CROSS-LEVEL INTERACTIONAL PATTERNS OF ORGANIZATIONAL RESPONSES TO TENSIONS

Introduction

Organizing involves managing tensions between opposite, mutually exclusive and yet interdependent demands, choices, or courses of action. Dealing with contradictory demands requires responses at all organizational levels. For example, the exploration/exploitation paradox needs to be addressed by the organization as a whole at the collective level, but it also elicits responses from its members at the individual level. Consequently, different approaches to the same contradiction may be taken at different levels of analysis. For example, a collective *either/or* approach may lead the organization to meet only one of two opposing demands, while individuals may prefer a *both/and* approach that emphasizes the paradoxical interdependence between the poles of the contradiction so as to meet both demands simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Although some studies have started to provide insights into the cross-level management of paradoxical tensions (Boemelburg, Zimmermann, & Palmié, 2023; Gümüsay, Smets, & Morris, 2020; Mom, Chang, Cholakova, & Jansen, 2019; Schneider, Bullinger, & Brandl, 2021; Zhang, Zhang, & Law, 2022), we are still from understanding how approaches taken at the two levels interact with each to produce organizational responses to contradictory demands (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018; Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). In particular, little is known on how approaches to the same tensions that are taken at different levels of analysis interact with each other to construct overall organizational (Fairhurst, Smith, Banghart, Lewis, Putnam, Raisch et al., 2016).

We aimed to address this gap by asking the research question: *How do individual and collective approaches to contradictions interact with each other to determine organizational responses to persistent tensions?*

Methods

We conducted a qualitative study of the cross-level interactions between approaches to contradictions in four case study organizations. We chose embedded multiple case research design to combine the richness that is typical of and case study research with the ability to perform abstractions and theory building across the cases (Given, 2008). Furthermore, the embedded case design enabled our investigation to span units, subunits and teams consistently with our research intent.

The case study organizations were four consulting firms of the Egyptian construction industry. We collected and analyzed 50 semi-structured interviews supplemented by organizational documents for the purpose of cross-checking and triangulating data sources. We employed an interview protocol to ensure consistency of fieldwork across the cases.

The interviews started with general introductory questions aimed at building rapport with the interviewees (Zikmund, Carr, & Griffin, 2013). Then, participants were asked questions about their individual perceptions of and approaches to contradictory demands as well as the related processes and practices. This allowed us to identify and explore individual- and collective-level approaches to contradictions, and to analyze cross-level interactions.

We sought confirmation of the collective-level approaches by cross-checking informants with different degrees of seniority, tenure, and hierarchical ranking, and by triangulating interview data with organizational documents. We aimed to minimize both informant and interviewer bias by asking questions on specific organizational conditions indicative of a the

presence of contradictory demands (e.g. plurality, change, scarcity), so as to allow accounts of contradictions to emerge spontaneously from our conversations with the interviewees (Brinkmann, 2014).

The data was analyzed via a three-step coding process, from raw quotes to identification of concepts, themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). A final phase of cross-case analysis enabled us to consolidate themes and dimensions across the cases (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2017).

Findings

We focused our attention on four contradictions that appeared to be pervasive in the experience of members across the case study organizations: (i) work/life; (ii) control/autonomy; (iii) learning/performing; and (iv) stability/change. Three patterns of collective-individual interactions formed the organizational responses to those contradictions, as shown in Figure 1: (i) *Confrontational pattern*; (ii) *Assimilative pattern*; and (iii) *Integrative pattern*. For example, responses to the learning/performing contradictions followed the assimilative pattern in one organization and the integrative pattern in another. Responses to the control/autonomy contradiction followed the integrative pattern in two organizations and the assimilative pattern in another.

The *confrontational pattern* of interactions arose from strong assertion of the either/or approach at the collective level, which individuals could only accept or reject. Such either/or stance was coercively imposed with practices that provided open support for the preferred pole, and a robust rhetoric against the dismissed pole. Different members engaged in different forms of confrontational interactions with the collective level. These included: (i) rejecting the either/or stance and demanding some rebalancing of the responses toward a both/and approach; (ii) constructing false both/and rhetoric that accommodated doublethink types of acceptance of the imposed imbalance; or (iii) accepting the imbalance based on personal preferences for one of the poles.

The *assimilative pattern* of cross-level interactions involved the adoption of a soft either/or approach at the collective level that aimed to avoid direct confrontation with the individuals' both/and thinking. The soft either/or approach consisted of supporting one pole of the contradiction (for example, by the means of suitable rhetoric, dedicated practices, and convenient allocation of resources), but also acknowledging some of the merits of the other pole. This gave individuals the opportunity to construct a rhetoric that maintained both poles simultaneously without directly challenging the primacy of the pole prioritized by the collective. For example, individuals exploited opportunities for learning during work hours even if these were limited. They also created informal networks to foster cooperation, share knowledge, and support each other's learning. Thus, a both/and approach was effectively maintained by the individuals, albeit within the boundaries set by the collective.

Finally, the *integrative pattern* of cross-level interactions involved paradoxical both/and acceptance at both levels. The collective actively sought paradoxical, integrative management of the contradictions through rhetoric and practices that maintained both poles and attributed to them equal status. Apart from echoing the collective rhetoric, individuals endeavored to refine the established practices so as to maintain and reinforce balance over time.

These patterns presented varying degrees of *paradoxical maturity*, which we define as the extent to which the collective-individual converge towards integrative balancing of contradictory demands.

Discussion

The study advances our understanding of multilevel paradoxical management (Gümüsay et al., 2020; Schad et al., 2016) by unveiling three patterns of collective-individual interactions that shape overall organizational responses to paradoxical tensions.

A key difference separated the three interactional patterns. In the case of clear either/or and both/and approaches at the collective level, individual responses were, respectively, clearly reactive (confrontational pattern) and clearly integrative (integrative pattern). In the case of confrontational patterns, the strong direction against one of the poles built a take-it-or-leave-it message that resulted in individuals either building rhetoric of acceptance or rejection. Of particular interest was acceptance that relied on a contradictory description of the conditions surrounding the contradiction within the firm. The maintenance of these contradictory statements allowed individuals to accept conditions through doublethink (El-Sawad, Arnold, & Cohen, 2004). The same pattern was evident for integrative interactions, whereby the rhetoric clearly developed a notion of balance resulting in the individuals' rhetoric being reactive in terms of simply providing support to this balance. However, while the rhetoric was clear, it appealed to multiple audiences as it maintained both poles rather than pushing for one over the other. On the other hand, the collective rhetoric for assimilative interactions relied on ambiguity and vagueness. This was rhetorical ambiguity in the context of an either/or logic, not in the context of balancing and maintaining multiple logics simultaneously as studied previously (Abdallah & Denis, 2011; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007). This ambiguity provided space for individual rhetoric to flourish, keeping the either/or logic guarded but also providing space for individuals to maneuver.

Our evidence contributes to enriching our understanding of the microfoundations of paradoxical behavior beyond cognition, vision, and sensemaking (Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2014; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022), as they concur to create multilevel effects such as top-down resource amplification and bottom-up refinements of balance. In confrontational interactions, some collective practices amplified resource scarcity creating differences in experiencing the contradiction across levels. This could help sharpen current understandings of resource scarcity as previous literature perceives scarcity as an environmental condition that is static and existing before the salience of contradictions (Smith, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011). More recent conceptualizations have shown that resource scarcity, and modifications to it, can be a major determinant of how paradoxes are perceived especially with respect to the strength of interdependence between the poles (Berti & Cunha, 2023). In this regard, the interactional patterns highlight the multilevel nature of resource scarcity. Collective practices can have a major effect on the individual-level experience of scarcity, which affects how paradoxes are shaped at this level. As for assimilative and integrative interactions, the findings bring to the fore the role of bottom-up individual practices in maintaining both poles of the contradiction. These were new both/and practices wholly developed through individual assimilative efforts, or refinements of existing collective practices for better management of contradictions. By providing insights into these practices, the study helps to clarify how phenomena of social aggregation takes place; specifically, how individual approaches to contradictions aggregate to higher-order responses (Schad et al., 2016). Particularly, it is essential to highlight the possibility of bottom-up approaches flourishing under collective either/or practices, again reflecting the possibility of positive outcomes in combination with collective either/or approaches (Berti & Cunha, 2023; Hahn, Sharma, & Glavas, 2023; Visnjic, Jovanovic, & Raisch, 2022).

Finally, our findings enable us to appreciates the nuances of different types of either/or approaches at the collective level, and to appreciate the potential for constructive employment of *soft* either/or logic in certain contexts (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). Previous research has maintained that either/or approaches fuel vicious cycles, and can have negative effects on

organizational performance (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). The findings of this research show that such a theoretical needs refining to encompasses different modes of upholding the either/or logic. In line with choosing and ignoring, strong collective either/or approaches entailed rhetoric and practices that actively sought one pole while completely delegitimizing and eliminating the other. A strong, coercive rhetoric was evidently supporting one pole and actively discouraging any form of support for the other. In addition, practices were mainly designed to focus on one pole of the contradiction in an act that eliminated the other pole completely. The soft either/or approach, instead played down the less desirable pole without rejecting it overtly. Illustrating softer approaches unpacks Putnam et al. (2016)'s definition by showing how one of the poles can be "minimized" rather than "ignored". This distinguishes soft either/or approaches from both/and approaches aiming at balance (Smith & Lewis, 2011). While balancing does not entail a static mean or equal weighting, it requires both poles to receive considerable attention without establishing priorities among them (Schad et al., 2016). Both poles need to be considered connected and important "like banks of a river" and the response can be seen as a form of "bridging" with the midpoint not being necessarily the optimum (Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015). Perceiving one pole as primary and non-sacrificial, while the other as secondary with the possibility of being overlooked, represents a major element deeming the act of minimizing more in line with either/or approaches (Putnam et al., 2016). However, the fact that the other pole is acknowledged rhetorically and practically resulted in differentiating softer approaches from stronger ones aiming at selection.

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Figure 1: Interactions among collective/individual levels

Higher Interactional Maturity

Confrontational Individual/Collective

Assimilative Individual/Collective

Integrative Individual/Collective

Strong collective Either/or Approach
- Rhetoric supporting one pole over other.
- Practices designed to eliminate unpreferred pole.

Soft collective Either/or Approach
- Rhetoric supporting one pole but acknowledging other
- Practices preferring one pole

Collective Both/and Approach
- Rhetoric providing space for both poles.
- Practices aim at balancing both pole.

Individual accepting imbalance via:
- Building false rhetoric
- Preferring same pole

Individuals rejecting imbalanced situation

Individuals building both/and balancing

Individuals employing both/and approach to support balance

Limited Balance for Select Individuals

Emergent Bottom-Up Balance

Refinement of collective balances