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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF
ORGANIZATIONS PART 73A

**INTERDISCIPLINARY
DIALOGUES ON
ORGANIZATIONAL
PARADOX: LEARNING FROM
BELIEF AND SCIENCE,
PART A**

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FOREWORD

Research in the Sociology of Organizations (RSO) publishes cutting edge empirical research and theoretical papers that seek to enhance our understanding of organizations and organizing as pervasive and fundamental aspects of society and economy. We seek provocative papers that push the frontiers of current conversations, that help to revive old ones, or that incubate and develop new perspectives. Given its successes in this regard, RSO has become an impactful and indispensable fount of knowledge for scholars interested in organizational phenomena and theories. RSO is indexed and ranks highly in Scopus/SCImago as well as in the Academic Journal Guide published by the Chartered Association of Business schools.

As one of the most vibrant areas in the social sciences, the sociology of organizations engages a plurality of empirical and theoretical approaches to enhance our understanding of the varied imperatives and challenges that these organizations and their organizers face. Of course, there is a diversity of formal and informal organizations – from for-profit entities to non-profits, state and public agencies, social enterprises, communal forms of organizing, non-governmental associations, trade associations, publicly traded, family owned and managed, private firms – the list goes on! Organizations, moreover, can vary dramatically in size from small entrepreneurial ventures to large multinational conglomerates to international governing bodies such as the United Nations.

Empirical topics addressed by *RSO* include: the formation, survival, and growth of organizations; collaboration and competition between organizations; the accumulation and management of resources and legitimacy; and how organizations or organizing efforts cope with a multitude of internal and external challenges and pressures. Particular interest is growing in the complexities of contemporary organizations as they cope with changing social expectations and as they seek to address societal problems related to corporate social responsibility, inequality, corruption and wrongdoing, and the challenge of new technologies. As a result, levels of analysis reach from the individual, to the organization, industry, community and field, and even the nation-state or world society. Much research is multilevel and embraces both qualitative and quantitative forms of data.

Diverse theory is employed or constructed to enhance our understanding of these topics. While anchored in the discipline of sociology and the field of management, *RSO* also welcomes theoretical engagement that draws on other disciplinary conversations – such as those in political science or economics, as well as work from diverse philosophical traditions. RSO scholarship has helped push forward a plethora theoretical conversations on institutions and institutional change, networks, practice, culture, power, inequality, social movements, categories, routines, organization design and change, configurational dynamics and many other topics.

Each volume of *RSO* tends to be thematically focused on a particular empirical phenomenon (e.g., creative industries, multinational corporations, entrepreneurship) or theoretical conversation (e.g., institutional logics, actors and agency, and microfoundations). The series publishes papers by junior as well as leading international scholars, and embraces diversity on all dimensions. If you are scholar interested in organizations or organizing, I hope you find *RSO* to be an invaluable resource as you develop your work.

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INTRODUCTION A

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THE VALUE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH TO ADVANCE PARADOX IN ORGANIZATION THEORY*

Rebecca Bednarek, Miguel Pina e Cunha,
Jonathan Schad and Wendy Smith

ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, scholars advanced foundational insights about paradox in organization theory. In this double volume, we seek to expand upon these insights through interdisciplinary theorizing. We do so for two reasons. First, we think that now is a moment to build on those foundations toward richer, more complex insights by learning from disciplines outside of organization theory. Second, as our world increasingly faces grand challenges, scholars turn to paradox theory. Yet as the challenges become more complex, authors turn to other disciplines to ensure the requisite complexity of our own theories. To advance these goals, we invited scholars with knowledge in paradox theory to explore how these ideas could be expanded by outside disciplines. This provides a bothland opportunity for paradox theory: both learning from outside disciplines beyond existing boundaries and enriching our insights in organization scholarship. The result is an impressive collection of papers about paradox theory that draws from four outside realms – the realm of belief, the realm of physical systems, the realm of social structures, and the realm of expression. In this introduction, we expand on why paradox theory is ripe for interdisciplinary theorizing, explore the benefits of doing so, and introduce the papers in this double volume.

Keywords: Grand challenges; interdisciplinary research; organization theory; paradox theory; tensions; theorizing

*All authors contributed equally.

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INTRODUCTION

Organizations surface ongoing competing demands such as change–stability, collaboration–competition, and exploration–exploitation. In early organization and management theory, the dominant paradigms depicted such tensions as anomalies – dilemmas that needed to be resolved by choosing one of the alternative options. Approaches such as Fayol’s “Principles of Management” or Taylor’s “Scientific Management,” promoted one “best way” to organize and manage. Contingency theory then added more nuance by suggesting that the choice between alternatives was contingent upon the context (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). In the late 1980s, scholars introduced the idea of paradox to organization theory to offer an alternative to understand competing demands. Rather than focusing on resolving tensions, paradox scholars built on insights from philosophy and psychology to depict them as persistent, interdependent contradictions, and explore options to accommodate and benefit from them (Bartunek, 1988; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Putnam, 1986; Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Smith & Berg, 1987).

Starting in the early 2000s, scholars offered more specificity to understand paradox as a theoretical lens for organizational phenomena and to provide structure toward a theory of paradox (Clegg, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Since then, we see an exponential growth of engagement with paradox theory to unpack the nature, dynamics, and management of tensions. For example, Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart (2016) identified 350 articles that engaged paradox across a broader field of journals between 1945 and 2014. Schad, Lewis, Raisch, and Smith (2016) identified 133 articles that engaged paradox theory in top management journals between 1990 and 2014. These insights offer new explanations to address complexity, uncertainty, and dynamics within organizations. Moreover, scholars increasingly turn to paradox theory to understand the complexity of our world’s grand challenges – wicked systemic problems including climate change as well as societal polarization. For example, in a recent issue of the *Journal of Management Inquiry*, scholars explore how paradox theory informs our understanding of the tensions surfaced by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Carmine et al., 2021; Keller et al., 2021; Pradies et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2021). Given both the increased scholarly interest in paradox theory, as well as its applicability to the challenges we face in our world, now is a moment to expand the richness of these ideas. To do so, we see value in learning from outside disciplines to enrich our theorizing and advance conceptual clarity within paradox theory (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Schad, Lewis, & Smith, 2019). We follow others that have suggested that we gain greater insight in our own theories by integrating insight from outside disciplines, views, and lenses (Graff, 2015; Spiller et al., 2015).

Our goal in this double volume of *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* is therefore to expand the complexity and richness of paradox theory via interdisciplinary dialogue, and in so doing allow paradox theory to better explain and inform complex phenomena and grand challenges. We advance a both/and approach to paradox theory – both expanding our research beyond existing boundaries and seeking to deepen our insights as a theory within organizational scholarship.

We asked contributors to this volume to explore how outside disciplines could inform our understanding of paradox in organization theory. The papers in this double volume draw from a wide variety of disciplines, which we cluster into four different sections – the realm of belief systems; the realm of physical systems; the realm of social structures; and the realm of expression. Seminal thinkers in the field of paradox, Jean Bartunek with Mary Frohlich, Charles Hampden-Turner, Ann Langley, and Andrew H. Van de Ven, conclude each section with a commentary on the ideas introduced therein. Finally, three papers provide an overall frame. In this chapter, we explain *why* we see great value in interdisciplinary research. In our introduction to the second volume, we address *how* we can effectively implement such research (see Bednarek, Cunha, Schad, & Smith, 2021). Finally, we conclude the volume with a paper that addresses *where* seminal paradox scholars see inspirations for further interdisciplinary research (see Bednarek, Lewis, & Schad, 2021).

PARADOX THEORY: ENRICHING THE THEORY TO BETTER UNDERSTAND COMPLEX PHENOMENA

Research on paradoxes focuses on unpacking tensions in organizations such as between today and tomorrow, global and local, and self and other. Paradox theory posits that oppositional forces are the essence of individual and organizational life and seeks to understand tensions' complexity. By understanding tensions as the underlying structure of organizational life, paradox theory explains complexity, challenges, and uncertainties missed by other theories. As organization theorists increasingly recognize the complexity of our world's grand challenges (Ferraro, Etzion, & Gehman, 2015; George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihanyi, 2016), they see great promise in paradox theory, given its multi-disciplinary foundations. Yet as the issues become more complex, so too must be the theory.

Since its introduction to organization scholarship, paradox theory has followed a pattern of diverging and converging. As Schad et al. (2019) argue, for theories to remain vital there is a need for both centrifugal forces that introduce divergence and challenge assumptions by looking to other theories, disciplines, and paradigms, and centrifugal forces that pull insights toward convergence and builds a conceptual core (see also Clegg, Cunha, & Berti, in press; Sheremata, 2000). Early insights about organizational paradox looked outward, seeking such divergence of thought by drawing heavily on ideas across a range of disciplines (e.g., Quinn & Cameron, 1988). For example, Putnam (1986) categorized paradoxes emerging in relationships and dialogue, building on foundational thoughts from communication scholars and sociologists such as Bateson. Smith and Berg (1987) engaged varied psychology schools from authors such as Adler, Frankel, Freud, and Jung, in their book *Paradoxes of Group Life*. Other influences for paradox thinking emerged from Taoism and Confucianism. Lewis (2000) integrated these various traditions to explore and advance the idea of organizational paradox in a manuscript that went on to win the *Academy of Management Review* best paper of the year.

In the past 20 years, scholars advanced foundational building blocks toward a theory of organizational paradox, clarifying definitions, assumptions, and boundary conditions. To do so, scholars turned inward, adopting more centripetal forces to increase conceptual clarity and identify core debates. Definitions started to converge, depicting paradox as persistent oppositions between mutually constituting or interdependent elements (Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Scholars also addressed underlying assumptions, such as the types of paradoxical tensions (e.g., Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Even as scholars turned toward increased clarity, paradox theory retained its characteristic as a set of ideas that engages diversity and tension as a means of generative insights – a big tent approach that accommodates multiple varied assumptions. Whereas some scholars advance a perspective of paradox as inherent in systems (Schad & Bansal, 2018), others describe paradox as socially constructed through dialogue and relationality (Putnam et al. 2016; Tuckermann, 2019), and still others explore an integration of both approaches (Hahn & Knight, in press; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Scholars further advanced an approach to understand the dynamic nature of paradox, highlighting how paradoxical tensions shift over time often in a cyclical pattern (Bednarek, Paroutis, & Sillince, 2017; Pradies, Tunarosa, Lewis, & Courtois, in press; Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003; Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017).

Converging on core elements of paradox theory has fueled the growth of organizational paradox as a valued lens. In the past decade alone, we have seen an explosion of papers drawing on paradox to inform varied organizational phenomena, such as ambidexterity (Papachroni, Heracleous, & Paroutis, 2016; Smith, 2014), hybridity (Gümüşay, Smets, & Morris, 2020; Smith & Besharov, 2019), and sustainability (Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2014; Sharma & Bansal, 2017). This work spans levels of analysis including the individual (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018), group (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014), organizational (Jay, 2013), inter-organizational (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, Chalkias, & Cacciatori, 2019), and systems (Schad & Bansal, 2018), as well as multi-level scholarship (Keller, Wong, & Liou, 2020) (for a recent bibliography of paradox scholarship, see Carmine & Smith, 2021). These theoretical advancements leave paradox theory ready for continued richness and depth. As Cunha and Putnam (2019) suggest, now may be the moment to encourage more divergence of thought in paradox theory and bring in new ideas. They warn against the danger of unchallenged ideas, leading to a “paradox of success.” Drawing on ideas from a wide range of disciplines can thus enrich and advance paradox theory.

This kind of deepening allows paradox theory to become even more relevant to addressing some of the most pressing issues in the world today. When we were beginning to write this introductory paper, smoke from the Australian bushfires drifted across the Tasman Sea to the office of the New Zealander in the team. The fires burned over 18 million hectares, destroying over 6,000 buildings, and killing millions of animals. As we engaged in rounds of rewriting, we were all under stay-at-home orders in an effort to diminish COVID-19 from further spreading across the globe. During subsequent rounds of rewriting, protests

loomed in cities across the world around racial injustice. These issues highlight a growing number of grand challenges – large-scale complex problems that span levels of analysis, multiple interlinking variables, and evolve over time (George et al., 2016; Reinecke & Ansari, 2016).

Addressing such challenges often requires drawing from multiple different disciplines (e.g., Ferraro et al., 2015; Wright, Meyer, Reay, & Staggs, in press). Confined within their own discipline and paradigm, scholars diminish their potential to understand pressing issues. Disentangling the factors at play in relation to the Australian bushfires requires ideas from disciplines as diverse as emergency response, climate science, and communication studies. Stopping the spread of COVID-19 requires insight from epidemiologists, medical professionals, psychologists, sociologists, and economists. Addressing racial injustice and societal polarization, requires us to integrate insights from sociologists, political scientists, psychologists, anthropologists, historians, etc. As Brewer (1999, p.328) summarized: “the world has problems, but universities have departments.”

Paradox theory offers a lens to understand such grand challenges. This theory emerged from multi-disciplinary insights, and therefore addresses phenomena with high levels of complexity and ambiguity (e.g., Bednarek, Chalkias, & Jarzabkowski, in press; Jarzabkowski et al., 2019; Schad & Bansal, 2018; Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa, Lewis, & Tracey, 2017), across multiple interwoven tensions (Sheep, Fairhurst, & Khazanchi, 2017) that integrates various levels of analysis (Keller et al., 2020). As such organizational scholars continue to realize the insights of a paradoxical or “both/and” approach to address these complex social issues. For example, the 2020 Academy of Management theme was “Broadening our Sights” and the description suggested that:

The most pressing challenges in the 21st century are directly or indirectly related to management and organizations: conflict, discrimination, corruption, well-being, economic opportunity and equality, and climate change. ... However, there are dichotomies that stand in the way of producing actionable knowledge to address these monumental challenges It is unlikely that we will be able to make impactful contributions to addressing major organizational, societal, and professional challenges if our scholarship and teaching adopt an “or” rather than an “and” approach By broadening our sight we can overcome dichotomies and avoid zero-sum propositions. Broadening our sight creates synergies, increased value-added, and positive results for individuals, organizations, society, and the field of management and organizations.

One of the *All Academy Theme sessions* brought together scholars to explore how paradox theory depicted and informed grand challenges such as climate change, gender discrimination, immigration, and health and well-being. However, for paradox theory to continue to address these grand challenges and offer ever more robust insights, it is again time to look outward and engage centrifugal forces that can expand our thinking and enable greater divergence of ideas. In particular, to address these grand challenges, we benefit from learning more from disciplines outside of organizational theory. Drawing from outside disciplines can fuel knowledge exchange to keep a vital academic debate and to help address increasingly complex problems.

THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF INTERDISCIPLINARY THEORIZING

Organization theory has always drawn on multiple disciplines and paradigms to unpack organizational phenomena (Lado, Boyd, Wright, & Kroll, 2006; Oswick, Fleming, & Hanlon, 2011). By disciplines, we mean the sciences that inform our thinking, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and economics. By paradigms, we describe the patterns or archetypes that often come with their own set of underlying rules and assumptions, such as functionalist/positivist, interpretivist, and critical (see Burrell & Morgan, 1979 for a typology). Disciplines often adopt and are aligned with a dominant paradigm. For example, the discipline of psychology has a dominant positivist paradigm. However, this is not always the case; distinct paradigms can exist within a particular discipline: organization theory emerged as a field drawing on both microdisciplines such as psychology, as well as more macrodisciplines of economics and sociology from the outset and continues to do so. Moreover, our field has always adopted multiple paradigms and our journals often include a positivist paper followed by an interpretivist or critical one.

This multi-disciplinary and multi-paradigm foundation of organization theory has led to debate within the field. Some scholars suggest that varied approaches enrich our ideas and strengthen our insights. Gioia and Pitre (1990) highlight the value of a drawing on multiple paradigms to inform theory and build varied approaches. They describe this process as “metatriangulation,” engaging multiple, seemingly contrasting theories and paradigms to be able to lead to new, creative theorizing (Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). For example, Staw, Sandelands, and Dutton (1981) demonstrate how threat rigidity, “the failure to alter responses in the face of environmental change” (p. 501), is informed by and informs features at the individual, group, and organizational levels (drawing on insights from psychology, sociology, and economics). Weick’s work on sensemaking explores both the psychology of individual cognition and the sociology of collective minds and mindfulness (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Weick & Roberts, 1993).

Other scholars, however, warn that the multiplicity can diminish the validity and influence of our field in the broader academic discourse (Donaldson, 1985) or could lead to the proliferation of paradigms and an obsession with newness without building on and expanding our current theories (Hambrick, 2007; Mendenhall & Marsh, 2010). Drawing on a breadth of foundational insights can result in scholars without the background to engage deeply with a discipline, therefore only cherry-pick ideas that fit with their argument. These concerns have led to a more disciplinary focus emerging within organization theory, creating more intellectual silos. Some theories focus on macroissues that draw on positivist paradigms from economics and adopt deductive methodologies. Others draw on more interpretivist paradigms from sociology or anthropology and adopt more inductive methods.

Paradox offers an organization theory that spans disciplines, paradigms, methods, and levels of analysis. We value how multiple disciplines can deepen our