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Authors(s)	Keegan, Anne E., Brandl, Julia, Aust, Ina
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HANDLING TENSIONS IN HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT: INSIGHTS FROM PARADOX THEORY

Anne Keegan, Julia Brandl, Ina Aust

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ABSTRACT

We have two aims in this paper. Our first aim is conceptual where we enrich tensions-focussed HRM research with insights from paradox theory. The second aim is to provide guidance for how HR practitioners can handle tensions that never go away. We focus on HR practitioners because they play leading roles in managing employment practices and designing intended HRM practices. We elaborate on the issue of handling tensions and apply a set of response strategies suggested by paradox theory including suppressing, opposing, splitting and adjusting. Finally, we illustrate these response strategies and their consequences using an example of hiring practices.

KEYWORDS

Paradox theory, Labour Process Theory, HRM, strategic HRM, tensions, HR practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

Existing scholarship has established well that HR (Human Resource) practitioners are confronted with myriad tensions embedded in the structured antagonism that pervades the employment relationship (Edwards, 2003), in the clash between operational and strategic activities (Marchington, 2015), and in the people-centred versus business-centred interests served by HR practitioners and the policies and practices they develop (Legge, 1978). We interpret this to mean that HR practitioners are appointed to deal with challenges related to managing employees and with the various stakeholders involved in employment issues. The idea of organisations using employees as resources involves them both justifying authority and portraying the organisation as caring for employees and their ethical treatment, while at the same time controlling employees and ensuring their productivity (Greenwood, 2013; Watson, 1986: 173). Tensions infuse HR practitioners' roles because of contradictory demands arising from these activities. For many HRM scholars, tensions are fundamental to employment management (Aust, Brandl, Keegan & Lensges, 2017; Boxall, 2007; Edwards & Wajcman, 2005; Legge, 1978; Watson, 1986). While some tensions in HRM may be resolvable, others seem to persist, constituting the lot of HR practitioners often associated with vicious cycles and ambiguities (Harrington, Raynor & Warren, 2012).

Two major perspectives have informed the debate on tensions in HRM so far. The pluralist Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) perspective (Boxall & Purcell, 2008; 2016) suggests balancing contradictory demands and making strategically informed trade-offs in order to "solve" tensions. Labour process theory (LPT) recognises the persistent tensions rooted in structured antagonisms embedded within the employment relationship (Keegan & Boselie, 2006).

Our two aims in this paper include firstly, to enrich tensions-focussed HRM research by offering insights drawn from paradox theory. Secondly, we aim to provide practical guidance

for how HR practitioners handle tensions that persist and never go away (Aust, Brandl & Keegan, 2015; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart 2016). We focus on HR practitioners because they play leading roles in managing employment practices and designing intended HRM practices. We elaborate on the issue of handling tensions and apply a set of response strategies suggested by paradox theory to the field of HRM. We illustrate these strategies using an example of hiring practices.

The reasons for highlighting the potential of paradox theory to enrich these current debates are twofold. First, paradox theory commends that HR practitioners may benefit from giving up the idea that tensions are negative and can or should be "solved". Secondly, paradox theory offers suggestions for how HR practitioners can approach tensions as sources of creativity and development and promote proactive responses to tensions between contradictory and persistently interrelated demands. This entails seeking both/and responses that are premised on leveraging the simultaneity of contradictory demands proactively (e.g. accepting, confronting) rather than responding defensively (e.g., denying tensions, framing contradictory and simultaneous demands as either/or decisions).

Following this introduction, we introduce major perspectives on handling tensions in HRM research with the objective of highlighting a research gap regarding guidance for HR practitioners on how to handle tensions. Next, we introduce the paradox perspective and we elaborate on the issue of handling tensions and apply a set of response strategies suggested by paradox theory to the field of HRM. Following this, we offer a worked example of handling tensions from hiring practices. Finally, we conclude with limitations and reflections on future research.

MAJOR PERSPECTIVES ON HANDLING TENSIONS IN HRM RESEARCH

Decades of research from two prominent HRM perspectives – pluralist SHRM and LPT HRM – offer valuable insights on HRM tensions. Pluralist SHRM scholarship is rooted in industrial relations research (Fox, 1973, 1974), multi-stakeholder approaches to HRM (Beer, Boselie & Brewster 2015; Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills & Walton, 1984), and increasingly since the 1990s, the resource-based view (Boxall & Purcell, 2000; Wright, McMahan & McWilliams, 1994). Tensions are viewed in terms of the pursuit of contradictory strategic goals including managing labour scarcity, employee motivation, change, the pursuit of management power, and complexity and politics in management (Boxall, 2007; Boxall & Purcell, 2016). Tensions surface when social legitimacy becomes important for business strategy in addition to performance goals. Contradictory management goals themselves can also be a source of tensions: the goal to establish a stable production system (and associated economies of scale) reduces managerial discretion in decision-making, as it requires them to obey rules (Boxall & Purcell, 2016: 21). The pluralist SHRM perspective assumes that tensions are more prevalent in organisational settings characterized by multiple stakeholders (Beer et al., 2015), strong institutional requirements (Boon, Paauwe, Boselie & Den Hartog 2009; Paauwe & Boselie, 2007; Wood, Brewster & Bookes, 2014) and misfits between internal and external demands (Boselie, 2014). Scholars also stress the importance of tensions in socio-economic settings where a plurality of interests in the employment relationship is accepted (Geare, Edgar, McAndrew, Harney, Cafferkey & Dundon, 2014), such as the European context (Boselie, Brewster & Paauwe, 2009; Paauwe, 2004) and globally operating organisations (Evans, Pucik & Bjorkman, 2011), and more generally, in countries where social legitimacy matters in addition to business goals for organisations (Paauwe, 2004).

Pursuing contradictory strategic goals inevitably involves HR practitioners wrestling with "'strategic tensions', including trade-offs between employer and employee interests" (Boxall & Purcell, 2016: 16). Given these could undermine the organisation's competitive advantage, HR practitioners respond to tensions. For many scholars, this means by finding

sufficient fit or "balance" between contradictory HRM goals to eliminate tensions (Boon et al., 2009: 492). In terms of the strategic role of HRM, the more different demands HR practitioners can balance, the better they can assure the organisation's competitive advantage (Boon et al., 2009; Boselie, 2014). HR practitioners are urged to achieve simultaneous fit or balance across a wide array of internal and external requirements (Boselie et al, 2009).

This view of solving tensions through alignment, balance or fit is a dominant one, despite questions of whether and how managerial actors can rationally design such fit/balance/alignment given the complexity, change and politics involved (Boxall & Purcell, 2008). In addressing how HR strategy can fuel competitive advantage, Boxall & Purcell, (2008: 229) hold this needs to be considered "across cycles of stability and change in industries". They argue that HR priority setting requires difficult trade-offs (Boxall & Purcell, 2016: 8).

The neglect of what "fitting" and "balancing" to solve tensions precisely entails for HR practitioners on a daily practice level is an important gap in pluralist SHRM research. The focus on fit and balance may also suggest that if tensions become salient (e.g., employees complain; industrial action is initiated), this may indicate the failure of the HR practitioner (e.g., his/her lack of competence). Consequently, the idea of being able to solve tensions by finding "optimal levels of conforming" (Boon et al., 2009: 505) to contradictory goals (e.g. internal fit, institutional fit) needs to be further fleshed out and to do so, additional perspectives are needed on how tensions can be handled by HR practitioners.

HRM tensions are also a prominent theme in labour process theory (LPT) (Bélanger & Edwards, 2007, 2013; Thompson, 2011). LPT informed HRM scholarship understands tensions as reflecting fundamental contradictions inherent in employment relations within the capitalist political economy, which operate on HR practices and "play out" within the workplace (McGovern, 2014; Thompson, 2011). Tensions between the focus on performance goals and other goals in HRM scholarship have been raised by LPT scholars and are seen as

inevitable because "[t]he raison d'être for HRM as with any other set of managerial practices is the functioning of organisations in pursuit of managerially defined goals" (Harley, 2015: 403). At the same time, criticism is voiced about the one-sided emphasis on performance that drives out attention for other concerns such as "the human experience of work" as a matter in its own right (Bolton & Houlihan, 2007; Harley, 2015). Moreover, tensions are seen as legitimate, since they result from valid conflicts of interest in employment relationships (Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010).

LPT informed HRM scholarship also acknowledges the possibility of achieving temporary alignment between different stakeholders (including customers), employer and employee interests and strategic HRM goals. However, scholars stress the importance of unequal conditions, capabilities and positions of different stakeholders in capitalist political economy, particularly the inferior position of employees. They analyse how such factors affect the ways in which contradictory interests are (temporarily) aligned, such as employment conditions for contingent migrant workers in a tight labour market (MacKenzie & Forde, 2009) or the longevity of cooperative dialogue arrangements (i.e. robust workplace partnerships) in liberal market economies where management power over labour relations has intensified (Dobbins & Dundon, 2015). As Boxall, Ang & Bartram (2011) have argued, LPT informed HRM scholarship has been highly effective in foregrounding tensions rooted in socio-economic factors in the workplace.

The implications of LPT informed HRM scholarship for HR practitioners, in terms of practical handling strategies, is a research gap. This research raises the awareness of HR practitioners that tensions are inherent even though sometimes latent and sometimes salient, reminding HR practitioners that they are "players" in a larger and very challenging game (Thompson, 2003). However, there is limited guidance for practitioners regarding handling tensions experienced in day to day work (O'Brien & Linehan, 2014; Steers, 2008). Paradox

theory, discussed in the next section, can complement current perspectives in HRM practice and offer possibilities for handling tensions.

THE PARADOX PERSPECTIVE

Paradox has long been studied in fields such as philosophy, logic, medicine and psychology (Lewis, 2000) and has become a core "lens" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) in contemporary organisational research (Fairhurst, Smith, Banghart, Lewis, Putnam, Raisch & Schad, 2016; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Putnam et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Rooted in theories of plurality and divergent perspectives within work and organisations (e.g., Poole & Ven, 1989; Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983) as well as theories of individual strain and tensions (Antonovsky, 1987; Putnam, 1986), scholars investigate dynamic cycles between latency and saliency of tensions. They aim to gain insights on sources and dynamics of paradoxes as well as options for responding to the tensions caused by paradoxes. Throughout this paper, we follow Smith & Lewis (2011: 382) who define paradox as "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time".

Conceptualisation of tensions

Paradox scholarship focuses on tensions actors experience due to the juxtaposition of contradictory interrelated elements. Key examples in the literature are business/social values, differentiation/integration structures, diversity/integrative unity, exploration/exploitation in business strategy, cost/quality focus, etc. Scholars explore how these can be handled simultaneously so virtuous cycles can be fuelled and vicious cycles avoided. Vicious cycles arise when contradictory elements that play a persistent role in responding to complex competitive conditions are treated as either/or choices leading to neglect of one element. Reasons for making either/or choices are to simplify situations and avoid paradoxical tensions, defined as "[s]tress, anxiety, discomfort, or tightness in making choices, responding to, and

moving forward in organizational situations" (Putnam et al., 2016: 69). Fairhurst, Cooren & Cahill view paradoxical tensions broadly as "the clash of ideas, principles, and actions as well as any subsequent feelings of discomfort" (2002: 506). The paradox perspective assumes that paradoxical elements are persistently interrelated over time. Returning to the example diversity/integrative unity, this means that neither the demand for diversity nor the demand for integrative unity will go away, nor can the tensions between them be permanently solved. This is not to say however that these tensions do not pervade work roles. On the contrary, handling tensions is an inherent aspect of working life.

Scholars writing from a paradox perspective assume that multiple contradictory elements are present in organisational settings and that tensions are inherent and natural phenomena. Smith & Lewis (2011) suggest four areas for investigating paradox in organisational settings. Paradoxes of performing refer to contradictory organisational goals (e.g., competition vs. cooperation). Paradoxes of organising refer to contradictory demands for designing processes and structure (such as differentiation and integration). Paradoxes of belonging refer to contradictory demands for forming interpersonal relationships (for example, being formal and informal). And finally, paradoxes of learning refer to contradictions in knowledge creation (e.g., executing for today, while experimenting for tomorrow). Importantly, paradox is not limited to these above-mentioned elements but depends on what organisational actors perceive and constitute in their context as contradictory, yet interrelated elements (Putnam et al., 2016). This allows for the application of a paradox perspective to different scholarly fields – including HRM - and leaves open the question what constitutes a paradox to empirical research.

Smith and Lewis (2011) offer a structurationally (Giddens, 1984) inspired integrative perspective on sources of paradox: the social construction of organisational policies and strategies develops distinctions (e.g. local/global structures; strategic/operational units) which

embed paradoxes (e.g. differentiation/integration, individual/collective, doing more with less) that become salient through individual sensemaking as a result of change, plurality and scarcity. Organisational actor's sensemaking results in the experience of tensions for individual managers, employees, and leaders as paradoxical. Building on this integrative perspective, Fairhurst et al (2016) provide the example that all organisational systems contain tensions between exploring and exploiting. However, members of an organisation may only experience these tensions under particular circumstances. These include when leaders juxtapose alternative demands on followers, and when pressures from plurality and change create stress in the system and (latent) tensions between contradictory elements become manifest (Fairhurst et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Both structures and the sensemaking of actors are therefore sources of paradoxical tensions (Fairhurst et al., 2016).

Implications of paradox theory for handling tensions

Paradox scholars focus on how alternative strategies for handling tensions can foster virtuous and avoid vicious cycles. When individuals are confronted by the juxtaposition of simultaneous, interrelated and contradictory demands, this leads to tensions. Paradoxical tensions can be latent, salient and in transition from one state to another. Latent tensions are linked with contradictory and interrelated demands embedded in organisations such as the need for differentiation *and* integration, continuity *and* change, and, in the case of HRM studies, employee well-being *and* performance. Factors that render latent tensions salient include (1) diffuse power, (2) plurality (3) change and (4) scarcity (Putnam et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

When tensions become salient, individuals need to make sense of the interdependencies between contradictory and interrelated demands. How individuals respond to paradoxical tensions and whether their responses spur virtuous or vicious cycles is influenced by many factors. One factor is their conceptual approach to tensions: whether there is openness to

contradictions, and a tendency to avoid simplifying and choosing between either one element or another. The broader context is also influential, including if there is a view of all members of the organisation as involved in responding to paradoxes or only top management (Smith & Berg, 1987; Vince & Broussine, 1996). Experiencing tensions associated with paradox can prompt different kinds of responses which are usually clustered as proactive and defensive in nature (Lê & Jarzabkowski, 2015). Table I summarizes a range of responses to paradoxical tensions that have been identified in the literature.

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Tensions can trigger different types of cycles associated with different handling strategies. Whether vicious or virtuous cycles emerge has been linked with the kind of responses that are chosen. Putnam et al. (2016: 81) define these cycles as "iterative spirals or self-reinforcing sequences of events that grow out of the ways that actors process contradictions". Smith & Lewis (2011) characterize virtuous cycles by people engaging with tensions actively and working them through them in constructive and self-reinforcing ways premised on accepting both/and elements. Virtuous cycles are facilitated by practices that help organisational actors overcome negative and paralysing emotions (Putnam, 1986; Smith & Berg, 1987). Such practices can be supported by HR practitioners through their interactions with others. Cognitive complexity and ability to engage with complex simultaneous oppositional ideas and thoughts is also linked with proactive responses to tensions (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Proactive responses such as adjusting are linked with a willingness and ability to rethink existing polarities and recognise more complicated interrelationships as well as how to deal

with them in ways that accept them (Lewis, 2000). Responses to paradox that foster vicious cycles, in contrast, are those based on defensive responses, such as opposing. Vicious cycles can emerge when organisational actors simplify or negate paradoxical tensions, prioritize either one or another contradictory element, and choose between them. These responses are often rooted in "forces for consistency, emotional anxiety and defensiveness" (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 391).

Handling tensions– an illustration from hiring practices

In this section, we illustrate the insights that a paradox perspective can provide on addressing tensions using a fictional example from hiring practices. These practices highlight several paradoxical elements including for example the simultaneous need for marketing and specific job information (i.e. attracting candidates vs. retaining them), for homogeneity and diversity (i.e. reproducing vs. changing characteristics of the existing employee pool) and, with these, the simultaneous needs for both flexibility and standardisation (i.e., local vs. corporate demands).

A paradox perspective suggests that HR practitioners need to handle tensions between contradictory demands. What does this imply? It means that pressures from local demands (e.g., quick filling of vacant positions, fit with hiring department culture) coincide with pressures arising from issues that have importance over the longer term such as requirements to meet prevailing legal standards and to anticipate labour market requirements. A paradox perspective also implies that focusing solely on one demand (e.g., providing specific job information to satisfy short-term hiring requirements in a specific department or job area) may have problematic consequences (e.g., discouraging applicants who do not exactly meet all requirements) and also that these consequences may even undermine the goal of filling positions with qualified candidates and risking staff shortages.

In large organisations with different participants involved in hiring activities, it is likely that contradictory demands are 'represented' by different participants including, for example, HR practitioners and line managers. While HR practitioners commonly focus on maintaining corporate standards and fulfilling legal requirements, line managers oftentimes represent the demand for vacancies in the short-term and prioritise flexibility over other priorities (e.g. standards/legal requirements). Tensions can be reinforced by different performance measures (e.g., application rate for HR practitioners, productivity for line managers) as well as by competing views on the relationship between HR specialists and line managers (e.g., control vs. partnership, see e.g. Dany, Guedri & Hatt 2008). To manage the above-mentioned tensions in hiring, various responses can be anticipated (see Table I). These include the defensive responses of suppressing, opposing, and splitting, and the proactive response of adjusting.

The first response for handling tensions is *suppressing* demands. The job postings may contain highly complex and non-intuitive information on the job and candidate requirements, which many (potentially qualified) external job seekers cannot relate to and hence, withdraw from sending an application. Devolution of hiring activities to line management may trigger this type of one-sidedness, as line managers typically include the local and highly specific aspects of the job, couch the position mainly in internal (technical) language, and spend less time and effort on polishing messages for consumption by outsiders who may be qualified. Other participants in the hiring process, particularly HR practitioners, may note the problems, but rather than articulating their concerns, try to compensate by using appealing and accessible language (e.g., by including candidate profiles from previous vacancies, spending more time/expense on searching for candidates) instead of directly confronting the problem. This potentially results in attracting fewer candidates and leading to a shortage of talent in the long run because discouraged job seekers gravitate toward other employers. In tight labor markets, this can pose a serious problem.

A second response option is *opposing* one demand, i.e. engaging in active confrontation. The requirements specified for hiring candidates in the job announcement can completely fail to meet important corporate (or legal) rules. The announcement may be interpreted as discriminatory against particular applicants (e.g. female applicants) which can create legal issues or can lead to direct conflict with the company goal of diversifying the workforce. Job seekers may object when they are not considered for the position. Opposing as a strategy for dealing with competing demands is more likely to happen when time pressures to appoint are high, and favoured candidates exist. Opposing can also occur when participants in the hiring process lack awareness of corporate requirements. This can result in hiring processes being completely blocked and positions not filled.

A third response type to tensions between paradoxical elements is *splitting*, i.e. spatial or temporal separation of the contradictory demands (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). In the example of hiring in large organisations, splitting could refer to diversifying the workforce by acquiring a smaller company where the workforce has the required diverse profile or characteristics, while hiring decisions continue to take local demands into account during the regular hiring processes. Although splitting might seem favourable and produce minimal tension between local and corporate demands in hiring, this response could be characterised as 'defensive' (Ehnert 2009; Jarzabkowski, Lê & Van de Ven, 2013; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Splitting reduces the possibility of tensions occurring in the present, but splitting solutions like overcoming local barriers to diversifying the workforce in conventional hiring by fostering acquisitions can be undermined in the future when new hires quit their jobs after their company has been taken-over and the culture of the acquiring company is not suitable for the diversity of the workforce that has been acquired.

The three responses above are not sustainable. For instance, while a detailed requirement list-type job announcement may facilitate the assessment of applicants (or at least

the justification of selection decisions) and may help to avoid early dropouts, it implies self-selection effects which discourage applications from particular (excluded) groups. It is also likely to provoke resistance from users, forcing HR practitioners to engage in handling complaints and crisis management (see Legge, 1978). Finally, a violation of legal requirements may interrupt the hiring process and call the company's legitimacy and reputation into question.

To summarise, defensive responses to hiring tensions provide relief for a short time but can then potentially lead to vicious cycles, because paradoxes have not adequately been dealt with. This is because defensive responses assume optimal fit and win-win solutions and also suggest permanent solutions to tensions in hiring arrangements. Thinking in terms of these 'solutions' prevents participants exploring competing demands and all their possibilities, including reconceptualizing their perceptions of the paradox.

In order to achieve virtuous cycles in response to paradoxes, responses to tensions are needed that deal proactively with paradoxes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). For example, *adjusting* is a coping mode which keeps tensions high and requires continuously taking simultaneous contradictory demands into account. For hiring situations, HR practitioners may make their insights based on interactions with job seekers available to line managers and thereby encourage them to take an external labour market perspective. They may supply line managers with support tools (e.g., check lists) and encourage them to occasionally join recruiters' activities (e.g., career fairs), perform their own experiments, and evaluate them. Through these practices, line managers can identify the biases inherent to their current perspectives and share these experiences with others. Whatever solutions they develop as they work through these tensions, the concrete solutions cannot be viewed as final. What matters is that participants recognise both (or multiple) demands of the paradox, adjust their expectations about their own deliverables to demand, and enable the other demand to be achieved.

Viewing hiring practices this way, it is possible for HR practitioners to raise difficult but much needed questions such as: What do the performance measures that we use in the hiring process imply for the cooperation with line managers and outcomes of hiring processes in the short-term as well as in the long-term? How does devolving responsibility to the line, and allowing line managers to produce job information in order to hire people, affect the applicant's perception of hiring and the ability to meet corporate/legal demands? What does the communicated information in the job announcement mean for the retention of candidates who are recruited? And what does it mean for the development of the business? The posing of such questions makes apparent the dynamic and complex relations between different demands of the hiring paradox. An appreciation of paradoxical tensions offers a possibility for constructive engagement between line managers and HR practitioners and opportunities for more elaborate discussions to stay with and work through the paradox over time considering different demands and how these interact in terms of long and short-term interests. In the next section, we summarise what we propose as the main implications of a paradox perspective on handling HRM tensions.

PARADOXICAL HRM TENSIONS – THEY NEVER GO AWAY

Paradox theory offers compelling insights to help us reframe our understanding of how HR practitioners could handle tensions. Paradox theory focuses on approaching paradoxes dynamically over time based on an acknowledgement that such tensions never go away. The interactions between attempts to solve tensions and newly emerging tensions related to the response itself underpin a dynamism in how tensions co-evolve over time with responses (Keegan, Bitterling, Sylva & Hoeksema, 2017). A focus on ongoing, dynamic and emergent tensions complements the work on the origin of tensions in LPT inspired HRM and pluralist SHRM perspectives. We suggest that HR practitioners can handle tensions in a more dynamic both/and way, anticipating cycles of latency and saliency identified in pluralist SHRM writing.

Paradox theory directs attention then to research questions regarding how tensions develop and co-evolve with responses over time (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017) which is currently neglected in HRM research.

Furthermore, paradox theorists have drawn attention to how rendering latent tensions salient, or vice versa, is always a temporary achievement and ongoing endeavour while a durable final balance or optimal level of fit that eliminates (HRM) tensions is probably very difficult to achieve (Francis and Keegan, 2018). By responding to tensions as paradox, HR practitioners can engage in what paradox scholars have identified as "an iterative and dynamic process….as they experience situations as paradoxical, often shifting from one response to another" (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017: 436). The purpose of proactive responses – accepting and accommodating persistent contradictory demands - is to take advantage of their simultaneity for spurring novel action even though this also results in tensions for individuals. Paradox theory emphasises how responses are constructed within everyday practice but do not permanently solve tensions in a "grand" way by managerial design. Daily approaches to tensions by HR practitioners can shape how tensions are responded to by others, and fuel both vicious and virtuous cycles. HR practitioners need to anticipate the impact of factors such as plurality, change, scarcity, and power on the persistent interrelationships between contradictory elements. Being aware of potential factors that dynamically render latent tensions salient, while accepting contradictory demands as inherent, allows for different options for HR practitioners regarding how they handle tensions.

Pluralist SHRM scholarship and LPT inspired HRM scholarship highlight tensions and their sources, and are therefore complemented by a paradox perspective that focuses on how HR practitioners can identify, differentiate and anticipate contradictory elements, in both/and terms, to proactively approach and respond to paradoxical HRM tensions dynamically over time. Proactive responses such as adjusting mean HR practitioners have to ensure that the

implications of the paradox are pursued actively (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Proactive responses imply HR practitioners seeking out the contours of contradictory though valued demands, and through confrontation (Lewis, 2000), bringing tensions to the fore with involved actors (employees, line managers, senior managers) and critically discussing them. Paradox theory suggests that proactive responses lay the groundwork for more effective handling of paradoxical relationships between different demands by ensuring these are not ignored or suppressed. Another implication for HR practitioners from paradox theory is that working through tensions takes place not in one time, where a grand solution "solves" tensions, but rather in cyclical tension-handling episodes that achieve temporary solutions which partially fuel future tension cycles and may prompt tensions to (re)surface at different levels and times (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). The assumption is that responses feed cyclically into the (re)emergence of tensions between the demands which have, at a point in time, been conceptualised and thought about in a particular manner. For example, with opposition, HR practitioners can work with line managers "to each side of the paradox asserting their own needs, despite evidence that these would oppose the needs of the other party and occasion head-on confrontation" (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017: 436).

Resulting responses to tensions therefore provide a workable but not a final solution to tensions which acknowledges and respects contradictory demands in hiring or other HR activities. Defensive responses suppress tensions rather than solving them, meaning tensions will re-emerge – often unexpectedly - where the paradoxes have previously been ignored and the elements inadequately differentiated and appreciated (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). HRM scholars are familiar with such patterns (Legge, 1978) that still emerge today (Guest & Woodrow, 2012) in classic HRM paradoxes where commitment/control, cost/development and well-being/performance are approached as either/or choices. HR practitioners orienting to proactive coping strategies rooted in both/and responses anticipate dynamic effects, creating a

broader perspective that aims at using tensions for creativity and innovative development (Smith, 2014). A paradox perspective conceptually moves the discussion beyond "dilemmas, trade-offs and conflicts, which can be solved by splitting and choosing" (Fairhurst et al., 2016: 174). It commends new thinking in HRM that blends our understanding of the origin and nature of HRM tensions with new emphasis on how tensions can be made sense of as paradoxes, and which foregrounds a view of the dynamic, emergent, ongoing and intertwined nature of tensions and responses.

LIMITATIONS

Three limitations in particular influence this conceptual paper. First, we focus primarily on HR practitioners handling tensions. Though paradox theory suggests that the core ideas apply to any organisational actor, we have touched only lightly on particular issues of other actors (e.g. line managers) in the employment context. More attention to actors including employees, trade union representatives, and line managers, is warranted in future research. Second, our illustrative example does not study the approaches and responses of *real* HR practitioners to tensions. Nevertheless, we suggest that such an account can be valuable as it stimulates insights on action possibilities and choices regarding very common HRM tensions. Third, we seek complementarities between our paradox perspective on tensions and how pluralist SHRM and LPT inspired HRM scholars conceptualise tensions, approaches and responses. We do not cover other streams of HRM scholarship (e.g. post-structuralist, postmodern, etc.) and how these conceptualise tensions. However, by focusing on HR practitioners and on the two of the most prominent streams of HRM literature, we show the contribution of paradox theory to HRM scholarship on tensions.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have offered two contributions to the literature on HRM. One conceptual contribution is that we complement tensions-focussed HRM research. The second contribution is practical where we have shown how insights from paradox theory provide guidance for how HR practitioners can handle tensions. We have identified two major areas for future research and practice. One area is the deeper examination of the conditions that enable/hinder HR practitioners to take on proactive strategies in handling tensions. Gerpott's (2015) work illustrates how HRM models can encourage a short-term focus on tensions when the emphasis is on adopting a particular structure and the supressing of inherent but contradictory demands in HRM work. The work of Kozica & Brandl (2015) shows the investments needed from the organisational side, and from multiple organisational actors, in order to create arrangements that integrate different HR demands and facilitate adjustment to multiple demands.

HR practitioners' power to respond proactively to tensions is also an extremely important factor (Guest & Woodrow, 2012). Top down imposition of unidimensional strategic HRM policies that promote a one-sided emphasis (e.g. on cost control or financial performance) will shape and constrain HR practitioners' approaches to tensions. However, empirical research in recent years continues to indicate that top-down institutional, organisational and strategic factors do not fully determine how HR practitioners respond to tensions between contradictory HRM goals such as cost driven/development driven HRM (Kroon & Paauwe, 2014). The need for more insight on the conditions enabling and constraining HR practitioners both/and proactive responses to HR paradoxes, even when tensions are highly challenging, is a key message of this paper. Further research is needed to focus systematically on differences in context, resources and abilities that underpin different ways of handling tensions, as well as tracing the impact at individual and organisational levels.

A second area relates to the dynamics resulting from alternative handling strategies. Our

perspective implies that awareness of defensive responses to tensions such as identifying/inspecting tensions regularly, organising awareness and discussion on tensions between different stakeholders, and organising working solutions, are more effective than defensive responses. To show this, longitudinal research will be necessary that considers the fundamental question about what types of activities are associated with virtuous or vicious dynamics in different contexts. Peters & Lam (2015) show the importance of context with their study on efforts to introduce employability policies in the public sector in the Netherlands. Snap-shot studies may capture temporary situations where tensions are latent but appear "solved". Understanding sources of tensions is vital for gaining insights into why some organisations manage to develop durable handling of paradoxes in HRM, while others do not (Guerci, Decramer, Van Waeyenberg & Aust, 2018; Dobbins & Dundon, 2015; Roche & Teague, 2012). Ethnographies are particularly useful for teasing out the dynamics of tensions resulting from the interaction of ordinary managers and the resources and capabilities they invoke to manage such tensions (Schneider, 2016).

Researchers could investigate how paradoxical tensions and handling strategies form "in and through dynamic actions and interactions" (Fairhurst et al., 2016: 1780) as actors including HR practitioners but also employees, line managers and trade unions interpret them (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Research can also examine how paradoxes are constituted, and the role power plays in this as well as in the range of possible responses to tensions between contradictory, persistent HRM demands. Recent research suggests that options for approaching tensions are shaped by "the expected distribution of systemic power, which influences the approach taken to managing contradiction" (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017: 321) and that there are advantages to be gained by paradox scholars paying more attention to conflict. The inherent dynamism in how tensions between HRM demands form in organisations, in how HR practitioners handle paradoxes, and the role that power and conflict play, can become more

visible and salient in HRM studies where paradox theory plays a more prominent role.

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