Emotional Responses to Surprise: Improvisation in an Underground Restaurant

Daphne Demetry  
Desautels Faculty of Management  
McGill University  
daphne.demetry@mcgill.ca

Abstract: Scholarship has identified improvisation – action that is simultaneously conceived and executed in novel ways – as a critical skill for organizations inhabiting uncertain environments. Pioneering studies of improvisation have recognized a range of resources, such as cognitive, material, social, and affective, necessary to support this novel action, however, we still know surprisingly little about the role of affective, or emotional, resources. Accordingly, this paper asks: how do emotions influence the occurrence of improvisation? To answer this question, I draw from a 28-month ethnography of a single underground restaurant, a temporary and nomadic dining establishment with minimal infrastructure where improvisation is both necessary and excepted, interviews with organizational members, and secondary online documents. Whereas the general organizational outlook towards improvisation was characterized by positive emotions, when analyzing each interaction surrounding a surprise (e.g., employee error or diner demands) actors display immediate negative emotions. The shared mood among participants at the time of the surprise and the emotional outcomes of prior attempts of improvisation within a dinner shape these negative emotional reactions into two potential action pathways. First, “emotional conversion,” whereby actors redirect and transform their negative emotional reactions into positive ones that incite and support improvisation. Second, “emotional fatigue,” whereby the negative emotions are amplified through the interaction and accumulation of prior events, resulting in actors shutting down emotionally and not improvising. These findings contribute to scholarship by presenting a process model of emotions influencing improvisation, showing that emotions build upon one another across a stream of interactions, rather than remain static. Such findings also have implications for the growing literature on emotions and organizational theory, and more broadly in how we think about the ways organizations deal with uncertainty.