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## Under pressure! Team innovative climate and individual attitudes in shaping individual improvisation

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## ABSTRACT

By embracing a perspective grounded in the Theory of Reasoned Action, this paper investigates the mechanisms through which team climate affects individual improvisation. By relying on data from 134 individuals belonging to 25 artistic collectives, our paper shows that team innovative climate impacts individual improvisation by triggering individual proactive attitude and risk aversion attitude. Because our research spans across different levels of analysis, we developed a multilevel model for analyzing our hypotheses. Our study complements the results of previous research by asserting that improvisation is not an inherently individual phenomenon; rather, improvisation is also affected by the characteristics of the team in which individuals are embedded.

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The increased organizational need to face unexpected and emergent issues attracted the interest of both scholars and practitioners in developing a better understanding on how individuals and organizations activate spontaneous and creative behaviors (i.e., improvisation) to deal with such kind of events (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Kamoche & Cunha, 2001). Improvisation plays a pivotal role when individuals deal with activities that cannot be entirely planned in advance, and which may require departure from established routines (Giustiniano & Cunha, 2016; Kamoche & Cunha, 2001). Indeed, while previous research that approached routines from a behavioral standpoint outlined their potential to create stability within the organizational life (Cyert & March 1963; Nelson & Winter 1982), subsequent research also recognized the importance to support flexibility in order to allow organizational actors to deal with uncertain situations (e.g., Turner & Rindova, 2012). Consistent with this perspective, organizational studies' interest in improvisation is based on the fact that traditional, top-down approaches to complex activities following carefully mapped out procedures may hinder the ability to deal with uncertainty (Kamoche & Cunha, 2001). Improvisational action, through a creative and spontaneous process that allows novel and useful

solutions to emerge on the spur of the moment, may enable individuals to continuously adjust (Crossan, P Cunha, Vera, & Cunha, 2005) and face the need for rapid responses to such complexity (Cunha, Clegg, & Kamoche, 2006; Smith et al., 1994).

A growing body of research has underscored the need to shed some light on the precursors of improvisation by considering both the individual and the team (e.g., Kamoche, Cunha, & Vieira da Cunha, 2003), with a particular focus on the mechanisms through which the team fosters individual improvisation. Despite these calls for further investigation, as of today, few studies have empirically investigated this phenomenon (e.g., Magni, Proserpio, Hoegl, & Provera, 2009). Indeed, improvisation research generally relied on a single level of analysis (see Giustiniano, Cunha, & Stewart, 2016; Magni et al., 2009 for exceptions), either examining the individual (Weick, 1993; 1998), the team (Vera & Crossan, 2005) or the organization (Baker, Miner, & Eesley, 2003). As suggested by Cunha, Miner, and Antonacopoulou (2015), in order to better understand the mechanisms that trigger individual improvisation, there is the need to embrace a broader cross-level approach that takes into account both the team in which individuals are embedded in and the individual mechanisms through which the team affects improvisation.

This emergent perspective on individual improvisation, which considers in a simultaneous fashion both the individual and the team, is implicitly grounded in the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), which represents one of the most influential theoretical

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framework adopted to predict a wide range of human behaviors across several settings (e.g., Ackermann & Palmer, 2014; Bagozzi, Wong, Abe, & Bergami, 2000). TRA aims at providing a framework to better understand the process through which individuals' behaviors are formed by rooting them to attitudes and beliefs and by relying on two main principles. First, the individual's decision to enact a specific behavior is based on the individual attitudes toward that behavior. Attitudes can be defined as individual dispositions to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a given object or situation (e.g., a specific person, thing, or mental concept) (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, 2010). According to the TRA, attitudes carry with them behavioral implications, such that individuals who develop a positive (negative) attitude toward a situation tend to engage in behaviors that foster (suppress) that kind of condition (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Second, according to the TRA, attitudes are molded by the individuals' beliefs concerning the environment they are immersed in, thus suggesting that team beliefs influence the activation of an individual's positive or negative response toward a specific situation (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975, 2010; Glisson & James, 2002). Therefore, TRA underscores that an individual's behavior is predicted by individual attitudes, and individual attitudes represent the mechanism through which the team affects individual behavior.

By following this logic, we draw on the TRA to develop a cross-level model that considers both team beliefs (i.e., team innovative climate) and individual attitudes (i.e., proactive and risk aversion attitude), which may affect individual improvisation. Team innovative climate can be defined as the team members' shared belief that the processes, the interactions, and the norms within a team promote the generation and the implementation of new ideas through the exchange of knowledge in a constructive way (Van Der Vegt, Van de Vliert, & Huang, 2005). Our focus on team innovative climate from a TRA perspective can be traced back to two main reasons. First, team innovative climate has been recognized as one of the main drivers of individual attitudes and behaviors (James & Jones, 1974; Schneider, 2000) especially in settings characterized by uncertain circumstances (e.g., Hülshager, Anderson, & Salgado, 2009; West & Anderson, 1996; Van der Vegt et al., 2005), making it suitable for studying the improvisation phenomenon. Second, beliefs are developed by the interaction with the immediate teammates (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), making the role of the team even more critical when individuals need to react quickly to the situation at hand (Weiss, Hoegl, & Gibbert, 2011).

Consistent with the TRA, we argue that team innovative climate influences individual improvisation also through proactive and risk aversion attitudes, which are considered critical when individuals are facing uncertain circumstances. Proactive attitude can be conceived as an individual favorable disposition toward taking initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones in order to face barriers and setbacks (Crant, 2000; Greenglass, Schwarzer, Jakubiec, Fiksenbaum, & Taubert, 1999), while risk aversion attitude is the individual unfavorable orientation toward embracing choices and courses of action that may lead to risky scenarios in a specific situation (Weber, Blais, & Betz, 2002). The reliance on these two attitudes is consistent with TRA, which underscores the need to focus on attitudes that would enable individuals to respond appropriately when a specific situation occurs.

According to the TRA theoretical framework and based on the cross-level nature of our research design, we develop theoretical arguments and hypotheses both at the individual level of analysis and across these two levels of analysis. Specifically, at the individual level of analysis, we hypothesize that proactive and risk aversion attitudes (individual level) affect improvisation (individual level). From a cross-level perspective, we argue that team innovative

climate (team level) affects improvisation (individual level) and that such cross-level relationship is mediated by attitudes (individual level), thus underlining a cross-level mediation.

Our study makes a number of theoretical contributions. By taking a multilevel perspective that considers both the individual and the team, our work complements extant research by providing a better understanding on how the team affects the individuals' departure from routines by taking a spontaneous and creative action. This theoretical perspective allows us to focus on the team member as the primary actor who embraces improvisation without losing the influence that the team exerts on the individual, thus contributing to the nascent literature that looks at improvisation as a phenomenon that spans across levels of analysis. Moreover, by using the lens of the TRA, our work helps to clarify not only that team climate affects individual improvisation but also how team climate influences individual improvisation by leveraging on individual attitudes. Therefore, we shed some light on the role that individual attitudes play in facing emergent situations. Such a perspective responds to previous calls to delve deeper into the mechanisms through which the team affects individual behaviors in situations requiring spontaneous and creative actions (e.g., Kamoche et al., 2003; Magni et al., 2009).

We tested our model in a field study by involving 134 individuals belonging to 25 Italian artistic collectives operating in teams. The validity of exploring improvisation within performing art teams can be linked to two main factors. First, complex cultural and artistic projects are regularly conducted through teams, and collective performing art presentations are often associated with significant uncertainty (Adler, 1999; Harrison & Rouse, 2014). This means that the role of the team is critical in influencing individual behaviors in order to cope with emergent events (e.g., Zellner-Bruhn, 2003). This is consistent with Halpern et al. (1994, pp. 13–14), who underscore that in the performing arts, “true improvisation is getting on stage and performing without any preparation or planning” and that “improvisation is making it up as you go along.” Second, teams often develop routines that yield activities and solutions learned from past experience. However, particularly in dynamic settings, a heavy reliance on established routines may limit the search for new cognitive pathways (Cunha, Clegg, & Mendonça, 2010; Levitt & March 1988), contrasting the ability to create effective artistic performances.

## 1. Theory and hypotheses

### 1.1. Improvisation as reasoned action

Improvisation is defined as the process of composing creative solutions to emergent issues within a short timeframe; thus, improvisation can be considered as the convergence of spontaneity and creativity (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Whereas conventional wisdom suggests the existence of a temporal sequence between composition and implementation of an action, the spontaneity facet of improvisation deviates from this convention by viewing composition and execution as co-occurring in time (Moorman & Miner, 1998). The time-dependent nature of spontaneity is such that individuals react and compose actions by recombining immediately available resources (Cunha, Cunha, & Kamoche, 1999). As a creative process, improvisation attempts to develop something new that is linked to the situation at hand. The value and importance of creative actions have been underscored in non-routine tasks, where the means-end relations associated with established routines become ambiguous.

Previous research has shown that individual departure from routines, in order to face an emergent issue, could lead to either positive or negative consequences (Vera & Crossan, 2005).

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