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Resources in play: Bricolage in the Toy Store(y)

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the "Toy Store(y)" narrative by imagining the words and perspectives of several participants other than those from whose perspective the original story is told. By applying the lens of bricolage to a series of critical events and activities described in the Toy Store(y), I illustrate the theoretical and practical application of prior research findings on both bricolage and improvisation and extend these to make suggestions for useful future research and teaching in these areas.

Keywords: Bricolage; Improvisation; Entrepreneurship

1. Executive summary

This paper analyzes the "Toy Store(y)" narrative by imagining the words and perspectives of several participants other than those from whose perspective the original story is told. In doing this, I followed two arguments. First, I assumed that many stories about ostensibly unique organizations–including the Toy Store(y)–reflect and express themes and points of view that are useful for understanding other organizations (Martin et al., 1983). Second, attempting to mimic what March, Sproull and Tamuz (1991) describe *organizations* as doing in order to learn "from samples of one or fewer," I created plausible "hypothetical histories" in order to "attempt to experience history more richly, to formulate more interpretations of that experience and to supplement history by experiencing more of the events that did not occur but could have" (March et al, 1991:8).

The guiding goal of the analysis in this paper is to apply the lens of organizational bricolage to the activities that surrounded and constituted the toy store venture and its

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apparent success. The main focus of this effort is to describe and display some ways that ideas about bricolage–defined here as "making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities" (Baker and Nelson, 2005)–can be applied to the theoretical and practical analysis of entrepreneurial organizations, and to suggest some promising areas for future research.

The paper focuses on a series of critical events and activities to explore and illustrate three contrasts. For the initial analysis, I adopt the perspective of the entrepreneur and narrator of the story, Neil Moriarty. The first contrast is between bricolage and "resource-seeking," which means attempts to attract and use resources that are not at hand. The second contrast is between bricolage and improvisation, defined following Miner, Bassoff and Moorman (2001), as the substantive and temporal convergence of the design and execution of a novel production. By focusing on the critical events in the Toy Store(y) narrative through the lens of these two contrasts, I am able to analyze the admixture of bricolage and resource-seeking, along with the varying relationship between bricolage and improvisation in the data. This relies on theoretical insights from prior research and illustrates some of the potentially complex and interesting interrelations between these concepts when they are applied at the level of the organization over time.

The third contrast moves beyond the single narrator's perspective to compare characterizations of some of the critical events and activities from the imagined perspectives of people in several different roles in the Toy Store(y). This analysis illustrates the plausibility of widely varying roles and perspectives on the same venture transaction — getting a bank loan. It suggests the potential value of research adopting a more social and perspectival approach to both bricolage and improvisation, including work building on the concept of "network bricolage" (Baker et al., 2003).

Finally, by attending closely to how the Toy Store(y) narrator suggests the venture made money versus the apparent possibilities it faced to make money through bricolage, this analysis surfaces research questions about perceptions of bricolage as illegitimate and about how these perceptions might bias entrepreneurial decision making, some entrepreneurship research results and the usefulness of what we teach entrepreneurship students.

2. Introduction

Retrospective tales about individual organizations–like the story of the Toy Store–sometimes display what has been called the "uniqueness paradox" (Martin et al., 1983). That is, they draw from a cultural trove of commonly recurring stories and story elements while making a claim to the uniqueness of a particular organization. The paradox is that the claim to uniqueness unavoidably also signals that the organization has important characteristics in common with the others about which the same or very similar stories are told. This suggests that such stories can tell us about many more organizations than just the particular one for which any story is told.

This juxtaposition of ostensible uniqueness against a penumbra of similar events also characterizes what March, Sproull and Tamuz (1991) describe as "learning from samples of one or fewer." They argue that organizations try to capture generalizable lessons from single, historically unique experiences. To make the most of what is otherwise a unique story, organizations "attempt to experience history more richly, to formulate more interpretations of that experience, and to supplement history by experiencing more of the events that did not occur but could have" (March et al., 1991: 8). Organizations experience and learn from the events that didn't occur, by defining and elaborating "a class of historical non-events that can be called hypothetical histories — events that might have happened under certain unrealized but plausible conditions"(March et al., 1991:4).

In this paper I investigate the phenomenon of "bricolage" (Levi-Strauss, 1966; Baker et al., 2003), in the Toy Store(y). Drawing on the uniqueness paradox, I assume first that the Toy Store(y) is most useful if we treat it not as unique, but rather as one of a class of similar stories that could be told both about the Toy Store and about other organizations with which it shares some common characteristics. Based on this assumption, my method utilizes techniques of learning from samples of one or fewer. Much like organizations learning from unique events, and also like the common stories of organizational uniqueness, I focus here on a limited number of "critical incidents," which are listed in Table 1. The "hypothetical histories" from which I draw are plausible alternative stories about these events that other participants in the Toy Store(y) might have told, had they been asked. The most common uniqueness stories–and this may explain why they are so common (Martin et al., 1983: 447)–appear to allow the individuals who tell them to signal to the listener how they wish to position themselves with regard to a particular organization. The narratives I attribute to various participants similarly allow them to signal distinct positions with regard to the Toy Store.

I begin with an introduction to the concept of bricolage. I then examine each of the critical incidents, analyzing it first from the perspective of the initial protagonists in the Toy Store(y), John Simons and more especially the storyteller, to whom I've given the name Neal Moriarty (Table 2 reviews the names of people involved in the Toy Store(y), including some unnamed in Neal's version). As I discuss these critical incidents, I introduce a variety of other brief narratives written from the perspectives of other actors mentioned or implied in Neal's story. I use the juxtaposition of these narratives to display

Table 1
Characterization of critical events and activities from Neal's perspective: pre-planned or improvised/resource seeking or bricolage

Event	Predominantly pre-planned or improvised	Predominantly bricolage or resource-seeking
Founding	Pre-planned	Bricolage
Rent and outfit store	Pre-planned	Bricolage
Building toy inventory:		
•Getting a loan	Pre-planned	Resource seeking
•Buying Marvel Mustangs and other toys from wholesaler	Pre-planned	Resource seeking
•Getting a second loan	Pre-planned	Resource seeking
•Buying last year's toys from Boston warehouse and combining them with toys from wholesaler	Pre-planned	Bricolage
•Buying Marvel Mustangs from Grants	Improvised (became a routine)	Balance of bricolage and resource-seeking
•Fixing the broken Marvel Mustang	Improvised	Bricolage
Generating a profit	???	Mainly bricolage?

Table 2
Toy Store(y) participants

Name	Role
John Simons and Neal Moriarty	Founders
Sally Moriarty	Married to Neal
John Moriarty, Jr.	Sally and Neal's son
Dr. Infante	Sally's father, local obstetrician
Bill Gartner	Banker
Dean Cassady	Owner of the Toy Store building
Mack — "just call me Mack"	Broker for last year's toys

and to extend some ideas from recent discussions of entrepreneurial bricolage. This paper is primarily an attempt to display applications of the concept of bricolage to understanding and managing ventures. In simple terms, these narratives represent "realistic thought experiments" (Perrow, 1986; Sarasvathy, 2001), used mostly to illustrate and extend aspects of theoretical insights developed previously. Through this exercise, the paper also suggests some areas in which additional research might be particularly valuable.

3. Bricolage

Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss introduced the concept of "bricolage," roughly defined as "making do with what's at hand" as part of his attempt to explain two phenomena. First, he used notions of "ideational" bricolage to understand the process by which members of various societies recombine elements of older myths to create new myths serving new functions. Myths are in this way much like organizational uniqueness stories. Second–and more important to this paper–he described "material" bricolage as a process through which people use and combine the various resources they have "at hand" as a means of finding workable–if typically imperfect–approaches to a wide variety of problems and opportunities.

Levi-Strauss contrasted bricolage–as an approach to dealing with various challenges and opportunities–with so-called "engineering" approaches in which designers create solutions that specify requirements for particular skills, tools, and materials. Unlike this idealized image of the engineer (Lanzara, 1999), someone engaged in bricolage instead "makes do" with whatever skills, tools and materials are at hand. For an itinerant tinkerer, the materials at hand might be whatever he can carry around with him; for a rainforest tribeswomen, the materials at hand may be whatever she knows how to scavenge within a half-day's walk.

Levi-Strauss was interested in material bricolage as a characteristic of resourcefulness more generally, and especially with regard to resourcefulness as a function of knowledge of one's environment. He argued that a close orientation to what is at hand can contribute to the development of deeper social knowledge regarding local resource endowments, and that this deeper knowledge (which he called "the science of the concrete") makes more apparent the usefulness of what is available cheaply or for the taking. For example, he noted "Several thousand Coahuila Indians never exhausted the natural resources of a desert region in South California in which today only a handful of white families manage to subsist. They lived in a land of plenty, for in this apparently completely barren territory they were familiar with no less than sixty kinds of edible plants and twenty eight other of narcotic, stimulant or medicinal properties (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 5)."

From its origins in anthropology, the notion of bricolage has proved useful in an extremely broad range of scholarly fields. Disciplines invoking use of Levi-Strauss's insights include–not surprisingly–anthropology (Chao, 1999; Dumont, 1996) and sociological ethnography (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Katovich, 1995; Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991), but also political science (Lanzara, 1998); women's studies (Gray, 1982), interpersonal relationships (Conville, 1997), complex information systems design (Lanzara, 1999), legal studies (Hull, 1991; Tushnet, 1999), education (Dent and Hatton, 1996; Hatton, 1988; Rynes and Trank, 1999) and evolutionary genetics, biology and economics (Campbell, 1997; Duboule and Wilkins, 1998; Hirabayashi, 1996; Hirabayashi and Kasai, 1993; Jacob, 1977; Lavorgna et al., 2001). Baker and Nelson (2005) conducted an extensive review of this literature and found three main themes that were common across disciplines. They offered an integrative definition of bricolage as *"making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities."* I adopt that definition for this paper.

Most prior discussions of bricolage in organizational contexts (e.g. Ciborra, 1996; Garud and Karnoe, 2003; Weick, 1993) have treated it as an integral element of organizational improvisation, which Miner, Bassoff and Moorman (2001) defined as the substantive and temporal convergence of the design and execution of a novel production. The insight tying bricolage to improvisation is compelling. When design and execution converge substantively and temporally, i.e. when they are one, there is little opportunity to seek additional resources; improvisation therefore usually implies reliance on the resources at hand. Because improvisation implies some degree of novelty, it drives the application of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities. Indeed, even Levi-Strauss's contrast of the engineer and the bricoleur can be interpreted as also a contrast between pre-planning and improvisation.

Most improvisation relies on bricolage, although some research has suggested that some improvisation producing new-to-the-world innovations may not (Gong et al., 2005). Other work, however, has suggested that while improvisation may imply bricolage, bricolage also occurs in the absence of improvisation, and that it is therefore important to recognize that they are separate constructs (Moorman and Miner, 1998a). For example, it is entirely possible to plan to do something by combining the materials that will be at hand at a later time: for example, "we might plan to hike, and intend to build a campfire making use of whatever materials are at hand when we make camp (Baker et al., 2003: 264)." Finally, because reliance on the materials at hand rather than on materials specifically designed or acquired for a particular task may generate surprises that reduce the usefulness of pre-planned designs, bricolage may be a *cause* of improvisation (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Nonetheless, bricolage as an organizational phenomenon separable from improvisation has only recently become an object of study by organization scholars.

The definition of bricolage implies that behaviors can be classified as "not bricolage" for several reasons. In this paper, I focus on one particular reason: reliance on "resource seeking" attempts to attract and use resources that are not at hand. In Table 1, I use the categorical contrast between bricolage and resource seeking to characterize each of the critical events in the Toy Store(y). I also independently characterize each event in terms of whether or not it is predominantly pre-planned or improvisational. In each instance, Table 1 attempts to reflect Neil Moriarty's perspective.

4. The founding process and renting and outfitting the store

The process of organizing the toy store appears to be–like many other businesses, perhaps especially start-ups–an evolving admixture of bricolage and resource-seeking (Garud and Karnoe, 2003). The founding itself seems plainly a matter of bricolage — the business was founded by combining the cash the two families had managed to accumulate in their bank accounts and applying it to a new opportunity. Like the vast majority of start-ups, the business was started with very limited financial resources (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

From a financial perspective, the activity of "launching ventures with modest personal funds" (Bhide, 1992: 109) is often labeled "bootstrapping." With a few exceptions (e.g. Bhide, 1992), the literature on bootstrapping is largely prescriptive and anecdotal, offering warnings to entrepreneurs about the sorts of cash-consuming activities they should avoid when their firms are young and resource-constrained. Much of what is interesting about bricolage comes from the combination–artful or clumsy–of various resources at hand. Bootstrapping often takes the form of bricolage, but because money is fungible, the notion of "combinations" of money is often trivial. What is interesting is not the simple fact of starting with little, or the sensible response of avoiding activities that devour liquidity, but rather the active things that resource-constrained entrepreneurs do in order to access, draw upon and combine other resources that are available cheaply or for the taking.

The Toy Store(y) displays this pattern. That John Simon's money was combined with the Moriarty's savings does not really matter much to the story; little would have changed if Neal Moriarty and his wife Sally had contributed the whole $1,005. The more interesting aspects of bricolage in organizing the Toy Store involve the combination of negotiating a cheap lease on a vacant–though far too large–building, using a curtain to reduce the apparent size of the vast empty store, adapting the fixtures Penney's left behind, and decorating the store with free school kid drawings (which presumably provided the additional benefit of helping to bring their parents into the store). John and Neal created a workable space in which to sell toys by combining a variety of resources available to them cheaply or for free.

Although the toy store founders managed to outfit their store by stumbling into and combining some resources they found at hand, they didn't really start out with too much on the ball as "bricoleurs" (someone engaged in bricolage). What did they do when they faced their first real problem—getting toys? In a classic act of entrepreneurial resource-seeking, they asked a banker for a loan.

4.1. Is it improvisation?

Maybe this series of early actions is interesting because it involves improvisation; after all, these guys didn't have much of a plan. As we'll see shortly, when John and Neal showed up at their banker's office, Gartner invoked a useful commonsense definition of improvisation and asked himself "what were these guys doing, making up their business plan as they went along?" Although most studies of organizational improvisation have examined evidence of improvisation at a tactical level within established organizations (Miner et al., 2001), some studies suggest that the actual founding of new firms is sometimes an example of what might be called "strategic improvisation" (Baker et al., 2003; Cunha et al., 2001; Preston, 1991), and the Toy Store might be an illustrative case.

However, when we examine things a little more closely, it becomes apparent that we are in danger of confusing bad planning with improvisation. The convergence of design and execution that defines improvisation implies, of course, that design cannot meaningfully precede execution. But nearness in time between the planning and the doing is necessary but not sufficient for improvisation; rather, figuring out what to do and actually doing it have to converge, with the planning informing the doing as the doing informs the planning (Miner et al., 2001).

What we observe in the founding of the Toy Store is a rough plan devised over dinner and drinks, which the planners subsequently attempted to follow. Then "Oops!" They discovered that they couldn't buy toys on consignment. Some preliminary research suggests that this sort of surprise may generate switches between preplanned and improvisational modes of behavior (Baker et al., 2001), suggesting the speculation that bad planning might be a precursor to improvisation. But in this case, a surprise in the face of poorly preplanned behavior resulted in resort to more preplanning. The entrepreneurs retire to a coffee shop where they create a plan on someone else's linen tablecloth (could anything be more plainly a resource at hand?) the execution of which leads to resource-seeking in the form of asking for a loan. In other words, the Toy Store founders worked from a poorly researched plan outlined in a drunken haze, but it nonetheless represented a prior design against which they subsequently attempted to execute. When a major assumption of the plan proved false, they once again engaged in pre-planning activities. The early days of the Toy Store provide us with examples of bricolage and of resource seeking, but they show little evidence of improvisation.

4.2. Why did the banker say "yes?"

Although Neal and John's loan application is a straightforward act of resource-seeking, the overall process of getting the first loan–and perhaps even more so the second–seems like something of an outlier in terms what we generally expect from bankers dealing with startups. In particular, it's not clear why the banker pursued signatures from spouses who didn't work outside the home but did not pursue collateral such as a lien on the founders' homes. The founders attributed the banker's easy way with money to the fact that the banker had several kids and therefore liked the idea of a new toy store. They also attributed his support derogatively to the notion that "most bankers are frustrated entrepreneurs. They really want to be in business for themselves, but they choke and can't take the risk." It seems odd that the Neal and John didn't view Gartner's provision of $17,000 in unsecured debt to two guys with no liquidity or pledged collateral as taking a risk, but more importantly, the whole transaction begs the question "who is fooling whom?" In slightly more technical terms, we might ask: "what are the information asymmetries here?"

Traditional models of information asymmetries in lending take the form of potential borrowers who know more about the opportunity and their ability to exploit it than the bank knows (Akerlof, 1970; Arrow, 1968). If we view "the bank as the buyer of risky promises to pay, and borrowers as the sellers of such promises, it is easy to imagine sellers knowing the riskiness of their promises and the bank being less well informed (Hillier and Ibrahimo, 1993, p.276)." For example, a borrower may have private knowledge that she intends to use a bank's money to invest in riskier projects than her firm has pursued in the past (called "asset substitution"), thus shifting risk to the bank and value to equity holders. Or our two guys starting a toy company may claim that they are going to commit to making it work over the long term, while they intend it to be only a three-month venture.

Similar to such "asset substitution" examples, many applications of asymmetric information to questions of financing assume that the firm or person seeking money is information advantaged, relative to the provider of funds. The information advantage may rest in superior knowledge of a firm's opportunities and capabilities, or in better understanding of intended or likely behaviors on the part of the firm's owner or managers. Financial intermediaries, for example banks, "solve these asymmetric information problems by producing and analyzing information and setting loan contract terms, such as the interest rate charged or the collateral required, to improve borrower incentives" (Berger and Udell, 1994, p.351; Lerner, 1995).

However, Hillier and Ibrahimo considered the case of start-ups and suggested "It would seem possible that banks know more than would-be borrowers, at least for small or new firms. This may explain why banks limit the loan size or refuse credit to some applicants, who then feel that they have suffered from rationing (Hillier and Ibrahimo, 1993: 301)." de Meza and Southey (1996) extended the idea that banks may be information advantaged relative to entrepreneurs and derived an equilibrium model in which credit is rationed. The information asymmetry in their model is very simple: entrepreneurs are unrealistically optimistic whereas banks, with knowledge of many case histories of prior borrowers "are viewed as well informed and efficient processors of information (p.375)."

In this model, credit rationing helps protect both entrepreneurs and economic productivity: "Whereas the standard formulations suggest that credit markets lend too little… the obvious implication of the optimism story is that new entrepreneurs are drawn to business and excessive bank loans much as lemmings are drawn to the sea. Banks should be applauded for stemming the rush (p.385)." From this perspective, we might expect that, all else equal, Gartner would be more, not less knowledgeable than the founders regarding the risks of lending to the toy store venture, and we might therefore wonder why he seemed to say "yes" so easily.

4.3. Out of the silence: Gartner speaks

"Boy was I ever glad when those guys–Moriarty and Simons–walked into my store. I'd written a huge mortgage–don't ask me why–on that building for a buddy, name of Dean, and since it had gone vacant, I was trying to find any way I could to help him keep making those payments. I'd worked with him to negotiate the latest lease with Penney's and when they walked out I realized the lease was like a sieve–they didn't owe us–I mean they didn't owe *Dean* anything. Just walked away clean. So I was pretty happy when he told me two guys had given him a thousand bucks for the next three months. It wouldn't cover his payment to the bank, but it would let him keep it close enough to buy me some time. I mean this was one of the prime downtown retail spots in Vermont… how long could it take to get some big name store in there?

So these two guys walk into my office–John is an HR guy–you know how little *they* know about actually doing business — and Neal runs a rental franchise because he can't run a real business. I managed to keep a straight face when I realized that they rented the building before they figured out they couldn't buy Christmas toys on consignment. I mean what were these guys doing, making up their business plan as they went along? If the consignment thing would work, we'd see every wannabe holiday "tycoon" from the North Woods opening a toy store under a big tent next to the lot where he sells his Christmas trees.

But still, I wanted to see some business getting done in that store — having customers going in and out makes it easier to find a real tenant who will pay real rents. Of course, Neal and John said in their loan application that they wanted to keep the store open year round. Couldn't they figure out that if there were much demand for toys outside of Christmas, Grants would have a big department year round? But the way I see it, most of entrepreneurial success is luck anyway, and I figured if these jokers actually got lucky, we'd raise the rent to the 2 grand a month it ought to be, and everybody would be happy. Worst case, they keep the building from looking abandoned for a few months, and maybe I can pressure them to pay a little extra if they violate the loan application and abandon the place after Christmas. So, I ask if they have any collateral to put down — I figured I could take a stake in their houses and in Neal's rental business, though he seemed to be running that into the ground, always using his help and equipment to do other projects.

But then I had an epiphany — one of these guys is married to Sally Infante, the daughter of the local obstetrician. Now, I knew Dr. Infante, because I'd paid for a lot–I mean a lot–of his services over the years. But more importantly, I knew that he was rich and that he had a stick up his butt about "proper appearances" and the dignity of his family. Part of this guy's whole restrained approach to things was that he never borrowed any money. Because of never borrowing, he was one of the few local rich guys who was not an important customer of our bank. Sitting right at hand–right in my office–were the two guys I needed to get me through my little problem.

You see, I realized there was no way that I could lose. I mean do you think Mr., I mean *Dr.* Upstanding is going to let his daughter's name get dragged through the mud? So I ask these guys–all innocent like–can they get their wives to co-sign the note? I say that if they get those signatures, I'll give them the 7 grand they want. Now let's see, these guy's wives don't work outside the house, they don't have any money of their own, I'm not making any claims on the houses these women and their kids live in… but did Neal and John stop and ask why I wanted the wives to co-sign? Nope, they just went ahead and got the signatures. I didn't have any particular need for John's wife to sign, but as I started to say that, I caught myself — if I just asked for Sally's signature, they might have figured out what I was doing.

Suddenly, it all looked good. In the unlikely case that these jokers succeed, I might have a new tenant for Dean's building. If they do O.K., their presence helps me to find another tenant and I still get my money back on the loan. If they really screw up, Dr. Infante bails us all out. By the time Neal and John came looking for another 10 grand, I figured "no problem" — I just structured it so that any payments would apply to the second ten grand first, keeping Sally Infante on the hook for the rest. The one time I really almost screwed up was when I said something like "Gee, *our* store looks pretty empty." I thought they were going to figure out what was going on, but apparently they just thought that I was somehow their partner!"

The obvious lesson here is that the information asymmetries in this transaction favored the banker over the entrepreneurs. But more interesting from the perspective of the analysis, the same transaction (getting the loans) that appeared to be pure resource-seeking from the perspective of the Toy Store entrepreneurs was a striking case of bricolage from the perspective of the bank and the banker. For Gartner, the problem was an empty building on which he had made a big mortgage to his friend. The resources at hand that he was able to combine and apply to the problem were two optimistic entrepreneurs who had sunk their life savings into a short-term lease, his ability to structure a note in a non-traditional way, Dr. Infante's posture of dignified rectitude, and Neal Moriarty's marriage. From this assortment of resources, Gartner crafted a workable solution to his problem.

As prior research has suggested is common in solutions rendered through bricolage (Lanzara, 1999), Gartner's solution appears to be temporary and he will likely need to patch it up in the future. It is also instructive to notice that Gartner had no prior design for the solution he put together — instead, he simultaneously designed and executed the structure of the proposed loan, switching the design, for example, from collateralized to co-signed when he realized that a tie to Dr. Infante was at hand. The banker, not the entrepreneurs, was making it up as he went along. Thus, it appears that close attention to perspective and to processes of social construction may be contribute to a better situated understanding of bricolage. The same transaction that constituted preplanned resource seeking for the entrepreneurs was instead a case of both improvisation and bricolage for the banker (see Table 3).

Of course, there are likely to be several other informative perspectives on this transaction, including those of Gartner's boss at the bank and Sally Infante. But in the interests of space, several voices on this transaction will remain silent. But, perhaps a more upright citizen will clear the air of all this talk of information asymmetries and partial honesty:

4.4. Dr. Infante

"I didn't bring my daughter up–or send her to Bennington to "find herself"–in order to have her find herself married to some guy who I didn't really think could support a family or provide my grandson with the things he needed. Frankly, it embarrassed me that people saw Neal Moriarty as part of my family. They'd been married several years and the only money they had to their name was half of the thousand dollars I gave them for a wedding gift. I made the down payment on their house — they needed a mortgage for the rest. When they got married, I mentioned to Sally that I'd heard that some women were deciding to keep their maiden–that is their father's–name when they married, but she just scoffed and went ahead and changed her name.

Table 3
The Initial loan transaction — various perspectives

Person: role	Pre-planned or improvised	Bricolage or resource seeking
Neal and John: founders	Pre-planned	Resource seeking
Bill: banker	Improvised	Bricolage
Dr. Infante: father-in-Law	Pre-planned	Bricolage
Dean: property owner	Neither	Neither

I taught Sally early on that indebtedness makes you dependent, and that dependency threatens your dignity. I think she understood. Sally still sought out my counsel, but her husband Neal–who I think is the real threat to her dignity–didn't really seem to take my opinion very seriously. To be blunt, I'd had a plan for a long time to rid this family of Neal, and I'd just been biding my time, waiting for the right opportunity to come along. My grandson was two years old at that time, and I figured if Sally was going to see her husband for what he was and move back into my house, the event to make it happen needed to take place soon, before the kid–my grandson–was old enough to talk about it at school and scandalize his friends.

Back that October, Sally came to me and said that Neal and his corporate drone of a friend John Simons wanted to open a toy store in the old building Penney's had just abandoned in favor of anchoring the new mall. I told her Neal ought to stick to what he was good at, or at least focus on trying not to screw up his rental business too badly. But if he was going to do it, I told her the sharpies down at the bank that held the mortgage ought to get him the place rent free, and agree to take some cut only if he made a profit. Although malls were still a new idea then, anyone who was paying attention could tell that stores like Penney's were all likely to move to the cheaper real estate and free parking in the suburbs. We can thank Eisenhower for that mess. I figured even the bankers could see this, and that they should feel lucky to get anyone to move into that relic of a retail space.

Anyway, Neal didn't listen and next thing I know Sally is asking if she should co-sign a note to buy toys. It's that banker Bill Gartner–I've known him and his wife for a long time, and I know what he's up to. He thinks I'll be left holding the bag when the deal goes sour. In a way, he's right–Bill understands about parents and kids. But like I said, I know about dignity and dependence. It might cost me a few thousand dollars in the end, but I figured both Neal and Gartner were going to be dependent on me, and that I'd use the occasion to make Gartner help me strip Neal down to the bone and that would help bring Sally and my grandson home.

In other words, this was exactly the opportunity I'd been waiting for; all I have to do is pull the trigger. So, I tell Sally that I don't think she should sign–but I don't really try to dissuade her–and I know that she's going to go ahead and do it anyway. I figured that all that Neal had going for him was the streak of good luck that brought my daughter to him in the first place. But we all know that entrepreneurial success is mostly about discipline and hard work and very little about luck. The way I looked at it, everything I needed to make life right again for Sally and the boy I liked to call "little Dr. Infante" was suddenly within reach."

Now the information asymmetries appear to be a little more complicated. While the entrepreneurs were making use of the banker, and the banker was making use of the entrepreneurs, a wife and a father-in-law, the father in-law is making use of his daughter, the banker, and the entrepreneurs (including his son-in-law). Prior research has labeled the use of pre-existing contact networks as the means at hand "network bricolage" (Baker et al., 2003: 265). Sometimes the network contacts are themselves the resources at hand; sometimes they are direct conduits to the welter of resources needed for organizing a new business. Network bricolage can be contrasted to resource seeking activities that involve "networking" or attempts to gain resources from strangers.

Toy Store(y), however, complicates the picture of network bricolage (see Table 3). We saw above that the same apparently "simple" transaction–getting the first loan–represented pre-planned resource seeking for the entrepreneurs, but improvisation and bricolage for the banker. We now see that for Dr. Infante, it represents bricolage as a way of executing the previously planned destruction of Neal Moriarty's marriage. More variations on this theme are easy to imagine, and we'll listen here to one more previously silent participant: Dean the building owner.

4.5. Dean Cassady

"I'll tell you a toy story. It's not a nice story, but it's one in which doing a lot of friendly drinking pays off. I used to hang out at the bar at the Slopes Inn, and Bill Gartner would come in. Now that man used to buy some 'toys'–mostly from jewelry stores–and mostly for the young women he used to like to hang out with from Bennington about an hour or so down Route 7. He never talked about it much, except when we'd had a few and we were telling stories. I was pretty much making my stories up, but not Bill. One day when I admitted that I was just engaging in a little puffery and suggested in a friendly way that he was probably exaggerating, too, he gets to looking all offended and he pulls out a wallet size picture of him with one of his girlfriends–not the sort of picture his wife would really enjoy–and hands it to me. Well, a couple of days later when he remembered and asked for it back, I just told him I really liked it and thought I'd hold onto it for a while.

I was happy to take the thousand from Neal and John, but it surprised the heck out of me when they were able to come up with the money to actually open a toy store. Gee, it turns out having a powerful banker on your side makes taking a drink or two a lot less financially damaging than it might be otherwise."

Here, we finally stop complicating the picture of network bricolage summarized in Table 3. With regard to the loan application, Dean didn't engage in pre-planning or improvisation. He didn't engage in resource seeking, but it would be a mistake to think that he therefore engaged in bricolage. Bricolage involves the active attempt to "make do"; passivity, however sensible and however great the payoff, is not making do.

5. Building the toy inventory

We've seen that from the perspective of the entrepreneurs, getting the loans to buy inventory was a pre-planned act of resource seeking. Buying Marvel Mustangs from a wholesaler and obtaining the second loan were similarly instances of pre-planned resource seeking. However, having obtained the second loan for $10,000, Neal and John engaged in another pre-planned act that strongly suggests elements of bricolage. Rather than figuring out what toys they really needed in their stores and then ordering them (the "engineering" approach that characterized use of the proceeds from the first loan) they instead spent the second loan on toys that happened to be left over from stores that went bankrupt the prior year, combining the "old" leftovers with the hot new toys that the first loan had purchased in order to meet the challenge of having a store that looked full.

Simply seeking out or paying discount prices does not–of course–constitute bricolage. But making use of a resource because is available cheaply or for free–rather than because it is the "right" resource–and then combining it with other resources to take advantage of some new opportunity exemplifies bricolage. For the rest of the story, though, for some reason we don't hear anything else about last year's toys. Apparently, the "old" toys help to make the store look less empty, but the focus of the entrepreneurs is unrelentingly on the Marvel Mustangs (MMs).

The process of acquiring all of the local MMs is deeply interesting from the perspective of bricolage. Neal apparently improvised a series of actions in which the people working at the toy store would call him every time there was $300 in the register, he would hand out $20 bills to the rental store employees, and they would all descend on Grants and buy MMs two at a time. It may be worth noting that both the rental store employees and the rental store trucks are “resources at hand” available effectively for free and reminiscent of the discussions of employee’s private use of factory resources in old Soviet Bloc nations by Stark (1996).

But more importantly, the daily purchases of MMs, which quickly evolved from an improvisation to a routine, seems to display an interesting admixture of bricolage *and* resource-seeking. It represents resource-seeking, because the primary activity involves getting more of the “right” toy for the season—the MM. But it also represents complete reliance on the resources at hand in the form of cash in the register in combination with rental store employees and trucks. In a manner that most experts on bootstrapping would probably decry as pure foolishness, the entrepreneurs each day reduced their liquidity to zero on the expectation that Grants would not be able to get in a new load of MMs by Christmas.

It’s easy to empathize with the tension Neal and John experienced as they avoided their banker and accumulated a huge inventory of MMs that they knew would be worth very little if they remained in stock after Christmas. Their excitement and focus on the MMs grew as it became apparent that they might pull off their attempt to “corner the market on Marvel Mustangs.” And in the end, they reported netting $3,000 each from their venture, which they viewed as a tidy sum. So apparently, the focus on MMs made a lot of retrospective sense. But what about the $3–400 a day they were bringing in that enabled them to acquire so many MMs. Where was that money coming from?

6. Mack wonders where the profits went; we wonder where they came from

“Yeah, I sold these yahoos down from Vermont a bunch of the prior year’s toys. They had ten grand to spend, and like I told them, most people sell my stuff at retail for at least 5 times what I charge — sometimes more. I mean, a lot of these toys are exactly the same as the ones the wholesalers are selling this year for two to three times what I charge. The chain stores just don’t buy from me or from other places like me, because they aren’t sure where the toys have been and they don’t always believe my paperwork that shows my stuff didn’t just “fall off of a truck” somewhere. Whatever the reason, chain store buying practices don’t include me in the supply chain.

So anyway, a few months later, I get a call from an IRS guy–nothing unusual there, I do a big cash business and they check me out all the time–and he wants to audit some of my books. Now this part is unusual for me; it’s not because they think I’ve done anything wrong, but rather because they think someone else is using me to cover up some cash.

I get to chatting with the investigator, who I see every couple of years anyway, and he lets it slip that these guys from Vermont claim to have made only $3,000 each — $6,000 total from this temporary Christmas store they set up. The way he sees it, Neal and John had two main sources of profit. The first was these MMs–by the way, does anyone in your neighborhood need one of them … I got a warehouse full from Grants–for you, I'll let them go for five bucks each. So, John and Neal sold a whole bunch of MMs right near Christmas. Now these numbers I'm using are a combination of deals Neal and John told me about when they were down here, and things the IRS guy mentioned plus other scuttlebutt you hear in this business. But I think they are pretty close.

The first bunch–300 of them–they bought from the manufacturer for $9.90. The rest they claim they bought at retail from the Grant's store just down the street from them. They said that they spent about $350 every day for a little more than two months buying these things for $9.97 a pop. So that's like 35 of these things every day, for maybe 70 days, that's another 2450 or a total of 2750 MMs. And they sold one for $25, 100 for $16.88 and the rest for $15.77. So, it sounds to me like they made (pokes at a calculator) a little more than $16,000 in gross margin on the MMs.

And their expenses were–I don't know all the actuals–but they expected a thousand bucks for rent, and one paid employee… these guys, making this kind of money, there's no evidence–especially not on any tax return–that they paid their wives anything for clerking in these stores… one employee, working 50 h a week, for 10 weeks, minimum wage of $1.25 plus overtime, that's another 700 bucks. Sure, they had a few other expenses, but the agent, he figures maybe 4 grand total, leaving 12 grand to the bottom line just for the MMs, double what these guys are claiming. And that's giving them the benefit of the doubt that they just broke even on the other four grand worth of toys they bought from the wholesaler.

But that's not the problem. The problem is the stuff they bought from me. They only ended up with $400 worth of stuff they needed to unload at the end of the season. Well, the $10,000 worth of stuff they got from me would have shot off the shelves at 5 times their cost, so the agent wants to know what happened to the almost $40 k they made off of my stuff. That's where I play into this. I show it on my books that they paid me $10 k, but he figures that they either paid me a lot more than that, or else there's a big problem–like an almost $50 k problem–with their return. From what I hear, these guys are going around bragging about how they "cornered the market" on MMs. But it seems to me like they made their serious money on the leftover stuff they got from me."

We don't really know about Neal and John's tax returns. Maybe, for example, they reimbursed the rental business for use of its employees and equipment. But regardless of their expenses, it appears that last year's toys, acquired through bricolage, may have generated substantially more profit than the entrepreneurs generated through the whole MMs escapade. Neal tells a story of success caused by a heady combination of risk taking and luck. Why isn't he also–or instead–telling us a story that celebrates the entrepreneurs' skills at making money through bricolage? Maybe it is because his version sounds more heroic.

We might understand Neal's Toy Store(y) as partly a retrospective construction of risk and heroism. But what about choices made at the time of the story? Why–instead of the highly risky project of cornering the market on the MMs, and the daily acquisition of Grant's inventory–didn't the entrepreneurs use some of their daily cash to replenish their stocks of last year's toys, which were apparently selling quite well ? (It's worth noting that this was true despite the fact that until just before Christmas, Neal and John's store was not a place where people could actually buy MMs. Their attempt to corner the market caused them to forgo this important draw for most of the holiday season.) Their gross margin on MMs was about 60%; but on last year's toys it was about 400%. Some portion of the $24,500 they spent on daily MM purchases might have alternatively generated a lot more profit (perhaps as much as $100 k) and allowed them to simultaneously pay off their loans *and* still corner the market on MMs if they really wanted to.

7. Bricolage as anti-heroic?

So why didn't Neal and John recognize and further exploit the value they gained from selling the last year's toys — either retrospectively when telling the story, or during the time they were engaged in the toy business? I speculate that it's because in contemporary approaches to business (don't forget, Neal had an MBA), the activities that constitute making do with the resources at hand are for some reason usually viewed simply as coping or survival mechanisms, as something that one does–perhaps even somewhat shamefully–only when one has to. Because of such broadly shared views about how businesses should make money, it may be difficult for entrepreneurs to use bricolage in a pre-planned strategic manner. But more importantly it may be hard for them to recognize and therefore to sustain or further exploit the value of bricolage even when it unexpectedly makes a central contribution to a stream of profits.

8. Discussion

In this paper, drawing on the notion of the "uniqueness paradox" in organizational studies, I have assumed that it makes sense to treat the Toy Store(y) as one of a class of stories that could be told about the Toy Store and about similar organizations. Then, adopting organizational techniques of learning from samples of one or fewer, I have attempted to pay close attention to the Toy Store(y) told by one of the protagonists, but also to construct plausible alternative stories told by other participants. This provided background for what I hope is a series of plausible speculations tying the toy stories to existing research on bricolage and suggesting useful areas for further work.

My analysis of the process through which Neal and John were given two loans displayed the idea of network bricolage, defined as the use of pre-existing contact networks as the means at hand. This speculative analysis moves beyond the limited prior use of the network bricolage concept and beyond prior notions of social exchange as an underpinning to bricolage. By presenting a relatively complex web of relationships (summarized in Table 3) in which the same transaction–getting money from the bank–is simultaneously pre-planned resource seeking by one actor, improvised bricolage by another, pre-planned bricolage by a third, and simple well-positioned passivity by a fourth actor. This analysis suggests the potential value of a social and perspectival approach to bricolage, rather than the more common assumption that a behavior or transaction either is or is not bricolage. In particular, it suggests that the concept of network bricolage might usefully be extended to include more complex structures of dependency and exchange (Cook, 1991; Emerson, 1972).

The same analysis also suggests the possibility of a similar perspectival approach to analysis of improvisation. In the ensemble models of improvisation that many analyses use as metaphors for organizational improvisation, an appropriate assumption is that each of the people involved in some novel production–typically stage actors or musicians–are jointly and severally engaged in improvisation. In contrast, the analysis in this paper suggests that in the novel production of getting loans for the toy store, some of the actors are improvising and others are not. This suggests a plausible new level of social complexity in organizational improvisation, one in which some actors involved in a novel production (Miner et al., 2001) are improvising, while others are not.

Finally, Mack the Used Toy Broker's comments suggesting that Neal and John may have actually made their money mainly through bricolage, rather than through risk-taking and good fortune, display the possibility of some form of contemporary bias against or illegitimacy that attaches to bricolage as way of conducting business. Such illegitimacy could have at least three effects. First, it might make successful entrepreneurs more likely to tell retrospective tales of resource seeking and daring, and less likely to relate stories of bricolage. Researchers working from reconstructions of firm histories–or even from largely contemporaneous descriptions of events–would be likely to underestimate the prevalence or importance of entrepreneurial bricolage. More broadly, this pattern might help support a theoretical predilection toward the study of "resource-seeking" activities at the expense of understanding other behavior under resource constraints.

Second, research has documented instances of the emergence of useful designs–including organizational strategies (Baker et al., 2003) and product features (Moorman and Miner, 1998a)–through improvisation and bricolage. However, it is difficult to capture and make future use of such designs if they remain unnoticed and therefore fail to enter organizational memory (Moorman and Miner, 1998b). Any bias against attributing success to bricolage might make entrepreneurs less likely to notice when emergent designs based on bricolage contribute to entrepreneurial success, and thereby make them less likely to learn from such designs or make use of them in the future (Baker and Nelson, 2005).

Third, and finally, the invisibility of bricolage appears to affect how we teach students — both in entrepreneurship and more generally. If bricolage is a common organizational activity, it would be useful for our students to become skilled in its use. But because we know relatively little about organizational bricolage, there is very little research-based knowledge for us to share. We teach students a great deal about financial markets, attracting investors, structuring debt and equity, capital budgeting, cash management and so forth, but we teach them almost nothing about how to make do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities.

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