A Practice-based Perspective on Paradox
Studying Strategic Tensions

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Paradox theory

Studies elements that are contradictory, interdependent and enduring

Practice theory

Social Construction
Everyday Practices
Consequentiality
Relationality

(Lê & Bednarek, forthcoming)

Studies the social realm as a nexus of doings and sayings.

“A principle of practice theory is [...] recognition of the inherent relationship between elements that have often been treated dichotomously [...] practice theory [thus] enables scholars to theorize the dynamic constitution of dualities” (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011: 1242)
Starting Point: Work at the Intersection

- Beech et al. (2004)
- Lüscher & Lewis (2008)
- Abdallah, Denis & Langley (2011)
- Jarzabkowski, Lê & Van de Ven (2013)
- Jay (2013)
- Smith (2014)
- Dorset & Dameron (2014)
- Jarzabkowski & Lê (forthcoming)
- Lê & Bednarek (forthcoming)
- Bednarek, Paroutis & Sillince (forthcoming)
- Knight & Paroutis (forthcoming)
PDW Schedule

1. Panel presentations / discussion (20 mins)
   • Wendy Smith, Eero Vaara & Ann Langley

2. Round-table discussions (45 mins)
   • Conversation, questions, advice
   • Task: Generate one question for the final panel

3. Concluding panel & conversations (35 mins)
   • Wendy Smith, Eero Vaara & Andy Van de Ven
   • Summary of questions & insights raised in round-tables
Our Esteemed Panellists

• **Wendy Smith**, Paradox theory
  *Associate Professor Delaware University*

• **Eero Vaara**, Practice theory & SAP
  *Professor Aalto University*

• **Ann Langley**, Paradox, practice & process
  *Professor HEC Montréal*
Roundtable Hosts

Eero Vaara, Aalto University School of Business
Rebecca Bednarek, Birkbeck, University of London
Mathew Sheep, Illinois State University
David Oliver, University of Sydney
Wendy Smith, Delaware University
Alexander Zimmermann, University of St. Gallen
Ann Langley, HEC Montréal
Callen Anthony, Boston College
Natalie Slawinski, Memorial University of Newfoundland
Garima Sharma, Ivey Business School, Western University
Our Esteemed Panellists

- **Wendy Smith**, Paradox theory
  Associate Professor Delaware University
- **Eero Vaara**, Strategy-as-practice
  Professor Aalto University School of Business
- **Andy Van de Ven**, Paradox, dialectics & process
  Professor University of Minnesota
Connecting with Paradox Scholars/Scholarship

- Scholarship
  - Organization Studies Special Issue on Paradox – Forthcoming; papers online
  - OUP Handbook of Organizational Paradox – Forthcoming 2017

- Communication/Connection
  - Email Newsletter – “Tensions and Mentions” (email Camille.pradies@edhec.edu)
  - LinkedIn – Paradox Theory Group
  - COMING SOON – Organizational Paradox Blog (see Eric Knight)

- Conferences
  - EGOS Standing Working Group
    - 2017 – Paradox and Emotions – Russ Vince, Camille Pradies, Wendy Smith
  - AOM 2016
    - See LinkedIn Group or email Camille Pradies for details on this year’s conference
    - “Drinking With Tensions” Sunday 4-5:30; Brewberry Café (see Garima)

Wanna add here? Email Camille if you have other news.
DYNAMIC DECISION MAKING: A MODEL OF SENIOR LEADERS MANAGING STRATEGIC PARADOXES

WENDY K. SMITH
University of Delaware

Senior leaders increasingly embed paradoxes into their organization's strategy, but struggle to manage them effectively. To better understand how they do so, I compared in-depth qualitative data from six top management teams exploring and exploiting simultaneously. The results informed a model of dynamic decision making in which strategic paradoxes can be effectively engaged. The details of this dynamic decision-making model extend and complicate our understanding of managing paradoxes by depicting dilemmas and paradoxes as interwoven, explicating a consistently inconsistent pattern of addressing tensions, and framing both differentiating and integrating practices as necessary for engaging paradox.

The senior leaders say it is a bitch to manage these two types of businesses. It takes a great deal of time, and they know there will be great outcomes, but they will not see them for 12–24 months. They say it's like brushing your teeth—you've got to do it...
Hargrave and Van de Ven, “Integrating dialectical and paradox perspectives on managing contradictions in organizations.” (Org Studies, forthcoming)

Contradictory AND Interdependent

- persistent
- dynamic
- processual
- nested
- interwoven
PARADOX AND PRACTICE

- How do our practices surface paradoxical tensions
  Putnam, 1986; Putnam, et.al. 2016; Le and Jarzabkowski, forthcoming

- How do our practices respond to paradoxical tensions?
  Smith, 2014; Knight, forthcoming

- What is paradoxical about practices?
  i.e. structuration; structure and agency; see Giddens, see Van de Ven and Poole, 1989

- What is NOT paradoxical about practice?
Current state-of-affairs in practice theory: Strategy-as-practice as a case in point

Eero Vaara
What is SAP?

- Strategy-as-practice (SAP) research as an increasingly popular movement
- Empirical interest in how strategy work is actually conducted
- Theories of practice in the background (e.g., Giddens, Foucault, Bourdieu)
- Focus on the enabling and constraining aspects of organizational and strategic practices
Where are we now?

- Focus on uncovering practices that play a key role in strategy work
- Proliferation of research on discursive practices
- Increasing interest in sociomaterial practices (e.g. frameworks and strategy tools)
- Less attention on the combinations or entwinement of various practices (e.g., bundles of practices or genres)
- Little understanding of tensions in and around various practices
- Relatively little work on how organizational members deal with dilemmas and paradoxes
Opportunities for future research

• Political processes and dynamics in strategy work (e.g. to uncover tensions)
• Reproduction and transformation of practices over time
• Dialectical models of strategy-making (e.g. to understand how different interests and views may be reconciled over time)
• Dialogical processes in strategy work (e.g. to understand how multiple views may coexist)
• Productive role of tensions and resistance
Cross-Over Opportunities between Paradox and Practice

Ann Langley, HEC Montréal
AoM 2016
Strong recommendation

“Paradox in Everyday Practice”: Applying Practice Theoretical Principles to Paradox

• Jane Lê, The University of Sydney Business School
• Rebecca Bednarek, Birkbeck, University of London


• Focus on four practice theoretical principles: (1) social construction; (2) micro-activities; (3) consequentiality; (4) relationality
Typical way of crossing paradox and practice in empirical research

• Focus research on “practices” associated with “managing” or dealing with paradoxes (or other kinds of tensions)

• Examples:
  • Smith (AMJ, 2014): Both “differentiating” and “integrating” leadership practices necessary to sustain exploitation and exploration simultaneously
  • Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke & Spee (AMJ, 2015): Three kinds of practices (“segmenting,” “bridging,” “demarcating”) used by reinsurance underwriters to work with market and community logics (competition vs. collaboration between underwriters)

Notice:

• The practices described can be seen as managing the paradox but also as somehow “enacting” paradox
• From “managing paradox” to “paradox as practice”
Two concerns: (1) Paradox as “real” vs. socially constructed

• Who is seeing paradox?
  • Is it the researcher?
  • Is it the participants we study?

• The dangers of reifying paradox in research
  • Are we constructing separation and then constructing bridges to cross it? Do the problems we study come from the participants or from ourselves?

• Suggestion
  • Listen more to our respondents
  • Consider paradox and its analysis as a potentially useful way for respondents to discursively and practically construct their world
Two concerns: (2) Paradox/ dialectics as tragedy, romance or epic

- What kinds of narratives are we telling with a paradox perspective?
  - Tragic stories (vicious cycles)
  - Romantic stories (virtuous both/and management)
  - Epic stories (never-ending stories)

- Dangers of the romantic perspective
  - Assumes “managers” of paradox are outside the paradox and can “manage” them
  - Assumes an endpoint

- Suggestion: the value of an epic perspective
  - need to look at practices over much longer time periods;
  - both/and not as a virtuous cycle but very fragile equilibrium;
  - managers as inside not outside paradox;
  - need to look at unintended consequences;
Example: Abdallah, Denis & Langley (JOCM, 2011): “Having your CAKE and eating it too: DISCOURSES OF TRANSCENDENCE and their role in organizational change dynamics”