

INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUES  
ON ORGANIZATIONAL PARADOX

# RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF  
ORGANIZATIONS PART 73B

**INTERDISCIPLINARY  
DIALOGUES ON  
ORGANIZATIONAL  
PARADOX: INVESTIGATING  
SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND  
HUMAN EXPRESSION,  
PART B**

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Emerald Publishing Limited  
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2021

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80117-187-8 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-80117-186-1 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-80117-188-5 (Epub)

ISSN: 0733-558X (Series)



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# FOREWORD: RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

*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 multi-national conglomerates to international governing bodies such as the United Nations.

Empirical topics addressed by *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 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 multi-level 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, *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 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 *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 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, 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 *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* to be an invaluable resource as you develop your work.

Professor Michael Lounsbury  
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# INTRODUCTION B

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# IMPLEMENTING INTERDISCIPLINARY PARADOX RESEARCH

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

## ABSTRACT

*Interdisciplinary research allows us to broaden our sights and expand our theories. Yet, such research surfaces a number of challenges. We highlight three issues – superficiality, lack of focus, and consilience - and discuss how they can be addressed in interdisciplinary research. In particular, we focus on the implications for interdisciplinary work with paradox scholarship. We explore how these issues can be navigated as scholars bring together different epistemologies, ontologies and methodologies within interdisciplinary research, and illustrate our key points by drawing on extant work in paradox theory and on examples from this double volume. Our paper contributes to paradox scholarship, and to organizational theory more broadly, by offering practices about how to implement interdisciplinary research while also advancing our understanding about available research methods.*

**Keywords:** Epistemology; interdisciplinary research; methodology; ontology; paradox theory; tensions

Interdisciplinary research allows us to integrate ideas from different disciplines to gain greater knowledge and uncover new ways of seeing. By reaching for theories beyond our own discipline, we learn new ideas that expand our understanding.

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**Interdisciplinary Dialogues on Organizational Paradox:  
Investigating Social Structures and Human Expression  
Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Part 73B, 3–24  
Copyright © 2021 by Emerald Publishing Limited  
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ISSN: 0733-558X/doi:10.1108/S0733-558X2021000073b002**

Paradox theory is particularly poised for such interdisciplinary research. Paradox theory has traditionally drawn from multiple disciplines, such as philosophy, psychology, and political science (Bednarek, Lewis, & Schad, 2021). With such breadth of foundations, these ideas offer a “big tent” or “meta” theory that incorporates a broad variety of phenomena, levels of analysis, and methodological approaches (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Over the past 20 years, scholars increasingly focused on clarifying the core building blocks of paradox theory within organizational scholarship. Even as debate persists, such foundational insights enabled an explosion of scholarly work on paradox. Now is a moment to turn back to the multi-disciplinary roots of paradox theory to seek new ideas (Bednarek, Cunha, Schad, & Smith, 2021; Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Schad, Lewis, & Smith, 2019).

Yet effectively implementing interdisciplinary research is challenging. Disciplines draw on different and often contradictory foundations that obstruct their integration. They may adopt different epistemological and ontological assumptions, which impact the methodological approaches to generate insights. These foundational differences require significant translation to understand the nuance of each discipline as well as thoughtful analysis and research designs to engage perspectives in a way that is neither oversimplified nor unduly complicated. Essentially, interdisciplinary research surfaces its own paradoxical challenges as scholars seek to value the interdependence of ideas across seemingly oppositional theoretical approaches and disciplinary conventions (Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989).

In this paper, we explore *how* scholars can implement interdisciplinary research, focusing on doing so in the context of paradox theory. We identify the challenges of interdisciplinary research, highlighting three specific issues: (1) superficiality (not knowing enough about another discipline), (2) lack of focus (unclear core audience and conversation), and (3) consilience (overstating the integration between disciplines) (Angus, 2011; Foshay, 2011). We then unpack how scholars can address these issues as they seek to engage epistemological, ontological and methodological approaches to paradox theory with other theories farther afield. To do so, we draw on scholars that have written about interdisciplinary work, examples from extant paradox scholarship, as well as the experiences of the authors in these two volumes. We conclude with specific ideas about how scholars can continue to expand the epistemological, ontological and methodological insights to advance paradox theory going forward. By doing so, we advance existing work about how to research paradox (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2017; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2019; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, Chalkias, & Cacciatori, 2019; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Lê, 2018) into the interdisciplinary space.

## CHALLENGES OF INTERDISCIPLINARY SCHOLARSHIP

Interdisciplinary scholarship surfaces a number of challenges. Scholars seek to draw on varied disciplines with their own assumptions, language, constructs, and methods, and explore how they can inform one another. We highlight three core issues that arise from this paradoxical challenge. First, interdisciplinary scholarship raises issues of *superficiality*, in which scholars in one discipline draw from

another discipline without fully engaging with the depth of these ideas (Angus, 2011; Foshay, 2011). Gaining expertise in a field means understanding nuanced insights to appreciate the variety of meanings of constructs and situate an argument within a broader debate. For example, when organizational scholars engage other fields such as art, mathematics, music, physics, and religion, to inform paradox theory, they need to translate insights back into their home field. Without doing so, they risk only using an introductory vocabulary of the new discipline which can lead to using concepts from these new fields incorrectly or only incorporating these ideas superficially, precluding deeper connection between the theories.

Second, scholars face the challenge that their work might *lack focus*. Scholars can speak to multiple audiences with interdisciplinary work, yet trying to contribute to multiple disciplines at once can lead to confusion of the core ideas. Seeking to offer insights to both academic communities risks not making a meaningful contribution to either. As Jay (2011, p. 33) outlines, the “weakening of disciplinarity may lead us down a slippery slope into intellectual incoherence.” For example, the interdisciplinary team of Spiller et al. (2015) reflected that their process involved shifting between the needs, conventions, and conversations of the respective authors’ distinct disciplines. The danger of this being a lack of focus and no clear contribution or home for that discussion.

Third, interdisciplinary scholarship faces the challenge of *consilience* – overstretching integration between disciplines into “sterile supercoherence” (Jay, 2011, p. 53) that does away with differences and distinctions. Angus (2011) warns against the intent of synthesizing “numerous specialized domains of knowledge” (p. 53) in which the initial disciplinary foundations and the tensions between these disciplines are lost within this blurring.

## APPROACHES TO INTERDISCIPLINARY PARADOX SCHOLARSHIP

Paradox theory offers a set of tools that can inform *how* researchers can navigate the challenges of interdisciplinary research (Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Lewis & Kelemen, 2002; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Paradox scholarship emphasizes that integration between contradictory elements can be best appreciated when adopted alongside the preservation of differences and separateness (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Schad et al., 2019; Smith, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Following this core idea, implementing interdisciplinary research requires both integration that brings distinct ideas together by stressing synergies and linkages and differentiation that maintains their distinct attributes and strengths and integrity through separating distinct elements. For example, “consilience” and a “lack of focus” involves integration in the absence of differentiation, meaning that distinct disciplinary conversations and differences are blurred, confused and/or lost. Meanwhile, superficiality represents a lack of meaningful integration (or synergy) as the disciplinary foundations remained overly disconnected, with one of those foundations not being adequately represented or understood.

Navigating the challenges of interdisciplinary research requires us to engage in differentiation and integration activities at the very core of the disciplines. We highlight issues related to epistemology, assumptions about the nature of knowledge and ontology, assumptions about the nature of reality, which in turn underpin methodology, approaches to discovering new knowledge (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These dimensions often represent and are used to describe competing, or even incommensurate underpinnings for conducting research (Kuhn, 1962). Thus, we adopt this scaffolding to explore how interdisciplinary dialogue is achieved within the field of paradox via navigating these dimensions in ways that meet the inherent challenges of such contradiction as these boundaries are crossed.

*Clarifying the Epistemological Foundation for Interdisciplinary Paradox Scholarship.* Different disciplines adopt varying epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge and what forms of knowledge are considered scientific (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lewis & Kelemen, 2002). The difference in epistemologies is akin to mastering foreign languages, which require familiarity not only with the basic grammar and vocabulary, but also with the nuances for each language. Interdisciplinary research raises questions such as: how do distinct disciplines become known to scholars (individually or within teams) in order to underpin disciplinary projects; how is that knowledge integrated and differentiated to underpin those projects; and how can scholars be attune to the boundaries and form of knowledge they themselves hold or do not hold.

Effectively navigating epistemological questions such as these that arise in interdisciplinary work depends on both differentiation and integration (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith, 2014). It requires clarifying differences across epistemological assumptions in order to better understand each and avoid superficiality, while also finding ways to integrate these assumptions in robust ways that avoids consilience and with a clear focus for the interdisciplinary integrative endeavor. We highlight three strategies in this regard: (1) differentiating disciplinary epistemological assumptions in order to integrate; (2) integrating reflectively; and (3) clarifying the role of each disciplinary epistemological foundation (see Table II.1).

First, scholars need strategies that allow them to delve deeply into the varied disciplines and better understand the differences in the underlying epistemological assumptions. They need to build enough depth in knowledge of each discipline to differentiate them as robust epistemological pillars for interdisciplinary dialogue. In some case, scholars have expertise in multiple backgrounds allowing them to be multilingual and understand each discipline's epistemological assumptions. For example, in considering the interdisciplinary dialogue between music and paradox theory in this volume, Colin Fisher describes his life as a top-jazz musician prior to his career as a business school academic, which offers him expertise to draw on insight about jazz improvisation (Fisher, Demir-Caliskan, Hua, & Cronin, 2021). Matthew Sheep (2021) writes about religion and paradox, drawing on his own knowledge of Christianity having been an ordained minister prior to his career as a business school academic. In such cases, building robust and separate pillars of disciplinary knowledge over

**Table II.1.** Approaches for Implementing Interdisciplinary Paradox Research: Epistemology.

Approaches to Implementing Interdisciplinary Paradox Research	Addressing Challenges of Interdisciplinary Research	Examples from the Volume
<p><b>Differentiating disciplinary epistemological assumptions to enable integration.</b> Involves building a depth of knowledge across both/multiple disciplines so they can be appropriately differentiated as robust pillars for interdisciplinary dialogue. One common way to achieve this, is to conduct interdisciplinary projects using interdisciplinary teams.</p>	<p>Building robust separate pillars of disciplinary knowledge as a foundation for any subsequent integration means this approach directly addresses the danger of superficiality. As the two bodies of knowledge are consciously and separately built as a foundation for the study, the danger of <i>consilience</i>, or the doing away of any differences or disciplinary distinctions, is also avoided.</p>	<p><b>Colin Fisher</b> (Fischer et al. 2021); <b>Matthew Sheep</b> (2021) and <b>Ali Gumusay</b> (2021) accessed alternative ways of thinking via bringing their whole musical and religious selves to their organizational scholarship. <b>Josh Keller</b> collaborated with a linguistic scholar <b>Ping Tian</b> to write on linguistics and organizational paradox (Keller &amp; Tian, 2021). In their commentary <b>Jean Bartunek</b> (an organizational scholar) and <b>Mary Frohlich</b> (a theologian) collaborated (Bartunek &amp; Frohlich, 2021).</p>
<p><b>Incorporate theoretical and methodological flexibility &amp; reflexivity</b> Paradox scholars engaging with alternative disciplines must remain theoretically flexible. They also must be actively reflexive in order to understand the boundaries of their own knowledge and be open to being transformed by alternative ways of knowing.</p>	<p>Reflexivity and flexibility help scholars avoid <i>superficiality</i> and <i>consilience</i> as it involves remaining aware and respectful of their own disciplinary foundations as well as those of others. It also enables the fruitful transformative dialogue from which integration between those disciplines is possible.</p>	<p>Theoretical flexibility is evident in paradox scholars grappling with new ways of knowing paradox brought on by an alternative discipline (e.g., <b>Seidl et al., 2021</b>) or belief system (e.g., <b>Gaim &amp; Clegg, 2021</b>). Reflexivity is required to understand when an interdisciplinary project needs a team to deepen its epistemological foundations (e.g., <b>Keller &amp; Tian, 2021</b>).</p>
<p><b>Clarifying the role of each disciplinary epistemological foundation.</b> Specifying the role of each disciplinary epistemological foundation in the project is important. Frequently this involves clarifying the discipline of focus for a contribution (e.g., organizational theory) and the role of an alternative discipline in enabling that contribution to be made (e.g., physics).</p>	<p>This strategy helps scholars avoid the challenge of a <i>lack of focus</i> through specifying the focal discipline that is the primary focus for contribution. <i>Consilience</i> is similarly avoided as the knowledge domains are kept clearly differentiated, with the focus being a contribution to a specific disciplinary conversation rather than doing away with disciplinary boundaries.</p>	<p>Most of the chapters in this volume treat organizational paradox theory as the focus for their contribution that their interdisciplinary forays into second disciplines enable; e.g., as summarize by <b>Knigher and Hahn</b> (2021) in the conclusion of their chapter.</p>

years (differentiating) becomes the foundation for subsequent successful efforts at integrating those ways of knowing.

Another strategy that scholars can adopt is to reach outside of their own expertise to learn from others and build teams that accommodate this broad expertise (Hitt, Beamish, Jackson, & Mathieu, 2007; Spiller et al., 2015). Having different team members deeply embedded in those separate disciplines allows this diversity to deepen engagement with various disciplines, avoiding superficiality by maintaining the necessary differentiation between insights. As Aldrich (2014, p. 3) remarks, usually “interest in and concern about interdisciplinarity revolves around creating new collections of individuals drawn from two or more established disciplines.” Keller and Tian (2021) write about how linguistics can expand paradox theory. Keller is an organizational theorist with an expansive understanding in linguistics. Still, Keller teamed up with Tian, a linguist, to gain even deeper knowledge into that discipline. Generating knowledge across diverse teams, however, requires good teamwork and research designs that facilitate deeper knowledge (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Cabantous, 2015). These dynamics could include having clear goals and vision to keep focus (Hackman, 2002), a culture of psychological safety to advance collective learning (Edmondson, 1999), and extensive conflict management skills (Jehn, 1997), and attention to ensuring the variety of inputs so that no perspective is subsumed within another (Huq, Reay, & Chreim, 2017).

Second, flexibility and reflexivity allow for effective integration of different epistemological assumptions. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Vince and Broussine (1996) observed multiple defensive responses when participants in their study faced paradoxical tensions. Similarly, engaged in interdisciplinary work, scholars often confront alternative and sometimes contradictory epistemological assumptions from an other discipline that challenge or contradict their assumptions, which can also surface defensive reactions. Flexibility and reflexivity are epistemological strategies that encourage scholars to be open to exploring how these new ideas can inform their thinking. Flexibility can enable a scholar to let their own disciplinary knowledge be either challenged or backgrounded as needed at different points in the interdisciplinary project demand. For example, organizational theory understands paradox differently from the field of logics (Berti, 2021) or of quantum mechanics (Knight & Hahn, 2021). Paradox scholars engaging in disciplinary work must be flexible in how tightly they hold onto their existing disciplinary knowledge in order to shift their thinking depending on the emerging interdisciplinary insights and the needs of any particular project.

This flexibility forms a foundation for paradox scholars conducting interdisciplinary work to be reflexive. Reflexivity enables us to surface an awareness of individual and collective biases that inform our scholarship (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Scholars can continually self-assess the limits of their own knowledge. Doing so can encourage scholars to seek collaborative input to expand that expertise if needed and to enable deep rather than superficial interdisciplinary knowledge as a foundation for robust and meaningful integration. Another example of reflexivity in practice involves being open to interdisciplinary dialogue transforming you as a scholar and your praxis (Gouldner, 1973). For example, Gaim and Clegg (2021) collaborated on a project involving an Ubuntu approach to