Our Collective Tensions: Paradox Research Community's Response to Covid-19

Joshua Keller – University of New South Wales
Simone Carmine – University of Padua[1]
Paula Jarzabkowski - Cass Business School
Marianne Lewis – University of Cincinnati
Camille Pradies – EDHEC Business School
Garima Sharma – Georgia State University
Wendy Smith – University of Delaware
Russ Vince, University of Bath

Paradoxical voices during crisis: Reflections on the process and future implications

Josh Keller, Camille Pradies, Simone Carmine & Garima Sharma

Since the beginning of the pandemic, academic life has been riddled with tensions. We have been tasked to maintain teaching quality while constrained by an unfamiliar online setting, maintain research productivity without having the time or opportunity to travel or collect data, address new administrative challenges with fewer financial resources, and increase our overall academic workload while facing an increased workload at home. And for many of us, we have engaged in all of these activities while concerned about friends or family who have been on the frontlines fighting the pandemic, infected by the disease, or worrying about finding a new job. Throughout the crisis, we have been forced to maintain our professional lives while coping with loneliness, anguish and tragedy. For academics, like for others, paradox has been a living and breathing experience.

[1] From here authors are listed in alphabetical order

For those of us studying paradox, it has become abundantly clear that our own experience is not unique. We have seen tensions embedded in the crisis itself, in government responses, and in the day-to-day experiences of the organizational actors we study—from the CEO to the frontline worker. We have also not been alone in our perception, as multiple media outlets have used the word "paradox" to describe the crisis, such as a *New York Times* opinion piece titled "Corona Virus and the Isolation Paradox" (Shihipar, 2020) and a *Le Monde* article titled "Political Paradoxes of Covid 19" (Monod, 2020). Never has the word *paradox* seemed so relevant and current to our family, friends, co-workers, and fellow citizens around the world.

A group of us decided that we needed to engage in a collective sensemaking effort. On May 2, 2020, at the height of the pandemic, we organized two virtual gatherings of over 100 paradox scholars around the world. These meetings were scheduled 12 hours apart to accommodate a global dialogue. Our goal was to discuss (1) how paradox theory can help understand the pandemic, and (2) how this pandemic allows us to rethink paradox theory. From the online dialogue, we compiled dozens of paradox-related themes that spanned multiple levels of analyses (i.e., from societal to organizational to individual levels) and across organizational topics (i.e., from leadership to alliances to innovation)[2]. We drew strength and energy from this dialogue, compelling a small group of us to take our insights as a paradox research community and put them into print. We believed that such an effort would provide potential solutions for practice and fodder for future research. The editorial team of the *Journal of Management Inquiry* embraced the idea with much enthusiasm. We proceeded to recruit a group of scholars with specific expertise in specific areas of paradox theory and work together as a team of 42 paradox scholars.

[2] This document is available at https://unsw-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/z3526419_ad_unsw_edu_au/EWU1RUI7fR1Cle7OOBEkfcIB_kfAVYKyQrz_iENR54XcrQ?e=zPjfNe

While we welcomed the opportunity, working collaboratively with 42 scholars on such a project posed significant challenges. One challenge was in including various voices within the paradox scholar community characterized by its disciplinary and geographic diversity. Paradox scholars vary in their methodological approaches (e.g., ethnographies, cases, experiments, and surveys; Andriopolous & Gotsi, 2017), and ontological assumptions for theorizing (e.g., treating paradox as something real or socially constructed; Hahn & Knight, 2020). In addition, as a team of scholars from around the world, in different points in our career, and with different personal circumstances, we varied in our first-hand experiences. We were experiencing different public health conditions, different economic conditions, different political contexts, and different issues around cultural norms. As one member of the team described, "the pandemic was impacting everyone around the world but differently".

This tension between integration and differentiation, which is a core tension in paradox theory, manifested quickly when deciding how to simultaneously be one voice and many voices. It impacted the most mundane of issues, such as how to assign writing responsibilities and how to recognize contributions. Our initial plan was to follow recently published papers on the pandemic aimed at addressing various aspects of the pandemic, as a single author team of 42 scholars (e.g., Van Bevel et al, 2020). This approach entailed compiling pieces from multiple authors, but with a final product that did not differentiate authorship for each piece. This approach, however, silenced diversity of perspectives and experiences among the co-authors. At the same time, we wanted to harness the collective insights of the paradox scholarship community, which would be undermined if we reduced our product to a collection of loosely connected short essays with no common thread. We recognized that we could address this issue not by seeking resolution but by embracing the tension. Thus, we allowed each author to identify their own piece within a larger shared

manuscript, but we also placed all pieces in a shared online document and asked all co-authors to read, comment and contribute.

Another big tension was around time. On one hand, we wanted to ensure that we were able to develop our ideas fully so that we were not only responding to the pandemic but responding in a way that enabled us to further develop paradox theory and offer potential insights for making sense of this crisis. On the other hand, the pandemic was constantly evolving. For example, as the Black Lives Movement emerged during the pandemic, it became apparent that the world was simultaneously experiencing at least two major crises and one could not be decoupled from the other. In fact, we could argue that these current crises were further imbricated in larger crises such as climate change, akin to nesting dolls or series of waves, each nested in the other. At the very least, we needed to address some elements of the events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement and its relationship to the pandemic. In some ways, our own tension mimicked the tension facing public health scientists who had been working through tensions relating to rigor and relevance (Sharma et al, this issue: Lê & Pradies). To address this tension, we again took a paradox approach. We simultaneously focused on how to address the events emerging in real time and the long-term implications of the various global crises, some of which were unfolding in the present and others only evident in the future. This effort required an ongoing modification to our process. We engaged in back and forth with the authors of pieces where such interconnections could be brought to the front.

What we accomplished

The result of this collective effort were three papers, which are each sources of tremendous pride. These papers spanned three levels of analyses—from the society to the organization to the

individual within the organization. Each paper includes important insights on the pandemic, and insights into paradox theory and more broadly how we approach the tensions that pervade major exogenous events. These papers also inspired the four of us who led this effort to produce this fourth paper to surface our reflection on the overall experience as paradox researchers. This reflection starts below with Russ Vince's commentary on the emotions that informed his own experience with the pandemic and that echoes the emotional experience of many of us. Paula Jarzabkowski, Marianne Lewis, and Wendy Smith then discuss the three papers, discuss their own experience, and provide their own insights on how this experience will shape the future of paradox research.

We are grateful that JMI and especially our editor Richard Stackman were supportive of us pushing the boundaries of academic publishing. We believe that without our radically different approach, we would not have been able to provide insights on the pandemic from such a widely diverse community. We also understand that our approach is one of many other approaches that have used the pandemic crisis as an opportunity to advance social science and management research in ways that address issues of rigor and relevance in a complex, dynamically changing world. For example, the *Journal of Business Venturing Insight*'s Entrepreneurship Rapid Response Research Initiative is tackling this issue in a different way yet also espousing the same principles of rigor, relevance, and timeliness. There have been other similar efforts, such as *Journal of Management Studies* commentaries on COVID-19 and management research, and the collection of opinion pieces from business and society scholars on the Network for Business Sustainability website[3]. We hope that

[3] https://www.nbs.net/covid19

other journals take heed and experiment beyond their set formats to allow researchers to make meaningful contributions in innovative ways.

What is missing and what is next

Despite our pride, we also recognize tensions are never completely resolved. Some aspects of the pandemic experience and some aspects of paradox theory will need to be reserved for future research. First and foremost, the pandemic has influenced every aspect of personal and organizational life, and the range of discussions throughout the paper certainly did not capture all the tensions experienced during the pandemic. Conspicuously absent were first-hand experiences among non-academics, especially those on the front lines. We hope that insights from these experiences can further enrichen our understanding of how the pandemic forces us to rethink paradox theory. Second, in our effort to make sense of the pandemic and its theoretical implications, there was little room for prescription. Because of the process of scholarship, management researchers are often left to the sidelines, struggling to contribute toward public discourse and solutions, especially those that are time sensitive. The pandemic, with changes occurring rapidly and contradictions appearing everywhere, makes the issue of time even more salient. However, we believe that the collection of ideas across the three papers may provide food for thought for astute practitioners even if the ideas are not directly speaking to those struggling at work, at home, or especially—those on the frontlines. Our hope is that this translation work happens in situ and over time. We invite practitioners to take these ideas forward, make these their own (Astley & Zammuto, 1992) in applying to their work of responding to and living through this crisis. We also invite researchers to take these ideas into public spaces in participating in public discourse and co-creating solutions for the many challenges triggered by this pandemic that we will see in years to come.

Paradox, Emotion and Coronavirus

Russ Vince

During the midst of the coronavirus lockdown, Deva Dalporto *(@mylifesuckers*) sent a tweet that seemed to capture my emotional experience of the pandemic. It went:

> "How are you doing?
>
> I'm fine.
>
> And then terrible. And then crying. And then laughing. And then screaming. And then grateful. And then over it. And then determined. And then terrified. And then anxious. And then happy. And then exhausted …
>
> all in the same minute".

Peoples' emotional experiences are often paradoxical in the sense that such seemingly incompatible emotions coexist 'all in the same minute'. We are always full of mixed emotions (whether we acknowledge this or not). This is exacerbated in relation to coronavirus, because everyday feelings of hope, peace and sympathy sit side-by-side with fear, pain and despair.

Paradox is a 'discomforting tug-of-war' (Lewis & Smith, 2014, p. 135). We live with this emotional tug-of-war all the time in organizations and it stimulates many contradictions. Our relentless determination to be positive has negative consequences. Our desire to make change

happen reinforces the status quo. Our eagerness for fairness is at the expense of difference. We are unaware of the harm our helpfulness is causing. What we unknowingly despise about ourselves is made to belong to others. An interest in paradox and contradiction helps us to perceive the emotional and political complexities of our lived experience in organizations. Our anxiety produces what we are seeking to avoid. Attempts to understand emotions rationally mobilize the irrational. Self-awareness is rarely free of self-deception. Such contradictions persist *both* despite *and* because of our attempts to resolve them.

The relationship between emotion and paradox is emphasized in the transformed world in which we now live. In the early stages of lockdown, when the first deaths from the virus were being reported, the BBC news showed photographic montages, head shots of those who had died. It was too painful to watch. Later, as I sat in front of my computer for a virtual conference, the 'gallery view' in Zoom evoked my visual memory of the faces of those early deaths, shown in full screen on my television. In these discomforting times, I am *both* talking with the living *and* haunted by the dead.

I can't answer the questions I was asked to engage with in providing this commentary. How can our understanding of emotions and paradox inform our understanding of the pandemic? Sorry. This pandemic is beyond understanding. It kills BAME people disproportionately; it scoffs at governments' political indecision, economic anxieties, and fantasies of control; it wants us to overcrowd the beaches on a sunny day; and it will never go away. How can the pandemic inform our understanding of the emotional experience of paradox? Who can say? We *both* seek to understand the incomprehensible; *and* we willfully ignore emotions that might help us comprehend.

Covid19: Disruptive shock or holding a mirror to societal disequilibrium

Paula Jarzabkowski

As the current pandemic has unfolded, my thoughts have increasingly turned to the way we conceptualise the dynamic equilibrium in paradox theorizing (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In particular, I have been musing on how we think about balancing of opposing forces, and how what we mean by balance – what particular social ordering we interpret as 'balanced' – is enacted in the taken-for-granted practices of our everyday lives. I was therefore delighted to be invited to read and comment upon this collection of three great papers examining the tensions posed by COVID-19, spanning levels from the societal (Sharma, et al, this issue), to the organizational (Carmine et al, this issue) and the individual (Pradies et al, this issue). Reading this amazing collection of 40 different scholars making sense of the pandemic through a paradox lens has only convinced me further that we are living in a society that was already "far from equilibrium" (Cunha & Putnam, 2019; Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016).

Dynamic equilibrium is at the heart of paradox theorizing (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011), explaining the processes through which contradictory poles are purposefully balanced. Systems are in dynamic equilibrium when they can oscillate between polarities, both exploring the advantages of distinctive poles but also hitting guardrails when they stray too far into opposition, bringing the poles back into interdependence (Smith & Besharov, 2019). Given our interest in ensuring interdependence between persistent contradictions, uncovering the processes and mechanisms through which dynamic equilibrium can be attained might be considered a key aim of paradox scholarship.

Right now, the news is full of polarities and oppositions. This is indeed a key feature of how colleagues in this issue are experiencing and observing the current pandemic: sacrificing the economy for health (Sharma et al, this issue: Schad & Etter); struggling to be both a parent and a productive employee (Pradies et al, this issue: Bednarek & Lê); privacy of individuals versus transparency for the collective good (Carmine et al, this issue: Raza & Keller); tensions between exercising public voice and ensuring public health (Sharma et al, this issue: Pamphile). Everything is contradiction and opposition. There is no balance. It seems COVID-19 has generated mass disequilibrium.

Yet I query whether the pandemic is an exogenous shock that has thrown everything into disequilibrium or, rather, it has held a mirror up to social orders that we take for granted, making persistent and suppressed tensions salient and observable. For example, while we have persistently tried to ensure parents can "have it all" – successful fulfilling jobs alongside well-nurtured children – there is a persistent problem with the costs of childcare, and, despite efforts to ensure more gender equality, a low uptake of parenting leave by men (van Belle, 2016). Health, or at least 'wellbeing', and the economy, are also the subject of "have it all"; lauded as one more target to achieve in busy working lives in which the productive employee is also required to be a 'well' employee (Cederstrom & Spicer, 2015). Hence, we might say these tensions have always been there, more or less latent; those persistent contradictions that are now thrown into sharp oppositional relief by the pandemic.

However, I argue that the contradiction lies deeper, in the way our everyday practices privilege one view of economy, health, wealth and continuous growth at the expense of others, such as sustainability (Sharma et al, this issue: Hahn), poverty alleviation and social equality (Sharma et al, this issue: Pamphile). Everyday practices instantiate taken-for-granted meaning systems that

are often invisible to those enacting them, even as they constitute a powerful guide for actions that perpetuate 'the way things are' (Goffman, 1978). In enacting these meaning systems, we may think we had equilibrium before the pandemic – able to balance health and economy, public and private, individual and collective, work and life, growth and sustainability – and now the pandemic has thrust us into disequilibrium.

But what if we have actually been in disequilibrium all along? Suppressing health – exercise, nutrition, job security, mental peace – to the demands of economy and continuous growth; assuming children are a counterproductive burden to productivity, for which women, who remain the primary caregivers, must sacrifice salary and career. And normalizing these contradictions in our everyday practices, including our scholarly practices of studying how individuals and organizations can 'balance' such wildly contradictory oppositions. For example, does any of us really think that sick, stressed citizens and a planet with rapidly declining resources will make bank accounts flourish and economies strong? Yet our society has increasingly allowed, indeed condoned and lauded, a range of work practices that support job insecurity (Pradies et al, this issue: Keegan, Brandl & Aust), inadequate childcare policies (Pradies et al, this issue: Bednarek & Lê) and growing inequality (Amis, Mair & Munir, 2020).

Despite growing unrest (Sharma et al, this issue: Rocheville & Bartunek; Pamphile), fears over climate change (Sharma et al, this issue: Hahn), and a set of collectively-subscribed UN Sustainable Development Goals aimed at addressing some of these inequalities, we continue to struggle to arrest the very activities that exacerbate these imbalances. Only this week, two reports highlighted the exceptional nature of imbalance. First, an Oxfam report shows that the richest 1% of the world's population generated more than twice the carbon pollution of the poorest 50% over

a critical 25-year period. An eye-opening opposition that is brought into sharper relief by a current report from the Commodity Futures Trading Commission emphasising the fundamental threat to our financial system posed by climate change. The very practices inherent in generating extreme wealth are also those that are the seeds of its destruction. As Smith reflects below, in the past 150 years we have witnessed exponential growth and advancement in science, technology, and interconnectedness globally. Perhaps this pandemic is a long-needed mirror, showing us the taken for granted practices within which our pursuit of that growth, those advances, and the accompanying interconnectedness have constructed a system that is far from equilibrium.

What does this mean for paradox scholarship? Let us take as our founding premise that our everyday practices and their associated taken-for-granted meaning systems suppress some contradictions so very well that they are invisible to us. If so, then COVID-19 is an opportunity to see the wild imbalances that these everyday practices have generated. The tensions chaotically exploding around us as documented in this collection of papers are the rebound of long-suppressed poles re-asserting themselves in our everyday lives. We are experiencing the particularly vicious circle of necessarily interdependent elements of everyday life – children, parenting, health, job security, equality – bouncing back from long-duration cycles of suppression and imbalance; precisely as paradox scholarship predicts will happen if a pole is suppressed (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

It is tempting to believe that the shock of seeing our world in the 'mirror' of COVID-19 will be a fundamental trigger for change; the big hard 'guardrail' (Smith & Besharov, 2019) off which our system will bounce as it comes back to balance. And indeed, there are some small indicators that at least parts of work life may be changing, as current surveys predict long-lasting changes to the office (Giles & Thomas, 2020). However, as some of the papers in this collection indicate, paradox

has a dark side (Pradies et al, this issue: Gaim & Cunha). Rushing to re-assemble what we took to mean equilibrium in a system that has been exposed as very far from equilibrium constitutes its own dangers of 'false mastery' (Gaim, Clegg & Cunha, 2019) which ignores or even further exacerbates the fundamental oppositions that make up the complex social system in which we live, and which we have enabled to become so very imbalanced. Rather, this is a time to acknowledge, the long-term (Carmine et al, this issue: Slawinski), systemic and collective responses (Sharma et al, this issue: Hahn), at multiple levels (Sharma et al, this issue: Sheep), through which we can embrace (Williams, Whiteman & Parker, 2019) and learn from disequilibrium (Putnam et al., 2016).

COVID-19 thus constitutes a 'call-to-arms' for us as paradox scholars to pursue what Lewis (see below) refers to as Paradox 2.0. As shown in this collection of papers from some of the leading scholars in our field, and some of the most exciting new voices, we have a breadth of issues, a vast array of paradox lens, and a wealth of deep knowledge of different aspects of this inter-organizational system (as Keller and colleagues discuss above), with which to expose the everyday practices within which disequilibrium has flourished. We need to subject these practices, the meaning systems that they enact, and our own scholarly practices to deep analysis for how they perpetuate persistent contradictions rather than addressing the fundamental dynamics of change through which we can truly construct a more interdependent and equitable social system; one that is sustainable for us to live in socially, economically, physically, materially and emotionally. As our brilliant co-editorial and co-authoring team for this series of papers emphasize, the onus is on us to develop both our research and our public and policy impact to reconceive a more equitable and equilibrated society.

Coping with the 'perfect storm': Toward a collective paradox mindset

Marianne W. Lewis

We are embroiled in a 'perfect storm' of wicked, knotted paradoxes. This thought-provoking JMI collection serves to unpack the complexity. Yet distinct for many, these scholarly writings are personal. We are researcher and subject within the anxiety-provoking tug-of-wars, vicious cycles of paralysis and polarization, and moments of epiphany and innovation. Applying my theorist's lens, I explore the pandemic as paradoxical phenomena, while as a business school dean, I share my lived leadership experience.

Tensions

For me entry into paradox begins with underlying tensions. While research accentuates variations, four categories aid framing: belonging, organizing, performing and learning. Studies suggest that tensions remain latent until surfaced by change, scarcity and plurality (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Have conditions ever seemed so ripe? Continuing pendulum swings between glimpsed normalcy and lockdown threats; organizations and lives strained by limited time, funds and energy; and loud, conflicting voices in media, leadership and research. Paradoxes feel exceptionally salient.

Paradoxes of belonging accentuate identity tensions between individual-collective, independence-dependence, commonality-distinction (Sharma et al., this issue: Sheep). In this worldwide experience, our shared humanity laid bare – all vulnerable to infection, longing for connections and hope. Yet likewise, personal differences are acute. Economic, mental, physical vulnerabilities appear in intricate, varied combinations. As dean, I have held firm to power of community. Collegiality has become sustaining, such as through virtual coffee hours, sharing new tricks (creative tech tools to acrobatic toddler-MBA balancing). I think of a WebEx call with our PhDs

that began with impressive sharing of remote research practices, shifting with a moment of silence broken by a young man stating his profound loneliness, spurring each to own up to their unique trials. Through such differences our collegial bonds tighten.

Performing paradoxes pit competing and interwoven goals actuated by diverse stakeholder needs (Sharma et al., this issue: Pamphile; Schad & Etter). What is 'success' in a pandemic? Early framing seemed succinct and articulate in cases made to 'flatten the curve'. Yet plurality and time surfaced dueling priorities – health/economic, virus/non-virus health, privacy/transparency. The list continues, and one thread leads to another. Paradox scholars increasingly examine such nesting, looking toward insights from complexity, chaos and systems theorists. In my school, competing demands feel intense, yet clarify long needed and ongoing attention to holistic support for faculty, staff and students.

Management exposes organizing paradoxes of centralization-decentralization, cooperation-competition, authority-trust (as illustration see Carmine et al., this issue: Raz-Ullah & Stadtler; Schrage). Boundaries sharpen and blur as we seek clarity, and adjustments to variations across geographies and units. I have become increasingly grateful for my university's approach to providing overarching guidelines that empower flexible responses to unit and personal needs. Yet grapple with frustrations as shifting national, state, then university constraints foster inconsistent messaging and flawed coordination.

These intersecting tensions, for me, become particularly acute in learning paradoxes (e.g., Sharma et al., this issue: Lê & Pradies). Impressive accumulation of research and reporting builds our understanding. Yet with each study and story – and counter arguments that are quick to follow – comes a growing sense of ignorance. I have found myself and colleagues seeking triangulation at much higher levels, expanding our searches to other disciplines, media outlets, and business and

educational exemplars. Such explorations expand our worldviews. Yet the paradox of knowledge intensifies: the more we know, the more we know we do not know.

Dynamics

Paradoxes are fluid as knotted tensions spur feedback loops and reinforcing cycles. Anxiety intensifies, challenging our acceptance of paradox and triggering counterproductive defenses. Dynamics within the pandemic have fostered a powder keg of distrust and extremism furthered by roiling emotions – from fear to ambivalence to apathy to anger; rinse, repeat.

Resulting vicious cycles are painfully evident (e.g., see Pradies et al., this issue: Pouthier & Vince; Sharma et al., this issue: Fairhurst & Endres). Polarization intensifies as conflicts between opposing views become increasingly oversimplified and extreme. Likewise, rising ambivalence and complexity overwhelm bounded rationality, fostering decision-making paralysis. And the interplay between polarization and paralysis further magnifies their challenges. In such times, critical thinking and dialogue is at a premium and most rare.

How far will the OR mentality take us down the rabbit hole? As fear and uncertainty drive anxiety, opposing lenses narrow. Vitriolic debate or eerie silence ensue. Global and personal patterns align to classic studies of reinforcing cycles (see Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003). Threat rigidity appears. The greater the anxiety, the more blame and shame is used from opposing corners; rendering risk avoidance increasingly risky. Escalating commitment abounds, evident in confirmation bias via social media algorithms and personal lenses, leveraging cases that reaffirm our preferred views, saving face, ending discussion. And polarization cycles accelerate. The more opposing sides talk down to the other, humanistic approaches are deemed ‘virtue shaming’ and requests to consider broader variables and research questions deemed ‘ignorant’. Trust erodes and the calls of ‘you’re either with us or against’ become louder. In Kuhnian terms, when narrowing

views, however rigorously derived, become framed as dogma or hyperbole, the paradigm closes itself to critique and development, evolution slows and revolution boils. And for leaders, decision making becomes increasingly paralyzed or extreme. I critique such dynamics in our ugly politics and media, am saddened by their daily appearance in university and college meetings, and critical of my mental and emotional limitations when caught in the fray.

Management

Yet by accentuating the OR the AND becomes more visible – the potential to cope and learn toward a more collective paradox mindset and practices (see Carmine et al, this issue: Krzeminska, Mafico & Härtel; Raza & Keller; Slawinski; Tunarosa; and Pradies et al, this issue: Miron-Spektor; Sparr; and Sharma et al, this issue; Putnam & Buzzanell). I am inspired by the remarkable research productivity in this trying period – social as well as medical. Examples such as this collection demonstrate the mutual care of our scholarly community; likewise, local and global examples of entrepreneurialism abound, such as creative approaches to hybrid education, social services and public activism. I pray these signals of positive and impactful collective innovation can dampen the powder keg, which is vital given too many, nearby flames from elections to second wave fears to intensified inequalities.

What will empower transformation amidst the tensions? I hope our shared experience – akin to living the blind men and the elephant analogy – will further scholarship blending greater paradoxical thinking and triangulation. With knotted tensions exposed, now is the time to explore their intricacies, leveraging alternative views of time and space to draw out opposing and interwoven insights. Where one stands on the time continuum alters views of both researchers and subjects, as does one's stance in space – hierarchically, geographically, disciplinarily. Complex and shifting tensions demands Paradox 2.0 and requires requisite variety.

In my leadership experience, I have seen remarkable examples of personal and collective creativity, agility and resilience. Colleagues elsewhere share similar stories. Our shared commitment to learning, to our students, and to each other buoys us in trying times. Yet I cannot pretend there will not be impact. Care is ever evident but teaching and research will not be to our usual high standards.

This is no Pollyanna story. Paradox management entails integration, differentiation and oscillation (Smith & Lewis, 2011): focusing on higher purpose, balancing optimism with realism, strengthening our communities' psychological ties even as physically remote. Yet strain is intensifying and the darkness of organizational paradoxes comes into the light (Pradies et al., this issue: Gaim & Cunha). In my case, we continue facing reduced resources (financial, temporal, psychological), substantive flexibility needs across stakeholders, and record enrollment. This means more work for fewer, intensified stress across demands (teaching, research, service, home), and amplified needs for mutual support, compassion and understanding. Flexibility challenges rigid systems and all involved. And critical needs for consistent, and equitable approaches surface existing discrepancies requiring policy changes difficult to manage amid the fire fighting. Tight resources and raw emotions spark frustrations. Even among the most collaborative community members, actors in varied roles and personal situations question fairness of burdens and resources. Tensions rise between junior/senior faculty, tenure/educator tracks, faculty/staff, admin/faculty. In a time when empathy and mutual support is most needed, fatigue, strain and misperceptions can impede.

Like so many, I am tired and anxious, yet remain hopeful. We have learned so much about ourselves, the potential for systemic transformation, and the power of our communities. Pandora's box has been opened. This is not a case of waiting for a vaccine or world peace. The underlying

tensions will persist – individual and collective, social and economic well-being, diversity and unity, empowerment and authority – as will the fragility of trust and confidence. They were here long before, reflected and made salient by the mass disequilibrium of COVID-19 (as explained by Keller and colleagues above). Now is the time to apply critical triangulation and paradoxical thinking. Let's strive to counter the vicious cycles. Let's do all we can to harness intellectual curiosity, humility and dialogue, leverage opposing views, question taken-for-granted assumptions, and raise new possibilities – to fuel more collective paradoxical thinking.

Zooming Out to Zoom In: Understanding the Paradoxes of the COVID Pandemic in a Broader Context

Wendy K. Smith

The collective challenges we face amidst the pandemic loom large. The commentaries in this issue bear witness to the unrelenting magnitude of tensions and the intensity with which we experience these tensions as paradox. In making unprecedented decisions, leaders face paradoxical tensions between health and economy (Sharma et al, this issue: Schad & Etter; Sheep; Li & Keller) as they seek to offer conviction while feeling deeply uncertain (Pradies et al, this issue: Sparr) and struggle to convey the complexity of paradox (Pradies et al, this issue: Kristine-Nielsen, Cheal & Pradies). Stay at home orders have, on one hand, laid bare the challenge of having our most essential workers also be some of the one working under the least beneficial conditions and worst pay (Pradies et al, this issue: Keegan, Brandl, & Aust), while also exacerbating tensions of work and family for those that are working from home (Pradies et al, this issue: Bednarek & Lê). The rush to find a vaccine has surfaced paradoxical tensions of quality and speed (Sharma et al, this issue: Lê & Pradies) as well as cooptation paradoxes as organizations struggle to work together across competitive lines to more quickly achieve this goal (Carmine et al, this issue: Raza-Ullah & Stadtler) These commentaries also highlight the broader knotted societal tensions that this pandemic has brought into focus such as those of climate change (Sharma et al, this issue: Hahn) and the fight for equity and justice (Sharma et al, this issue: Pamphile). This issue also surfaces the deep emotional responses to these tensions, pointing to anxiety (i.e., Pradies et al, this issue: Gaim and Cunha), optimism (i.e. Pradies et al, this issue: Miron-Spektor) or both at once (Pradies et al, this issue: Pouthier & Vince).

This moment offers us the chance to zoom in and hold up a mirror to our world, surfacing the underlying tensions lurking in the practice of our everyday lives (see Jarzabkowski above), as well as in our systems that structure those lives (See Lewis above). In these commentaries, both Jarzabkowski and Lewis remind us of the robustness of a paradox lens, and the opportunity to use this theory to help us unpack these tensions in our research and in our personal life. They also remind us of the opportunity to expand our theorizing to accommodate the intensity we experience. This moment also allows us the opportunity to zoom out, understand this moment in the context of a broader arc of history. To complement the discourse and commentaries that zoom in, I take this opportunity to zoom out – seeking to situate this moment amidst the lessons of history, ones that include a deeper understanding of how ideas of paradox interweave with advancing civilization and expanding human consciousness.

Karl Jasper, psychiatrist and philosopher wrote, "The most extraordinary events are concentrated in this period." (Japer, p. 2) He might have been talking about our experiences in this moment. Rather, he wrote these words in 1949, in a reflection on events from over 2500 years ago. He was reflecting on the time period between 800-200 BCE, with a concentration in 500 BCE. During that time, significant developments of knowledge and belief systems emerged independent of one another around the globe. As Jasper pointed out:

"Confucius and Lao-tse were living in China, all the schools of Chinese philosophy came into being, including those of Mo-ti, Chuang-tse, Lieh-tsu and a host of others; India produced the Upanishads and Buddha and, like China, ran the whole gamut of philosophical possibilities down to skepticism, to materialism , sophism and nihilism; in Iran Zarathustra taught a challenging view of the world as a struggle between good and evil; in Palestine the prophets made their appearance, from Elijah, by way of Isaiah and Jeremiah to Deutero-Isaiah; Greece witnessed the appearance of

Homer, of the Philosophers — Parmenides, Heraclitus and Plato — of the tragedians, Thucydides and Archimedess. Everything implied by these names developed during these few centuries almost simultaneously in China, India, and the West, without any one of these regions knowing of the others (Jasper, p. 2)."

During this age, Jasper points out that humans become conscious of their own being as a whole. Awakening to the potential for self-assertion creates both awe of the possibilities and fear of the grandeur of the rest of the universe. Awareness of their increasing agency both inspires a sense of powerfulness, but also one of powerlessness amidst the grandeur of the world they inhabit – creating both opportunity and anxiety. Critical thinkers emerge across the globe in Greece, Israel, China, India, etc. within decades of one, and they another offer responses to these questions. Their insights reflected an increased sense of human agency, a deeper understanding of the physical world, and more awakened human consciousness. These profound ideas sparked tremendous innovation and scientific discovery, and persist as fundamental beliefs today. Jasper labeled this era the Axial Age, a pivotal moment with radical shifts around the world.

While the distinctions in their ideas are notable, the threads of similarities are more striking, particularly given how many of these insights emerged with little knowledge of one another. One such thread is the core fundamental insights that inform the nature of paradox. Smith and Berg (1987) draw on work by Hughes and Brecht (1975) to define paradoxes as contradictory, self-referential and triggering vicious cycles. In doing so they point to two core ideas of paradox: duality and dynamism. Duality describes the unity of opposites; the contradictory/oppositional forces that are also interdependent/self-referential. Dynamism refers to the persistent cyclical movement that happens through the constant interplay between paradoxical poles.

The notion of both duality and dynamism lie at the core of insight for many of these Axial Age philosophers. The *Dao de Jing* penned by Laozi asserts that true harmony and understanding comes from an ongoing interaction where a force produces its opposite; "All things are born of being. Being is born of nonbeing." (translation by Mitchell, 1988; Verse 40). Heraclitus offered a similar philosophy to Greek society around the same time, "What opposes unites, and the finest attunement stems from things bearing in opposite directions, and all things come about by strife" (Graham, 2019; Fragment B9). Heraclitus also famously proclaimed the adage that we now know as, 'no man steps in the same river twice,' noting that the river is in ongoing motion, as is the person. We see similar themes of duality and dynamism in other scholars during the same period, including Confucius, the Buddha, the Hebrew prophetic scholars, etc.

The lessons we can learn from this Axial Age are vast; but three stand out to me as relevant to advancing our collective discussion. First, history has a long arc. The insights from 2500 years ago offered enduring truths that sustained us for millennium, offering hope, optimism, and possibility even amidst darker and more challenging moments of devastation and loss. Second, these ideas emerged amidst an expanding human consciousness, while also contributing a foundational approach to collective civilization that continued to advance this consciousness. Third, and most directly relevant of this discussion, the paradoxical nature of the world and how we should operate within it lies at the core of many of these Axial Age ideas.

How does zooming out to look back in history help us to understand the moment that we are in today? It may be that this pandemic comes amidst another Axial Age, and can be understood within that context. In the last 100-150 years, we have seen exponential advances in science and technology, reconsiderations of the complexity and interconnectedness of civilization, and, as some people might suggest, an evolution of human consciousness. Technology and science

significantly developed transportation and communication such that we can now move people, ideas, money and goods rapidly around the globe and beyond. For example, in 1908, the Ford Motor Company introduced the first mass production of cars to automate physical movement from one location to another. Since then, we have traversed the world by airplane, built spaceships to take us to the moon, and started exploring expeditions to Mars. Similarly, in 1876, Alexander Graham Bell received a patent for the first telephone. Since then, we learned how to share ideas instantaneously through the well-traveled internet and how to build powerful satellites to gain information about the broader universe. Amidst these rapid and inspiring technological advances, we see civilizations shifting as we build a more deeply linked humanity that is reliant on complex, interwoven systems and infrastructure. In doing so, we are also shifting our collective consciousness that attends to the interconnectedness of humanity, reasserts our reliance on the physical earth, depends on a growing appreciation for integrative collaboration, and invites questions about our place within a broader universe.

The COVID-19 pandemic offers a dark side to this growing complexity and interconnectedness. Global integration allowed the disease to spread at a pace and scope around the world like we have never seen before, threatening commercial and financial systems, diminishing personal liberties, and surfacing and reinforcing well established social hierarchies. Amidst these deep challenges, a look back in history to the Axial Age might enlighten us as we seek inspiration to look forward. First, the arc of history is long. The implications of the pandemic feel challenging. For some, it has been personally devastating. For all, it has upended our lives and the social fabric as we know it. It may be that the search for insight that can sustains us in this moment are actually the deeper enduring truths that and will guide us not only through this moment, but far beyond it. Second, we may be called at this moment to recognize and contribute to a greater expanding consciousness,

one that invites us to move beyond our primal defensive responses to fear and uncertainty, and instead toward our search for interconnection and holism. Third, that we may recognize the greater complexity of some fundamental ideas; that our complex systems and deep sense of interconnections point to an even richer understanding of paradox. Not only are we aware of the dualistic and dynamic nature of the world, but the ways in which these paradoxical tensions sit amidst a web knotted with one another and nested across levels.

The future then might offer hope amidst the suffering, one in which our scholarship provides insights that can sustain us through this moment and inspire greater ideas into the future. It is through this lens that I read the deeply thoughtful contributions of this issue, as a deepening understanding of the paradoxical complexity of the world and a collective cry for greater conscious awareness of this complexity.

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