



Paradoxical Theorizing: A multimodal approach to generate new theory

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Joshua Keller¹ , Marco Berti² 
and Wendy Smith³ 

Abstract

Over three decades ago, Marshall Scott Poole and Andrew Van de Ven proposed using paradoxes to develop more rigorous and robust organizational theories. We reignite their efforts while offering two important advances. First, we introduce to their initial ideas the expanding paradox literature to suggest how scholars can generate creative theories by surfacing and engaging tensions. We label this process *paradoxical theorizing*, which we define as a set of practices leveraging interdependent contradictions to generate new theory. Second, recognizing that extant theorizing emphasizes cognitive analysis and formal reasoning, we seek to expand this approach by unpacking four modalities of paradoxical theorizing and identifying the embedded tensions within each modality. We contribute to organizational theory by explicating a process and modalities that draw on tensions to generate more creative theories.

Keywords

Theorizing, theory, paradox, modality, organization

Theory enables scholars and practitioners to make “informed knowledge claims . . . offering . . . a way to think better or differently about something” (J. Cornelissen et al., 2021, pp. 3–4). Organizational theory, in particular, seeks to address “relevant questions about . . . phenomena in the world that are worth explaining” (Davis, 2015, p. 314), such as how to

¹UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia

²Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal

³University of Delaware, Newark, DE, USA

Corresponding author:

Joshua Keller, UNSW Sydney, UNSW Business School, College Road, Sydney, 2052, Australia.

Email: j.keller@unsw.edu.au



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coordinate action amid divergent interests, imperfect information, and constant change (Alvarez et al., 2020; Furnari et al., 2020). However, career and employment pressures, publishing demands, and excessive construct convergence (Sumpter et al., 2021) can lead organizational scholarship to become more narrow and self-referential, often to the neglect of new debates, relevant organizational issues, and challenging societal dynamics (Davis, 2015; Mair & Seelos, 2021).

Over three decades ago, Poole and Van de Ven (1989) proposed drawing on paradox to generate new theories. They argued that existing approaches produced insights that were internally consistent but of limited scope and encouraged scholars to “look for theoretical tensions or oppositions and use them to stimulate the development of more encompassing theories” (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989, pp. 562–563). Others have followed, exploring opportunities for more rigorous and relevant theories by integrating opposing theories (Lewis & Smith, 2014), paradigms (Gioia & Pitre, 1990), methodologies (Lewis & Grimes, 1999), and disciplines (Bednarek et al., 2021b). Increasingly, scholars draw explicitly on paradox as a theorizing tool. For example, Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003) generated novel governance theory by seeking integration, more control, and more collaborative approaches.

In this paper, we build on and extend the idea of leveraging paradox to inform theorizing in two significant ways. First, we draw on paradox theory’s expanding insights to propose a process for how interdependent opposites can be harnessed to generate novel theory. In the last two decades, scholarship on paradox theory has exploded, applying insights about interdependent opposites to a wide variety of phenomena (Lewis & Smith, 2022). While scholars have explored the paradoxical nature of knowledge, unpacking interdependent opposites in our ontology or epistemology (Hahn & Knight, 2021), our purpose is more methodological, focusing on the scholarly pursuits of theorizing. We identify define a set of practices leveraging interdependent contradictions to generate new

theories which we label as *paradoxical theorizing*. Drawing on insights from paradox theory, we identify four core practices: (a) *surfacing* tensions; (b) *differentiating* opposite poles; (c) *integrating* across poles; and (d) *managing issues* that derive from these tensions.

Second, we explore multiple modalities for paradoxical theorizing. Often theorizing is conceptualized as an individual endeavor based on formal analysis and reasoning (Shapira, 2011). Yet, theorizing also involves practical activities through which observations are collected, given sense to, transformed into general claims, communicated, and justified to a scientific community (Swedberg, 2016, 2017). These actions are shaped by sociomaterial practices situated in specific communities of practice, so the individual agency of the theorist is constrained by structural and discursive dynamics (Clegg et al., 2022). Theorizing further encompasses a broader set of engagements that involves embodied, social, and material approaches of integrating data (Hambrick, 2007; Pfeffer, 2014) to enable collective processes of knowledge production and communication (Clegg et al., 2022). Observing these varied approaches, we identify two dimensions of theorizing based on (1) level of analysis—internal activities and external activities, and (2) engagement mode—conceptual elements and physical elements. We use these two dimensions to identify four distinct modalities of theorizing: (a) *embrained modality*, drawing on cognitive analysis and formal reasoning; (b) *embodied modality*, drawing on emotions and identities; (c) *social modality*, drawing on culture and language; and (d) *material modality*, drawing on space, time, and technology. We surface tensions within each modality and apply our process model of paradoxical theorizing to engage interdependent opposites within each type. Extending theorizing beyond formal reasoning to include scholar’s feelings, language, work and behaviors can generate broader tensions while also enabling more original insights (Swedberg, 2016).

Unpacking the process and modalities of paradoxical theorizing makes at least three contributions to organizational theory. First, by

articulating sociomaterial and embodied factors involved in theorizing, we reveal novel ways to generate insightful (DiMaggio, 1995), provocative (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021), and impactful (Reinecke et al., 2022) theories, which is particularly critical to address the grand challenges in our contemporary world. Second, our approaches to paradoxical theorizing invite more diversity of insights into organization theorizing more broadly. Extant theorizing can inadvertently silence voices due to power dynamics, expertise biases, taken-for-granted assumptions of what is valued, or even self-silencing. By surfacing, valuing, and engaging with opposing perspectives and circumstances, paradoxical theorizing creates opportunities for often marginalized insights to find voice and inform conversations. Finally, by drawing on diverse, opposing insights, paradoxical theorizing can enable vitality and overcome potential hegemony (Clegg et al., 2022).

Paradoxes as a theorizing engine

Paradoxes are “contradictory, yet interdependent elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382). Paradox theory depicts interdependent opposites as inherent in organizations and organizing and explores how surfacing and integrating these tensions can generate novel approaches to challenges. A rich and growing literature explores the nature and implications of paradoxes (see Smith & Lewis, 2022; Berti et al., 2021 for a review), applying insights to a broad range of organizational phenomena, such as exploration and exploitation (Papachroni & Heracleous, 2020), social missions and financial demands (Hahn et al., 2016; Pamphile, 2022), and learning and performing (Petriglieri & Peshkam, 2021). Moreover, scholars have explored tensions at various levels, such as the society (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Sharma et al., 2021), professions (Pradies, 2023), organizations (Rosales et al., 2022), teams (Miron-Spektor et al., 2022), and individuals (Wenzel et al., 2019).

While contemporary scholars apply paradox theory broadly, early theorists drew on paradox as a tool for the scholarly pursuit of theorizing. Poole and Van de Ven (1989) noted that extant theorizing emphasized internal coherence and parsimony, resulting in overly simplistic insight applied to increasingly narrow contexts. Scholars sought to perfect theory by testing, measuring, and assessing, which reinforced, rather than expanded, insights. Moreover, increasing expertise within one theory often results in “theory construction methods [that] are biased toward consistency” (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989, p. 562). While consistency can be valuable for knowledge accumulation, it can stifle knowledge exploration (March, 1991).

In contrast, Poole and Van de Ven (1989) called for a theorizing process that valued inherent tensions to enable more robust and vital insight. To do so, they drew upon insights of paradox and dialectics (Benson, 1977), noting that juxtaposing opposition can engage existing understanding while challenging and expanding upon it and leading to new insights. Schad et al. (2019, p. 108) argued that such processes require both “centripetal forces [that] revolve around the conceptual core, integrating disparate knowledge and thereby buffering its boundaries [and] centrifugal forces [that] pull away from the core to spur exploration and creativity, challenging, spanning, and extending its boundaries.” Together, these forces “manage the tension between construct convergence and construct evolution” (Sumpter et al., 2021, p. 485).

Scholars have adopted various approaches to harness contradictions as a source for novel theorizing. One approach seeks to reconcile inconsistencies. For example, J. P. Cornelissen (2023) proposes to develop stronger, more substantial inferential claims and strengthen explanations by iterating across contrasting theoretical grammars in the process of theoretical triangulation. A second approach invites breakdowns and surprises in empirical observations as a source of mystery to spur new theoretical insights (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007)—for example, a male-dominated organization that embraces

feminine values. Alternatively, scholars can explore contrastive explanations, asking “why P instead of Q” to account for an observation—for example, transaction cost theory emerged by asking why some production activities are coordinated through hierarchy rather than market (Tsang & Ellsaesser, 2011). An extension of this approach involves problematizing, which questions assumptions informing existing theories (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011), for instance by challenging the functionalist tenets underlying agile methodology, revealing their inherent paradoxes and risks (Horlach & Drechsler, 2020).

While these approaches draw on opposition, others highlight interdependence between paradigms or theories. Gioia and Pitre (1990) describe a multiparadigm approach to theorizing that values opposition and seeks a meta-level of integration across different paradigmatic assumptions. Building on these assumptions and drawing directly on paradox theory, Lewis and Grimes (1999) detail a meta-triangulation process to articulate the distinctions between paradigms in service of surfacing the points of integration and synergy. In contrast with traditional theory-building processes, they encourage scholars to purposely explore phenomena and ideas from different paradigms and then compare these varied insights. In addition, scholars can also surface theory interdependence through dialectic interrogation, “imaginatively engaging in a back and forth inquiry between the phenomenal world of a given field and existing theory” either to consolidate or to disrupt an existing corpus of knowledge (Hoon & Baluch, 2020, p. 1248).

Recent research highlights how a scholar’s motivations influence theorizing practices, particularly in extreme contexts (Wright et al., 2023). Similarly, Bednarek et al. (2021a) advocate for interdisciplinary theorizing, encouraging scholars to integrate insights from diverse fields to explore the interdependence of divergent ideas. This shapes how scholars approach contradictions, affecting their theoretical insights. In sum, paradoxical theorizing, which emphasizes the heuristic potential of contradictions and tensions, can be understood as an

additional mode of engagement in addition to phenomenon-driven, theory-driven, change-driven, or vulnerability-driven engagement (Wright et al., 2023), that can support theory development.

A process model of paradoxical theorizing

Building on this extant literature, we draw on paradox theory to propose a process model of paradoxical theorizing with four stages: (a) surfacing tensions; (b) differentiating opposing poles; (c) integrating across poles; and (d) managing issues that derive from these tensions.

The first stage, surfacing tensions, involves making inherent opposition in the theorizing salient. Theorizing involves navigating demands that are often contradictory yet interdependent, both across and within theoretical frameworks. Such tensions can remain latent and unintrusive, overlooked or suppressed, unless scholars purposefully engage with them, seeking out, noticing and juxtaposing oppositions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Making tensions salient does not imply artificially creating opposition by being contrarian, but rather acknowledging underlying tensions inherent in theorizing (Clegg et al., 2022; Schad et al., 2019). Surfacing tensions often involves finding alternative lenses and approaches to depict and understand these potential tensions (Hahn & Knight, 2021) so that they can be discussed and addressed with an approach that stimulates creativity through opposition (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018, 2022). This includes asking key questions such as: What is an opposing theory, insight, or ontological assumption to my current theory? What might be the opposite understanding of this theory? Doing so might also involve recognizing emotional discomfort or intuitive triggers that signal opposition (Pradies, 2023; Santistevan et al., 2024), or creating research teams with varied participants with different perspectives (Keller et al., 2020).

The following two stages can occur in either order and involve an ongoing oscillation

between differentiating opposing poles and integrating across poles (Smith, 2014). Differentiating involves pulling apart opposing perspectives and recognizing and valuing the opposing poles of paradox. Doing so allows for deep engagement in each theory to understand its underlying ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and key insights. Better understanding each pole can allow for a deeper level of integration (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Smith, 2014). Integrating further requires us to ask where the theories reinforce one another, how they connect, and how their emergent insights might expand on one another. Effectively navigating paradox involves both differentiating and integrating practices (Smith, 2014). Differentiating without integrating fosters ongoing conflict, whereas integrating without differentiating leads to false synergies, in which power dynamics may suppress the weaker pole (Huq et al., 2017).

Acknowledging the role of power dynamics and the potential for resistance and conflict leads to the fourth stage, which is to effectively manage issues that arise. In early organizational theory, Mary Parker Follett reminded scholars that conflict is neither good nor bad. It simply exists. The challenge depends on how we navigate these issues. As conflicts arise across opposing approaches in the process of theorizing, managing these disputes becomes critical for enabling productive insights from opposing poles (Bednarek & Smith, 2023; Follett, 1924). This includes recognizing when to make “both/and” or “either/or” decisions about which contradictory yet interrelated theories to build on (Berti & Cunha, 2023; Krautzberger & Tuckermann, 2024).

Paradoxical theorizing across multiple modalities

Scholars have long treated theorizing as an analytical and formal reasoning process involving observing, abstracting, and relating concepts using thought experiments (Folger & Turillo,

1999) and/or disciplined imagination (Weick, 1989) to generate new ideas. Such approaches tap into a limited set of cognitive capabilities for generating insights. Increasingly, scholars acknowledge the practical nature of theorizing by generating meaning from a broader array of modalities that tap into multiple forms of sensory data, including emotions, language, identities, etc. (Swedberg, 2017) and that involve not only individual but also collective endeavors. Exploring a broader approach to theorizing across modalities invites us to consider three underlying assumptions. First, theorizing is not produced by “the ghost in the machine” (Ryle, 1949 [2009], p. 21). It is an embodied activity connected with identities shaped by our physical bodies’ interaction with ourselves and others (Cunliffe, 2022) and emotions shaped by our physical bodies’ physiological processes (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008; Langenbusch, 2021). Rather than treating these features as sources of bias or noise, we can investigate how they inform the processes and outcomes of theorizing. Second, theorizing is not just the outcome of mental operations but requires organizing human and non-human entities: a theory can be seen as the instantiation of a network of empirical objects, methods, observation instruments, and communication devices (Callon, 1995). Doing so invites us to consider the material tools (e.g., the software we use to analyze qualitative or quantitative data) that inform theorizing. Third, theory is not the sole product of a lonely thinker but emerges from endeavors across collectives of people who participate in scholarly movements (Clegg et al., 2022), which can also be labelled as “disciplines,” “bandwagons,” “invisible colleges,” or “intellectual movements” (Frickel & Gross, 2005, p. 205). Social dynamics inform these collectives and constitute “the context in which . . . [theory] lives” (Weick, 1995, p. 387). Idea generation emerges through relationality, not individuality (Follett, 1924). Understanding these social dynamics and how they inform theorizing invites exploration into culture, language games, and social structures.

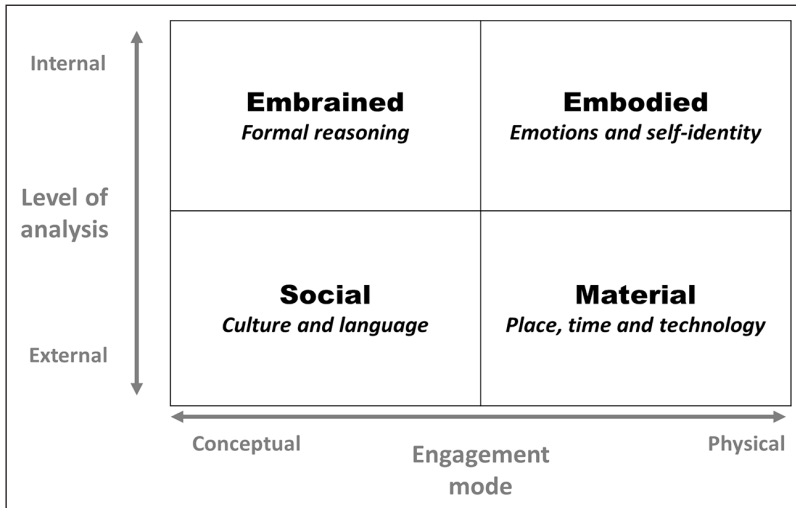


Figure 1. Modalities of theorizing.

We unpack this broader approach by highlighting an array of modalities for theorizing (Gherardi, 2012) (see Figure 1). We identify two dimensions of modalities: (1) level of analysis (Gond & Moser, 2021)—the extent to which the modality involves an internal or external focus; and (2) engagement mode (Wright et al., 2023)—the extent to which the modality involves engaging with more physical materials or abstract concepts. These two dimensions inform four modalities of theorizing. We label the first modality as *embrained*, as it involves the analytical and purposeful reasoning that comes from internally focused abstract engagement and represents the activities traditionally associated with scholarship. The second modality, which we label as *embodied*, involves an internal focus on the physical elements of oneself, theorizing through the intuition, emotions, and physical identity that stem from our physiology. Moreover, since theorizing is never performed in isolation, it is further necessary to consider our external environment. The third modality, which we label as *social*, captures theorizing that is externally focused, with an emphasis on how we interact with others through communication. This modality highlights the role of culture and language,

constituting the theorists' social embeddedness. Finally, we label the fourth modality as *material*, as it considers interactions through the use of external physical materials. This modality involves theorizing that draws on tools and artifacts that highlight space, time and technology. Table 1 unpacks the processes of paradox theorizing for each of these four modalities.

Embrained modality: Juxtaposing tensions in analytical and purposeful reasoning

Extant idea generation focuses on individual thought processes informed by abstract concepts, which we define as an embrained modality of theorizing. Scholars draw on insights through their own analytical and purposeful processes. Extant insights about paradox in theorizing assume an embrained modality, inviting cognitive processes to expand from more internally consistent and simplified insights to theories that invite contradiction and enable complexities.

Processes for paradoxical theorizing in an embrained modality *surface tensions* by recognizing and making salient multiple, opposing insights as reflected across different theories

Table 1. Paradoxical theorizing across multiple modalities.

Categories	Surfacing tensions	Differentiating opposite poles	Integrating across poles	Managing issues
	<i>Make inherent tensions embedded in theorizing salient</i>	<i>Pulling apart tension to value alternative approaches</i>	<i>Seek synergies and points of transformation</i>	<i>Acknowledge and navigate points of conflict, power differentials and trade-offs</i>
Embrained Tensions of analytical and purposeful reasoning	Surface tensions of ontology, epistemology and methodology across and within theories	Unpack the differences that surface between different theories	Explore possible synergies across varied theories, create typologies, use contrastive explanations, seek novel insights through dialectic contrast	Recognize conflicts that surface across tensions; identify potential power differentials that might constrain insights
Embodied Tensions of emotions and identities	Surface tensions exist between positive and negative emotions, comfort and discomfort, arousal and calmness, attachment and detachment, intuition and analysis, and varied scholar identities	Create opportunities—time, space, discourse—in the theorizing process to engage in intuition and analysis, value varied emotions, and understand the different identities that inform the analysis	Explore the integration of intuition and analysis, varied emotions and identities; consider how positive and negative emotions might expand key insights and how varied identities can work together to generate novel insights	Acknowledge the emotional labor required by research and seek support in collaboration with colleagues; identify and minimize potential power dynamics amid varied identities
Social Tensions of cultural values, cultural practices and language	Surface tensions from juxtaposing multiple cultural values and cultural practices (disciplinary, national, professional) and tensions in language	Create time and space for engagement between people with varied disciplinary, national, or professional cultural backgrounds; recognize and understand the impact of varied norms on theorizing, making underlying culturally informed assumptions explicit	Explore how varied cultural engagements can reinforce one another or work together toward novel insights, toward possible third culture space	Address cultural preference for how “harmony” can be leveraged for hegemonic purposes; ensure the existence of healthy debate and surfacing of resistance
Material Tensions of time, place and technology	Surface tensions in the time, place and technology of the company; surface tensions in the locations of where theorizing happens, and the outcomes and channels to introduce theorizing	Create time and space for theorizing within specific spatio-temporal settings, such as sitting in an office building or taking a hike; explore different outputs for insights	Explore spatio-temporal settings that integrate multiple temporal and spatial features, such as hiking in an office building; facilitate dialectic interplay between knowledge produced in different settings	Recognize how material settings (e.g., places) can reinforce existing power hierarchies; seek alternative times and places to avoid silencing of less powerful voices

(Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Varied extant studies demonstrate an embrained modality for paradoxical theorizing, which leverage tensions to support theorizing by surfacing contradictory perspectives within the organizational field. For example, Poole and Van de Ven (1989) surface tensions between theories by describing social systems as actions or structures. Similarly, Sundaramurthy and Lewis (2003) surface tensions within the study of corporate governance between economics-inspired approaches that stress agency and opportunism and psycho-social-informed approaches that stress stewardship and collaboration. Other examples include J. P. Cornelissen (2023), who surfaced tensions between opposing theoretical grammars, and Furnari et al. (2020), who surfaced tensions between opposing explanatory attributes. In other cases, prior work has surfaced tensions by borrowing theories from outside the organizational field and juxtaposing contradictory perspectives (see Bednarek et al., 2021a, 2021b for a complete volume on interdisciplinary perspectives on paradox theory). For example, Berti (2021) surfaced tensions between definitions, assumptions, and understandings of paradox between organizational theories and philosophical theories of logic.

In the next two stages, paradoxical theorizing that uses an embrained modality involves *differentiating* and *integrating* assumptions, theories, methodologies, and perspectives. For example, Hargrave and Van de Ven (2017) differentiate the concept of paradox from dialectics by distinguishing the outcomes of tensions that theorists presume when they conceptualize tensions as either paradoxes or dialectics, referring to paradoxes as tensions that are managed through acceptance and dialectics as tensions that are transformed through conflict. At the same time, they integrate the two concepts by establishing a new conceptualization of tensions as dynamic, which persists and changes over time. Similarly, Berti and Cunha (2023) differentiate the concepts of paradoxes and trade-offs found in prior literature by contrasting their underlying ontologies, referring to paradoxes as socially constructed and trade-offs

as material. They then integrate the contradictory ontologies by incorporating a double-loop model that includes socially constructed and material factors, demonstrating that the two concepts are contradictory and interrelated.

Sometimes, an embrained mode of paradoxical theorizing involves focusing on either differentiation or integration to help balance the field. For example, in an “opposition-driven” approach that emphasizes differentiation, Tsang and Ellsaesser (2011) recommend using contrasting explanations, such as comparing the explanatory powers of different theories, to clarify which particular aspect of a phenomenon a theory intends to explain and to identify additional causal factors that may intervene. Others differentiate by uncovering conflict over meanings and interests vested in different polarities (e.g., Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023). Others focus on integration, emphasizing the necessary tools that enable integration even when theories or concepts appear contradictory, such as letting go of disciplinary attachment (Fabian, 2000), adopting combinative approaches (Grandori, 2001), theoretical triangulation (J. P. Cornelissen, 2023), configurational theorizing (Furnari et al., 2020), or the adoption of integrative theories from other disciplines (Hahn & Knight, 2021).

Finally, an embrained mode of paradoxical theorizing can include a recognition that not all theories and concepts can be integrated. It is also possible to “agree to disagree” by recognizing that different organizational theories have distinct purposes and intent, since theorizing in social sciences is not just motivated by the desire to explain or predict some “naturally occurring” phenomena but can also have the explicit intent of promoting a desirable change, or articulating a social critique. Even the term theory has multiple divergent meanings, including the explanation of phenomena to interpretive stance, from attempt to unveil social construction phenomena to exegeses of texts (Abend, 2008). Acknowledging this difference of purposes and uses of theory can facilitate co-existence of divergent interpretations, despite the existence of irreconcilable paradigmatic

differences (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Cannella & Paetzold, 1994).

Embodied modality: Juxtaposing tensions of emotions and identities

Individuals draw on both analytical and intuitive processing to make decisions and generate ideas (Sadler-Smith & Shefy, 2004). To trust one's intuition is to trust one's "gut," which is connected to the physiological responses we get from our body that trigger emotions (Christopoulos et al., 2019). Because our idea-generation process cannot be completely separated from our emotions, and our emotions are not completely separable from our body (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008), recognizing the role of intuition invites us to move beyond embrained aspects of theorizing and instead consider the physicality of an embodied scholar. In addition, our bodies inform our visibility to ourselves and others, thus contributing to forming our identities (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019), including (but not limited to) our gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and age. Even when our identities are not tied to our bodies, emotional responses to identity threats (Dickerson, 2008), shaped by the inseparability of academic and personal selves (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012), render the body a vital conduit for theorizing through lived experience. Therefore, paradoxical theorizing also involves *embodiment*, which includes the surfacing and navigation of tensions attributed to the emotions and identities that connect our bodies to our theorizing process. We recognize that the expression of emotions (Härtel et al., 2009; Zietsma et al., 2019) and identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) are also shaped by the social context, yet emotions and identities are continuously connected to physical bodies through the physiological nature of emotional experiences (Poppa & Bechara, 2018).

Embodied paradoxical theorizing first involves *surfacing tensions* that involve emotions and identities. One tension involves deciding whether to incorporate emotions in theorizing through the use of the gut (i.e., intuition) or the

heart (i.e., emotional attachment) (e.g., Cunliffe, 2022; Weick, 1989), while simultaneously incorporating rationality, logic, and reason. The incorporation of intuition or emotional attachment concurrently with rational and analytical thinking surfaces tensions because they tap into contradictory reasoning styles (Calabretta et al., 2017; Keller & Sadler-Smith, 2019). Trusting one's gut or heart is typically fast and prone to making mistakes, yet it promotes creativity and authenticity, which are the opposite of rational and analytical thinking (Miller & Ireland, 2005). Another tension involves navigating one's own emotions when theorizing. Scholars can have positive, negative, or mixed feelings about any theoretical issue, topic, or framework. Positive emotions can promote flexibility (Wang et al., 2017) and resilience (Tugade et al., 2004), while negative emotions can promote attention to detail and realistic expectations (Rowe & Fitness, 2018). Scholars can surface tensions between positive and negative emotions by embracing emotional ambivalence, which entails simultaneously having positive and negative feelings toward a target (Rothman & Pratt, 2022). Finally, scholars can surface tensions between identities, including disciplinary identities (Keller et al., 2020), or between academic and non-academic identities, such as gender or nationality (Clegg, 2008). For instance, Cunliffe (2022) argues that traditional theorizing adopts more masculine approaches that often conflict with more feminist approaches. Scholars can surface tensions by simultaneously juxtaposing identities, even when each has an emotional attachment.

Once tensions surface, an embodied mode of paradoxical theorizing involves *differentiating* and *integrating* between emotional and rational thinking, between positive and negative emotions, and between identities. Scholars cannot integrate intuition and analysis simultaneously at the nano-level. However, they can integrate by quickly oscillating between the two ways of thinking, such as when individuals quickly oscillate between suspending disbelief and introspective contemplation to appreciate the aesthetics of art (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Meanwhile, scholars can differentiate by

providing extended time for freestyle drawing or poetry to capture intuition (Dörfler & Ackermann, 2012) and extended time for deliberate analysis to capture rationality. Similarly, scholars cannot consciously integrate positive and negative emotions at the nano-level (Carrera & Oceja, 2007). However, they can find time and space to express positive and negative emotions simultaneously (Larsen & McGraw, 2014), such as feeling bittersweet about a theory or topic. Meanwhile, scholars can differentiate by providing time and space to self-reflect on each of their emotions (Conway & Bekerian, 1987) and incorporating their separate reflections into their theorizing. Finally, scholars can follow the strategies of biculturals by finding time and space to integrate and differentiate their academic and non-academic identities (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). Feminist scholars, for instance, can find time and space to lean into their varied identities, as only women, only scholars, and an integrated identity of female scholars (Benschop, 2021; Fotaki & Pullen, 2024).

One illustrative example of the use of multiple identities with varying levels of emotional attachment is a series of articles on paradox scholars' response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Keller et al., 2021; Pradies et al., 2021). Some scholars identified as academics examining the COVID-19 pandemic from the outside, other scholars identified as academics and private individuals experiencing COVID-19, and other scholars identified only as private individuals, thereby providing a range of integrated and differentiated approaches to identification.

Finally, an embodied mode of paradoxical theorizing includes recognizing that too much oscillation between the integration and differentiation of emotions or between emotionally laden identities requires guardrails. For example, mixed emotions can foster creativity (Fong, 2006) and enable more deliberate idea generation and refinement (Rothman & Wiesenfeld, 2007) by providing conflicting signals. However, mixed emotions can also foster rumination (Van Harreveld et al., 2009), delays in making decisions (Van Harreveld et al., 2015),

and burnout (Oh, 2022). Therefore, an embodied mode of paradoxical theorizing requires attention to time management and emotion regulation. This includes, for example, setting limits on time for deliberation, navigating tensions between the need to embrace "slow theorizing" and pressures to publish (Bansal et al., 2025), and being attentive to heightened emotional states. Navigating multiple identities can also be emotionally taxing, especially if the scholar is emotionally attached to one or more identities. In this case, paradoxical theorizing may require focusing on one identity (e.g., an academic identity) within a given project. At the same time, paradoxical theorizing requires us to recognize that trade-offs are temporary, and leaning into one identity in one project should be balanced by leaning into another identity in another project.

Social modality: Juxtaposing tensions of cultural values, cultural practices, and language

Paradoxical theorizing also involves careful attention to the social environment because all theorizing takes place within a social context (Swedberg, 2014). The values that drive our motivation to theorize, the conventional theorizing practices we engage in, and the language we use to make sense of our theories and communicate our theories to others are shaped by our organizational, disciplinary, and societal environments. We refer to this interpersonal and conceptual influence on theorizing as *social theorizing*, highlighting cultural values, cultural practices, and language as key features.

Cultural values indicate explicit and implicit shared ideas about what is good, right, or desirable (Schwartz, 1999), providing a template of what we should do as theorists. At the organizational level, cultural values can vary in whether members prefer control or flexibility and prefer external or internal engagement (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Organizational cultural values can thus influence how theorists structure their work and choose collaborators. At the discipline level, cultural values can vary in

epistemological and ontological preferences (Boon, 2020) or the treatment of paradigms (Austin, 1990). Disciplinary cultural values can thus influence the questions that theorists pursue and their underlying assumptions. Societal cultural values can vary in their attention to performance, generosity, or loyalty (Schlösser et al., 2013). Societal cultural values can thus influence the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for theorizing. In some cases, disciplinary and societal cultural values intersect, creating differences between a dominant disciplinary culture shaped primarily by Anglo societal cultures and subcultures reflecting alternative societal values (Hamann et al., 2020; Mir & Mir, 2013).

Cultural practices are shared perceptions of how people routinely behave and act within a given collective (Frese, 2015), providing templates of what we do as theorists. They impact behavior by providing collectives with taken-for-granted assumptions about how others behave (Weber & Dacin, 2011). Although there are common practices across the academic field, each discipline has its own distinct epistemic culture with its own set of theorizing practices (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Van Rijnsoever & Hessels, 2011). For example, disciplines vary in the heuristics that their theorists tacitly use to solve problems (MacLeod, 2018). Disciplinary cultural practices are historically rooted within Anglo societal cultures, which has led to calls for expanding the type of theorizing practices conducted outside of those societal cultures (e.g., Alcadipani et al., 2012).

Finally, language encompasses the set of signs, sounds, vocabularies, and grammars that collectives use for joint sensemaking and communication (Clegg et al., 2022; Keller & Tian, 2021), providing templates of how to interpret and interact as theorists. A key feature of language is a “language game,” which Wittgenstein (1958) describes as a set of rules for social interaction analogous to a playbook in other games. Scholarly communities have distinct language games with “key concepts and correct ways to relate them, aligning ontological and epistemological assumptions, objects of study and heuristic purposes” (Clegg et al., 2022,

p. 385). As with cultural values and practices, language games encompass all theorizing activities from brainstorming to publication and may vary across societies, fields, disciplines, and even subdisciplines. Therefore, theorizing beyond our specific scholarly community also requires translation.

As with other modalities, paradoxical theorizing within the social modality begins with *surfacing tensions*, which entails juxtaposing opposites in cultural values, cultural practices, and language. This is a social activity that requires engaging with people with diverse disciplinary, professional, ethnic, and societal backgrounds, via co-authorship, mentorship, editorial work, conference participation, and formal and informal dialogue with others within and outside of academia. Culturally diverse social engagement surfaces contradictions by uncovering our own assumptions about values, practices, and meanings and exposing us to alternative assumptions. For example, interdisciplinary engagement can challenge assumptions about how theorists value rigor versus relevance, parsimony versus nuance, or independence versus collaboration (König et al., 2013). Intercultural engagement can surface contradictory meanings of words, such as the surfacing of breakthrough versus incremental meanings of innovation when basic and applied scientists work together (Keller et al., 2020). Similarly, engaging in knowledge production practices outside of academia breaks assumptions about how we engage with others in theorizing practice. For example, traditional Jewish practices of studying theology do so by inviting two people to be sparring partners to generate new insights. These conflicting partners are called *havruta* from the word “friend” (Kent, 2008)

Once contradictions surface through social engagement with others across disciplinary, professional, ethnic, and societal cultural boundaries, paradoxical theorizing involves *differentiating* and *integrating* polarities by positioning ourselves within and between cultures. Differentiating, which entails immersing oneself within a specific social sphere, enables

theorists to acquire a depth of knowledge about the values, practices, and language that shape our understanding of a particular pole. Integrating through engagement across social spheres, on the other hand, enables theorists to acquire a breadth of knowledge about contrasting values, practices, and language, which provides insight into complementarities between poles. Examples of differentiating and integrating are found in prior paradox theory research, which includes theorists with varying scholarly backgrounds (Bednarek et al., 2021b). Some work differentiates itself by grounding itself in a positivist tradition developed within psychology (e.g., Miron-Spektor et al., 2011, 2018), a constitutive tradition developed within communication studies (e.g., Putnam et al., 2016; Sheep et al., 2017), or a critical tradition with roots in Marxism (e.g., Berti & Simpson, 2021; Cunha et al., 2023). Others integrate contradictory perspectives based on divergent disciplinary traditions within a single framework (e.g., Hahn & Knight, 2021). Similarly, some work dives deeply into non-Western traditions (e.g., Gaim & Clegg, 2021), whereas others integrate contradictory perspectives based on divergent societal traditions (e.g., Keller et al., 2017). Theorists can even differentiate by engaging in practitioner-oriented work (Hoffman, 2004) or integrate through collaboration with practitioners (Slawinski et al., 2025).

Integrating and differentiating multiple contradictory perspectives through social engagement within and between disciplinary, professional, ethnic, and societal spheres can also create tension between the deliberation of different ideas and the efficiency of coming up with a single answer during the theorizing process. In addition, bringing in multiple perspectives can also increase conflict within the group (Stahl et al., 2010). Intercultural conflict is likely to be even more salient during the theorizing process when the surfacing of multiple identities tied to multiple cultural backgrounds trigger an “us versus them” perspective that can hamper the overall process (Van Der Zee et al., 2004). To overcome this issue, theorists can encourage the application of a paradox mindset

across those working together (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), which has been found to increase group creativity through the embrace of tensions among culturally diverse members of a team (Mannucci & Shalley, 2022). Establishing a climate for inclusion is also helpful, as it encourages those working together to respect alternative perspectives (Li et al., 2017). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge the asymmetry of some cultural juxtapositions; for example, academics based in the periphery of the Global North who need to adhere to the expectations of the “international journals” of the Anglosphere experience these as colonial encounters, rather than dialogues between peers (Barros & Alcadipani, 2022).

These social dynamics can raise different issues in the publication review process. The peer review process is often criticised for its idiosyncrasies and biases and it has been compared to a playground game, where actors interact based on formal and informal rules, sometimes unfairly (Graue, 2006). Tensions between the role of the assessors (editors and reviewers) and that of the creatives (authors of new theories) are complicated by issues of exploitation of reviewers’ work (Chalmers & Solomon, 2022; Cheah & Piasecki, 2022), by the negative emotions experienced on the occasion of rejection (Day, 2011), and by the fact that academics perform multiple roles, as both authors and reviewers. Yet, it is also possible to approach this tension productively, first learning to cope with negative emotions and avoiding to create vicious circles (e.g., letting the negative experiences as an author influence the decision as a reviewer) and by reframing the approach to the process—for instance, thinking of the “other” not as a gatekeeper or as a potentially inadequate aspirant, but as a co-author with whom to collaborate in the production of knowledge.

Material modality: Juxtaposing tensions of time, space, and technology

Paradoxical theorizing also involves engaging with multiple forms of materiality, including

time (Bansal et al., 2025), space (Dacin et al., 2024), and technology (Bailey et al., 2022). Organizational theorists often refer to elements as *sociomateriality*, acknowledging that time, space, and technology cannot be disentangled from social construction (Cooren, 2020; Orlikowski & Scott, 2008; Putnam, 2015). However, the materiality modality is distinct from the social modality because it emphasizes how theorists engage with the material elements of the environment, regardless of their social and/or physical origin. Materiality can take on different forms of engagement: as boundaries, barriers, tools, resources, intermediaries, or agents (Contu & Willmott, 2003). Time can be chaotic or rhythmic, structurally constraining or agency-enabling (Bansal et al., 2025). Space can be stable or dynamic, physical or digital (Dacin et al., 2024). Technology can be established or novel, complementary or supplemental (Bailey et al., 2022). These features create an inherent source of tension for theorists, centered on whether theorists engage with materiality and how (Clegg et al., 2022).

Tensions are likely to remain latent for theorists who choose not to engage with the question of materiality. They can conceptualize theory as an “abstract, timeless representation” (Clegg et al., 2022) devoid of material influences. However, as with other modalities, *surfacing paradoxes* embedded within materiality can foster theoretical creativity and insight. This process begins by recognizing the materiality with which theorists are already engaging and their social and physical origins. This includes, for example, recognizing that theorists often assume that theorizing is conducted within a timeframe reserved for “research time,” located within an ivory tower building shared by fellow academics, and primarily involving word processing software. For many theorists, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged these underlying assumptions by blurring the boundaries between home and office and between night and day (Pradies et al., 2021), forcing theorists to recognize the role of time and space in shaping our theorizing experience. The emergence of generative artificial

intelligence (AI) has also forced theorists to reinterpret technology as an active agent instead of simply a tool (Jo, 2023). At the same time, as COVID-19 becomes a distant memory and generative AI becomes taken for granted, paradoxical theorizing will require active recognition of alternative uses of time, space, and technology. Time can be a tool for isolation and contemplation unhindered by outside interference, or time can be a resource constraint that requires attention to parsimony and consideration of teaching, service, or other endeavors. Theorists have agency in creating a certain rhythm that aligns activity with time (Blagoev & Schreyögg, 2025). Space can be a specific setting attributed to theorizing, such as an office, a natural setting that promotes meditation and reflection, such as a beach or forest, or a busy setting that provides multiple stimuli, such as a shopping mall or transit station. Technology can include designated word processors the sole aim of which is to produce text, artistic tools that promote visualization as an alternative to text-based theorizing (Langley & Ravasi, 2019; Pradies et al., 2023; Ravasi, 2017), or the sole use of the human body for singing, dancing, or miming, to provide novel forms of insight.

After surfacing materiality tensions, paradoxical theorizing entails *differentiating* and *integrating* multiple elements of materiality. Theorists can differentiate multiple polarities of time by engaging solely in a theorizing process that ignores time constraints or sticks to a regimented time. Theorists can differentiate multiple polarities of space by engaging solely in a theorizing process uniform in its external stimuli, whether an office, a natural setting, or a busy setting such as a shopping mall or transit station. Theorists can differentiate multiple polarities of technology by engaging solely with a word processor, working with generative AI, using visual artistic tools, or one’s own physical body. Theorists can integrate multiple polarities of time and space through oscillation, varying rhythms of theorizing work, or varying physical settings. They can, for example, go to a bustling café to stimulate active brainstorming, take a walk in nature to engage in deep

reflection, and then go to the office to structure their thoughts. They can establish hard, strict deadlines with a devoted period for ignoring them. They can integrate multiple polarities of technology by synthesizing one's text, outputs from generative AI, drawings, and body movement as a collage. The differentiation and integration of materiality can align with theorizing goals. For example, the theorist may turn to novel spaces to stimulate divergent thinking and familiar spaces to stimulate convergent thinking.

As in other modalities, paradoxical theorizing requires *managing issues* that arise from adopting a paradoxical approach to navigating materiality. Resource constraints, including time constraints, stimulate individuals' subjective experience with tensions, fostering creative solutions that address multiple poles. Imposing constraints on time, space, and technology can, therefore, generate theoretical insight through the experience of paradoxical tensions. At the same time, theorists must recognize that material constraints are, by definition, constraints. Theorists may be unable to alter their rhythm, find an alternative space, or acquire a new technology. Disciplinary conventions and reward systems may not favor alternative outputs of theorizing efforts, reducing theorists' incentives to engage in alternative materialities. Paradoxical theorizing therefore requires an understanding of fixed constraints—both material and institutional.

Juxtaposing tensions across interwoven modalities

Paradoxes emerge as scholars draw from the varied modalities to theorize. Each of these four modalities is interwoven with the others. Theorists can never fully separate their minds from their bodies, and thus they must recognize the simultaneous roles of embrained and embodied theorizing. Theorists can also never isolate themselves from their social context and thus must consider how social factors shape the emotions and identities that constitute their embodied theorizing. They also must consider

how their embodied emotions and identities frame their understanding of their social environment. In other words, individuals shape and are shaped by the social environment, and ideas are shaped by both the social and material elements of the environment (Orlikowski & Scott, 2008). The juxtaposition of contradictions between social spheres cannot be disentangled from the materials that each social sphere engages with. All four modalities, therefore, inform and are informed by one another. As scholars seek to generate insights across levels and engagement modes, tensions surface between modalities.

Paradoxical theorizing invites scholars to value and engage the tensions across modalities as an additional source of generative insight. For example, theorizing tensions surface between internal and external approaches. Individual theorizing might be easier and more efficient, minimizing compromise and coordination costs, yet such insights often lack the creativity that emerges through collaborative discourse and engagement. Similarly, scholars face tensions between abstraction and materiality. Abstraction enables generalizable insights across contexts but is often constrained by the application attempts in specific material contexts. Materiality contextualizes insights into time and place, which can help with specificity, but at the extreme be so highly unique that they lack generalizability and conflict with abstract approaches.

By engaging with these tensions, scholars can seek new understanding. Rather than ask whether to build theory individually or interpersonally, scholars can draw on the processes of paradoxical theorizing to explore how to engage both individual contributions and social interactions. For example, some co-author teams brainstorm together, divide sections of a paper to write separately, then collectively evaluate the paper. Others work to brainstorm alone in service of generating insight, then come together to work toward integrating those insights. Paradoxical theorizing also involves navigating tensions between the theorist's sense of self and sense of belonging to multiple

communities (Kreiner et al., 2006), while simultaneously surfacing, integrating, and differentiating tensions within both oneself (e.g., between the intuitive and rational self; see Keller & Sadler-Smith, 2019) and between social spheres (e.g., the organizational scholar and religious practitioner; see Sheep, 2021). Paradoxical theorizing can involve participating in multiple, intersecting groups of academic peers with shared non-academic identities (e.g., gender, race, religion) providing outlets for intrapersonal reflections and interpersonal scholarly dialogue.

Similarly, rather than seek either more abstract theorizing or a more physical or material focus, scholars can recognize the inherent tensions and explore options for both. Some theorizing starts with materiality that values the contextualized space and time of ideas and seeks to generalize from those, while others start with exploring broad ideas and the application in specific places and times. For example, a scholar studying organizational resilience might begin with a specific case of a community recovering from a natural disaster, then abstract insights to develop a broader theoretical framework. Conversely, another scholar might start with a general theory of resilience and then apply it to how a particular organization adapted to a crisis in a specific time and place.

Through a mixture of integration and oscillation between the four modalities, paradoxical theorizing enables scholars to maintain a dynamic equilibrium that not only spurs intellectual insight across the field but creates a holistic experience for each individual's self.

Discussion

Scholars need more sophisticated theorizing processes to make sense of an increasingly complex world. Paradox theory offers an approach. By applying insights from paradox theory to our own scholarly pursuits, we unpacked both processes and modalities for using tensions to generate novel, robust theoretical insights. Our insights about paradoxical

theorizing contribute to organizational theory in at least three significant ways.

First, we encourage scholars to lean into, rather than avoid, theorizing tensions. As any paper development workshop will attest, theorizing surfaces inherent tensions within and across theories and causes unending challenges. Conflicts between co-authors continually surface. Efforts to contextualize theories in specific material contexts contrast with goals for more abstract generalization. Scholars continue to feel pressure to choose between alternatives and reinforce consistency, narrowing the scope and insight of theories. In this paper, we return to and extend the early roots of paradox in organizational theory (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989) to explore how the juxtaposition of opposites can enrich the theorizing process. Drawing on recent paradox theory, we identify specific practices to enable such an approach: surfacing, differentiating, integrating, and managing issues. While these approaches are well developed within paradox theory, we extend their application by inviting scholars broadly to apply them to our own theorizing processes. Provocatively, paradox theorizing invites authors and co-authors teams to not sweep away and try to minimize tensions as obstacles to generate new ideas, but to lean on them as the source of inspiration and intellectual advancement. In fact, some recent contributions demonstrate the vitality of this dialectical debate, wherein core tenets of the theory are constantly probed and challenged in the effort to generate new ideas and frameworks (Krautzberger & Tuckermann, 2024; Seidemann, 2024). Even in developing this paper, each of us as authors has experienced varied tensions in bringing together a unified vision, leveraging different perspectives to gain insights that both draw on and extend beyond paradox theory. These tensions can be double-edged, creating detrimental frustrations and barriers toward effective engagement or enabling creativity and novelty (Lewis & Smith, 2022). Our process of paradoxical theorizing offers practices to recognize the frustrations yet value them as opportunities, not obstacles.

We also introduce a greater array of modalities for theorizing that point to more varied tensions than simply the initial cognitive difference surface across theories. We broaden the modalities of theorizing beyond individual analytical reasoning—what we call embrained modality—to include interpersonal approaches and expand beyond conceptual analytical insights to include material approaches. Pointing to these varied modalities broadens the array of tensions. If tensions are a source of theory generation, then these varied modalities enable even more creativity.

We invite future scholarship to continue to explore how paradox theory applies to our own work as scholars and theorists. For example, scholars have noted how tensions arise in broader methodological realms, such as in the processes of data collection and analysis (Langley & Klag, 2019). Others have noted the paradoxes in framing papers and articulating contributions (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997), or in seeking to be both academically rigorous while having a relevant impact on core phenomena (Sharma et al., 2022). Future scholarship can continue to expand upon how we can navigate the tensions in our work as scholars.

Second, our model of paradoxical theorizing invites a broader diversity of insight and voices into the theorizing process. Extant processes of theorizing highlight power dynamics in which more novice or more divergent voices are frequently silenced in favor of the majority's perspective. Such power dynamics can play out in research collaboratives, in which more senior scholars overpower the insights of more junior scholars and more dominant, established theories diminish those that are more novel and underdeveloped. These dynamics are further reinforced in the review process, in which editorial boards and reviewers often advance more established theories, with little incentive to take risks on novel approaches (Christofi et al., 2024). Such approaches emphasize dominant theories without advancing novel insights. In contrast, paradoxical approaches invite greater diversity of voices into the theorizing process. By giving voice to opposing ideas, paradoxical

theorizing invites both mainstream as well as marginalized insights. In doing so, this process expands the diversity of ideas represented in our theories.

Finally, we extend organizational theory by expanding beyond potential field hegemony. While some colleagues have lamented an absence of theoretical progress, or called for a unified organizational theory akin to other disciplines such as physics (Davis, 2015; Pfeffer, 2014), others celebrate plurality (Reed & Burrell, 2019; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021). A unified theory would advance the field's political influence (Pfeffer, 1997), but paradigmatic convergence may silence and oppress alternative perspectives (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Banerjee, 2022; Cunliffe, 2022). Organizational theory should constantly expand to address new societal challenges (Barley, 2016), while preserving robust knowledge accumulation. Scholars can both expand existing theory while generating ideas divorced from relevant phenomena. Aiming to achieve coherence and internal alignment may lead to ascribe divergence as an anomaly (Sumpter et al., 2021), thus limiting theoretical vitality. By offering an approach to generating more novel and insightful theory through a process of harnessing paradoxes, we invite in greater vitality of theories (Clegg et al., 2022). Doing so allows scholars to be both convergent and divergent in their theorizing; to value core assumptions while extending and expanding beyond the core (Schad et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Aside from several notable contributions highlight opposing perspectives to inform theory, scholars have predominantly emphasized paradox as a tool for understanding phenomena. In this paper, we return to and extend the early roots of paradox in organizational theory to explore how the juxtaposition of opposites can enrich the theorizing process. Future scholarship can continue to expand upon how we can navigate the tensions in our work as scholars.

Our world faces expansive crises, demanding theories that address the magnitude and grandeur of the challenges. Generating such theories requires expansive, holistic, and complex approaches to theorizing. We have offered one model to doing so in this paper that engages with paradoxes in the modalities and processes of theorizing. We hope these ideas about theorizing are highly practical to help generate valuable insights for our challenging world.


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ORCID iDs

Joshua Keller  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5767-4087>

Marco Berti  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0519-8824>

Wendy Smith  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6019-7699>

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Author biographies

Joshua Keller is an Associate Professor in the School of Management and Governance at UNSW Sydney. His research interests primarily involve exploring organizational and strategic paradoxes' cognitive and cultural foundations, with insights from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and linguistics. He is an American Australian with a dash of sichuan peppercorn on his kugel. He loves to travel around the world and is anxious about it every time.

Marco Berti is Professor of Organization Theory in Nova School of Business and Economics, Lisbon, Portugal. His research interests include organizational complexity and paradoxes, power dynamics, emergent forms of organizing, and sociology of

knowledge. His background also reflects his interests for dualities and tensions: before becoming a full time academic he had a long career in consulting, he is Italian and Australian (but lives in Portugal), he loves ideas but cares about people.

Wendy Smith is the Dana J. Johnson Professor of Management at the Lerner College of Business and Economics, University of Delaware, where she studies how leaders navigate organizational paradoxes—exploration and exploitation, profit and purpose, collaboration and competition. Grappling with tensions between rigor and relevance, insight and impact triggered her exploration into paradox theory and now she has three kids that demand her to look beyond a simple no and offer them a both/and.