Using Organisational Play to Overcome Organisational Constraints for Innovation

Professor Ruey-Lin Hsiao

National Chengchi University, Taiwan

E-mail: rueylin.nccutim@gmail.com

Dr Su-Hua Ou

Soochow University, Taiwan

E-mail suhua.scu@gmail.com

Dr Yuliani SUSENO

School of Business and Law, Centre for Innovative Practice

Edith Cowan University, Western Australia

y.suseno@ecu.edu.au

(Corresponding Author)

Using Organisational Play to Overcome Organisational Constraints for Innovation

ABSTRACT

Faced with various organisational and environmental constraints, organisations often need to make do with whatever resources they have at hand. Using the concept of organisational play, we suggest the different roles of play that can enable organisations to overcome organisational constraints for innovation, by looking at whatever they have at hand from a 'fresh' and different angle. Adopting the case study method using the popular Taiwan's 'Lady First' TV program, we discuss two constraints that organisations face, analyse the principles of organisational play in relation to how organisations manage those constraints, and finally exemplify how innovation is facilitated.

Keywords: constraints, organisational play, resources, innovation

INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on creativity and innovation have highlighted that organisational play is critical in fostering innovation, in that the dysfunctional nature of play allows for limitless space, boundary, and thinking. Little children, when playing, may not have a set goal in mind of what they want to build or create, but they are actually learning during the process of playing. The outcome of play may not be something tangible or even attractive-looking, but that learning becomes implicit and embedded in the minds. While 2-year-olds could stack blocks which may not look like anything, simply different colours of blocks being stacked together, 8-year-olds could build trucks, police cars, submarines, castles, or even Star Wars characters. It actually takes years of explicit and tacit learning to build recognisable building blocks and creative art pieces, but creativity may be hampered if play is not incorporated in the process of learning.

In much the same manner, play is often subconsciously integrated into the working environment. Organisations like IDEO (Sutton & Hargadon, 1997) have integrated play into their organisational culture. Google, Facebook and other technology companies in the Silicon Valley have even gone further to not only create the 'playful' mood but also provide facilities to foster that 'play' feeling by incorporating physical spaces for play to occur. It is in fact no longer uncommon to see slides inside an office or even bowling alleys (Smith, 2013). However, our understanding and knowledge about organisational play is still relatively limited (Statler et al., 2009). As commented by Tökkäri (2015, p. 87), organisational play has "remained an undervalued and understudied phenomenon", in which we aim to contribute in filling the research gaps. The objective of this research is to examine the role of play, particularly in overcoming organisational constraints, and how organisational play could foster innovation. The following research questions are formulated: How is organisational play used to deal with constraints, and how can organisations use play to create innovation?"

Our intention in this study is to contribute to the literature and practice in three major ways. First, present research on organisational play has not considered the interplay between play and the constraints that organisations face. While work and play are important in facilitating and enabling creative juices, innovation is not simply about choosing the 'best' idea that wins the day, but it is in fact about "people creating and managing a series of constraints to nurture an innovation" (Euchner & Henderson, 2011, p. 48). Most organisations face multiple constraints, such as lack of time and lack of affluent customers (Cunha et al., 2014), as well as limited human skills and pressures for legal and regulatory compliance that may prevent them from achieving an optimal performance. However, we are yet to fully understand how the macro perspective of constraints influences the micro perspective of organisational routine of play in creating something innovative.

Second, extant research has not particularly examined how play can enable innovative outcomes. As noted by Cheng & Van de Ven (1996, p. 594), much has been researched on the already-developed innovations and how these are implemented and diffused, but "little research has examined the emergence

of novelty, or the generative process by which innovations develop." One may also wonder, given the various constraints that organisations face, how is innovation created exactly? We argue for the need to consider the process of entrepreneurial bricolage when playing to create something unique. Bricolage is a term that refers to "making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities" (Baker, 2007, p. 698). When children play, they are not limited to using particular things; they subconsciously have to make do with using whatever they lay their eyes on - pots and pans, pencils and blocks, to play and create something. The process of 'making do' may not be strategic and explicit just like play time for children, but the process of bricolage may provide an opportunity for organisational actors to be creative.

Third, our study here uses the case of a cultural industry using one of Taiwan's, or indeed one of Asia's most successful reality television (TV) programs, the 'Lady First' program. Although cultural industry is influential in shaping our values and lifestyles, the study of cultural industry particularly from emerging economies has only received marginal attention from management scholars (Lampel et al., 2000). Similar to other cultural goods such as movies, music and visual arts, the cultural industry uses play as a key component of work to incite creativity (Lampel et al., 2000). As such, the context of a reality TV show serves to provide insights into organisational play. Using the 'Lady First' TV program, the purpose of this study is to identify the constraints that organisations face, to analyse the principles of play and the process of bricolage in relation to how organisations manage those constraints, and finally to understand the innovative outcomes that can result from the process.

PLAY IN ORGANISATIONAL STUDIES

The idea of play as an experience is something that all of us have experienced at some stage in our lives. It is linked to the concept of fun and is often connected to the feeling of joy and stress-free. However, play as a topic of research inquiry is "among the least studied and least understood organisational behaviour" (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 82).

The term 'play' is commonly associated with childhood. In our adulthood, we often thought of play as a non-serious activity which happens in our leisure time. It is actually common to presume that play could be in opposition to the idea of learning or working, which is perhaps due to the fundamental contrasting forms of the two activities. For example, Rieber (1996) notes that play is often intrinsically motivated while work tends to be more extrinsically motivated. Work also seems to be a rather involuntary action – it is often a 'must', driven by a person's need to do work to earn income. It is very much focused on the outcomes that are attained. Play, on the other hand, is not inhibited by a 'must' to do it, where actors, children or adults alike can be free to exercise any decisions without being afraid of making mistakes or facing failures (Morgan & Kennewell, 2006). This is, once again, quite in contradiction to the idea of work.

Statler et al. (2009) outlined three conditions of play: play as imaginative, play as ethical, and play as autotelic where play is an end in itself. The autotelic characteristic of play in fact differentiates play from work as they represent different meanings. However, both work and play can be considered to be similar as they evoke experiences – it could induce a feeling of excitement and enjoyment but it could also conjure the dark sides of feelings of frustration and addiction (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Rather than segregating work and play as two separate concepts, Sørensen and Spoelstra (2012) characterise play at work in three different ways: play as a continuation of work, play as an intervention in work, and play as a usurpation of work where play can take over central tasks in the organisation. Indeed, work and play become inseparable from many activities in adulthood, such as arts and sports (Sutton-Smith, 2001). For instance, during a game of competitive golf, work and play intermingle. Play essentially invites a perspective change that encourages proactivity and creativity. Play also enables one to persevere through challenges and comes out with 'winning' solutions.

The separation of work and play has become increasingly difficult with the advancement of technology and the pace of work. We often find it difficult to keep up with the impossible pace of technology – we seem to want to pay attention to various notifications and news from Facebook, e-mail,

Twitter and other social media, that we somehow find it difficult to draw the boundary lines between work and play. Our pace of work also dictates that we incorporate play in our organisational structure. For example, many organisations instil 'entertainment value' in organisational life to build a collegial workplace and to ease the stress that their employees may be facing by having for example, Friday social gatherings, theatrical performances, festive functions such as for Christmas and the Melbourne Cup Carnival (Australia's most prestigious horse races), as well as annual outings. Play, thus, is not in binary opposition to the more serious activity that is work, as Freud (1908) cited in Carr (2003: 201) mentioned: "every child at play … creates a world of his own …. It would be wrong to think he does not take that world seriously; on the contrary, he takes his play very seriously and he expends large amounts of emotion on it".

Research on play has highlighted that play is "relatively free from external constraints" (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006: 89). However, in reality, organisational and environmental constraints are inevitable and often expected. Organisations can choose to eliminate, minimise, or even embrace those constraints as opportunities for creativity. Responding to the often unexpected and surprising moments in organisation's daily conditions, the process of play of trial-and-error, mistake-prone, and messy, could in fact be the only thing that organisations can reasonably do at times. However, given the various constraints that organisations face, how can play be used to create something creative? We argue for the need to do bricolage, to make do or 'play' with whatever resources at hand, to deal with those constraints.

THE CONCEPT OF BRICOLAGE

With its origins in the anthropological study of craftsmanship, the concept of bricolage has been used to illustrate a different approach in studies about resource-constrained entrepreneurs and businesses (Baker, 2007; Baker & Nelson, 2005). Baker and Nelson (2005) highlight that bricolage has three characteristics. The first characteristic is that, bricolage involves 'making do' which implies "a bias toward action and active engagement with problems or opportunities rather than lingering over questions of whether a workable outcome can be created from what is at hand" (p. 334). As such, the problem or opportunity at

hand is not avoided or dismissed but rather, is confronted and resolved. The second characteristic of bricolage is that, 'everything matters' (Duymedjian & Rüling, 2010), and bricoleurs often find value in inputs that others may view as worthless. Finally, bricolage enables innovation through the creative use and combination of their limited resources for a new purpose. Often, organisations have to 'make it up as they go along' which could result in improvisation and even, novel productions (Baker, 2007; Miner et al., 2001).

Yet, "we know relatively little about organisational bricolage, there is very little research-based knowledge for us to share" (Baker, 2007, p. 709). Banerjee and Campbell (2009, p. 473) also highlight that bricolage is "an important, yet under-studied special case of the 'make-or-buy' literature". When organisations attempt to 'make do' with whatever they have at hand, they do not view constraints as limitations but rather, these are viewed as creating "space …. [for] solutions that would otherwise seem impermissible" (Baker & Nelson, 2005, p. 349). The various constraints can be exploited as the source of opportunities for innovation. However, how organisations use play to bricolage and overcome organisational constraints for innovation, requires further examination.

METHODOLOGY

We adopted an exploratory methodology using a qualitative research from a single, in-depth case study (Eisenhardt, 1989), using the popular 'Lady First' fashion and beauty show program, produced by TVBS, Taiwan. The 'Lady First' program started in 2003 as a talk show program with low budgets and multiple constraints. Similar to a police SWAT team and film production crews (Bechky & Okhuysen, 2011), this TV program embodies components of surprise, unpredictability and constraining situational conditions that dominate their daily organisational life, requiring it to utilise and organise their activities using resources at hand.

We used various data collection techniques for the study. We conducted personal face-to-face interviews with multiple stakeholders, including the senior managers of the show's production team, the international cosmetic brands that have been involved in 'placing' their products on the show, the users,

and the technical team members. To gain a deeper insight, we participated in observations as non-participants during the filming of a live studio show. In addition, we were also involved in various meetings with the executives and members of the program's production team in various sessions to seek feedback.

Throughout the data collection period, we documented our interviews, observations and meetings in field notes. We did an in-depth analysis of the various constraints, paying particular attention to identify the source of constraints. Second, we traced back how organisational play was used as the principles of action when faced with constraints. Third, we considered how the process of bricolage was done by the program. Finally, we examined how this particular program creatively used their resources to captivate their audience, and produce a program that is unique and stands the 'test of time'.

Only two of the constraints are highlighted in this paper due to the page limit constraint. We also outline our observation findings, rather than our interview analysis for the purpose of this paper. We adopted Kutsche's (1998) approach in first understanding our preconceptions, the physical environment and the interaction of the participants with the environment. We set out an outline of the information we have, and organise the information in accordance to the outline that has been mapped out. Once the data are organised, several sections of the narrative may emerge, reflecting our interpretation of certain themes. We also reported back to the executives and members of the program's production team as a way to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1994).

Using the two constraints, we outline the roles of play in overcoming organisational constraints – first, play is noted as a source of knowledge power, and second, play is noted for its role as an emotional appeal. In discussing organisational play, we also highlight how an organisation makes do with the resources it has at hand to come up with something innovative.

FINDINGS

Play as a source of knowledge power

Many TV stations around the world experience massive financial constraints. This trend is particularly obvious in the past 10 years in Taiwan. Commercial advertisements as TV stations' core revenue source, have been diluted significantly in Taiwan due to the release of permission for cable licenses and the significant prominence of websites and new media. The production teams of many Taiwanese TV programs thus become more conservative in terms of inviting famous guest or 'TV superstars', nor innovating in their programs due to the lack of financial resources.

Faced with financial constraint, the 'Lady First' production team comes up with different ideas of injecting fun in the format of the program. First, rather than using the 'core team' to deliver 'serious instructions of how-to-do' fashion and beauty tips to the audience on a daily basis, the program invites external people for their fashion and beauty knowledge, and bringing them to the show. These so-called 'experts' were relatively unknown when they were first asked to come on board. This is obviously a financial saving on the part of the program, in comparison to a format of inviting 'TV superstars'. Second, these 'expert' resources are then groomed to deliver and share their knowledge in a playful, fun and casual manner. The insights the experts provide are conveyed in their personal stories they tell to the audience, making it very rich and meaningful for the audience. Their stories highlight the dos and don'ts in fashion and beauty, and delivered in a humorous and engaging manner. There is a lot of laughter triggered by the interactions between the anchor lady, the experts and the audience on the show. This makes the show rather authentic and genuine in its delivery of content. Play is thus used here as the source of knowledge power to convince the audience of the 'value' of the program as it enables the audience to learn something new about fashion and beauty matters, delivered in an entertaining manner. Third, using the physical studio space that they have, the program also creates a 'space for promotional activity' for world-famous cosmetic brands to showcase their new beauty and fashion products. The 'expert stars' are also trained to provide live step-by-step 'instructions' and training videos for the counter sales ladies and the target audience.

Thus, despite the financial constraint, the program creates innovation through incubating expert stars and redesigning the studio as a training class. Play is used here as a source of knowledge power whereby knowledge of beauty and fashion tips is delivered in an interesting and witty manner, enticing the audience to watch the show while informing and engaging them on a daily basis.

Play as an emotional appeal

The shrinking of the production budget not only puts a constraint for reality TV shows around the world in terms of inviting famous superstars/celebrities, but it also puts a limit on the use of supporting actors that could potentially enrich the show. The lack of supporting actors obviously presents a challenge or constraint in terms of the employment of skilled human resources. Faced with such human resources constraint, the 'Lady First' TV program rethinks its strategy by inviting non-artists (i.e., 'ordinary' members of the audience) who are eager to show up on TV. The idea behind this approach is that, rather than simply listening to the expert stars all the time, 'normal' women could come as guests and discuss about fashion issues that concern them. Indeed, the show uses its own resources in the forms of 'ordinary' audience members by creating what is famously now known as the 'Women Troop'. The ladies who are chosen to form the 'Women Troop' are 'imperfect' either in their body proportions or facial features, to emotionally connect to the audience. The conversations and the 'display' of the Women Troop's insecurities of their body shapes or facial features create shared identities between the guests and the audience, with the playful mood connecting them on an emotional level.

The set is also redesigned to provide a stage for products launching. The 'Women Troop' not only become the 'testing ground' of product testing/transformation, they also become the models for new product exhibitions. During the daily live show, the expert stars of the show 'transform' the 'Women Troop' into charming ladies. Such big differences in terms of the 'before' and 'after' effects create the

program's "magic moments". The audience is entertained and captivated by the 'magical' transformation of the ladies. They witness with their own eyes how ordinary females could be 'transformed' to be beautiful and charming. This certainly has an emotional appeal, making audience attracted and interested in the program as they could relate to the issues discussed on the program.

Faced with human resources constraint, the program thus creates innovation through the use of the 'Women Troop' as representatives of the target market, and also by converting the stage as product launch exhibitions. Organisational play in this context is used as an emotional appeal, with bricolage being done through using their own audience to come up with something innovative.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, we have examined a significant yet overlooked perspective of the interplay between organisational play and constraints, and their impact on innovation. We have also investigated how the use of 'making do with whatever you have' or bricolage can facilitate innovation by embedding them in the everyday organisational life. Our study makes several contributions to the organisational play and innovation literature. First, the findings of the study indicate the different ways in which organisational play can be used to deal with constraints. By integrating the theories of organisational play and organisational constraints, we describe in this study how the principles of organisational play can indeed assist organisations in managing their constraints.

Second, our study contributes to the literature on bricolage by clarifying the actions of such bricolage effort, and its effect on innovation. Play could essentially enable organisations to look at whatever they have at hand from a 'fresh' and different angle, which may enable them to be innovative. Although entrepreneurial bricolage requires an improvisation of the use of existing resources (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Miner et al., 2001), current studies have yet to explain how resources are re-used or re-contextualised in response to the various organisational and environmental constraints. Our findings suggest the different ways bricolage process can be done and how the organisation can change their

perspectives to view their limited resources and difficult environments as rich opportunities for innovation (Baker & Nelson, 2005).

In addition, our study explores the context of a cultural industry particularly from emerging economies which has not received much attention in management scholarly research (Lampel et al., 2000). Our findings of the 'Lady First' TV program illustrate that this organisation is culturally and structurally playful. Although the program faces multiple constraints, the program embeds play behind the scenes and on the live show. Not only does the program creatively re-contextualises its resources, it also redesigns its space (or environments). All the actors who are involved in the program also espouse play as their behaviour; they do not separate play and work as two very contrasting forms to be innovative.

In terms of the practical implications, our findings encourage managers to view constraints as opportunities to be creative. Managers need to pay particular attention to investigating different ways to recombine and transform constraints into creating innovation without the need to incur additional costs or time. At the core, play is used in different ways to come up with different perspectives to create something unique. While resources at hand can be used creatively, there also needs to be an awareness that play must permeate throughout the organisation. It is not simply just about the nature of employee behaviour but there must be an awareness that the physical environment could also be redesigned to support play for creativity and innovation.

This study also offers practical insights for business model innovation particularly in today's hypercompetitive environment. The 'Lady First' television program, through the use of play and bricolage, has become the flagship program of TVBS, with an extended broadcasting scope in Hong Kong and Mainland China. It has also been successful in marketing the whole program to Singapore's Starhub TV station and formatting it to the local context. Organisations that can survive in the increasingly complex and globally competitive environment are those that are able to develop competitive advantage in the face of multiple constraints – one way to do this is to incorporate organisational play and

using whatever they have at hand to come up with something innovative, just like the 'Lady First' TV

program.

REFERENCES

Baker, T. (2007). Resources in play: Bricolage in the toy store(y). *Journal of Business Venturing*, 22, 694–711.

Baker, T., and Nelson, R. E. (2005). Creating something from nothing: Resource construction through entrepreneurial bricolage. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 50, 329-366.

Banerjee, P. M., and Campbell, B. A. (2009). Inventor bricolage and firm technology research and development. *R&D Management* 39: 473-487.

Bechky, B. A., and Okhuysen, G. A. (2011). Expecting the unexpected? How SWAT officers and film crews handle surprises. *Academy of Management Journal*, 54, 239-261.

Carr, A. (2003). Organisational discourse as a creative space for play: The potential of postmodernist and surrealist forms of play. *Human Resource Development International*, 6, 197-217.

Cheng, Y-T., and Van de Ven, A. H. (1996). Learning the innovation journey: Order out of chaos? *Organization Science*, 7, 593-614.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Cunha, M. P.e., Rego, A., Oliveira, P., Rosado, P., and Habib, N. (2014). Product innovation in resource-poor environments: Three research streams. *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, 31, 202-210.

Di Domenico, M., Haugh, H., & Tracey, P. (2010). Social bricolage: Theorising social value creation in social enterprises. *Entrepreneurship: Theory & Practice*, 34, 681-703.

Duymedjian, R., & Rüling, C.C. (2010). Towards a foundation of bricolage in organisation and management theory. *Organization Studies*, 31, 133-151.

Eisenhardt, K. M. (1989). Building theories from case study research. *Academy of Management Review,* 14, 532–550.

Euchner, J., and Henderson, A. (2011). The practice of innovation: Innovation as the management of constraints. *Research Technology Management*, 54, 47-54.

Kutsche, (1998). *Field ethnography: A manual for doing cultural anthropology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lampel, J., Lant, T., and Shamsie, J. (2000). Balancing act: Learning from organising practices in cultural industries. *Organization Science*, 11: 263-269.

Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Mainemelis, C., and Ronson, S. (2006). Ideas are born in fields of play: Towards a theory of play and creativity in organisational settings. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 27, 81-131.

Miner, A. S., Bassoff, P., & Moorman, C. (2001). Organisational improvisation and learning: A field study. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 46, 304-337.

Morgan, A. E., & Kennewell, S. E. (2006). Initial teacher education student's views of play as a medium for learning-divergence of personal philosophy and practice. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 15, 307-320.

Rieber, L. P. (1996). Seriously considering play: Designing interactive learning environments based on the blending of micro-worlds, simulations and games. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 44, 43-58.

Smith, J. (2013). '*10 Cool Office Spaces'*. Forbes/Leadership*,* available from http://www.forbes.com/sites/jacquelynsmith/2013/03/08/10-cool-office-spaces/, accessed on 10th November 2015.

Sørensen, B. M., and Spoelstra, S. (2011). Play at work: Continuation, intervention and usurpation. *Organization*, 19, 81-97.

Statler, M., Roos, J., and Victor, B. (2009). Ain't misbehavin': Taking play seriously in organisations. *Journal of Change Management*, 9, 87-107.

Sutton, R. I., and Hargadon, A. (1997). Brainstorming groups in context: Effectiveness in a product design firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 42, 685-718.

Sutton-Smith, B. (2001). *The Ambiguity of Play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Tökkäri, V. (2015). Organisational play: Within and beyond managing. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 10, 86-104.