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Unleashing the Creative Potential of Research Tensions: Toward A Paradox Approach to Methods

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**Unleashing the Creative Potential of Research Tensions:
Toward a Paradox Approach to Methods**

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Unleashing the Creative Potential of Research Tensions: Toward a Paradox Approach to Methods

ABSTRACT

Research is a paradoxical process. Scholars confront conflicting yet interwoven pressures, considering methodologies that engage complexity and simplicity, induction and deduction, novelty and continuity, and more. Paradox theory offers insights that embrace such tensions, providing empirical examples that harness creative friction to foster more novel and useful, rigorous and relevant research. Leveraging this lens, we open a conversation on research tensions, developing the foundations of a Paradox Approach to Methods applicable to organization studies more broadly. To do so, we first identify tensions raised at six methodological decision points: research scope, construct definition, underlying assumptions, data collection, data analysis and interpretation. Second, we build on paradox theory to identify navigating practices: accepting, differentiating, integrating, and knotting. By doing so, we contribute to organizational research broadly by embracing methods tensions to advance scholarly insight.

Keywords: Methodological tensions, paradox theory, empirical research methods

**Unleashing the Creative Potential of Research Tensions:
Toward a Paradox Approach to Methods**

Research is imbued with tensions that empower and vex scholars. According to Turner and colleagues (2017), tensions arise, in part, because methods are naturally limited. Research necessarily abstracts complex reality; methodological decisions determining what phenomena, data and approaches are excluded, as well as included. Quantitative researchers grapple with needs for simplicity vs. complexity and explanatory reach vs. specificity. Qualitative scholars face demands for data collection that aids greater proximity to vs. distance from informants (Hoffman, 2021; Langley & Klag, 2019), and for data analysis that applies more structured vs. holistic heuristics (Köhler et al., 2022; Langley & Abdallah, 2011). Woolley and Fuchs (2011) find that such tensions can fuel knowledge evolution in organization science, spurring innovation within and across studies. Yet conflicting pressures can also compel counterproductive tradeoffs, pitting specificity against creativity, data against theory, accuracy against generality (Sutton & Staw, 1995). Enabling scholarly innovation while building trusted knowledge requires methodological approaches to surface these tug-of-wars and effectively navigate these tensions.

To aid navigation efforts, we turn to paradox theory. This lens examines the nature, challenges and management of tensions (see Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016; Sparr et al., 2022). Paradox theory offers a generative, yet structured approach (Lê & Bednarek, 2017), in search of creative balancing and transcendent integration (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Further, existing scholarship offers empirical examples that apply paradox insights. Attuned to tensions, several paradox scholars have turned the lens on their own research tensions and resulting decisions (e.g., Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2017; Clegg, Pina e Cunha & Berti, 2022; Fairhurst & Putnum, 2019). For example, Langley and Klag (2019) address tensions of closeness and distance in

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4 qualitative methods. Instead of championing a single approach, they surface the underlying
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6 paradox and apply synergistic practices across the competing demands. Further, paradox
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8 scholars tap into wide ranging epistemologies and methodologies, rendering tensions in their
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10 own research particularly salient (Smith et al., 2017a, 2017b).
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14 Leveraging this lens, we lay foundations toward a Paradox Approach to Methods, expanding a
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16 conversation on research tensions across organization studies. Our goal is not to adjudicate
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18 specific methodological debates. Rather, we offer a basis from which organizational scholars
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20 may further a mindset, process and practices for ‘working through’ research tensions to unleash
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22 their creative potential (i.e., Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). First, we review research tensions and
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24 paradox theory’s insights into their challenges, value and navigation. Next we explicate our
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26 development of the paradox approach using empirical paradox examples, expert interviews,
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28 and case studies. We then present the Paradox Approach to Methods, unpacking tensions that
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30 surface at six methodological decision points: research scope, construct definition, underlying
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32 assumptions, data collection, data analysis and interpretation. To aid navigation, we illustrate
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34 practices of *accepting* the paradoxical nature of tensions, *differentiating and integrating* their
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36 competing demands, and *knotting* methodological decisions across tensions.
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43 A Paradox Approach to Methods can unleash the creative potential of tensions. Toward this
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45 aim, we, first, contribute generative yet structured practices that help scholars across
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47 organizational studies navigate tensions of research, namely accepting, differentiating and
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49 integrating, and knotting research tensions. Applying a paradox lens to organizational methods
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51 helps scholars reframe tensions from obstacles into opportunities. In doing so, scholars shift
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53 from viewing decisions as singular, linear choices to be adjudicated toward engaging
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55 conflicting interdependencies that persist over time (Berti et al., 2021). Doing so can enable
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57 creativity (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011) and spark methodological innovation (e.g., Lê &
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Schmid, 2022). Second, we offer guidance for authors and reviewers to further nurture diverse, novel and rigorous methods. Our paper invites scholars and reviewers to embrace methodological diversity within literatures and fields, offering guidance to apply these varied practices with rigor. Methodological diversity, when applied with thoughtful consideration, can enable study and field-level creativity. Yet authors and reviewers need to ensure quality and alignment. Our paper offers guidance to do so, unleashing creativity with rigor. Finally, our paper offers a comprehensive, integrative insight across methodological decisions. Extant methods scholarship pinpoints specific challenges at particular decision points in the research process. Instead, we enable scholars to zoom out and consider the alignment across all decision points. Taken together, this Paradox Approach to Methods advances organizational methods toward more creative, insightful scholarship (Fairhurst et al., 2016; Lê & Schmid, 2022; Schad et al., 2016).

RESEARCH TENSIONS AND PARADOX THEORY

Scholarly methods inherently embed tensions. To aid rigor that creates and extends knowledge, research necessarily and paradoxically ‘flattens’ the multidimensional, dynamic and messy phenomena being studied. Tensions arise as scholars make methodological decisions among competing demands, delimiting what is ‘in’ and ‘out’ (Turner et al, 2017). For example, early stages invite questions about the specificity versus complexity of research scope. Specificity enables more targeted, reliable and valid constructs, measurements and analysis, but results in less generalizable applications. Engaging with greater phenomenological complexity expands impact and insights, but requires more abstracted approaches and crude measurements. Similarly, as scholars enter the field, they grapple with choices among qualitative and quantitative data, emic or etic approaches, inductive or deductive analysis. Interpreting data generates tensions between advancing or challenging existing insights. Research tensions

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4 become particularly salient as scholars draw on varied paradigms or disciplines, where varied
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6 underlying assumptions, epistemologies and ontologies often directly clash with one another
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8 (i.e. Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Yet such tensions pervade scholarship, challenging authors
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10 throughout the research process.
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14 Early scholarship encouraged researchers to view these tensions as either/or tradeoffs (Turner
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16 et al., 2017), choosing between alternatives to ensure study-level alignment and field-level
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18 consistency. Foundational multiparadigm and interdisciplinary scholarship, as example,
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20 depicts alternative approaches as incommensurable (Lewis & Grimes, 1999). Authors and
21
22 reviewers reinforce convergence - a sharpening and narrowing of accumulating knowledge -
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24 as past experiences reinforce uses of more predominant approaches. Doing so enables clarity,
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26 yet can be limiting and problematic. Over time theoretical fields and disciplines become tied
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28 to specific methodological choices, enabling convergence but minimizing creativity and
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30 expansion. Similarly, construct clarity fosters knowledge accumulation, but can limit novelty
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32 and imagination.
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38 Paradox theory has proven a useful aid for navigating tensions broadly, inviting scholars to
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40 apply these insights to enhance methodological creativity (e.g., Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2017;
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42 Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Langley & Klag, 2019; Lewis & Grimes, 1999). Paradox denotes
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44 “contradictory yet interdependent elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time”
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46 (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). While paradox insights are ancient (see Keller et al., 2021),
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48 applications in organizational studies have intensified over recent decades (see Putnam et al.,
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50 2016; Schad et al., 2016). As a ‘big tent’ theory, scholars study paradox across phenomena,
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52 disciplines, paradigms and levels of analysis, applying methodological diversity that often
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54 amplifies their experience of research tensions (Bednarek et al., 2021a, 2021b). For example,
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56 some scholars have applied in depth, inductive data to study systemic tensions embedded in
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interorganizational relationships (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022). Others apply deductive, experimental approaches to understand individual and team-level tensions (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Miron-Spektor et al., 2022).

Paradox theory investigates the double-edged sword of tensions (see Lewis & Smith, 2022). Scholars find that the emotional and cognitive discomfort of tensions can raise defenses that trigger paralysis, polarization and intractable conflict (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Vince & Broussine, 1996). Yet tensions can also spark innovation, learning and change (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). Unleashing this creative potential, however, requires careful navigation. Paradox theory invites scholars to surface and value underlying research tensions as a source of generative creativity.

Understanding paradoxical tensions as both inherent to systems and socially constructed by actors (Hahn & Knight, 2021; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023), paradox theorists identify several keys to navigating tensions (see Smith & Lewis, 2011). Some call for a mindset shift, enabling acceptance of tensions and their paradoxical nature. Lüscher & Lewis (2008) find that a process of questioning one’s underlying assumptions aids a cognitive and emotional shift. Moving from either/or dilemmas toward more holistic, circular, both/and thinking, actors come to accept tensions as natural, even beneficial, and gain comfort in their discomfort. Developing a paradox mindset measure, Miron-Spektor and colleagues (2018) find benefits for those having a greater awareness of tensions and propensity to lean into their positive potential. Others investigate a practice of differentiating and integrating (e.g., Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smets et al., 2015, Smith, 2014), diving deeply into the opposing poles of tensions. In tandem, differentiating serves to accentuate each pole’s distinctive value, while integrating seeks to identify their paradoxical links. Building from paradox studies, Smith and Lewis (2022) stress that tensions are knotted and interwoven (see also Sheep et al., 2017a; Jarzabkowski et al.,

2022), often requiring intentional variation among decisions. Described as consistent inconsistency, they use a ‘tightrope walking’ metaphor (Lewis & Smith, 2022) . Iteratively leaning toward one pole then another, within guardrails to avoid trapping extremes, aids progression toward an overarching vision.

Valuing this approach to navigating tensions, scholars have applied a paradox lens inward toward addressing research tensions, suggesting that ‘navigating paradox is paradoxical’ (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Smith & Lewis, 2022). Indeed, early scholars championed a paradox approach to organizational theorizing (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). More recently, scholars applied this lens to examine specific methodological decisions. Andriopoulos and Gotsi (2017) introduced methodological insights for scholars studying paradox, inviting awareness of research tensions in core constructs and ontologies. Langlely and Klag (2019) drew on a paradox lens to unpack tensions between engagement and disengagement in inductive, qualitative research, which they label as the involvement paradox. Bartunek and Rynes (2014) invoke paradox theory to surface and navigate research tensions between academics and practitioners.

Building from these insights, we develop the foundations of a more comprehensive Paradox Approach to Methods. Our approach extends existing work in several ways. First, rather than narrow our focus on a particular challenge, we introduce a broad-based approach. Doing so allows us to offer insights into navigating specific tensions, while also exploring how varied tensions intertwine across a research project. Second, even as we draw on paradox exemplars to illustrate our approach, our insights apply to scholarship across organizational studies. Even as a method or theory may tend to surface particular tensions, we argue that a paradox lens can apply across all of these research tensions. As such, we aim toward a paradox approach agnostic to theory, method or ontology.

METHODS

To understand the nature and navigation of research tensions, we integrated empirical induction and extant theory (Tracy, 2013). Beginning with an awareness of research tensions from theory, we sought empirical examples to explore specific methodological tensions and responses. Next, we interviewed scholars to understand their experiences with these tensions and then focused on two key papers - one qualitative and one quantitative - helping identify practices for weaving together approaches across tensions. Linking empirical evidence with existing paradox theory aided explication of specific research tensions and navigation practices across tensions. As an important note, we examined empirical paradox studies to sharpen our focus and serve as exemplars. Paradox research, however, is emblematic, not exceptional, in terms of research tensions, fitting our methodological aims yet not limiting our goal of initiating an approach valued well beyond paradox scholarship.

Data collected

We examined empirical papers to explore how scholars navigated research tensions. To enable comparison across exemplars, we sought papers that share a theoretical lens (Eisenhardt, 1989). Paradox theory offered a valued research setting for empirical examples for two reasons. First, as a ‘big tent’ theory (Lewis & Smith, 2022), studies canvas an exceptional array of phenomena and methodologies (Bednarek et al., 2021b). Such diversity helps inform a more generalizable approach across methods, while their common theoretical lens aids study comparisons. Second, paradox scholars are acutely aware of tensions, increasingly stressing their value in the research process and discussing their navigation in community forums (Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2017). Therefore, paradox studies inform our proposed approach through both theory and empirical examples. In our discussion, we generalize our approach across theories to apply our insights

to organizational scholarship broadly. We drew on three data sources: reviewing empirical paradox studies, interviewing scholarly experts, and leveraging two case studies.

Empirical paradox studies. Following Langley and Klag (2019) and Köhler, Smith and Bhakoo (2022), we first reviewed existing papers, surveying empirical paradox studies broadly in order to identify research tensions. Our sample was not exhaustive, but rather sought illustrative, diverse and insightful examples of methodological challenges and solutions. We began with special issues on paradox in *Organization Studies* (see Smith et al., 2017) and *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* (see Waldman et al., 2019). We further included paradox research in three key organizational journals - *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, and *Organization Science*. We categorized works by their methods (qualitative, quantitative and sub-categories) and levels of analysis. We then selected exemplars (Huff, 1999) to ensure representation across methods and journals (e.g., North American and European, generalist and specialist). For sufficient methodological diversity, we shared our initial sample with 19 paradox experts and asked them to assess the collection for breadth and depth of methods, and contribute any papers in areas they deemed lacking representation. The final result, shown in Table, included 60 empirical exemplars.

Please insert Table about here

Interviewed scholarly experts. To better understand how scholars experienced and navigated research tensions in crafting their research, we engaged experts directly. To select interviewees, we read all 60 papers, then chose five papers (noted in bold in the Table) representing different methods and levels of analysis. We contacted their lead authors, asking for semi-structured expert-conversations on their paper's research question, paradox definitions, assumptions, methods, and contributions (Köhler et al., 2022). Our review of empirical paradox papers

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informed our questions. During interviews, which lasted between 55 to 70 minutes, we encouraged the scholars to describe their ‘backstage’ sensemaking and emotional experiences of research tensions and their navigating practices. Specifically, we interviewed Katsuki Aoki (e.g., Aoki, 2020), Paula Jarzabkowski (e.g., Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), Josh Keller (e.g., Keller et al., 2017), Ella Miron-Spektor (e.g., Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), and Linda Putnam and Gail Fairhurst (e.g., Fairhurst & Putnam, 2019). Two interviewers joined each interview; one guiding the primary questions, the other asking follow-up, probing questions to explore statements further. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Leveraging case studies. We conducted a deeper dive into two research projects to better understand how scholars addressed multiple tensions within one paper. The papers were: (1) ‘We Have To Do This and That? You Must be Joking: Constructing and Responding to Paradox Through Humor’, a qualitative study by Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017), and (2) ‘Culture, Conditions and Paradoxical Frames’, a quantitative study by Keller, Loewenstein, and Yan (2017). These cases were chosen for their contrasting methodologies, aiding generalizability; and for their common publishing in *Organization Studies*, facilitating comparison. We extended our coding and analysis of these papers and our interviews of their lead authors, returning to the lead authors when we had additional questions about their decision choices. Diving deeply into these papers helped us explore how varied tensions and authors’ responses informed methodological decisions across the research process.

Data analysis

The purpose of our data analysis was to identify research tensions, while gaining insights into scholars’ navigation of these challenges. As such, we iterated between existing theory and our emergent findings. Our analysis progressed in three stages.

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4 *Coding Empirical Exemplars.* In the first stage, two co-authors coded the 60 empirical
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6 exemplars. Using a shared spreadsheet, we noted each study's research tensions embedded
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8 within the research question, unit of analysis, ontological assumptions, methods of data
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10 collection and analysis, and contributing literature streams. Initially, we focussed on the
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12 introduction and methods sections of the papers, but later broadened our analysis to the entire
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14 text recognizing the implications of research tensions for other decision points in the paper.
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16 Through our review, we used a shared Excel file to store semi-structured notes and
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18 representative quotes highlighting key tensions. In regular meetings, we discussed our
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20 emerging insights as an author team. We drew on an analysis strategy of using insiders and
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22 outsiders (Gioia et al., 2010; Rerup & Feldman, 2011). The two coding co-authors offered
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24 emerging inductive insights, seeking reactions from the other two co-authors who brought a
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26 lens of paradox theory to inform continued exploration of the data. This iterative process
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28 surfaced recurring tensions at six decision points (e.g. research scope, construct definition,
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30 underlying assumptions, data collection, data analysis and interpretation).
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37 *Analyzing interviews.* In the second stage, we drew on interviews to understand scholars' lived
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39 experience of and response to research tensions. Continuing our insider-outsider iterations, two
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41 co-authors conducted and coded the interviews, leveraging the fresh perspectives of the other
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43 co-authors to discuss insights surfacing across interviews. Informed by the categories that had
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45 emerged from our review of empirical papers, we identified passages that described how
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47 scholars understood and responded to tensions. Our analysis highlighted that, for instance,
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49 managing emic-etic tensions during data collection requires balancing closeness with
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51 objectivity. As example, during an interview, Jarzabkowski described her acceptance that data
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53 collection involves striving for objectivity while acknowledging the inherent subjectivity of
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55 ethnography. We coded this practice as "accepting". By further analyzing the interviews, we
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57 identified two additional, reinforcing practices for navigating the six decision points:
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“differentiating” and “integrating”, which referred to interviewees separately calling out tensional poles (differentiating) and discussing how they combined or linked them (integrating).

Analyzing case studies. In the third stage, we conducted a more comprehensive assessment of tensions and their navigation within two, focal studies (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Keller et al., 2017). Two co-authors re-read these papers and the authors’ interviews, applying our emerging model to assess tensions and navigation practices. They then sought to understand the alignment of decisions across the papers. All the co-authors analyzed these insights as a team and integrated existing literature. Our analysis identified a fourth navigating practice, *knotting* - the dynamic weaving together of entangled, co-occurring tensions (see Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Sheep et al., 2017a). For instance, Jarzabkowski and Le (2017), while navigating the complexities of data collection, discovered humor as a recurring pattern. This discovery spurred the authors to revisit their initial scope, knotting data collection tensions with tensions of research scope enabled an iterative process of alignment.

TOWARD A PARADOX APPROACH TO METHODS

Taken together, our review, interviews and case studies enabled the basis for a Paradox Approach to Methods; a framework toward surfacing and navigating research tensions in organization studies. As illustrated in Figure 1, we came to envision a web of tensions embedded within research projects. Different tensions surface at six methodological decision points regarding research scope, construct definition, underlying assumptions, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation.

Please insert Figure 1 about here

Iterating between paradox theory and our empirical exemplars and interviews helped us identify a process of four, reinforcing practices for navigating research tensions - accepting, differentiating, integrating and knotting (see Figure 2). *Accepting* involves recognizing tensions as paradoxical, posing conflicting yet interdependent demands that raise challenges and opportunities. Surfacing tensions, scholars shift their mindset from either/or tradeoffs to both/and thinking, rendering the tug-of-war workable and triggering more expansive exploration (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). *Differentiating and integrating* work in tandem as dual practices (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith, 2014; Lewis & Smith, 2022). Differentiating entails identifying distinct characteristics of opposing demands in order to value each option. Integrating aims to discover synergies and links across alternatives, exploring how advancing one pole can enable, rather than limit, its opposite. Together differentiating and integrating reinforce one another, helping scholars decide whether to oscillate between opposing demands with ‘consistent inconsistency’ or find a synergistic ‘creative integration’ (Smith, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Finally, through *knotting*, scholars weave together their responses across tensions. Dynamically bringing together entangled, co-occurring tensions, scholars may build creative coherence within a project. To craft a clear and compelling narrative that achieves one’s research aim, knotting entails piecing together accumulating decisions and insights via methodological bricolage (Pratt, Sonenshein & Feldman, 2020).¹

Please insert Figure 2 about here

To present the model, we examine the six methodological decision points in turn. Zooming in, we explicate *accepting* and *differentiating and integrating* practices to navigate each decision point. While we unpack tensions in a sequence, methodological decisions shape one another

¹ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for connecting us to the methodological bricolage literature.

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through an iterative, even circular process. Using the case studies as illustration, we conclude this section by zooming out to examine *knotting* as a practice that spans a full research project. Knotting serves to help scholars interweave multiple research tensions and related decisions across a paper to craft a cohesive narrative. Applying and expanding these insights to navigating research tensions, a paradox approach may foster methodological creativity while ensuring consistency, clarity and rigor. [Note: in this section, illustrations from the two case studies are highlighted by presenting their authors' names in italics].

Research Scope

Research scope denotes the boundaries of a study - its focal phenomena, level(s) of analysis, and research question - and determines its explanatory potential (Wooley & Fuchs, 2011). This methodological decision point raises a core *complexity-simplicity* tension. Scholars seek a research scope complicated enough to capture systemic intricacies and phenomenological accuracy, yet simple enough to deliver reliable and generalizable contributions. To organization scholars, complexity vs. simplicity can seem an inevitable research trade-off (Turner et al., 2017). As Thorngate (1976, p. 126) notes: “It is impossible for an explanation of social behavior to be simultaneously general, simple, and accurate.” A paradox approach, however, moves beyond trade-offs to explore mutual value and synergies.

Accepting. Scholars begin to engage the complexity-simplicity tension by surfacing its underlying paradox, thereby accepting its opposing and interwoven demands (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Leaning into the paradoxical nature of research scope can energize scholars' search for explanatory power via relevance and rigor; for broad patterns and focused depth. Paula Jarzabkowski explained in an interview the importance of embracing this tension:

If you deny it, then you have no way of explaining this thing that is happening or trying to control it. So in that sense, the very fact that [...] [paradoxes are present] make it not

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4 *just acceptable, but even imperative and good [...] sense to say, 'This is really*
5 *challenging'. (Paula Jarzabkowski, interview).*
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7 Analyzing the exemplars, complexity-simplicity tensions were particularly evident when
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9 choosing level(s) of analysis. While most paradox exemplars focus on a primary level of
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11 analysis (see Table), some are multilevel, hence leaning towards the pole of a more complex
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13 research scope. For example, Schrage and Rasche (2022) sought insights into both meso-level
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15 organizational practices and macro-level institutional forces. Simplifying the complexity of
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17 this multilevel research scope, they use a 2x2 matrix to examine both levels (see Table 4 of
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19 their paper).
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23 To accept complexity-simplicity tensions, scholars widen their lens to sharpen their focus;
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25 needing complex realism and simplified rigor to aim their research (e.g., Sheep et al., 2017a).
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27 This is also evidenced in the two case studies. *Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017)*, for instance, note
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29 their conflicting yet interwoven research goals at different levels of analysis, accepting them
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31 as a given tension of their research project (Paula Jarzabkowski, interview). They seek
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33 understanding of how a new strategy ripples tensions across a telecommunications company at
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35 the organizational level, and of actors' micro-practices in response (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017).
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37 Similarly, our analysis reveals how scoping sparked an insightful tug-of-war for *Keller et al.*
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39 *(2017)*, as they grappled with focusing on macro sociological patterns (e.g., how culture and
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41 conditions influence the framing of tensions) and micro cultural nuances (e.g., how American
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43 and Chinese actors frame a specific tension).
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50 *Differentiating and integrating.* These dual practices aid navigation of scoping tensions:
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52 differentiating to value opposing options, and integrating to embrace their interconnections.
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54 Exploring complexity widens the research aperture, enabling a more holistic view of field
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56 intricacies and consideration of theoretical and methodological variations (i.e., 'what if we use
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58 X to examine...' scenarios). Assessing for simplicity, in contrast, narrows the lens to gauge
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research rigor and manageability (i.e., the feasibility of methodically addressing varied questions). As illustration, in order to navigate the complexity brought by their level-spanning research goals, Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017, p. 435) begin by reviewing 12 well-studied paradoxes across levels. Cataloging organizing paradoxes at a macro-level, belonging paradoxes at a meso-level, and performing paradoxes at a micro-level helps them convey field intricacies, while positioning their deep dive into actors' repertoire of micro-responses. Accentuating complexity, they widen their lens to various, complex tensions, then sharpen their focus on a specific unit of analysis, thereby simplifying their research endeavor (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017, p. 442). Keller et al. (2017) also start from an expansive stance. Seeking to understand when and why actors respond to paradoxes differently, they review the impact of societal cultures, environmental conditions, and personal characteristics. They then turn a laser-focus on their intersection, thereby sharpening and simplifying their research scope. Specifically, they test interactions among cultures (Chinese and American), situational conditions (cooperation-competition tensions) and personal characteristics (paradox mindset) on actors' responses to paradox (Keller et al., 2017). Exposing distinctive benefits of complexity and simplicity can clarify their shared value, helping scholars frame an insightful and workable scope. One interviewee explained how she and her co-author gain comfort with their scoping choice by appreciating scholars' different, accumulating and complementary approaches to the field.

[We] see that [our data] are operating as a contradiction, or an interplay of tensions, pushing and pulling dialectically and... that it's so complex; it is evolutionary; it is changing... So we move to looking at this as being a holistic thing. There's studies out there looking only at dialectical tensions. And they tend to just focus narrowly on that part, and I think that's just fine. Because that narrows them in not to look at kind of the way it ends up or the way it starts, or in some ways because they're just playing the evolution in and the push pull. But I also think there are others that can say these things are interwoven (Linda Putnam, interview).

Construct Definition

Theoretical constructs can be built on different construal levels, raising tensions between loose and tight definitions (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Loose constructs are more generalizable, relating to a wider array of organizational settings and theories. Tight constructs specify characteristics of the focal phenomenon, building from and speaking to targeted scholarly audiences, and enabling more reliable and replicable research. In organization studies, some stress a trend toward the former (Buchanan & Bryman, 2007), while others note that more prescribed processes foster greater conformity and tightening of construct definitions (Lambert & Newman, 2023).

Accepting. Acknowledging the benefits of *tight-loose* tensions can empower intentional, reflexive and creative consideration of research constructs. For example, in paradox studies, scholars grapple with defining their core construct, asking ‘what is - and is not - paradox?’ This question is often a valued subject of conference talks and debates within the community. Seeking greater generalizability and flexibility, some scholars define paradox loosely as tensions (e.g., Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). In contrast, tight definitions build on more specific constitutive elements (e.g., Gümüşay et al., 2020; Sheep et al., 2017b; Smith, 2014). Most exemplars using an extant paradox definition apply three, well-developed criteria: contradiction, interdependence, persistence (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016, p. 6).

Definitional tensions may also surface at different times. For example, Ella Miron-Spektor noted how this tension can resurface during the review process. “It depends on the extent to which reviewers are familiar with paradox in general. When we started [doing paradox research], the challenge was ‘what is paradox?’ How to define paradox? How is it different from other related constructs? I still get these comments when reviewers are less familiar with

paradox” (Ella Miron-Spektor, interview). Accepting the value of loose-tight tensions, Gail Fairhurst depicts how the ebbing and flowing of paradox definitions throughout her research process and her career have enabled greater insight:

People need to get their arms around the definition and that's what a lot of paradox writers say, 'find a definition and, by god, stick to it!' I have become a little looser on that subject. Because I think when you're attempting to analyze data, you have to sort of hold these definitions lightly... You may see one very clear example of a tension that's not a contradiction, not dialectical, and not paradoxical...but then you may see tensions that actually qualify for one of those other three. And yet, you're in a study where you have multiple tensions. And so do you call one a dialectic and one a tension or do you just use the broader term paradoxical tension? I mean, there's a lot of language games to play around definitions. And my approach would be to [...] get people to educate themselves as to what these ideal types are, but also to know that you're going to have difficulties with data or the way actors articulate or how articulate they are. You may have to hold those definitions lightly and make some choices about what those definitions are. And just be clear about them as you write (Gail Fairhurst, interview).

Differentiating and integrating. Differentiating entails taking stock and assessing the value of tight versus loose constructs, aiding their vetting, yet also exposing conceptual gaps. Integrating aims to link varied approaches, seeking synergies within one paper or across a research field. Osigweh (1989, p. 579) positions constructs as the ‘building blocks of science’, tight definitions offering a base for conceptual clarity, consistency and justification, while loose definitions enable conceptual flexibility. Together, their interplay fosters greater insight and options at varying levels of abstraction ‘from situational concepts to generalizable universals’. He calls for a paradoxical stance, applying definitions that are both general and precise, serving the research problem by specifying what it does not cover while valuing broader approaches.

Differentiating and integrating tight and loose definitions aids clarity in individual papers and advances the overall field. Drawing on tight definitions within a particular paper enables creativity across insights and more expansive understanding of other constructs. Yet loose definitions invite discussion that can then sharpen definitions. For example, our analysis suggests that most scholars draw from established, tighter definitions (e.g., Pamphile, 2021; Schrage & Rasche, 2022). Well-established constructs offer a foundation from which these

papers introduce new constructs. Miron-Spektor illustrated how tight, existing definitions fueled their broader conceptualization of a paradox mindset:

... for the 2018 paper... there wasn't a clear definition [of a paradox mindset]. So one challenge was to say, 'Okay, how is it different from paradox?' So whenever you move to that, you have to be very clear in defining the construct and the boundaries. So we spent a lot of time thinking about, for example, what is the difference between paradoxical frames and paradox mindset? (Ella Miron-Spektor, interview).

In our exemplars, we found studies that opted for a looser vocabulary of 'tensions' (e.g., Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), seeking greater conceptual breadth, while others sought the depth of tighter specifications of 'paradox' (e.g. Gümüşay et al., 2020; Sheep et al., 2017b; Smith, 2014). Still others spanned loose and tight definitions. For instance, Sheep et al. (2017a) in their paper on knotted tensions begin their literature review by contrasting paradoxes and tensions, drawing on definitions by Schad et al. (2016), then choosing the broader vocabulary of 'tensions' for their own study.

Both case studies converge on the tight paradox definition of Smith and Lewis (2011), yet - as we read it - do so for differing methodological purposes. Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017) leverage this base to creatively explore how paradox is embedded in actors' everyday actions and reflected in their micro-practices. In contrast, Keller et al. (2017) use the definition to guide operationalizations of related measures (paradoxical framing and paradox mindset), aiding their quantitative study of interactions (Josh Keller, interview). While a tight definition of paradox helps these two papers sharpen their research focus, they recognized that holding tensions more loosely might have made their work more broadly applicable (Josh Keller, interview; Paula Jarzabkowski, interview).

Differentiating and integrating can also occur across the research field. For example, paradox theory offers a 'big tent' accommodating both loose and tight definitions of the core construct. Several authors compare and contrast varied tight definitions, leading to valued expansion and

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integration of constructs (see Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017; Putnam et al., 2016). Varying definitions invite more inclusive and creative approaches, yet challenge reviewers who seek certainty and clarity. Valuing tight and loose constructs within a field therefore requires reviewers to assess the validity, clarity and consistency of definitions within each manuscript, while remaining wary of their personal preferences and biases.

Underlying Assumptions

Assumptions refer to the ontological, epistemological and ideological choices driving methodologies, and raise *singularity-plurality* tensions. In organization studies, underlying assumptions frame distinct theoretical lenses (Lounsbury & Gehman, 2024). The ‘paradigm wars’ of the 1980s identified co-existing and conflicting sets of assumptions, such as those of Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) typology: objective vs. subjective, managerialist vs. critical . These debates helped expand paradigmatic options, while pushing scholars to specify their assumptions and thereby justify and guide subsequent research choices. Operating within a singular set of assumptions sharpens one’s lens and project boundaries. Yet studies also demand plurality, as integrative assumptions may surface novel insights into organizational dynamics and intricacies. Buchanan and Bryman (2007, p. 485) observe that organizational research ‘displays a variety of positivist, critical, phenomenological, constructivist, interpretative, feminist, and postmodern perspectives’, each with assumptions to vet, select and/or blend.

Accepting. Coming to accept the paradoxical nature of underlying assumptions helps scholars see, carve out, and act upon our world differently, sharpening yet limiting our worldview and resulting representations (Chia, 2019). Singular assumptions aid convergence of thought within a particular research project, while plural assumptions invite divergence and novelty. Accepting this tension, paradox scholars, as illustration, often surface singularity-plurality

tensions by asking about ontological assumptions: is paradox in the minds of actors or an objective part of ‘reality’? One’s response poses substantive methods issues, rippling through later decisions of analytics and interpretation. Reviewed exemplars surface underlying assumptions in varied formats. For example, some make clear declarations, positioning paradox as objective and thereby observable (e.g., Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). Such is the example of Zhang et al (2015: 538), noting in their abstract: “As organizational environments become increasingly dynamic, complex, and competitive, leaders are likely to face intensified contradictory, or seemingly paradoxical, demands.” In contrast, others select constructivist ontologies. Sheep et al. (2017a), for instance, explicate their assumption of paradox as socially constructed, accessible via “discursive formulations in which members construct tensions, not only as co-occurring, but as Gordian (inseparable) entanglements of interdependence (2017a: 465). Similarly, Ella Miron-Spektor embraces singularity-plurality tensions, while harnessing her own assumptions: “So think about it, the notion of paradox, whether it's socially constructed or it's out there. For people like us, like me [researchers in psychology], I believe everything is socially constructed [... so] focus on mindset and framework” (Ella Miron-Spektor, interview).

For other scholars, recognizing these tensions helps clarify their emphasis on plurality. Some reviewed exemplars explore paradox by unpacking insights across ontological assumptions (e.g., Schrage & Rasche, 2022; Smets et al., 2015). For instance, Gümüşay et al. (2020) explore paradoxical institutional logics between commercial and religious ambitions of an Islamic bank. They depict how study participants ask themselves both ‘What kind of Islamic bank would the market allow us to be?’ (viewing conflicting logics as deriving from the external environment) and ‘What kind of Islamic bank do we want to be?’ (viewing conflicting logics as internally constructed) (Gümüşay et al., 2020, p. 135). Such work aligns with views of paradox as both socially constructed and inherent (Hahn & Knight, 2021; Smith & Lewis,

2011), and explorations of multiparadigm methods (e.g., Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Lewis & Kelemen, 2002). Both case studies represent this turn. *Keller et al. (2017, p. 539)* view organizational contexts as creating conditions—“systems, structures, and practices”—that actors may interpret as contradictory. *Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017)* similarly frame paradoxes as inherent yet whether deemed opportunities or challenges depend on how actors construct their experience.

Is market and regulation paradoxical? I would say that they are interpreted as interdependent and often contradictory. But is that due to external forces or is that internally constructed? For us they have a propensity to be so because of the way they are organized. Is it from outside? Well, yes, if a regulator sets it up with particular kinds of controls, structurally, that will create the contradictions that will become prevalent. But then, how do people respond to that? How do they construct that sort of situation? (Paula Jarzabkowski, interview).

Differentiating and integrating. Dual differentiating and integrating practices help challenge and clarify underlying assumptions. Differentiating pushes scholars to unpack divergent lenses on the focal phenomena. Contrasting alternatives highlights the benefits and gaps of distinct lenses. Differentiation also renders scholars' initial assumptions explicit and open to question, expand and confirm. As such, differentiation aids integration, helping scholars set guiding assumptions to best serve the research at hand. For example, *Keller et al. (2017)* view paradox as socially constructed within one's external, cultural environment (Josh Keller, interview). They examine interpretive studies of paradox sensemaking, then apply more positivist lenses on observed cultural, situational and individual variations. In contrast, *Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017)* map studies of externally identified paradoxes and responses, then examine socially constructed experiences within their data. Differentiation sharpened their focus, finding that scarce attention had been paid to how paradox responses 'are actually constructed in [...] micro-interactions' (p. 434). While analyzing their data, this awareness sensitized the scholars to micro-practices of humor.

[The clarity of our assumption that paradox is socially constructed] gave us confidence, because the thing, that really kind of 'core thing', in that paper, for us the real 'A-ha'

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4 *was that pre-response moment; that humor is a pre-response to paradox. And within*
5 *that pre-response, before you're even responding, the laughter is constructing it in a*
6 *particular way (Paula Jarzabkowski, interview).*
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8 9 **Data Collection**

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12 Methodological decisions swirl around data collection as scholars consider how to enter the
13 research field and what data to collect. Aguinis, Hill and Bailey (2021) offer a thorough
14 checklist to enable research transparency. As they note, deciding which data to collect raises
15 interwoven issues of when, how, and from whose perspective. Such questions reflect long-
16 standing methodological debates on *emic-etic* tensions and related approaches. An emic
17 approach collects situated data to gauge perceptions, meanings and uses from an inside view.
18 In contrast, an etic approach applies an outside view, gathering data observable and comparable
19 across settings. While early scholars deemed these approaches incommensurable such that
20 scholars would need to choose one or the other, Morris and colleagues (1999) value their
21 paradoxical interplay, each exposing and filling the other's gaps. They offer the example of
22 tension with language scholars who might study meanings ascribed and varying by users and
23 historically and culturally embedded (emic), or might isolate and measure units, such as
24 sounds, to compare across contexts (etic). Langley and Klag (2019) label this the 'involvement
25 paradox.' Scholars seek proximity that builds deep understanding of how actors see, touch and
26 feel phenomena, yet minimizes possible bias of directly or indirectly influencing data.
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47 *Accepting.* Accepting emic-etic tensions as paradoxical first starts with scholars actively
48 grappling with competing demands for both greater closeness to and distance from their focal
49 phenomenon. A paradox approach invites scholars to lean into these tensions. For example,
50 paradox scholars value these varied approaches across research, resulting in data collection
51 approaches offering close, even participative, proximity - such as case studies and action
52 research (e.g., Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) - to greater distance and controls - as with surveys (e.g.,
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Keller & Loewenstein, 2011) and experiments (e.g., Miron-Spektor et al., 2011). For instance, Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) used interviews, observations and archival data to capture paradoxical phenomena in the ‘wild’. Rich case studies help them unpack how the exploitation-exploration paradox is experienced in situ, while archival data serves to illustrate ambidexterity cycles over time. Accepting the emic vs. etic tension of data collection, Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017) had to familiarize themselves with the industry, organization, internal processes and people to build trust in a complex organization. As they write:

Our study follows the case of Telco, a regulated but publicly-traded European telecommunications company implementing a complex new strategy with inherently paradoxical elements. Such major restructuring efforts offer an opportunity to observe salient paradoxes (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017, p. 440).

Yet, this familiarity had to be counterbalanced by ensuring objectivity, as they reflect:

Ensuring that you're trying to keep objectivity here, within so much as an ethnographer always socially constructs their relationship with the field anyway, but you know, so but there we were helped by the fact that we could provoke each other. We're always helped by the review process because your reviewers will push you hard so they are like an external analyst (Paula Jarzabkowski, interview).

Differentiating and integrating. Differentiation efforts highlight the benefits of both emic and etic approaches, while integration practices sharpen focus of data collection to empower their creative synergies. Examining alternatives and varied researcher positions helps scholars remain open to new data, collection methods and viewpoints during the research process. Qualitative paradox scholars, for instance, often draw on data sources that require distance to objectively observe events (e.g., gestures, laughter, emotions, unique archives), yet close enough proximity to understand their nuances, meaning and value (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2019). Differentiating means highlighting the value of both distance and proximity. Quantitative scholars face the challenge of building metrics and measurements with enough proximity to a phenomenon that they capture a core construct, and enough distance from it to be generalizable. As Ella Miron-Spektor described:

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4 *People who are experts in scale development recommend not using double-barreled*
5 *descriptions, meaning two competing statements in the same sentence, because when*
6 *you answer this item, you don't really know if people answered high, because they are*
7 *high on one aspect of the sentence and the other let's say or both. Now, the question is,*
8 *how do we capture paradox if you cannot do that, right? This is a challenge (Ella*
9 *Miron-Spektor, interview).*
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11 Integrating means striking a balance between distance and proximity. To address this tension,
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13 Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) decided to begin with broad and abstract items and then narrow
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15 them down to something that they could capture. They also debated whether they should create
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17 scales that can be generalized to many situations, contexts and/or tasks or on measurements
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19 that focus on a specific situation. For instance, if a respondent scores high in the paradox
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21 mindset construct, does this mean that s/he is really good in managing tensions generally (at
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23 work, life, and relationships) or does it mean that s/he can do really well with tensions only at
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25 work, and may not be good in other parts of their lives?
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31 *So we spent a lot of time thinking about, first conceptually, what do we think? Secondly,*
32 *when we were developing the items we also had the question, should we develop items*
33 *that are more tension specific or develop items that are more generic? We ended up*
34 *doing both (Ella Miron-Spektor, interview).*
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37 In their 2018 paper, Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) developed items specific to tensions of
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39 performing, learning, and belonging (differentiation), and included items to capture the general
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41 paradox mindset (integration). Stressing their use of more generalizable items, they also invited
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43 scholars to adapt the instructions toward more specific tensions as needed. Similarly, Keller et
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45 al. (2017, p. 540) came to innovate, applying survey and experiment approaches to gather data
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47 on actors' uses of paradoxical frames to navigate cooperation-competition tensions.
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49 Differentiating and integrating for them meant being close enough to their research context to
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51 develop a novel experimental approach, expanding upon their use of more standard survey
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53 methods. When interviewed, Josh Keller explained:
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I found something interesting...because we couldn't find an existing experimental paradigm that had... allowed people to cooperate and compete with each other at the same time, or even to, you know, to see their response, because everything in all of the previous experiments, were all designed in a way that here's the cooperation manipulation and here's the competition manipulation right? (Josh Keller, interview).

Differentiating and integrating might also mean seeking explicit sample boundaries within which scholars can examine phenomena deeply. Reminiscent of improvisation (Smith & Lewis, 2011), firm boundaries enable sharper focus and more controlled data comparisons that can spur creativity. As example, Aoki (2020) weighed varied means of data collection - some of which are more emic, others more etic in character - to help understand how actors' experience tensions of kaizen (continuous improvement). He then rigorously set the boundaries of an emic-etic mix, employing archival, observational, and interview data that allowed elucidating the role of material artifacts as actors navigate the learning-performing paradox (Katsuki Aoki, interview).

Data Analysis

Long-standing debates create a tug-of-war between more deductive and inductive analysis, often associated with quantitative or qualitative data, respectfully. Deduction enables a top-down approach, imposing then testing theory-based predictions against collected data, while induction aids bottom-up opportunities, expanding theory through data-informed insights and surprises. Torn between opposing analytical approaches, authors traditionally choose one. Yet as Shepherd and Sutcliffe (2011) warn, this either/or view oversimplifies data analysis and misses their mutual benefits for scholarly curiosity. Mantere and Ketokivi (2013) further critique either/or approaches to analysis, claiming that analytical approaches - deduction, induction and abduction - overplay rationality. They implore scholars to embrace heterogeneity and better address limits of data, of analytic tools, and of scholars, such as our own bounded rationality and biases. As scholars increasingly surface the *deduction-induction* tension, they

also search for their paradoxical interplay. Scholars argued that a full cycle of research depends on alternating between induction and deduction at varied stages in knowledge development cycles and even within distinct projects. Inductive approaches generate insights to be tested by deductive analysis. Deductive testing raises anomalies that require more inductive processes. (Chatman & Flynn, 2005). Others describe methods that integrate both types of reasoning (Proudfoot, 2022). Abduction involves noting anomalies in data compared with previous explanations, and generating and assessing new theoretical explanations (Golden-Biddle, 2020; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) draws inductive reasoning to explore configurations across data and deductive approaches to test these patterns against theoretical expectations. Others describe iterative approaches that begin with pragmatic problem statements and shift between inductive and deductive analysis (Sharma & Bansal, 2023; Tracy, 2013; 2018).

Accepting. For paradox scholars, accepting the value of top-down and bottom-up analytical approaches can help leverage data to discover and unpack, and test and theorize insights. Qualitative scholars, for example, often lean into language, helping embrace deductive-inductive tensions as valuable to data analysis. For example, Andriopoulos and Gotsi (2017) encourage paradox researchers to initially define then continuously expand their paradox vocabulary to support data coding and analysis. In their interview, co-authors Gail Fairhurst and Linda Putnam shared their ‘backstage’ experiences with this data analysis tension in studying paradoxes.

Language can be so idiosyncratic and so tied to context and uniqueness of the moment that unless that researcher brings that kind of sensitivity to it, as opposed to a lens that's going to be pretty simplistic overall, because you're looking at the situation in broad strokes rather than fine strokes (Gail Fairhurst, interview).

Look at your data ... and see that it's operating as a contradiction, or an interplay of tensions, pushing and pulling dialectically... it's so complex, it is evolutionary, it is changing. Yeah. And so if you just follow those tensions, you can see they can develop

into a paradox fast, or you can know there's paradox or implications in the beginning and then see the tensions reenact in some of that (Linda Putnam, interview).

Analyzing our exemplars revealed how paradox scholars accept and value both inductive and deductive analysis. For instance, Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) sought to understand exploration and exploitation tensions. Drawing on inductive approaches, they found language indicators within their data demonstrating how practitioners understood paradoxical relationships, then used deductive reasoning to evaluate these language indicators across their data:

Examining all interview transcripts, we identified patterns and variance in descriptions of innovation tensions using language indicators such as: tension, friction, yet, but, on one hand...on the other hand, juggle, balance, it can swing both ways, there is a fine line,...how can you...and still. We also looked for contradictory statements within the same transcript (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009, p. 701).

Similarly, to develop and enhance second-order coding of their inductive study, Schrage and Rasche (2022, p. 12) deductively coded incidents of paradox against existing theoretical criteria, resulting in a table with descriptive data on the categories of “contradiction”, “interrelatedness” and “persistence” in Smith & Lewis’ (2011) definition of paradox.

Differentiating and integrating. Differentiating means examining the distinct value of data analysis from both inductive and deductive approaches. Integrating helps scholars identify unexpected nuances within their data while comparing to existing theory. For example, qualitative scholars depict efforts to stay in the uncertainty and draw on inductive approaches without straining, thereby helping avoid focusing too quickly on patterns that then become subjected to deductive analysis. Gail Fairhurst describes this practice of differentiating and integration in relation to discourse study on paradox in her interview:

I think that's very important to begin really close to your data and to let your data talk to you before you move to form repertoires of kinds of ways of operating and before you can move to assumptions of what people are doing and why. And before you can even move to try to look at how people are managing or coping with that. It's very easy to see some patterns very early on and say okay, here's what's really going on here ...

So I do think that there is a challenge with the discourse stuff, but it's well worth it if you put in a little bit of time, and you don't have to just, you know, climb the mountain immediately. It's really just one foot in front of the other in terms of sticking to it and saying, you know, there's something interesting going on here (Gail Fairhurst, interview).

Balancing the inductive-deductive tension, Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017, p. 433) first sought to deductively gauge patterns of paradox in their data. Yet their analysis surprisingly pointed to extensive uses of humor. Consulting the literature revealed humor as a potential, yet under explained, indicator of paradox. Abductively, they pursued this anomaly seeking to understand and theorize the uses of laughter. Going through the transcripts, they realized that people were often using the words “impossible”, “difficult”, “challenging”, and “tension”. They asked themselves: ‘Is there a pattern in place?’ As they progressed in their analysis, they started asking themselves: ‘Why are they always laughing?’ (Paula Jarzabkowski, interview).

And then we said like, you know, it's a really difficult situation, they're worried all the time about what's going to happen, and yet they're laughing, so we thought we should start just making a notice that whenever, you know, so that when we're writing our notes, we just put in brackets “Laugh, laugh, laugh”, so that later we can just come back and check our impressions. Is there really laughter going on? And we found it was really going on. So, then we thought “well laughter is doing something in a tense situation. more than half of them were specifically about these things that engage in the tensions, and that's why we said ... Wow, laughter, that's not random or coincidental. Laughter is clearly very key to handling these tensions. So that's when we started to look at what laughter is doing. So then we went back and looked at every one of those incidents, to try and understand what laughter was doing in each paradoxical incident (Paula Jarzabkowski, interview).

In contrast, Josh Keller described an analytical approach to quantitative data which iterated between inductive and deductive reasoning throughout the study (Keller et al., 2017):

[This was] sort of weird in the sense that it was quantitative micro, but also inductive, using a very different type of methodological technique to surface how people think about what cooperation means to them... similar to what qualitative people do... but using quantitative methods. We inductively discovered that, hey, you know what, when it comes to these sort of relationships between cooperation and competition, and cooperation and confrontation, we're seeing that the Chinese and the Americans are thinking about these things in very, very different ways. And so it really wasn't, it wasn't like we sort of said, ‘Hey, let's study tensions between cooperation and competition’... it really was like the data revealed this. (Josh Keller, interview)

In his interview, Katsuki Aoki noted feeling that his analyses were hampered by language barriers. To further potential insights, he engaged his translator, carefully explaining the concept of Yin Yang to help them collaboratively identify both/and moments in the data. Engaging a translator required a deductive logic with clear insight and instructions to enable an inductive analysis.

Actually, so the concept of Yin Yang [...] always has bright and dark aspects. So that means there is no separation between different poles. Something that is integrated but also has opposite aspects. [...] actually the challenge was with the interpreter, who mediated the conversation [with the Chinese interviewees] because the Chinese employees speak only Chinese, they don't speak Japanese. And I only speak Japanese, and also they don't speak English. So very much the interpretation also depended on the Chinese interpreter in that sense, as I clarified many things directly with the interpreter (Katsuki Aoki, interview).

Interpretation

Interpretation involves processes using scientific reasoning to make the creative leap from data to theoretical findings (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013) and situating insights within existing literature. Doing so surfaces *novelty-continuity* tensions. According to Clegg and colleagues (2022), novelty-continuity tensions stretch scholars to challenge or change current insight with new knowledge, yet leverage extant scholarly foundations and ‘grammar’. Jarzabkowski and colleagues (2021, p. 72) explain this as “the iterative process of rendering creativity credible through the structure of its presentation, but never substituting structure for creativity.”

Accepting. Working through the novelty-continuity tension begins with embracing its paradoxical nature as opportunities for interpretations and theorizing. Empirical exemplars in paradox theory seek a delicate balance, showing how their study expands well-worn paradox insights, while questioning its limits and engaging non-paradox literatures (e.g., Knight & Paroutis, 2017; Schrage & Rasche, 2022; Sheep et al. 2017a; Smith, 2014). Paradox offers a meta-theoretical lens, drawing on and offering insight to a variety of theories (Andriopoulos &

Lewis, 2009). As such, scholars have to decide whether paradox is in the foreground or the background in their study. They grapple with whether extant paradox insights offer a novel approach to an alternative theory or whether drawing on alternative theories can help inform new insights into paradox. Jarzabkowski et al. (2022), for instance, used paradox in the foreground to explain the dynamics through which different actors in interorganizational systems navigated the contradictions that are generated. Keller et al. (2017) describe their reasoning from data to confirm, extend and reshape existing understandings of paradoxical frames. Likewise, Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017) strive to further the practice approach yet spark bold insights and new applications for it within the realms of paradox theory. Akin to paradoxes of organizational ambidexterity (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), scholars embrace the novel and interesting, while valuing validated, existing structures.

Differentiating and integrating. Differentiating by distinguishing between new and reaffirmed insights, scholars may identify vital linkages as opportunities for integration - aiding theorizing that provokes curiosity yet enables understanding. In moving from data to theorizing, scholars may leverage foundational knowledge, building from existing clarity, validity and trust to anchor novelties. In their ethnographic study, Smets et al. (2015) harness institutional and paradox theory, contributing new insights into tension between market and community logics. Keller et al. (2017) subtly challenge the culture-condition debate. While their theorizing builds from existing studies, they posit novel insights at their intersection. Reasoning from their data, they demonstrate how unique conditions (outperforming and out-helping) interact with cultural differences to influence paradoxical framing. Likewise, Paula Jarzabkowski (interview on Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017) noted turning toward then away from paradox theory to examine systemic, inter-organizational, grand challenges. 'I think that paradox is a really great lens to understand those things... But I found I would have to move a little bit beyond transcendence and dynamic equilibrium toward more dynamic theories of balancing'. Other experts shared

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the value of review processes in helping better position their work. For instance, Katsuki Aoki thanked an editor who encouraged him to tap into existing, albeit scarce, paradox studies that examine the role of materials. The resulting interpretation helped ‘expand that literature and focus on paradoxical leadership and objects’ (Katsuki Aoki, interview).

Knotting

In this final subsection, we propose *knotting* as a practice for weaving together research tensions and related decisions across a paper. Rigorous scholarship requires cohesive methods. Building on early systems models of congruence (i.e., Fry & Smith, 1987), scholars sought alignment across methodological decision points to ensure internal fit and consistency (i.e., Kashan et al, 2022; Luciano et al., 2018). A paradox approach, however, expands a conventional view of alignment, by instead embracing tensions as nested and interwoven (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Sheep et al., 2017a). Rather than a linear approach, as one decision dictates the next, knotting entails a dynamic bricolage (Pratt et al., 2022). Through an iterative dance between decision points, scholars craft a cohesive, compelling narrative aligned to their research aim.

To illustrate knotting, we zoom out from specific methodological decision points, examining its practice in the two case studies. The cases demonstrate that scholars need not apply knotting at every decision point, but rather as serendipitous opportunities arise, spurring rethinking of prior and future decisions. *Jarzabkowski and Lé (2017)* conducted an ethnography. Grappling with complexity-simplicity tensions, they initially set a broad scope - actors’ responses to organizational change. Yet they adapted as opportunities arose. Staying open to surprises and bounded by their goals enabled serendipity or planned luck (Smith & Lewis, 2022). Later, while navigating emic-etic tensions of data collection, humor surfaced as a recurring pattern.

This discovery spurred the authors to revisit their scope, knotting data collection tensions with tensions of research scope (Paula Jarzabkowski, interview). Seeking to retain a simple, sharp focus, and now awash in complicated qualitative data, they carefully expanded their scope - the role of humor in actors' response to organizational change. This seemingly minor shift, rippled through other research tensions and their corresponding decisions. Their data collection efforts moved closer to their subjects, helping identify more subtle signs of humor, while their analyses iterated between inductive - discovering further insights into humor - and deductive - testing their prevalence and impact. The authors crafted a rigorous and provocative narrative in the resulting paper, contributing a novel micro-practice to the well-studied realm of organizational change. Paula Jarzabkowski explained their iterative process:

So the research wasn't designed to collect humor. It was actually designed to look at a very paradoxical situation (of disruptive organizational change)... We certainly did not expect to find humor in that sense, but what we realized is that people were laughing... And then we said 'Why is there always laughing?' Like, you know, it's a really difficult situation. They're worried all the time about what's going to happen, and yet they're laughing. So we thought we should start just making a notice... When we're writing our notes, we just put in brackets 'Laugh, laugh, laugh', so that later we can just come back and check our impressions. Is there really laughter going on? And we found it was really going on. (Paula Jarzabkowski, interview)

While such dynamic knotting practices may be more familiar for qualitative scholars (Gioia et al., 2013), Ella Miron-Spektor praised its value in quantitative research. In her interview, she noted how her initial theory, chosen method, and analytical results came to form a narrative through iterative sensemaking. In their quantitative case study, Keller et al. (2017) illustrate, seeking to examine influences on how individuals frame tensions. Their literature review, however, raised research tensions as setting a relatively simple, manageable scope proved challenging, given the extent of potential cultural, situational and individual influences. They stayed flexible, using their next key decision point, construct definition, to help sharpen their scope. The authors chose to study a specific situation, cooperation-competition tensions, and apply a tight definition of paradox (i.e., cooperation and competition as conflicting and

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interwoven pressures). This decision helped them recognize a gap, previously missed, in their reviewed literature, knotting scoping tensions with tensions of construct definition (Josh Keller, interview). Existing studies assessed whether and why actors framed a situation as either cooperation *or* competition, and not as a paradoxical tension (Josh Keller, interview). In response, they innovated. Within strict sample and analysis specifications, they expanded their scope to conduct a highly complex study of interaction effects. Using survey and experimental methods, the scholars examined individual differences, conditions of outperforming and out-helping, across contrasting cultures, Chinese and American, in response to one paradoxical tension, cooperation-competition. Their resulting narrative contributes insights into “how culture and conditions interact to shape whether individuals adopt paradoxical frames.” (2017, p. 539).

DISCUSSION

We identified research tensions and navigating practices at key methodological decision points, leveraging a paradox lens and empirical exemplars, expert interviews and case studies. As noted previously, paradox studies sharpened our focus and served as exemplars, yet we envision this approach contributing to the broader field of organizational studies. Building from this base, the Paradox Approach to Methods offers at least three contributions that may advance organizational methods.

First, applying paradox theory to methods invites an expansive approach to empowering research creativity and rigor. Early methods scholars highlight complex and conflicting research pressures, encouraging clear and consistent choices in methodological design and implementation (e.g., Campell et al., 1963; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 2008). Other examples specify tensions in research design phases and offer targeted strategies for resolution (e.g., Aguinis et al., 2021; Hoffman, 2021; Köhler et al., 2022; Langley & Abdallah, 2011; Turner

et al., 2017). In contrast, we build on a handful of studies (e.g., Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Andriopoulos & Gotsi, 2017; Langley & Klag, 2019) that depict research tensions as paradoxical. Applying a paradox lens to organizational methods helps scholars reframe tensions from obstacles into opportunities. In doing so, scholars shift from viewing decisions as singular, linear choices to be adjudicated toward accepting conflicting interdependencies that persist over time (Berti et al., 2021). Reframing underlying tensions as paradoxical and seeking alternative responses can empower creativity (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011) and spark methodological innovation (e.g., Lê & Schmid, 2022). Rather than seek the 'right' solution, a paradox approach invites scholars to generate strategies for 'working through' tensions (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Efforts may foster a creative integration that accommodates opposing poles within a particular paper, or enables consistent inconsistencies by prioritizing each pole in different papers across a research portfolio (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

A paradox approach also demands rigor in methodological choices. Framing research tensions as paradoxes does not mean that 'anything goes'. Doing so would foster sloppy or incoherent methods. Instead, we draw on paradox theory to identify specific navigating practices that offer guidelines and guardrails - accepting, differentiating and integrating, and knotting. Extant scholarship suggests that effective navigation starts with accepting - noting the contradictory, yet interdependent tensions that underlie vexing dilemmas (Lewis & Smith, 2022; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Accepting paradox, however, can be a double-edged sword, fostering paralysis or opening creative possibilities (Lewis, 2000). Effectively moving toward opportunities depends on differentiating - pulling apart options to understand and value each - and integrating - seeking synergies and connections (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith, 2014). Such dual practices generate novel ideas, yet also impose guardrails that bound these ideas within clearly defined parameters (Besharov et al., 2019).

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Knotting practices further such guardrails. Paradoxes do not occur independently, but are knotted within a system (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Sheep et al., 2017a). Rather than depict varied tensions as independent, knotting practices require that scholars negotiate responses in relationship to one another. Scholars have agency in confronting the web of tensional decision points of the research process. Knotting extends scholarship on alignment. For example, Luciano, Mathieu and Tannenbaum (2018) invite scholars to explore the consistency between construct definitions and measurement approaches. As such, alignment practices often suggest allowing an overarching ontology and methodology to dictate a set of decisions. For example, adopting process ontologies invites a set of methodological choices across varied decisions (i.e. Langley, 1999; Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). Knotting invites scholars to explore fit, while also accommodating tensions across various decision points. Moreover, rather than anchoring on an overarching methodology or ontology, knotting involves a more dynamic, iterative process of bricolage, through which responses to varied research tensions influence one another.

Importantly, our Paradox Approach to Methods generalizes across theoretical domains. While our paper drew from examples in paradox scholarship, research tensions surface across literatures. For example, institutional theorists grapple with loose-tight definitions and novelty-continuity interpretations (i.e. Tolbert & Zucker, 1999); culture and cognition scholars experience tensions between constructivist and realist perspectives (i.e., DeSouza, 2014); inductive scholars across theories confront emic-etic tensions (Langley & Klag, 2019). These tensions become more salient as scholars juxtapose multiple theories (Clegg et al., 2022). Our Paradox Approach to Methods generalizes to offer insight about the nature and navigation of methods tensions across these theoretical domains.

Second, our paper invites scholars and reviewers to embrace methodological diversity within our literatures and fields, offering guidance to apply these varied practices with rigor (Bednarek

et al., 2021b). Complex organizational challenges require diverse methods to generate and test insights. Advancing theory requires a full cycle of research. Inductive studies generate new theories to be tested with more deductive approaches, which eventually leads to novel curiosities to explore inductively (Chatman & Flynn, 2005). While diverse methods collectively contribute to scholarly development, theories may become reified with a specific set of methods. Reviewers often engage with papers because of their theoretical expertise, yet bring along methodological preferences or biases. Doing so reinforces a strong connection between theory and methods. Single case, processual studies dominate institutional theory, while large, archival data analysis informs most of upper echelon theory and survey studies primarily shape social network theory.

A Paradox Approach to Methods invites scholarly insight by accommodating competing methodological priorities, enabling study and field-level creativity, while challenging reviewers to ensure quality. We encourage reviewers to assess whether scholars effectively recognize and navigate their research tensions. The key practices identified here offer guidance to authors, while also providing reviewers and editors guiding questions for consideration: Do authors recognize and accept methodological tensions? Do their methodological responses value and confront, even harness, competing demands? Are responses to varied tensions knotted and aligned across decision points in the paper?

Finally, our paper offers a more comprehensive, integrative insight across methodological decisions. Extant methods scholarship pinpoints specific challenges at particular decision points in the research process. For example, while some studies highlight research scope issues with constructive literature reviews (e.g., Hiebl, 2023), others zoom in to offer data analysis recommendations (e.g., Rönkkö et al., 2022). Moreover, insights about methods frequently differentiate recommendations for qualitative, inductive studies (e.g., Gioia et al., 2013; Köhler

et al., 2022) versus for quantitative, deductive research (e.g., Alfons et al., 2022; Zyphur et al., 2020). By zooming in, such scholarship presents targeted insight and pragmatic tools, yet obscures broader application. By zooming out to unpack patterns across varied decision points and methods types, we offer generalizable insights that invite more expansive applications. Beyond a particular problem, pattern-thinking invites critical questions and creative responses across challenges (Edmondson, 2012; Grandin, 2008). In addition, a paradox approach encourages scholars across methods to engage with one another in dialogue, spurring further intellectual richness and fostering conditions for ongoing methodological advances.

CONCLUSION

Methods offer vital means to empower theory building. While paradox scholars have highlighted how tensions might inform our theories (e.g., Poole & Van de Ven, 1989), we apply this lens to our methods. Further, labeling research tensions as paradoxical normalizes the tug-of-war scholars feel as they confront opposing demands during research projects (i.e., Locke et al., 2008). Doing so can reduce the isolation, anxiety and frustration that scholars often experience. Indeed, in writing this paper, we often commiserated with one another, recognizing how acutely various paradoxes challenged our own previous work. Such tensions even surfaced in this manuscript, as we sought broad applications across organizational studies, while sharpening the focus on commensurate examples within paradox theory. Junior scholars can find comfort in knowing that senior mentors also confront research tensions. Likewise, authors should note that their reviewers and editors, too, face paradoxes when developing their own research. Such awareness - accepting and navigating paradoxes within the research process - invites scholars to value these tensions and seek novel and creative approaches to address them. By doing so, we hope that our Paradox Approach to Methods can advance knowledge development in organization and management theory.

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TABLE AND FIGURES

Table: Exemplars of Empirical Paradox Research

Method	Papers	Level of analysis
<i>Qualitative</i>		
Action research	Lüscher & Lewis, 2008 Pradies et al., 2020	meso (organization micro / meso)
Cross-case study	Jarzabkowski et al., 2022 Ramus et al., 2021 Sharma & Bansal, 2017 Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009 Aoki, 2020 Bednarek et al., 2017 Knight & Paroutis, 2017 Smith, 2014 Pamphile, 2021 Petriglieri & Peshkam, 2021 Pradies, 2023	macro / multi-site field-level meso (organizations) meso (teams) micro (individuals)
Single-case, longitudinal study	Aoki & Wilhelm, 2017 Ashforth & Reingen, 2014 Jay, 2013 Smith & Besharov, 2019 Ansari et al., 2016 Cornelissen et al., 2021 Schrage & Rasche, 2022 Stadtler & Van Wassenhove, 2016	meso (organization) macro (multiple organizations)
Secondary sources	Gaim et al., 2021	meso/micro
Ethnography	Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017 Ashforth & Reingen, 2014 Gümüşay et al., 2020 Kwon et al., 2020 Michaud, 2014 Smets et al., 2015 Tuckermann, 2019	micro (practices) meso (groups) meso (organization)
Discourse/ Rhetoric analysis	Bednarek et al., 2017 Dameron & Torset, 2014 Sheep et al., 2017a Wenzel et al., 2019	meso (organization) micro (individuals)
Literary analysis	O'Connor, 1995	meso (organization)
Grounded theory	Cañibano, 2019 Child, 2019	micro (individuals)
Images (informants' drawings)	Clarke & Holt, 2017 Halgin et al., 2018 Vince & Broussine, 1996	micro (individuals)

Table (continued): Exemplars of Empirical Paradox Research

Method	Papers	Level of analysis
<i>Quantitative</i>		
Survey	Ahearne et al., 2014	micro (individuals)
	Miron-Spektor et al., 2018	
	Zhang et al., 2015	meso (teams)
	Lewis et al., 2002	
	Keller et al., 2020	
Experimental	Schmitt & Raisch, 2013	multi-level
	Keller et al., 2017	
	Miron-Spektor et al., 2011	micro (individuals)
	Leung et al., 2018	
Computational	Calic & Hélie, 2018	micro (individuals)
<i>Methods papers</i>		
Qualitative methods	Langley & Klag, 2019	
Discourse analysis	Engeström & Sannino, 2011	
	Fairhurst & Putnam, 2019	
	Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993	
Paradox & grand challenges	Jarzabkowski et al., 2019	
Document research	Michaud, 2017	
Practice approaches	Lê & Bednarek, 2017	
	Jarzabkowski et al., 2018	
Social Systems Theory	Tuckermann & Rüegg-Stuerm, 2011	
Literature reviews	Sharma & Bansal, 2020	
Video research	Whiting et al., 2018	

Figure 1: Paradox Methods Approach

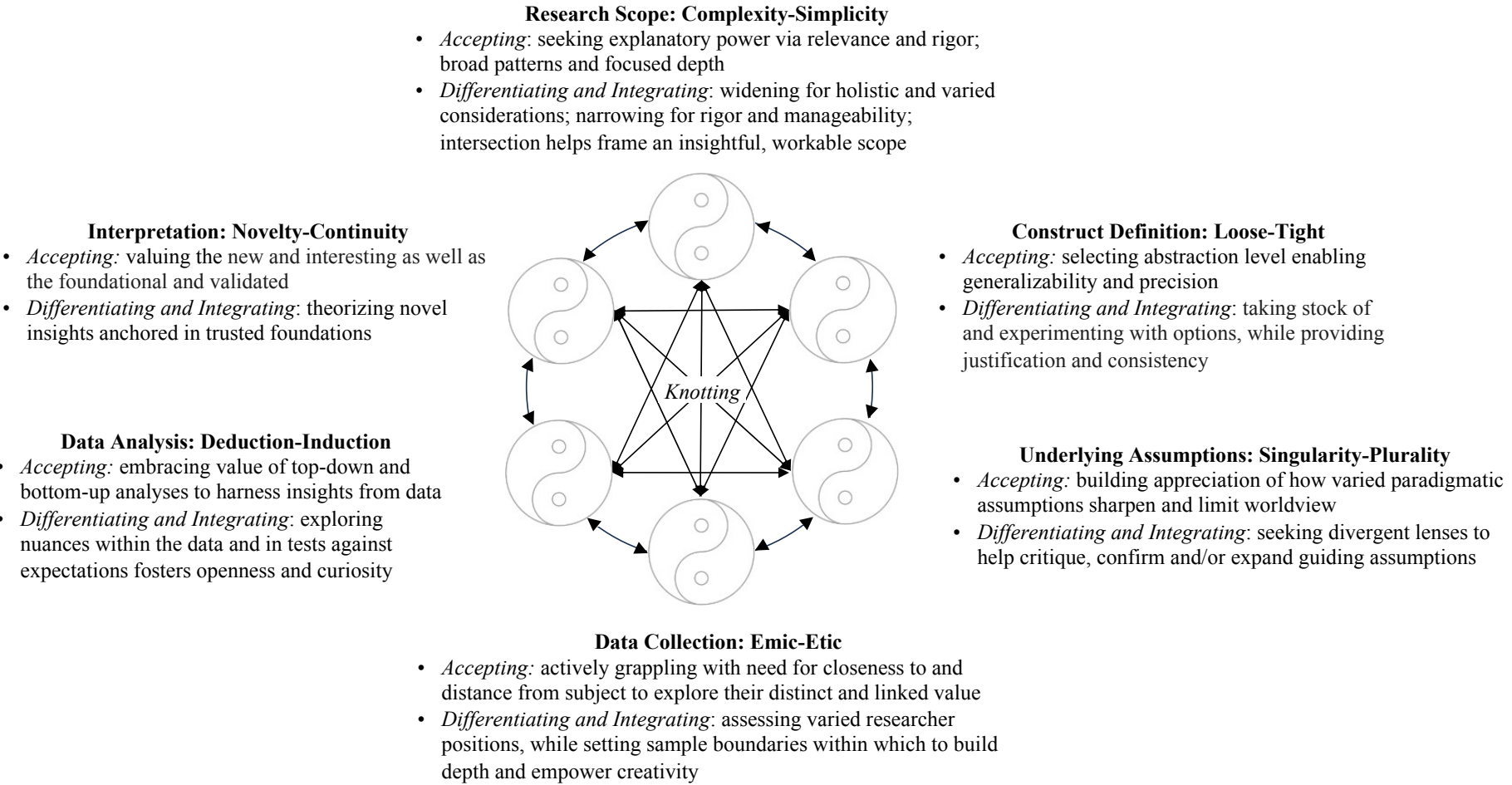
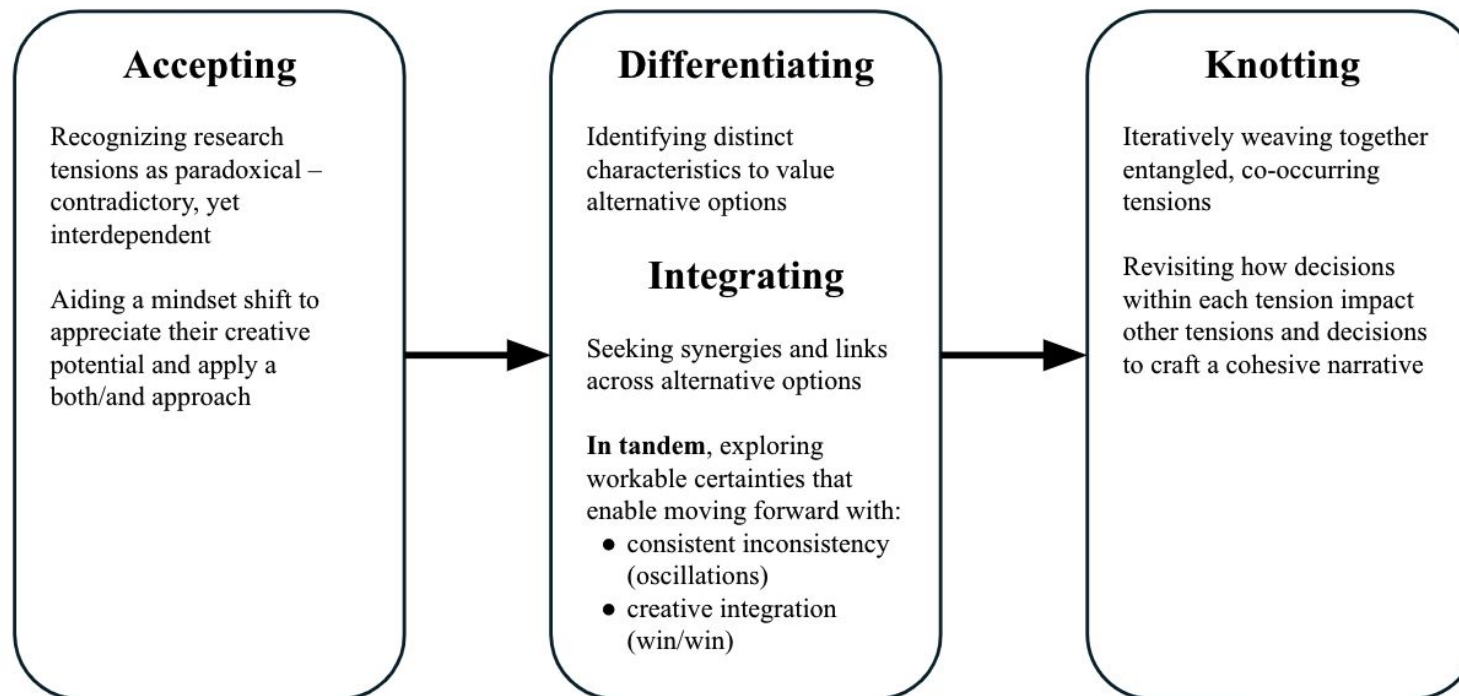


Figure 2: Process of Navigating Research Tensions



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Marianne W. Lewis is dean at the Lindner College of Business, University of Cincinnati. Prior she was dean at Cass (now Bayes) Business School, City University of London. Renowned for her research on organizational paradoxes surrounding innovation and leadership, her latest book *Both/And Thinking* (HBSP, 2022) has been a Top 10 book of the year from Thinkers 50, a finalist of the Next Big Idea Club. *Both/And Thinking* is published by Harvard Business Review. Lewis has been recognized among the world’s most-cited researchers in her field (Web of Science) and received the Decade Award (2021) from the *Academy of Management Review*. Her work also appears in such journals as *Harvard Business Review*, *Academy of Management Journal*, and *Organization Science*.

Wendy Smith is the Dana J. Johnson Professor of Management at the Lerner College of Business and Economics, University of Delaware. She earned her PhD in organizational behavior at Harvard Business School, where she began her intensive research on strategic paradoxes—how leaders and senior teams effectively respond to contradictory, yet interdependent demands. Her latest book, *Both/And Thinking* (HBSP, 2022) has been a Top 10 book of the year from Thinkers 50, a finalist of the Next Big Idea Club. Smith has been recognized among the world’s most-cited researchers in her field (Web of Science) and twice received the Decade Award (2021, 2024) from the *Academy of Management Review*. Her work also appears in such journals as *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Academy of Management Journal*, and *Organization Science*.