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We live in uncertain and challenging times, ripe for the study of complexity in the environments that organizations face. Organizations’ environmental uncertainty and complexity have been typically examined under the light of well-established approaches such as open systems theory (Emery and Trist, 1965) or resource dependence theory (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). These approaches contribute to (a) identifying external constituencies and their role, demands or needs when interacting with organizations, and (b) determining the ways in which organizations respond to external demands (Child, 1997). The organization-environment fit construct that emerged from these approaches has guided scholars’ work to identify fit dimensions focusing on diagnosing the extent to which an organization matches or differs from its environment’s requirements and demands (e.g. Miller, 1992).

The aforementioned conceptual approaches rely on two main assumptions: one is that organizations need to understand the environment in order to enact change and improve performance, and the second is that organizations need to know environmental trends to improve fit, control and, again, ensure improved performance. In general, therefore, these approaches to uncertainty and complexity in organizational environments go back to the same economic and market-driven paradigm, seeking models for improving organizational performance. These models have limited applicability nowadays because they usually include a limited set of environmental factors that are typical of specific contexts. Because these factors are known to organizational actors, the environment’s dynamic evolution can be understood and predicted.

Looking beyond basic economic and market-driven approaches to understand organizational environments, we observe contextual elements that are often ignored and frequently difficult to include in linear
or contingent models. For example, relative to the study of human resource management (HRM) in the US, European HRM researchers acknowledge government’s role beyond labour regulations, and its active partnering with organizations for human development, individual welfare and democratizing employment relationships (Brewster, 1995). In Latin America, by contrast, governments have limited ability to partner with business organizations for human development or individual welfare; therefore, organizations play a major role as social institutions that replace governments in those matters (Elvira and Davila, 2005).

Given the diverse nature of challenges for today’s global management, we surmise the need to examine in greater depth how uncertainty and complexity in organizational environments affects emergent settings. We refer to, broadly speaking, organizational as well as contextual elements. For example, emergent organizational environments include regions where institutional structures are only now taking shape due to recent public policies fostering the opening of the economy. In these countries, such as Brazil or China, which are poised to experience continuing and sustained economic growth, evidence exists of industries with a high need for integration and collaboration among the economic actors, organizations that develop learning capabilities before they interact with powerful stakeholders, and management issues concerning employees in highly creative work. These characteristics of emergent environments and their classification into various types of complexity are subjects approached by authors in this book.

Novel concepts and theoretical approaches

Concepts based on cultural hybridism, new humanism, salient stakeholders management and pragmatism emerge from this book’s chapters and other theory development in organization studies (Davila and Elvira, 2009). These approaches fit well with organizations in emergent economies because of the traditional management practices and organizational arrangements in these contexts, which often diverge from standard ‘rationality-based’ assumptions and models. Some of the notable common themes underlying the study of organizations in developing countries or transition economies are based on contexts of localism, traditionalism and patrimonial structures.

Today, emergent economies are undergoing the ‘shock of the new’ as both external foreign direct investment (FDI) and internal economic liberalization push for rationalizations of modernity already
institutionalized in the dominant economies and societies. The chapters in this book survey key organizational changes occurring in these complex, emergent and uncertain environments so relevant to the business world today and yet so imbued with interest, opportunity and even anxiety in recent years (Khanna and Palepu, 2010). The manuscripts presented here differ from traditional research approaches which offer partial explanations with universalistic solutions for organizations operating in these complex environments.

This book gathers a selection of manuscripts presented at the Asia Pacific Researchers in Organization Studies (APROS) conference held in Monterrey, Mexico in December 2009. The research journey for the book began with our call for novel theoretical frameworks and innovative research strategies in management and organization studies to respond to a broader understanding of organizational theories focused on how organizations could function in complex, emergent and uncertain environments. We had first worked on these themes while researching management practices in Latin America, and wondered how similar theoretical approaches could help understand organizations in other similarly uncertain and growing economic environments. While assuming that researchers would find divergent perceptions about appropriate management and organizational practices, we also noticed common themes across these different contexts (Davila and Elvira, 2009). Against this background, we selected representative chapters for this edited collection, offering ideas on such timely subjects for scholars, executives and business students.

Informed by these diverse theoretical frameworks, the empirical findings which contribute to understand today’s distinct environment of economic, political and social instability, we can highlight the role of enterprises as social institutions, the value of the individual within society, and the pragmatic character of government public policies. These phenomena require novel interdisciplinary views even if they appear only somewhat distinct from what we know from developed economies.

Framing the studies of this book we distinguish four key conceptual approaches, which we explain next. First, there is a need to continue using the cultural perspective to understand organizations’ management practices in emergent economies. Yet, culture could be seen as a hybrid dynamic process that enriches societies because of continuous intercultural contact points among individuals and groups. A hybrid approach questions the dichotomy typical of cross-cultural studies in emerging economies by rejecting a binary categorization of contrasting
views regarding simple cultural identities (Frenkel and Shenhav, 2006). With this edited book we hope to contribute to the understanding of hybridization processes from a management and organization theory viewpoint. We propose the element of diversity to study hybridization. For example, companies operating in emergent economies are frequently hybrid in nature. We observe diverse ownership arrangements: mergers, acquisitions, multinationals, international joint ventures and local private firms forming business groups. Therefore, diversity is expressed not only at the individual level but also in organizations’ characteristics.

Diversity also manifests itself in stakeholders’ interests and demands. Organizations operating in emerging environments often know little about the multiplicity of claims from diverse stakeholders. This stakeholder diversity represents a challenge for all-purpose management models. As a result, hybridization processes in any environmental context often require management models based on cultural sensitivity to balance complex and sometimes contradictory stakeholder interests or demands such as those of shareholders and workers, or customers and suppliers.

Understanding hybrid cultures also calls for studying broader socio-economic or political processes that shape complex contexts. For example, as in the past when colonizers replicated their culture in a foreign land – either by imposition or by education – today international institutions and FDI flows reinstate foreign patterns of behaviour in local business organizations. The acceptance or rejection of foreign patterns might result in hybrid management systems that respond to different cultural mindsets coexisting within an organization. Yet, it is not obvious how business organizations would naturally develop a cultural sensitivity to respond to foreign practices and understand that conflict could arise during their implementation. Therefore, a need exits to foster international management education accepting of hybridization, to complement the worldwide trend for management education standardization (Üsdiken, 2004).

In prior work we had proposed a second approach, the new humanism, as a foundation for enriching hybrid cultural approaches (Davila and Elvira, 2009). This focus builds on the existence of diversity in management practices and takes into account individuals’ positions within intercultural relationships. From this perspective, human resource management practices play a central role for human development within organizations (de la Cruz Déniz-Déniz and De Saá-Pérez, 2003), and education has been found the most important factor for attracting FDI in emerging economies such as those of Latin America (Trevino, Thomas and Cullen, 2008).
Issues of employment, work design and quality spark particularly challenging ethical dilemmas in complex organizational environments. Multinationals in the manufacturing sector, for instance, are often accused of unfair worker treatment when operating in emerging economies. Interestingly, Sargent and Matthews (1999) reframed the problem by asking whether multinationals should offer attractive jobs to lower class workers in a developing country. They found that while low-level workers in Northern Mexico’s maquila1 industry have the choice to work outside the maquiladoras with less compensation, they choose to work in the maquila industry because of the favourably perceived working conditions such as air-conditioned environments, social relationship options and time-off opportunities. This study illustrates the need to understand individual workers in their actual context without losing sight of employee development and ethical treatment. In this book, we thus find chapters focusing on understanding individuals within particular settings, highlighting the relevance of leaders for corporate governance and the specific motivational needs of creative employees.

A third theme common to organizations in uncertain environments is the inclusion of multiple and diverse stakeholders. In emerging economies it is paramount to understand indigenous stakeholders’ demands, and those of singular stakeholders lacking legitimacy or power, relative to what is typically observed in more developed economies (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997). Research shows that organizations perform best when they work effectively with both powerful and silent stakeholders. Acknowledging a horizontal relationship between an organization and its stakeholders, in contrast to a hierarchical relationship of subordination, could set the basis for a more comprehensive stakeholder theory applicable to international management, and specifically to emergent-economy contexts (Davila and Elvira, 2009). Consistent with this view of silent stakeholders (those individuals or groups that are ignored in a stakeholder-organization relationship), the authors in this book present evidence about the social dimensions of board activism and the resulting improvement in corporate governance, as well as the importance of environmental compliance among small- and medium-sized firms beyond large corporations, and highlight the stakeholder-organization relationship. As evidence grows that ignoring silent stakeholders could jeopardize organizational viability, much work remains to be done in order to build theories of stakeholder salience.

Finally, pragmatism emerges as a fourth approach to help understand organizations in complex environments. In Santiso’s (2006) view, pragmatism refers to ‘what is possible’ in Latin America given the
environmental complexity in which organizations function. Today, Latin America’s governments are increasingly adopting pragmatic methods of development. So are business organizations, especially in what concerns management practices. This pragmatic orientation has allowed managers to learn what works best and lead with an optimistic attitude of hope. In some chapters of this book, pragmatism appears as a key driver to innovation, knowledge-sharing and adoption of environmentally responsible practices by entrepreneurs and small-sized firms, which are critical to human development. Precisely because of the challenging pace of change in emergent economies, we argue that pragmatism should be acknowledged and its consequences reflected upon, in order to avoid a merely utilitarian view of management practice.

The crux of this book is to advance these theoretical approaches to help understand the nature of organizational work in complex settings.

Overview of the book

*Understanding Organizations in Complex, Emergent and Uncertain Environments* is organized into two parts. In Part I of the book, authors unpack the concept of complexity and analyse how organizational governance can contribute to environmental sustainability. A common theme in these chapters is that organizations actively engage with their environments. Consequently, organizational responses are partly the result of iterative processes with the environment, beyond a simple reaction to external demands. Thus, organizations enact their environments. In Part II of the book, the chapters focus on concrete managerial practices that facilitate innovation and entrepreneurship at both the organizational and individual levels, especially in the context of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) which are central to the vitality of most economies. The book ends with a proposal to change conceptual metaphors and build management theories fit for organizations’ social reality in complex environments.

In Chapter 2, Child and Rodrigues examine how organizations engage with external complexity from a political action perspective. After reviewing the cognitive and relational complexity constructs, they classify the ways in which key organizational actors and organizations engage with environmental complexity. Intention, learning and strategic decision-making are the three facets of this engagement. Depending on organizational power, organizations could seek to reduce, penetrate or mediate environmental complexity. The authors illustrate their
theoretical proposals using examples from multinationals in unfamiliar environments such as Brazil and China.

In Chapter 3, Ingley, Rennie, Mueller, Warrick and Erakovic analyse corporate boards’ role and relationships with multiple shareholders as parallels of diverse types of owners. Using multiple principal agency theory, the authors identify boards’ responses to shareholder social activism in defence of particular interests. They conclude that shareholder activism is a powerful mechanism that influences organizational governance, and that a social dimension on the board’s part could contribute to balancing the common and divergent interests of diverse owner groups.

In Chapter 4, Erakovic and Jackson build on the prior chapter to focus specifically on the intersection between leadership and board governance, bridging the literatures in these two rarely connected research areas. Recognizing the board’s role in promoting good governance also including good leadership, the authors propose three avenues to link these concerns systematically: team leadership on the board, the chair’s leadership of the board and strategic leadership by the board.

In Chapter 5, Beckett presents four case studies to explore how SMEs in Australia adopt environmental management practices, and to further research on sustainability. He identifies embedded environment-friendly practices in the studied firms, and illustrates how formal instruments such as ISO 14000 facilitate their introduction, even as all business functions need commitment to sustainability initiatives.

In Chapter 6, Couchman and Beckett describe additional empirical evidence from five case studies in Australia about how engaging in ‘R&D clubs’ enable SMEs to build absorptive capacity. Small businesses in many countries tend to perform poorly on innovation due to limited resources and underdeveloped absorptive capacity. By facilitating knowledge exploration and exploitation, networks such as R&D clubs serve to enhance innovative strategies. The cases studied illustrate that besides e-Collaboration, direct social interaction seems necessary to build effective communication, common understandings, trust and the interpersonal relationships that promote collaboration and organizational learning.

In Chapter 7, Burgess et al. focus specifically on e-Collaboration initiatives as mechanisms to build social capital among SMEs, in order to enhance their competitiveness and grow their business. A key concern for the success of these initiatives revolves around trust, so the authors examine e-Collaboration trust, its determinants and dimensionality. Trust is viewed as a multidimensional construct consisting of four distinct elements: individual/interpersonal trust, system trust,
economic trust and technology trust. For small business owners to consider e-Collaboration as a business option, individual (interpersonal) trust was considered to be the most important dimension. Once initial personal trust has been established, the other three dimensions, namely system, economic and technology trust must be developed to enable successful e-Collaboration among SMEs.

In Chapter 8, Maranto, Garcia-Calderon and Reynoso, explore Mexican managers’ perceptions of innovation processes aiming to illuminate how firms in an emerging economy foster innovative ideas, translate them into new products and services, and launch them into target markets. A major challenge for the development of Mexico and its regions concerns the creation of a culture and an infrastructure geared to innovation. The results suggest that managers perceive firms as much better at generating ideas than converting and diffusing them into innovations, while they perceive culture as a key element to promote the generation of ideas in organizations, and rules for funding projects as an important impediment to convert ideas into innovations.

In Chapter 9, Zapata-Cantu Pineda and Rodríguez Lozano study the roles of physical space and information technologies during the process of knowledge transfer in SMEs. The authors conduct a two-stage exploratory research and find evidence that the design of physical space and the layout of the organization enhance the transfer of knowledge by facilitating the process in a fast and timely manner, allowing for open interaction among employees. Additionally, informal communications mechanisms, such as face-to-face chats, messaging and email, are more relevant in a knowledge-transfer process than information technologies. Overall, these three chapters consistently find that social interaction cannot be substituted by other forms of technology-enhanced collaboration, as valuable as this is for the diffusion of innovation.

In Chapter 10, Hedegaard Hein proposes a model of motivation for highly specialized creative employees, based on long-time field studies at The Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen. She focuses specifically on how a Prima Donna’s calling and search for meaning with positive motivational experiences of kick, flow and identity pose a special challenges for managers, who must base leadership on shielding, authentic alignment, feedback skills and leadership virtues matching the needs of Prima Donnas. The framework can be extended to the knowledge society, in which the workforce might be increasingly dominated by a highly specialized and creative workforce.

In Chapter 11, Clegg and Baumeller challenge the use of Weber’s historical metaphor of the iron cage in favour of transparent liquidity
as a dominant metaphor in organizational analysis. The implications of this shift are drawn by applying the metaphor to emotional intelligence studies and a future research agenda.

In summary, this book is a call for theoretically anchored research to guide organizations facing increasingly complex environments through a pragmatic, yet humanistic and culturally sensitive focus on management issues. Besides opening up the agenda for organizational research interacting with complex environments, the book will be of interest to undergraduate and graduate students, researchers and practitioners looking for innovative approaches to management in complex, emerging or uncertain settings.

We are truly grateful to the many individuals and institutions who have helped to make this book a reality, beginning with the APROS 2009 conference for the opportunity to call for papers focusing on this theme, and continuing with the team of excellent chapter contributors. Thanks also go to the Palgrave Macmillan-IESE Collection director Stephen Rutt and managing editor Virginia Thorp, for their assistance at various stages of this book's production, as well as to María Mora-Figueroa for her expert librarian work at IESE. We are grateful to International Research Center on Organizations (IRCO) at IESE Business School for its support of this research endeavour. Above all, we thank Tecnologico de Monterrey in Mexico and IESE Business School in Spain that provided the resources and place to bring the book to completion.

Note

1. Labour-intensive manufacturing plant, typically owned by foreign firms.

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