

## ON THE PRACTICALITY OF RESISTING PRAGMATIC PARADOXES

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We welcome Li's (2020b) critical commentary on our article on pragmatic paradoxes (Berti & Simpson 2020) both because it offers the opportunity to clarify some fundamental concepts and implications of our contribution and also because it stimulates further exploration of organizational paradoxes. In our paper (Berti & Simpson 2020) we drew attention to a phenomena, pragmatic paradoxes, those situations where power differentials and lack of agency hinder an actor in negotiating contradictory managerial demands. Theorising pragmatic paradoxes, hereto overlooked in organizational paradox theory, allowed us to stimulate a 'critical shift' in this increasingly influential theory. The pathological situations that pragmatic paradoxes represent, though theorised as mostly experienced by individuals in subordinate positions, can also affect managers and entire organizations. We proposed that, since pervasive and persistent contradictions are inherent to organizing (Hahn & Knight 2019; Smith & Lewis 2011), it is necessary to address the excessive power differentials that underpin them. Li criticises our suggestion, arguing it to be impractical, because of the impossibility of reforming a system characterized by strong power differentials. The alternative he suggests, is one of "expectation reduction by giving up some elements of such an unrealistically high expectation" (p.4). He uses the example of Google pragmatically lowering its expectations in relation of a powerful actor (the Chinese government), thus avoiding being locked into a destructive power struggle, choosing instead to play a 'long game'.

Ironically, considering that we are debating paradox, it is possible to demonstrate that Li's critique is both right and wrong. We will first highlight the theoretical, pragmatic and ethical limitations of Li's suggestion for dealing with pragmatic paradoxes by lowering expectations. We will then reconsider his argument, showing that it also has conceptual merit, in that it can help advance paradox scholarship in two ways: (1) by signalling the need to determine boundary conditions for the manifestation of pragmatic paradoxes (a limitation of our original paper) and (2), by highlighting the role of actor expectations in socially constructing paradoxes.

## RESISTANCE IS *NOT* FUTILE

Li's criticism is based on a logical fallacy, a *reductio ab absurdo* of our argument on redressing power differentials. We did not suggest (as he claims) that pragmatic paradoxes are caused by *any* power differential; rather, they only manifest in extreme situations, where power conditions severely hinder agency, defined as the capacity to act creatively. While Google, as an organizational actor, might be less powerful than a state actor, China, its key decision-makers certainly did not lack agency. Google was still free to operate in the rest of the world, with the loss of the Chinese market not representing an existential threat to the company. By contrast, we theorised that the necessary precondition for pragmatic paradoxes is when a subject is involved in a relatively inescapable and intense relationship (Watzlawick, Jackson, & Bavelas 1967) characterized by great inequities in resource control, normative commitment and severely limited alternatives. An example would be that of an aged and unskilled laborer made redundant in a time of pandemic, when unemployment is massive and opportunities are miniscule, heightening the fundamental paradox of a labor market in which free time and labor power can only be sold on terms skewed by the structural inequality between many sellers and few buyers, a topic to which we shall return. When applied to the cases of those relatively powerless actors that cannot easily choose to 'walk out' of a relationship without suffering severe material consequences, Li's recommendation of "reducing one's expectations" amounts to victim blaming.

The Black Lives Matter movement offers both a vivid illustration of the reality of pragmatic paradoxes as well as the importance and possibility of redressing the excessive power differentials that underpin them through collective resistance. The murder of George Floyd during his arrest represents a most graphic demonstration of what constitutes a pragmatic paradox: the unfortunate victim of this horrific police abuse had no possible way out of his

predicament. ‘Accepting’ a policeman’s knee on his throat meant dying of suffocation but resisting would attract further injury and, given survival, likely more serious charges. The existence of racial biases that raise the likelihood of black citizens experiencing hostile encounters with law enforcement (Ross, Winterhalder, & McElreath 2018) unjustly exposes a significant portion of the population of many countries in which white people outnumber ‘others’ to analogous pragmatic paradoxes. Nevertheless, the public outcry over this and similar cases shows that, even if individual resistance is impossible, collective struggle can stimulate reform and a shift the dominant discourse towards re-evaluating the ways in which black citizens are represented (and represent themselves).

Li also object that, “in the business world, there is no *inescapable* relationship” (p.7). We beg to differ. The existence of modern slavery (Davidson 2015; Nolan 2019), and the evidence of unresolved human rights issues in the operation of the global value chain (Clarke & Boersma 2017) demonstrate that in the contemporary business world even the most basic individual freedoms cannot be taken for granted. Rather, the workplace provides precisely the socio-cultural conditions under which pragmatic paradoxes may flourish or flounder, be condoned or condemned. A recent study by Padavic, Ely, and Reid (2020) shows that, while both men and women experience distress due to excessively long work hours, social expectations make the opposition between and work family duties more intense for female staff. Organizational policies offering flexibility to working women (without addressing the underlying problem of excessive workloads for all staff members) end up exposing them to a pragmatic work-life paradox: if they choose to privilege family duties they must give up career opportunities, thus reducing their independence and capacity to provide for their family. If on the other hand they prioritize work, they risk being regarded with suspicion for failing their caring role, which might even impair their career. Indeed, for decades working women have coped with this

pragmatic paradox by following Li's advice, reducing their expectations in relation to their roles in work and society.

In all circumstances where victims of workplace pragmatic paradoxes are not sufficiently strong, courageous or well-resourced to just walk away, 'like Google', this will happen. It may happen because families depend on these people for food and shelter; it may happen because there is a high probability of experiencing the same systemic oppression in the next work environment. The current COVID-19 influenced economy has revealed that for many this predicament is – sadly – common. For example, higher COVID-19 mortality rates among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people in the UK illustrate how systemic conditions of high-power differentials and constrained agency limits this group's work-life choices. 'Essential' workers performing roles with less opportunity for shielding from the pandemic (carers, nurses, taxi drivers, staff in security and logistics) have a higher than average likelihood of being from BAME background (Francis-Devine 2020; Office for National Statistics 2020). Workers who cannot afford to stop work for fear of losing their jobs due to a lack of personal savings (Farquharson, Rasul, & Sibieta 2020), cannot simply 'walk away', especially in the current context of high unemployment. While there might be isolated instances within such communities where a victim is strong, courageous and lucky enough to change their expectations and achieve independence, such exceptions do not justify the continued operation of oppressive systems.

Even when individuals are free to choose, "reducing one's expectations", leaves the systems underpinning pragmatic paradoxes, along with their managerial perpetrators, in place to oppress those who are neither as strong nor as fortunate. Such a situation is not beneficial for the victims nor for the system (individual manager, organization, or society) because any community/society is only as strong as its weakest link. An organisation or society that tolerates

abusive behaviour by its managers or leaders does a disservice not only to their victims but to the organization as a whole, morally as well as socially. The social costs include diminished trust, health, engagement, enthusiasm, loyalty while the organizational costs can be counted in terms of employee's discretionary effort, improvisation, innovation, growth and performance (Nguyen, Teo, Grover, & Nguyen 2019). By ignoring abuse from managers, organisations permit self-sabotage in terms of higher turnover, absenteeism, disengagement, politicking, injuries and compensation claims (Kline & Lewis 2019). It is therefore imperative for organizations-communities to resist systems of abuse that perpetrate pragmatic managerial paradoxes and not put all the responsibility on victims to reframe, by "reducing expectations" and accepting abuse.

#### **EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PRAGMATIC PARADOX**

##### ***Boundary Conditions***

Despite these serious flaws in Li's line of reasoning, there are two important concepts that his critique offers to the discussion on paradox. First, it (implicitly) highlights a limitation in our discussion of pragmatic paradox, which, due to space constraints, did not discuss the boundary conditions that delimit the manifestation of pragmatic paradoxes. In other words: when are the power differentials so great and agency so curtailed that the experience of contradictory managerial demands will lead to the manifestation of a pragmatic paradox? Or, conversely, what is the minimum amount of agency that is necessary to mount a response that can harness the generative, synergistic potential of a paradoxical tension?

To address this question, it would be particularly useful to identify the systemic conditions that determine disempowerment. These variables are well articulated by Crane (2013) in his description of "modern slavery", which he defines as "the attempt to underprice a key resource (labor) through illegitimate means: forced threat, ownership/control through abuse,

dehumanisation, constrained freedom, economic exploitation” (Crane 2013, p. 51). He identifies enabling conditions (such as industry, cultural and regulatory contexts), exploiting and insulating capabilities (such as access to violence, debt management, accounting capacity and labour supply chain management), and sustaining capabilities (moral legitimisation and domain maintenance). Empirical research on pragmatic paradoxes could use Crane’s framework to better understand the systemic enabling conditions underpinning pragmatic paradoxes. It is important to note, however, that for many marginal workers, especially in the sweatshops of the world, there is little difference between being a slave and being a ‘wage slave’ (Sandel 1998).

Li’s use of the case of Google and China also brings attention to pragmatic paradoxes experienced at other levels than that of the individual worker-manager relationship, broadening theorising to include organizational and state actors. For example, it would be also useful to identify under what conditions organizations participating in a supply chain could be so deprived of the possibility of freely choosing and adopting alternative strategies that they end up being exposed to pragmatic paradoxes. It is likely that excessive reliance on a single client, presence of strong regulatory bonds, lack of reliable systematic legal redress could cause such conditions.

### ***The Role of Expectations in (Generative) Paradox Management***

A second valid point made by Li concerns the role of expectations in shaping perception and responses to paradox. Paradox theory puts stock on the role of ‘mindsets’ in determining contradiction responses (Smith & Lewis 2011). Empirical research shows that actors who can freely choose alternative strategies in face of a paradox “feel comfortable with and energized by tensions” (Miron-Spektor et al. 2018, p. 38), which correlates with synergetic paradox management. It is certainly plausible that, in such conditions, “the asymmetry between one’s

capacity and expectation” (Li 2020a, p. 8) plays a role in response determination. A sense of self-efficacy is necessary for tackling the challenge: for instance, believing it is possible to synergistically accommodate contradictory elements without being paralysed by their inconsistency is a precondition for ‘accepting’ paradoxes. From this perspective, Li’s claim that pragmatic paradoxes can be solved by reducing expectations could turn out to be literally correct. Within an organization, such pathological situations can be removed if those managers who issue directives learn to lower their expectations either in relation to subordinates’ capacity for dealing with contradictory demands, or in relation to the desire for maintaining autocratic control over an organizational unit.



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