bali (Geertz, 1963). Another case in point concerns entrepreneurial activities in a remote sub-Arctic Alaskan town where Eskimos in the town are found to be less likely to become entrepreneurs than do non-natives (Dana, 1995). As one of the pioneer studies to explore the influence of culture on entrepreneurship, this research suggests that the low rate of entrepreneurship by native Eskimos is attributed to their traditional values such as working and sharing collectively as well as disliking competition (Dana, 1995). More recently, empirical research on "pull" and "push" entrepreneurs reveals interesting findings as well. For example, statistical analysis of Canadian entrepreneurs indicates that "pull" entrepreneurs (those lured by the attractiveness of their new venture ideas) are more successful than "push" entrepreneurs (those dissatisfied with their pre-entrepreneurial positions) (Amit & Muller, 1995). Another large-scale empirical research of American entrepreneurs shows no differences in life satisfaction (pull factor) between entrepreneurs and the comparison group; yet contrary to the prediction, it shows that entrepreneurs are more satisfied with their pre-entrepreneurial jobs (push factor) than the comparison group (Schjoedt & Shaver, 2007).

The current research integrates literatures on shocks to the system and personal turbulence because they are grounded on several key common characteristics. First, similar to shocks to the system, personal turbulence may be positive (e.g., substantial financial offer) or negative (health or financial crisis), internal or external to the person, job-related or non-job-related, expected, or unexpected. Shock to the system literature suggests that shocks may involve positive, neutral, or negative aspects (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Likewise, displacement literature suggests that a turbulent event may be positive or negative, and negative turbulence may precipitate more entrepreneurial activities than positive turbulence (Shapero & Sokol, 1982). Further, although a jarring event holds an individual's attention, it does not necessarily generate any negative emotions. Second, both personal turbulence and shocks to the system assume that inertia guides human behavior

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