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PARADOX AS A META-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: SHARPENING THE FOCUS AND WIDENING THE SCOPE

Abstract

Organizations are rife with tensions – flexibility vs. control, exploration vs. exploitation, autocracy vs. democracy, social vs. financial, global vs. local. Researchers have long responded using contingency theory, asking "under what conditions should managers emphasize either A or B?" Yet increasingly studies apply a paradox perspective, shifting the question to: "how can we engage both A and B simultaneously?" Despite accumulating exemplars, commonalities across paradox studies remain unclear, and ties unifying this research community weak. To energize further uses of a paradox perspective, we build from past reviews to explicate its role as a meta-theory. Contrasting this lens to contingency theory, we illustrate its meta-theoretical nature. We then dive deeper to sharpen the focus and widen the scope of a paradox perspective. Identifying core elements viewed from a paradox perspective – underlying assumptions, central concepts, nature of interrelationships and boundary conditions – offers a guide, informing the practice of paradox research. Next, we illustrate diverse uses of this lens. We conclude by exploring implications and next steps, stressing the rising need for paradox research, as complexity, change and ambiguity intensify demands for both/and approaches in theory and practice.

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Paradox as Meta-theoretical Perspective: Sharpening the Focus and Widening the Scope

To thrive in our increasingly interconnected and changing world, organizations must explore and exploit (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith & Tushman, 2005), improve financial and social performance (Margolis & Walsh, 2003), and meet global and local needs (Marquis & Battilana, 2009). Addressing such competing demands requires structures that are mechanistic and organic (Burns & Stalker, 1961), leaders who are autocratic and democratic (Quinn, 1984), cultures that enable control and flexibility (Flynn & Chatman, 2001), orientations that stress learning and performance (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003) and thinking that is forward and backward looking (Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000).

Researchers have long responded to organizational tensions by applying a contingency approach. This lens has enabled increasingly sophisticated, "if-then" insights, identifying conditions under which firms should attend to varied, opposing demands (Qui, Donaldson, & Luo, 2012). For instance, Tushman and Romanelli (1985) proposed conditions under which firms target innovation towards exploration versus exploitation, while Burns and Stalker (1961) noted factors that favor mechanistic over organic structures. Likewise, traditional approaches to social responsibility argue that organizations should focus on either financial or social outcomes, depending on their most immediate or pressing priorities (Friedman, 1970; Jensen, 2002).

Increasingly, however, scholars leverage a paradox approach. Paradox denotes "contradictory yet interrelated elements—elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously" (Lewis, 2000: 760). In their review, Smith and Lewis (2011) found that in organizational theory, paradox studies grew on average 10% annually between 1998 and 2008. Early advocates of this lens argued that leaders must confront tensions simultaneously to achieve long-term sustainability (Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Smith & Berg,

1987). As such, paradox researchers seek insights into how firms can support opposing demands, and investigate the corresponding results. Illustrative studies span phenomena and levels of analysis, including work-life balance (Rothbard, 2001), identity (Huy, 2002; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006), innovation (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith & Tushman, 2005), strategic leadership (Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007), corporate governance (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003) and hybrid organizations (Jay, 2013; Smith, Gonin, & Besharov, 2013). Consistent across these studies is the belief that sustainable high performance stems from embracing multiple, opposing forces simultaneously. Collectively and boldly, exemplars suggest an emerging view that moves organizational research beyond 'either/or' debates toward 'both/and' expectations.

Despite rapid growth of this field, commonalities across studies remain unclear and bonds within the paradox community remain weak. Previous reviews lay the groundwork for paradox research (e.g., Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Building from this base, now position paradox as a meta-theory to inform the practice of paradox research. We begin by juxtaposing paradox and contingency approaches, illustrating their varied meta-theoretical perspectives on organizational tensions. We then sharpen the focus and expand the scope of a paradox lens. First, we identify core elements viewed from a paradox perspective – underlying assumptions, central concepts, nature of interrelationships, and boundary conditions – to provide a guide for paradox theory and research. We then expand its scope, illustrating the versatility of this meta-theory. Specifically, we demonstrate the value of a paradox perspective as a strategy for more creative theorizing and as a framework for approaching specific organizational tensions. In conclusion, we discuss implications, stressing that as complexity, change and ambiguity intensify in organizations, so does the value of a paradox lens and both/and approaches to theory and practice.

META-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZATIONAL TENSIONS

Contingency and paradox approaches operate at a meta-theoretical level. Described as an overarching perspective (Ritzer, 1990) or paradigm (Qui et al., 2012), meta-theory is unconstrained by particular contexts, variables or methods, rather delineating core elements, such as underlying assumptions and central concepts, for a scholarly community. Such a lens informs research practice, guiding advocates as they select specific variables and explicate their interrelationships within a theorized and testable model. To clarify their meta-theoretical nature, we juxtapose contingency and paradox perspectives on organizational tensions (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 About Here

The contingency perspective has evolved substantially from foundational studies of organizational structure, technology and strategy (Galbraith, 1973; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Woodward, 1965). Recently Qui, et al. (2012) explicated the development of this meta-theoretical lens. They stressed that its core premise and shared mindset have enabled progress, complicating and extending understandings through the addition of variables and relationships, the fusion of related theories, and increasing sophistication of methods. Through this lens, tensions appear as organizational problems in need of solutions. Its core premise revolves around fit, that alignment of managerial decisions (e.g., elements of organizational design) and contingencies (e.g., environment, strategy, task) positively affects performance. As such, researchers ask under what conditions should managers emphasize either A or B (e.g., flexibility or control, efficiency or innovation, change or stability). This "if-then" mindset is characterized by formal logic that enables rational decision making. Studies seek to identify the pros and cons of opposing choices, the needs of the current context, and the option that offers the greatest fit. Early exemplars illustrated the value of matching structure to strategy (Chandler, 1962),

leadership style to situation (Fiedler, 1967), or structure to external environment (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Recent works, in contrast, detail more complicated fit, examining intricate interactions among numerous managerial decisions and contingencies via multidimensional configurations (Qui et al., 2012).

Sharing a focus on organizational tensions, a paradox perspective diverges in its approach and underlying assumptions. Although this lens is relatively new to management, its early advocates drew from a rich history, grounded in the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Hampden-Turner and Taoism as well as the psychological insights of Freud, Bateson and Watzlawick (e.g. Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987). Proponents approach tensions as ubiquitous and persistent forces that challenge and fuel long-term success. As such, the core premise is not problem solving through fit, but coexistence. Acceptance and engagement enable actors to live and thrive with tensions. Paradoxical thinking entails a both/and mindset that is holistic and dynamic, exploring synergistic possibilities for coping with enduring tensions. Early studies explored specific contradictory demands, identities and needs, offering insights into 'working through' tensions such as individuality-cohesion in group life (e.g., Smith & Berg, 1987). Yet, like contingency theory, this meta-theory has fostered growing sophistication, as paradox researchers increasingly examine the interplay of contradictory forces across levels, time and phenomena (e.g., da Cunha, Clegg & e Cunha, 2002; Smith, Lewis, & Tushman, 2011). .

Two examples help distinguish contingency and paradox perspectives. Studies of exploration-exploitation and learning-performance tensions illustrate similarities and differences among these meta-theories as they guide research on specific organizational tensions. For instance, these lenses offer varied approaches to the exploration-exploitation tension. Exploring and exploiting offer contradictory strategies, associated with inconsistent managerial cognitions

(Gavetti & Levinthal, 2000; Gilbert, 2006; Smith & Tushman, 2005), contexts and cultures (Ghoshal & Bartlett, 1994; Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004) and leadership skills (Beckman, 2006; Perretti & Negro, 2006; Virany & Tushman, 1986). To effectively exploit existing products, managers use convergent thinking, disciplined implementation and risk avoidance. In contrast, exploring new opportunities involves divergent thinking, experimentation and risk-taking. These agendas further challenge decision making through their competition for scarce resources.

A contingency approach to exploration and exploitation seeks to resolve the tension by determining when and where to focus on each strategy separately. For example, Tushman and Romanelli's (1985) punctuated equilibrium model posits that stability and flexibility should take precedence during different time periods. They suggest that firms engage in incremental change during long periods of convergence, punctuated by brief reorientations that involve experimentation, innovation and exploration. An alternative contingency approach suggests that exploration and exploitation occurs in different locations, either through spin-out entities loosely tied to the parent organization (Rosenbloom & Christensen, 1994) or through different firms in the market (Foster & Kaplan, 2001). Established firms maintain stability and efficiency to exploit their current capabilities, while exploration and more radical innovation occur in segregated, spun off entities or in new entrepreneurial firms (Christensen, 1997).

Paradox studies, in contrast, promote ambidexterity that enables both strategies simultaneously (Raisch & Birkinshaw, 2008; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996). Structural ambidexterity theories suggest that firms create differentiated subunits to host either exploratory or exploitative efforts. This separation by location is similar to contingency separation approaches, but a paradox approach stresses that separation is temporary, placing substantial responsibility on senior leaders to enable interplay between differentiated efforts and seek more

holistic synergies between the strategies (Smith & Tushman, 2005). In comparison, contextual ambidexterity theory posits that the tension can be fruitfully engaged throughout the firm via contextual supports (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), and dynamic capability theory seeks ongoing engagement with exploration and exploitation via fluid organizational routines (Harreld, O'Reilly, & Tushman, 2007), senior leadership efforts (Adner & Helfat, 2002; Smith & Tushman, 2005) and leadership cognitions (Gilbert, 2006).

At a more micro level, researchers have explored tensions between learning and performance orientations. Performance involves achievement, validation and success. To effectively perform, actors must appropriately identify and apply their existing skills. Yet performance is highly subjective, and a performance orientation seeks to avoid negative and maintain positive judgment. In contrast, learning involves experimenting, seeking new ideas and abilities. Learning orientations inspire efforts to identify and build needed skills (Elliott & Dweck, 1988). To perform well, actors must apply and hone their competencies; to learn well, actors must explore and reduce their incompetencies (Dweck, 1986; Mueller & Dweck, 1988).

A contingency approach accentuates distinctions between learning and performance orientations, enabling theory building to propose conditions under which each is most effective. Research by Dweck and colleagues treats these orientations as distinct and independent. They theorize and test the relative benefits of a learning orientation over a performance orientation for outcomes associated with creativity, as well as physical and psychological well-being (Dweck, 1986; Elliott & Dweck, 1988; Mueller & Dweck, 1988).

In contrast, advocates of a paradox lens examine means of fostering the co-existence of learning and performance orientations. Such research approaches these orientations not as mutually exclusive, but rather views their interplay as fueling long-term success. Bunderson and

colleagues examined structures and consequences for supporting learning and performance in teams (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2003; Van Der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005), whereas Ghoshal and Bartlett (1994) explored dual orientations in firms. Further, Dobrow and colleagues (2011) posed strategies for simultaneously engaging performance and learning orientations in the classroom.

SHARPENING THE FOCUSING

Juxtaposing contingency and paradox perspectives aids their differentiation and positions paradox as a meta-theory of organizational tensions. We now sharpen the focus of the paradox lens. As Qiu and colleagues (2012) provided for contingency theory, a honed meta-perspective offers a guide for research and theory examining specific organizational tensions. Following their approach, we address core elements viewed from a paradox perspective: underlying assumptions, central concepts, nature of interrelationships and boundary conditions. Examples from paradox studies help illustrate their applications in practice (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 About Here

Underlying Assumptions

Applications of a paradox lens rest on two, underlying assumptions regarding the nature of organizational tensions and the construction of paradoxes. First, from this perspective, tensions appear inherent and ubiquitous in organizational life, arising from the interplay among complex, dynamic and ambiguous systems. Complex systems – from industries and firms to teams and human beings – are comprised of interwoven subsystems. While each subsystem can operate independently, success of the overall system depends on their interdependence (Katz & Kahn, 1966; Simon, 1962). Tensions emerge between subsystems with different and changing goals, functions and expectations. Further, systems learn and develop, adapting to and/or sparking changes in their external environment. The motor of change (Van de Ven & Poole,

1995) or tempo of change (Weick & Quinn, 1999) may vary, but change remains a constant (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Lastly, tensions are exacerbated by ambiguity within the system, given limited understanding of subsystem interactions and their consequences (Merton & Barber, 1976), as well as the bounded rationality of decision makers (March & Olsen, 1976).

Second, from a paradox perspective, the construction of paradox emanates from actors' responses to tensions. When actors polarize elements, ignoring or masking their interdependence, tensions are cognitively and socially constructed as paradoxical (Ford & Backoff, 1988). While inherent tensions may remain latent in organizations, they surface or become salient as actors emphasize differences over commonalities (Smith & Lewis, 2011). For instance, although subsystems must operate synergistically to sustain the overall system, their efforts may conflict for scarce resources (funds, human resources, time). As actors grapple with rising demands and declining resources, individual and collective sensemaking accentuate conflict. Further, actors tend to polarize in the face of pressure (Follett, 1925/1996; Lax & Sebenius, 1986). Actors may narrow their attention to factors most under their control and within their understanding, and collaborate more closely with colleagues applying a similar focus. As Lewis (2000: 762) explained, "most actors accentuate contradictions by interpreting data (e.g., their own and others' feelings, organizational practices, environmental cues) through simple, bipolar concepts, constructing logical, internally consistent sets of abstractions that separate opposites."

Viewing organizational tensions as inherent in complex, dynamic and ambiguous systems, and paradox as constructed through actors' responses shifts research expectations dramatically. A contingency perspective approaches tensions as problems, solvable through rational analysis and formal logic. In sharp contrast, a paradox lens accentuates the need for a holistic understanding of tensions and cognitive and social influences on decision making.

Central Concepts

Influenced by core, underlying assumptions, a meta-perspective accentuates central concepts, elements to be leveraged in the development of specific theories or models. Through the lens of contingency theory, Qui and colleagues (2012) defined types of managerial variables (e.g., choices among structural components), contingencies (e.g., environmental, task and technology characteristics), and performance outcomes. In contrast, a paradox perspective guides researchers to delineate the focal paradox(es), actors' responses, and ideal outcomes.

Focal paradox(es). Setting the stage for paradox theory and research requires clearly articulating the focal paradox or paradoxes of inquiry. Smith and Lewis (2011: 382) defined paradox as "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time." As Lewis (2000) illustrated with the yin yang symbol, paradoxical tensions reflect polarities that are interrelated aspects of a greater whole. As actors pulls toward one side (love, trust, control, stability), they feel the pull toward the other (hate, distrust, autonomy, change). Smith and Berg (1987) further specify three characteristics of paradox: contradictions, self-reference and reinforcing cycles. These characteristics emphasize oppositional tendencies, their interplay as well as their endurance over time. In their description of the inherent paradoxes of group life, they illustrate that groups are replete with varying emotions, identities, thoughts and actions that members construct as paradoxical. Further they explain that the more "members seek to pull the contradictions apart, to separate them so they will not be experienced as contradictory, the more enmeshed they become in the self-referential binds of paradox" (1987: 14).

Putnam (1986) identified broad types of paradoxes that share these characteristics. *Self-referential loops* or double binds refer to the ironic or contradictory outcomes arising from a specific action. For instance, Audia, Locke and Smith (2000) described the paradox of success,

as the irony that failure that results from great success. Similarly, Ely and Thomas (2001) and Fiol, Pratt and O'Connor (2009) found that seeking integration across diverse social identities only occurs through the explicit differentiation of identities. *Mixed messages* involve contradictions reinforced by language or discourse. Boettger and Greer (1994) highlighted the inherent tensions in a reward system that seeks to achieve competing goals, and noted that these tensions are exacerbated when the rewards system emphasizes only one aspect of the goals, without adhering to the second. Finally *system contradictions* involve tensions that arise as a function of the complexity of the system. Illustrative system contradictions include tensions between exploring and exploiting (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith & Tushman, 2005) or between centralization and decentralization (Siggelkow & Levinthal, 2003).

Actors' responses. A paradox perspective emphasizes the need to examine actors' responses, defensive or strategic, to paradoxical tensions. The experience of paradox – the discomforting tug-of war, the absurdity of co-existing opposites – evoke strong emotions that pose a double-edged sword (Vince & Broussine, 1996). On the one hand, actors may respond defensively, clinging to the pole that supports their preferred priorities, skills and routines (Lewis, 2000). Yet anxiety, fear and discomfort may also foster creativity, innovation and change through more strategic responses.

Defensive responses may be cognitive, behavioral or institutional. For example, Lewis (2000) defined six defenses to paradox: *splitting* the tensions to reinforce their distinctiveness, *projecting* the conflicting attributes to another, *repressing* or ignoring the experience, *regressing* to a prior state when the tensions were not salient, *reaction formation* to reinforce the feeling opposing the tensions, and *ambivalence* to create distance from the tensions. In states of anxiety, actors may also avoid risk (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) and conflict (Deutsch, 1973) and drive

toward consistency (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1971) and simplicity (Miller, 1993). Such defenses serve to temporarily avoid or reduce the negative affect raised by tensions.

Strategic responses engage, rather than defend against, competing forces. From a paradox perspective, management strategies seek to embrace, cope with, and thrive through tensions. For example, Lewis (2000) outlined strategies of acceptance, confrontation and transcendence as means to proactively explore tensions, tapping the potential power of paradox to enable change and creativity. Recent research suggests that high-performing individuals, teams and firms apply a combination of strategies. For example, Luscher and Lewis (2008) applied action research to help middle managers "work through" double-binds, grappling with the need to manage self-managed teams. They termed their strategy "sparring sessions", during which managers would move toward, rather than away from a tension, examining it as a problem to solved, then as a dilemma, and finally, as the tension persisted, as a paradox to live with on an ongoing basis. This process helped the managers find means of managing at one level (e.g., setting goals and providing direction), then providing autonomy at a lower level (e.g., allowing subordinates to manage challenges that arise on a daily basis). In contrast, through comparative case studies of ambidextrous firms, Andriopolous and Lewis (2009) found that the firms leveraged strategies of differentiation – splitting tensions to focus dedicated attention to each element – and integration – to build synergies between tensions. Building from these studies, Smith and Lewis (2011) theorized the value of applying multiple strategies in an ongoing, dynamic process of managing organizational paradoxes. They proposed that management begins with acceptance, as actors embrace tensions, then leverage strategies to enable both focus and synergies.

Ideal outcomes. Although specific outcomes may vary with the levels and phenomena addressed, a paradox lens stresses ideal, and paradoxical, outcomes of peak performance and

sustainability. Cameron (1986) explained that peak performance denotes exceptional energy and achievement, as a firm, team or individual excels at competing demands, such as fostering flexibility and control, or supporting internal operations and meeting external demands. Similarly, sustainability involves attaining both short- and long-term goals, achieving immediate goals without compromising the ability to achieve those goals in the future (Smith et al., 2011), and meeting end goals without compromising the means, such as human or environmental assets, of achieving those goals (Bruntland, 1987; Elkington, 1998). Yet these ideal outcomes also illustrate the processual nature of paradox, accentuating ongoing iterations between outcomes and tensions. For example, seeking sustainability further raises tensions within complex systems, as strategies and routines to achieve more immediate goals stress stability, efficiency, and production, while emphasis on change, innovation, and development enable the future (Ghemawat & Costa, 1993; March, 1991; Tushman & Smith, 2002). Likewise, peak performance may reinforce, even raise recurring demands among a firms' varied stakeholders, such as shareholders, employees, customers and suppliers (Jones, 1995; Nonaka & Toyama, 2002).

Nature of Interrelationships

Meta-theory further suggests the nature of interrelationships among central concepts, guiding subsequent theory building and research. In the case of contingency theory, Qui et al. (2012) stress investigation of increasingly sophisticated, even multi-level interactions among managerial variables and contingencies. In comparison, a paradox lens emphasizes reinforcing cycles, linking central concepts via iterative dynamics. As Lewis (2000) explained, the dynamics of paradox appear as reinforcing cycles – vicious or virtuous.

Vicious cycles arise when actors respond defensively to the discomfort of paradoxes. Applying defenses that provide short-term comfort, ironically, intensifies the tensions and

reinforces counterproductive thinking and behavior. Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003) offered an example in their examination of collaboration-control tensions in governance. Boards and executive teams that over-emphasize collaboration become trapped in vicious cycles of groupthink, while boards that primarily stress control foster increasing levels of distrust between the board and executives. In both cases, as decision-making effectiveness and organizational performance declines, boards and executives cling even more tightly to their defenses, exacerbating the tension and fueling further defensiveness in a downward spiral. Cameron (1986: 546) similarly discussed schismogenesis: "a process of self-reinforcement where one action or attribute in the organization perpetuates itself until it becomes extreme and therefore dysfunctional." The Enron, WorldCom and Tyco cases reinforce the pathology of overemphasizing profits over process, ends over means and outcomes over ethics.

In contrast, strategic responses to managing paradox may enable reinforcing, virtuous cycles. Embracing contradictory forces can inspire learning, discovery and creativity. Tensions embed conflicts and inconsistencies that motivate a search for new possibilities (Festinger, 1957; Kelley, 1971). Rothenberg (1979) depicted this search as Janusian thinking. His study of creative geniuses reveals that breakthrough ideas consistently result from identifying and juxtaposing contradictions. Similarly, firms such as Toyota (Eisenhardt & Westcott, 1988; Osono, Shimizu, & Takeuchi, 2008), Southwest Airlines (Gittell, 2002) or the Rocky Flats Nuclear Power Plant clean up (Cameron & Lavine, 2006) purposely embed paradoxical tensions into their strategies to fuel ongoing creativity and learning. Smith and Lewis (2011) portrayed a virtuous cycle as a dynamic equilibrium. By accepting paradox and applying consistently inconsistent strategies of differentiation and integration, systems may thrive, reinforcing paradoxical thinking and management in an upward spiral of peak performance and sustainability.

Boundary Conditions

To determine conditions under which a paradox perspective does and does not apply, we revisit the definition of paradox: "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 382). This definition differentiates paradoxical versus non-paradoxical tensions, thereby determining the appropriateness of this lens. In cases of a dilemma, in which actors face a challenging either/or decision, or a conflict, which pits varied perspectives in search of a choice or a compromise, or a dialectic, in which a thesis and antithesis enable a new synthesis, an alternative approach to tensions, such as a contingency perspective, may be appropriate. Yet paradoxical tensions demand a more holistic, dynamic, both/and approach, as a one-sided or compromising response will be fleeting, and the tension will resurface, even intensify, over time.

WIDENING THE SCOPE

As a meta-theoretical perspective, paradox offers an overarching approach to addressing organizational tensions. Existing reviews illustrate its breadth by categorizing studies of varied tensions (e.g., Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). These reviews demonstrate how paradox studies examine tensions at different levels of analysis and leverage eclectic methods and theories. We now widen the scope by illustrating three alternative uses of this meta-theory. First, as a strategy for theorizing, a paradox lens can help researchers juxtapose conflicting perspectives in search of novel links and synergies. Second, as an aid to addressing both/and challenges, a paradox perspective offers insights as researchers, and the managers they study, grapple with a specific tension that demands simultaneous, albeit seemingly conflicting elements. Lastly, paradox offers a theoretical framework, suggesting the aforementioned central

concepts, interrelationships and outcomes to help build theory of organizational tensions. We now examine each use in turn to clarify and illustrate the versatility of a paradox perspective.

Paradox as a Strategy for Theorizing

In *AMR*'s inaugural, theory-focused special issue, Poole and Van de Ven (1989) proposed paradox as a lens for fostering more creative and potentially insightful theorizing. From this approach, juxtaposing conflicting theories can help researchers question taken-for-granted assumptions, explore alternative views of previously mixed findings, and/or develop more holistic understandings. As they noted, "Contemporary theory construction methods are biased toward consistency… There is a great potential to enliven current theory and to develop new insights if theorists search for and work with inconsistencies, contradictions and tensions in their theories and in the relationship between them"(1989: 575). Advocates of this inductive approach, stand in sharp contrast to those with a consistency bias. Indeed, in the second *AMR* theory-centered issue, Lewis and Grimes (1999) moved beyond debating theories to contrasting paradigms in hopes of enabling even more frame-breaking induction.

Researchers include a tremendous variety of theories, paradigms and perspectives juxtaposed to spur creative theory building. For instance, Schultze and Stabell (2004) contrasted four paradigmatic views – neo-functionalist, constructivist, critical and dialogic – of knowledge management to accentuate its double-edged nature. Lynn (2005) re-visited the question of how to effectively buffer organizations, tackling the organization-environment tension long addressed in structure research. On the one hand, exposure to market influences spurs responsiveness and innovativeness, yet such influences simultaneously spark pressures and inefficiencies that can overwhelm the firm. By juxtaposing three competing theories of organizational buffers, Lynn weaved together their insights to explicate functional and dysfunctional buffering. Likewise,

Ashcraft (2001) examined opposing models of power to depict feminist bureaucracy as a hybrid form of organized dissonance. In comparison, Berthon, Hulbert and Pitt (2005) developed a model for managing tensions between serving and creating customers by contrasting strategies aimed at either an innovation or a customer orientation.

Paradox as an Aid to Addressing Both/And Challenges

Studies often illustrate researchers turning to a paradox lens to address a particular, both/and challenge. Luscher and Lewis' (2008) study of Lego serves as illustration. Seeking to help middle managers make sense of tensions, such as the need to both control and empower their self-managed teams, they applied the lens to collaboratively construct a "process of working through paradoxes". Other studies leverage this perspective to understand the experience of a both/and challenge. For instance, Sanchez, Spector, and Cooper (2000) proposed that the internal conflict experienced by expatriate executives stems from polarizing two cultural identities as mutually exclusive. In comparison, effective coping entails learning to live with dual identification. Still other studies propose paradoxical strategies for engaging in contradictory efforts simultaneously. Offering a practitioner-targeted exemplar, Nonaka, Toyama, and Nagata (2000) applied a paradox lens to examine how firms create knowledge dynamically. They posited that by enabling interplay between old and new knowledge, managers can fuel a reinforcing spiral of knowledge creation.

As further illustration, multiple studies have turned to paradox to examine the specific, both/and challenge of achieving control and flexibility. Several studies position Toyota as a model for its management. Takeuchi and Osono (2008), for instance, claimed that Toyota's success stems from accommodating tensions within their strategy, thereby embedding their management within seemingly conflicting, yet complementary practices and systems. Spear and

Bowen (1999) explained the paradoxes ingrained in the Toyota Production Process. Through their study of over 40 plants, they concluded that this rigidly efficient process enables flexibility through close monitoring and continuous, controlled experiments. Shifting from auto workers to knowledge workers, Robertson and Swan's (2003) case study investigated similar tensions among scientists. Their findings suggest the value of a strong culture that accepts ambiguity in roles, practices and power relations. Using rich, qualitative data, they illustrate, for instance, of how this culture helped the scientists achieve a consensus that there will be no consensus.

Paradox as a Theoretical Framework for Exploring Organizational Tensions

A third use of a paradox lens is as a more comprehensive, theoretical framework. As noted previously, this meta-theory suggests central concepts, the nature of their interrelationships and ideal outcomes that can serve as building blocks for more specific theories of organizational tensions. For instance, Ofori-Dankwa and Julian (2004) applied the framework to propose the value of diversity and similarities curves. Their work unpacks the focal paradoxes, tensions between work/play and job stress/task creativity, then explores their dynamic interplay through sophisticated modeling. Huxham and Beech (2003) theorized how paradoxical understandings of organizational tensions might foster reflective managerial strategies that enable virtuous cycles of learning. Huy (2001) applied a paradox perspective to examine tensions fueling change, accentuating the trying yet vital role of middle managers as change agents. His work suggests that clinging too tightly to singular intervention approaches or swinging between opposing variations may spur vicious cycles. Rather, more effective efforts involve divergent intervention types, mindfully sequenced, timed and paced. Such efforts, however, demand that middle managers build understanding of and comfort with paradoxes that typically raise anxiety.

Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003) offers an interesting, hybrid exemplar. Their work begins by leveraging paradox as a strategy for theorizing. Rather than fuel the long-standing debate between agency and stewardship theories, a paradox lens shifts the question from "which lens provides the more insightful account of governance?" to "what are the dangers of overemphasis control (agency) or collaboration (stewardship)?" They then elaborate resulting insights using paradox as a theoretical framework. Following the flow of their conceptual study, they begin by polarizing governance theories to reflect an orientation of either control (agency theory) or of collaboration (stewardship theory). Contrasting these divergent theories accentuates different base assumptions about human nature. The former stresses human tendencies toward opportunism and the value of extrinsic motivation, while the latter accentuates human desires for cooperation and the benefits of intrinsic motivation. Yet each theory also highlights dangers of the other. Such insights helped the researchers theorize why vicious cycles ensue if governance is driven by either orientation alone. In conjunction, a paradox lens enabled a more holistic and thought-provoking view of human nature and corporate governance.

DISCUSSION

A paradox perspective has the potential to address interwoven organizational challenges, inspire creative theory development and suggest effective both/and management strategies. The past two decades have seen uses of paradox become increasingly plentiful, varied and sophisticated. Early advocates called for organization researchers to move beyond paradox as a simple label, accentuating its value as a guiding perspective (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987). Today, paradox studies have accumulated rapidly, canvassing disparate topics, theories, and levels of analysis.

The versatility of a paradox lens poses opportunities and challenges for this burgeoning research community and to help researchers offer complex insight into real world problems. Such eclecticism supports claims that a paradox perspective enables creative, provocative and relevant theory building and research. Yet there has been little unifying its advocates and exemplars. Indeed, the field resembles Wenger and Snyder's (2000) paradox of communities of practice. As such communities build through common interests and viewpoints, their efforts can enable novel insights along varied tangents. To fully leverage their possibilities, however, requires efforts to identify bonding commonalities. It is with this goal of creating unity while fostering diversity that we sought to focus this lens, while widening its scope.

We began this paper by juxtaposing paradox and contingency perspectives. Coming full circle, we propose that paradox enables the next generation of organizing and management theory. Rather than seeking the most effective strategy under a given set of conditions, a paradox perspective explores the simultaneous and ongoing engagement with competing forces. Our earliest theories asked, "Is it best to use A or B?" Contingency theory then posed the question, "Under what conditions do we choose A or B?" A paradox perspective, in contrast, now asks "How can we support both A and B simultaneously?"

The increased adoption of a paradox perspective may further reflect the increased exposure of Western traditions to Eastern principles. A paradox approach may be relatively new to organizational theorizing, but it is far not novel. Paradoxical principles of engaging and supporting contradictions simultaneously underlie basic religious tenets in Eastern religions and intellectual heritages. Taoism, Buddhism, and Zen embrace concepts of contradictions, implied within the notion of the yin/yang, or the concept of a koen – a saying that defies rational logic. These traditions contrast sharply with Western religious and intellectual heritage. Judeo-

Christian beliefs revolve around a single deity. Aristotelian logic presumes the search for a single 'Truth', with tensions reflecting limitations of the searcher rather than a feature of the system.

Finally, acceptance of a growing breadth of methodologies in organizational theory make paradoxical phenomenon and studies more accessible. Dominant methodologies used in organizational studies can obscure paradoxical insights. Traditional quantitative statistical approaches focus on mean tendencies and continua-based concepts that minimize researchers' experience of tensions. In contrast, more complex, non-linear approaches enable researchers to surface and address paradoxical tensions. As one option, configurational analysis describes constellations of variables, and how multiple dimensions and their relationship impact outcomes (Fiss, 2007; Ragin 1987). Applying these methods to paradox studies offers greater insight into complex interactions between contradictory tensions in a system. Paradox studies can also adopt methods that focus on outcome variability, stressing extremes and inviting multiple varied factors impacting those outcomes (Baum & McKelvey, 2006). Alternative methods further including a broad array of qualitative approaches, which expose tensions and explore managerial strategies. By engaging rich contextual variables, and providing in depth insight into dynamic processes, qualitative studies can surface interwoven tensions across levels of analysis (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith & Lewis, 2011), and depict the dynamic and mutually constituative relationship between alternative poles of a paradox (Jarzabkowski, 2008; Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011).

These phenomenological, intellectual and methodological tendencies not only describe increasing adoption of a paradox perspective, but suggest that this trend will only increase over time. Our organizations and their environments will continue to increase in complexity. Globalization will continue to infuse alternative intellectual and philosophical heritages into our

predominantly Western organizational theorizing. Alternative methodological approaches will continue to increase in breadth and specificity. These factors not only suggest the increased adoption of paradoxical perspectives. They further suggest that our theories may be heading in an era beyond contingency theory. Not only will a paradox perspective enable new and more insightful theoretical insights and managerial prescriptions, but we may be doing a disservice to our field, to our theories and to practitioners if we neglect paradoxical approaches.

Implications for Future Theory and Theorizing

The articulation of paradox as a meta-theoretical perspective attempts to provoke new questions in our field, and unify these explorations across multiple and varied domains. As a meta-theory, we sharpened the focus by articulating core elements, namely underlying assumptions, central concepts, the nature of interrelationships, and boundary conditions. We propose these as 'walking sticks' to help unify and guide future the practice of paradox research. We also hope these ideas encourage and invite reactions, response and alternatives, as well as nuances in their application.

We then widened the scope of the paradox perspective, demonstrating how this guide might energize creative theorizing, explicate both/and challenges, and provide a theoretical frame. These ideas set the groundwork for how paradox can inform organizational theory more broadly. A paradox perspective may offer insights as other theoretical domains grapple with the simultaneously presence of contradictory, yet interrelated phenomenon. For example, institutional theory increasingly explores the nature and implications of addressing multiple logics at both the societal level (Friedland & Alford, 1991) and the organizational level (Pache & Santos, 2010; Pache & Santos, Forthcoming). Identity theory seeks to understand how organizations cope with multiple, competing identities (i.e. Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

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Structuration theory posits a dynamic, mutually constitutive relationship between structure and actions (Giddens, 1984). At a more micro level, motivation theories seek to understand the simultaneously experience of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators, while seeking to understand the ironic self-benefits from giving to others (Grant, 2013). By delineating paradox as a meta-theory, we hope this lens can more fruitfully inform how other theories understand the nature and management of tensions. Similarly, such theories have much to offer paradox, as new challenges emerge to understand the dynamic and persistent nature of tensions.

Implications for Practice

Increasingly complex environments continually surface tensions for leaders and employees. Adopting a both/and approach to these tensions may foster virtuous cycles of peak and sustained performance. Studies of paradox therefore prescribe various strategies to enable leaders and employees to more effectively accept and engage paradoxical tensions. One approach suggests reframing problems from an either/or to a both/and (Bartunek, 1988). Research points to Toyota as an exemplar, suggesting that their management frames strategy as embracing contradictions (Osono et al., 2008), and solves problems by seeking to accommodate inconsistences (Eisenhardt & Westcott, 1988). Other studies encourage managers to live with paradox, by surfacing and acknowledging the tensions (Murnighan & Conlon, 1991; Smith & Berg, 1987). Luscher and Lewis (2008) find that leaders at Lego live with tensions by finding a 'workable certainty', a strategy to raise and acknowledge tensions, without resolutions. A paradox metatheory provide a complex lens for researchers to offer greater insight into these phenomenological dynamics.

Adopting a paradox perspective challenges researchers to further consider their messages to practitioners. What would it mean to teach our students about paradoxes? Doing so would

implore our colleagues who write textbooks to consider including this theoretical frame in their textbooks. Similarly, each of us who teach could explore how to engage our students with tensions of structures, strategies, identities and cognition. Indeed, this perspective further raises questions about the nature of leadership. What does it take for a leader to engage paradoxes in a complex organization? Previous research has pointed to two distinguishing features of individuals able to engage paradox – cognitive complexity (Suedfeld, Tetlock, & Streufert, 1992) which involves the capabilities to see integrative strategies and behavioral complexity (Denison, Hooijberg, & Quinn, 1995) the ability to adopt contradictory managerial behaviors as needed. Are there other features that enable leaders to engage paradoxes? Can these features be taught (i.e. Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012), and if so, how?

CONCLUDING NOTE

A paradox perspective shifts a fundamental assumption in organizational theory. Traditional theory relies on rational, logical, and linear approaches, whereas a paradox perspective emerges from the surprising, counterintuitive and tense. Traditional organizational theory assumes that scientific processes can uncover truth, and that our prescriptions for managers emanate from these truths. A paradox perspective assumes that understandings emerge over time, created from the juxtaposition of opposing forces and focused via actors' cognitions and social constructions. Not only are we proposing new theoretical tools and constructs, but a fundamental rethinking of the assumptions underlying organizational theory. We believe that such transformational shifts will result in greater insight and more relevant prescriptions. We hope too that they will create intellectual connections across a broader community of scholars engaging with organizational tensions.

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Table 1: Meta-theoretical Perspectives on Organizational Tensions

Perspective	Contingency	Paradox
Theoretical Foundations	Galbraith, 1973 Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967 Woodward, 1965	Cameron & Quinn, 1988 Lewis, 2000 Smith & Berg, 1987
Approach to Tensions	Discrete organizational problems to be solved	Ubiquitous and persistent forces that challenge and fuel long-term success
Core Premise	Fit – alignment of managerial decisions and contingencies positively affects performance	Coexistence – acceptance and engagement enable actors to live and thrive with tensions
Overarching Question	*Under what conditions either A or B?*	*How to engage both A and B simultaneously?*
Mindset	If-Then Formal Logic; Rational Decision Making	Both-And Paradoxical Thinking; Holistic and Dynamic Decision Making

Illustrative Exemplars	Exploration-Exploitation
	    Separate by time (e.g., Tushman & Romanelli, 1985) or location (e.g., Rosenbloom & Christensen, 1994)
	
	Learning-Performance Orientations
	    Choice emphasis depending on contextual conditions (e.g., Dweck, 1986)
		Exploration-Exploitation
		    Ambidexterity through structure (e.g., Tushman & Smith, 2002), contextual supports (e.g., Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), and dynamic capabilities (e.g., Gilbert, 2006; Teece, et. al. 1997)
		
		Learning-Performance Orientations
		    Dual orientations key to long-term success in teams (e.g., Van Der Vegt & Bunderson, 2004) and organizations (e.g., Ghoshal & Bartell, 1994)

Table 2: Sharpening the Focus – A Guide for Paradox Theory and Research

Core Elements	View from a Paradox Perspective
Underlying Assumptions	**Nature of Organizational Tensions**: Organizational life is inherently tenuous, given the interplay among complex, dynamic and ambiguous systems (e.g., human beings, teams, organizations, society). **Construction of Paradoxes**: Tensions are cognitively and socially constructed as paradoxical when actors polarize elements, ignoring or masking their interdependence.

Central Concepts	**Focal Paradox(es)**: Contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 382).
	
	 Actors' Responses
	   Defensive: Cognitive, behavioral, or institutional resistances that seek to temporarily avoid or reduce the negative affect of tensions.
	   Strategic: Management strategies that seek to engage competing forces.
	 Ideal Outcomes: Embracing tensions enables peak performance and sustainability in an ongoing, iterative process.

Nature of Interrelationships	**Reinforcing Cycles: Central concepts linked via iterative dynamics**
	   Vicious Cycles: Defensive reactions to paradoxes involves emphasizing one pole, fueling pressure from its opposing force, resulting in a downward spiral
	   Virtuous Cycles: Embracing and accepting paradox sparks creativity, and learning, fueling synergies that enable systems to thrive among tensions

Boundary Conditions	**Complexity:** Paradox theory applies more when organizations are more complex depending on environmental conditions or firm factors such as age and size. **Goals:** Paradox theory applies more when organizations seek multiple goals.