

Researching the lived experience of organisational paradox through contradictions and tensions, and its impact on organisational life

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Project description:

Many studies acknowledge the prevalence of paradox, tensions and contradictions in organisational life (e.g., Farjoun et al., 2010; Kourti, 2021; Ngoasong et al., 2021; Putman et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016). Paradoxes are defined as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382), and are constituted by tensions and contradictions that arise between different sides of the paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In organisation studies, the application of a paradox lens entails examining how multiple, seemingly contradictory forces coexist, and exploring relevant implications for the organisation (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Global competition, fast-changing business contexts and environmental complexity bring to the surface the paradoxes, tensions and contradictions that organisational members experience in their everyday work practices, and intensify the complicated task of management and success.

The primary focus of the project will be on enriching paradox knowledge within organisational studies and contributing to the understanding of practical implications in contexts, including but not limited to:

- paradox of embeddedness as applied in studies in entrepreneurship
- managing paradoxes in public service collaborations
- sustaining paradoxes where there are conflicting organisational objectives

Project aim:

Even though some organisational paradoxes have been explored, there is still a lot to be learnt regarding how organisational members experience and respond to paradoxes, tensions and contradictions, and the impact that these have on their work and the organisation. The aim of the project is to research the lived experience of organisational paradox through its related tensions and contradictions, and explore the impact it plays on organisational life.

Some possible areas of inquiry could include but are not limited to:

- How do members engage with paradox in dynamic organisational/collaborative settings where they must understand and work with contradictions and tensions that arise over complex demands?

- What is the role of paradoxes, tensions and contradictions for the success or failure of enterprises?
- How can organisations/collaborations navigate paradoxes to achieve a positive outcome?
- Are organisational paradoxes inherent (existing within the organisation) and/or socially constructed (created by the actors)?
- Under what conditions are paradoxes latent (existing paradoxes that are not manifested yet) or become salient (latent paradoxes that become manifested)?

Theoretical perspectives:

There are different ways to approach the study of paradoxes and tensions and the prospective students will be encouraged to explore an approach that works for their study context. The dialectics tradition considers opposing elements as a thesis and an antithesis, emphasising changes that lead to a unified synergy -a synthesis- between paradoxical alternatives (Benson, 1977; Putman et al., 2016). The duality tradition stresses an interdependent relationship between contradictory elements and looks at the interplay between these elements as mutually constituted and ontologically inseparable (Farjoun, 2010). On the other hand, the paradox tradition explores how contradictory and interrelated elements co-exist, persist over time and affect the attainment of organisational objective (Smith and Lewis, 2011). This definition illustrates the main paradoxical elements that each paradox incorporates: contradiction; interdependence; persistence and tensions (Schad et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis; 2013).

Proposed methodology:

Applicants will adopt a qualitative methodology, but we are particularly keen to consider proposals that adopt an ethnographic approach. Ethnography requires researchers to be present and being embedded in the context of their study. We are keen for the prospective student to combine a range of participant observations, focus group and open interview methods of data collection into their ethnographic analysis (e.g. Kourti, 2021; Bloomfield, 2021). Recent developments in digitisation and remote working also opens up new opportunities conducting ethnography online. We welcome applications to study paradoxes in virtual/online organisations, communities or environments.

About the Supervisors:

Isidora Kourti is a Lecturer in Management in the Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise at the Open University. Over the past 8 years Isidora has built a strong research profile located within the tradition of the social psychology of organisations, and follows a processual and practice-based study of organisations and organising. Her research has focused on exploring the impact of dynamic working conditions, paradoxes and tensions on employees and working practices. Isidora uses primarily qualitative, ethnographic methodologies while she is also experienced in digital ethnography.

Sarah Bloomfield is a Lecturer in work-based learning in the Department of People and Organisations at the Open University. Sarah's research focuses on how organisational

contradictions are lived, and the impact those contradictions have on leadership, behaviour and organisation. She is also interested in how individual and collective effectiveness can be improved in the workplace, recognising that each work situation is unique. Sarah uses engaged methods of research, and has a published book chapter on employing an ethnographic methodology within organisational research.

Michael Ngoasong is a Senior Lecturer in Management in the Department of Public Leadership and Social Enterprise at the Open University. His research interest is in entrepreneurship and international partnerships involving private, public and community collaborations in disadvantaged communities. Key publications relevant to this studentship include the paradox of embeddedness in women's entrepreneurship (*Journal of Small Business Management*), how subsidiary managers of western MNEs manage tensions when implementing global business models (*Management and Organisation Review*) and how global health partnerships influence access to healthcare (*Health Policy and Practice*) in developing and transforming economies.

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