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State-of-the-art and future directions for HRM from a paradox perspective: Introduction to the Special Issue**

Managing HRM related tensions is a matter of practical and theoretical significance. Despite increasing interest among HRM scholars in understanding the nature of tensions in managing the employment relationship, attempts to explore these tensions that go beyond the mapping of dualities or naming of the negative aspects of tensions are somewhat rare. Furthermore, discussions on managing HRM tensions tend to be of limited value for practitioners due to their overly abstract nature contributing to what several commentators lament is a growing theory-practice gap in HRM research. This Special Issue aims to advance the discussion on tensions in HRM by drawing on a recent paradox perspective from organization theory. Along with the contributors to the Special Issue, we explore how a paradox perspective can support HRM researchers in a more systematic analysis of types of HRM paradoxes and tensions and in deepening awareness of practical strategies for coping actively and constructively with tensions. In this introduction to the Special Issue, we first provide a synthesis of the features of a paradox perspective and contrast it with previous research on tensions in organization theory and HRM. Next, we illustrate how a paradox perspective can be applied to analyzing HRM tensions presenting key examples of such analysis. We then introduce the contributions to this Special Issue all of which draw, albeit in different ways, on a paradox perspective on HRM. Finally, we explore opportunities for future research. In particular, we focus on the need to move from a duality perspective to a paradox perspective on HRM, on opportunities to explore the links between HRM, paradox and organizational sustainability and on the skills and capabilities needed for coping with HRM paradoxes both at individual and organizational/HRM levels.

Key words: **paradox, tension, Human Resource Management**
(JEL: M10, M12, M14)

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Introduction

Tensions are inherent aspects of organizational life generally and of HRM in particular. Since Legge (1978) characterized HR managers as ‘victims of ambiguity’ caught in ‘vicious cycles’, scholars have explored different types of tensions and their consequences for HR practitioners. It would seem from a cursory reading of recent literature these tensions have not abated but have perhaps even intensified (e.g., Brandl & Kozica, 2015; Caldwell, 2003; Keegan & Francis, 2010; Sheehan, De Cieri, Greenwood, & Van Buren, 2014). It has also become clear that other actors encounter tensions in relation to their HR roles including line managers (Renwick, 2003; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003). Studies of international HRM suggest tensions pervade issues such as localization versus globalization of HR practices (Evans, Pucik, & Björkman, 2011) and tensions are also studied in the area of service work (Korczynski, 2002). There is also reason to believe that employees might struggle to cope with managerial practices that elicit high levels of work performance (Ramsay, Scholarios, & Harley, 2000) with possible tradeoffs in terms of their wellbeing (Grant, Christianson, & Price, 2007).

The identification and naming of such tensions is an interesting development (e.g., Boselie, Brewster, & Paauwe, 2009; Keegan & Boselie, 2006). However, while the terms duality, paradox, ambiguity, dilemma and/or tension are widely used in contemporary HRM research, the underlying concepts and theoretical assumptions are rarely explored systematically to deduce implications for how to deal with the tensions (Ehnert, 2009). HRM research has focused largely on describing tensions, their effects on actors, and resulting negative consequences (e.g., stress, dissatisfaction, helplessness, work-related health problems or inertia in decision-making). HR and general managers as well as employees easily become framed as passive ‘victims of ambiguity’. In contrast, organization theory scholars view tensions as a potential source of change and innovation (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Smith & Lewis, 2011). While we assume that work taking this perspective might also inform HR research, this has so far rarely been the case (Ehnert, 2009; Brandl & Kozica, 2015; Guerci, Rahimian, & Carollo, 2015).

In 2013 and 2014 we organized an international research workshop on ‘Paradoxes and tensions in HRM’ at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. In these workshops recent developments were explored regarding the study of the tensions in HRM and the theoretical perspectives that help to increase our understanding of tensions, their origin and dynamics in HRM, and how they can be dealt with. As stated in our original Calls for Papers for the workshops, and for this Special Issue, we were looking for conceptual and empirical papers that afford HR actors more than a passive role in responding to paradoxes and that explore how HR actors engage with them, take advantage of them, and find ways to ignore, subvert, or resist them. In other words, our aims for this Special Issue were to attract papers that address the *active* role of HR actors, the potentially positive effects of dealing with tensions and paradoxes, and that address questions such as:

- What tensions are of relevance for HRM and why/how are they (not) experienced by HRM actors?

- How are paradoxical tensions dealt with in HRM today and how could they be dealt with?
- How can current theorizing on paradox in the broader social sciences (e.g. organization theory) inform HRM research?

By exploring the usefulness of frameworks for paradox from organization theory for HRM research, the objective of this Special Issue is to sharpen the theoretical underpinning in the debate on tensions in HRM. We also aim to increase the relevance of insights on coping with HRM tensions so as to inform practitioner communities about research based insights on coping with tensions and skills and capabilities required of HRM actors doing so. The five articles in this Special Issue highlight important aspects of this theorizing process enabling us to extend this research further in the field of HRM.

In this introductory article, we first provide a synthesis of the features of a paradox perspective on HRM tensions and briefly contrast it with previous research on tensions in organization theory and HRM. Next, we discuss how a paradox perspective can be applied to analyzing HRM tensions and present examples of such analysis. We then introduce the contributions to this Special Issue all of which draw, albeit in different ways, on a paradox perspective on HRM. Finally, we offer suggestions for future research. In particular, we focus on the need to move from a duality perspective to a paradox perspective on HRM, on opportunities to explore the links between HRM, paradox and organizational sustainability, and on the skills and capabilities needed for coping with HRM paradoxes both at individual and organizational/HRM levels.

A paradox perspective on tensions and responses to tensions in organization theory and HRM

In organization theory, research on responses to tensions has been strongly influenced by beliefs about the appropriate relationship between an organization and its context. For HRM research, these beliefs influence how researchers view the appropriate management of the employment relationship and the resulting orientation towards employees. For our Special Issue, we distinguish three perspectives influenced by (1) early organization theories, (2) contingency theory, and (3) paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011; see Table 1).

In early organization theories, tensions were not really seen as an issue. Instead, the basic epistemological assumption of approaches like Taylor's Scientific Management, Weber's Bureaucracy or Fayol's Administrative Science was that there is one best way to manage and to be successful (Smith & Lewis, 2011). In this early organization context, employees were seen as production factors and like any other production factor costs associated with employees needed to be minimized, i.e. HR strategy clearly followed organization strategy.

Table 1: Theoretical perspectives on tensions, responses to tensions and implications for HRM

Key theory/ perspective	Early organization theories	Contingency theory	Paradox theory
Characteristics			
Research tradition (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 395)	Scientific Management (Frederic W. Taylor), Bureaucracy (Max Weber), Administrative Science (Henry Fayol)	e.g. Lawrence & Lorsch (1967), Galbraith (1973)	Smith & Berg (1987), Cameron & Quinn (1988), Poole & Van de Ven (1989); Ehner, 2009; Smith & Lewis (2011); Jarzabkowski et al. (2013)
Epistemological assumptions (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 395)	One best way to be successful	Alignment and consistency with internal and external environment, enables success	Contradiction is inherent and can be powerful to enable peak performance if harnessed
Purpose of the business organization	To reach ends (purpose) - profit maximization can be planned	To achieve outcomes - contingent on restrictions to profit maximization (means to ends)	The sense and purpose of modern organizations are continuously challenged; profit maximization motives can endanger organizational viability and legitimacy; multiple purposes possible (e.g. organizational sustainability)
Response to organizational tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 395)	A or B? (either/or choice)	Under what condition A or B? (either/or choice)	How to engage A and B simultaneously? (both/and choices)
Theorizing employees	Employees as 'production factors'; tensions can be suppressed or ignored	Employees as resources or assets of the organization; HRM is contingent on external and internal requirements, but increasing tensions	Employees as human beings, HRM is faced with plurality; contradictions, tensions occur which need to be actively dealt with instead of being ignored
Implications for HRM - Performing - Organizing	Contribute to profit via cost-minimization Implementation of best organizational structure; HR strategy follows organization strategy	Identify best conditions for (high) performance via internal and external fit Alignment (fit) to organization strategy; HR follows (fit, matching, consistency)	Focus on tensions (Evans, 1999, p. 327) and multiple 'bottom lines' (sustainability) HR strategy can become organization strategy

Source: Authors' own elaboration extended to HRM dimensions based on Smith & Lewis (2011, p. 395).

Later, a dominant contingency theory perspective emerged (e.g. Woodward, 1965; Burns & Stalker, 1961) and theorists assumed that business organizations need to be aligned with their internal and external environments to enable organizational success (internal/external fit). Under this paradigm, the purpose of the business organization remains profit maximization but this can only be achieved if certain constraints are considered and if organizations are designed in a way that makes ‘means’ purposeful i.e. to add to the final end or purpose of the organization which is generally specified as optimal alignment with internal and/or external conditions. From this contingency lens, scholars probe the specific conditions under which management solutions A or B are most effective and efficient and if and whether to choose either one option or the other. Organization theory and HRM scholarship are largely dominated by this paradigm. In HRM, employees are theorized as means (‘resources’, ‘assets’ or ‘human capital’) of the organization to be differentially deployed according to whether one condition or another (e.g. cost minimization versus differentiation strategy) prevails (Schuler & Jackson, 1987). HRM scholarship focuses on identifying the best conditions for high performance via internal and external alignment of the HR function and a ‘fit’ of the HR strategy/strategies (e.g. Lepak & Snell, 1999) with organization strategy. Potential tensions are framed as problematic and solutions are sought to avoid them.

At the end of the 1980s an alternative meta-theoretical paradigm to contingency theory was developed, called the paradox perspective (Lewis & Smith, 2014). As Smith and Lewis (2011) highlight, early proponents of the paradox perspective such as Smith and Berg (1987), Cameron and Quinn (1988) and Poole and Van de Ven (1989) advanced the epistemological assumption that organizations *are* paradoxical with contradictions or tensions as inherent and persistent features of modern organizing. Crucially, they also argued that the sense and purpose of organizations today are not as clear-cut as previously assumed. Questions about purpose are valid epistemological issues challenging the assumption that profit maximization is an unquestionable goal. Instead, the purpose of the organization is continuously challenged (e.g. de Woot, 2005) and multiple purposes and goals are both possible and thinkable. It is increasingly acknowledged that pursuing profit maximization at all costs can endanger organizational viability and legitimacy, and organizational sustainability has become an important goal (Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, & Figge, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Smith, Lewis, & Tushman, 2011). Instead of viewing tensions *per se* as problems that need to be avoided, paradox scholars assume that focusing on tensions can help in finding creative, novel solutions to organizational problems in the pursuit of organizational sustainability.

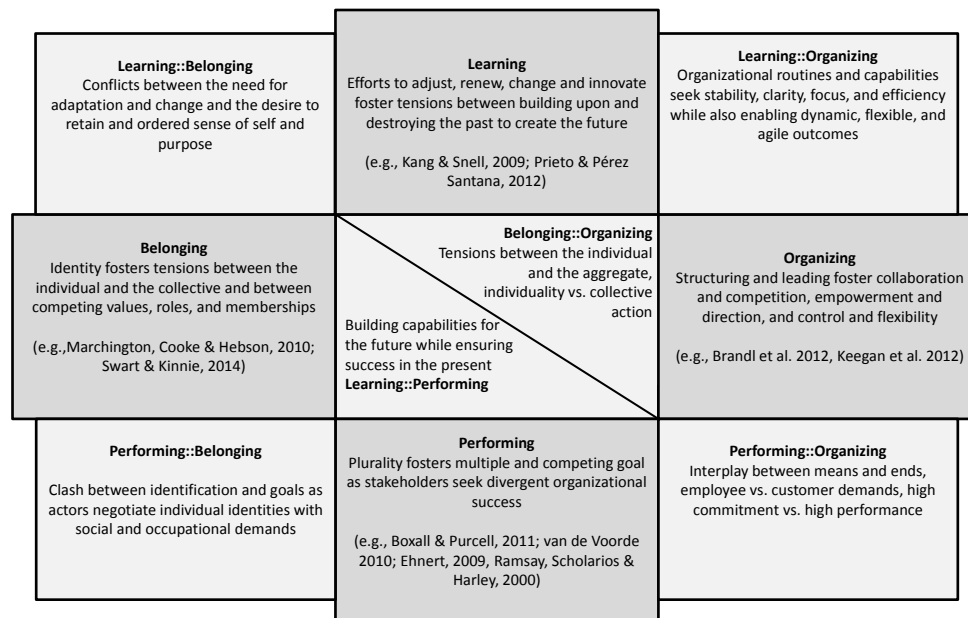
The key question paradox scholars deal with is how multiple interrelated tensions ‘A and B’ can be engaged simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 395). For HRM theorizing, one of the consequences of this line of theorizing is that it challenges the ‘purposeful’ view of human resources in organizations. Instead, people need to be theorized as ‘human beings’ (Ehnert, 2009; see also Greenwood, 2002; 2013) and HRM as a function that is continuously faced with plurality and paradoxicality in the management of human beings within the context of the employment relationship. To avoid non-sustainable consequences, the HRM function needs to take an active role e.g. by focusing not only on fit but also on tensions (Evans, 1999) and on multiple

‘bottom lines’ (sustainability) (Ehnert et al., 2015) for coping with and working through tensions. In the next section, we explore a paradox perspective on dealing with HRM tensions.

Applying a paradox perspective to HRM tensions

In this section we apply a paradox lens to both tensions and responses to tensions in terms of key examples from the field of HRM. We draw on theorizing on organizational paradoxes that has become increasingly detailed and sophisticated in recent years. A number of frameworks have emerged to typify tensions and/or responses to tensions (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Andriopolous & Lewis, 2009). One of the most well-developed and cited frameworks for exploring tensions is the Smith and Lewis (2011) paradox framework. Figure 1 illustrates Smith and Lewis’ (2011, p. 383) categories of paradoxes of performing, organizing, belonging and learning as well as the intersections between these categories. The authors assert that “the four categories of paradox represent core activities and elements of organizations: learning (knowledge), belonging (identity/interpersonal relationships), organizing (processes), and performing (goals)” (p. 383). We follow Smith and Lewis (2011) and show how these paradoxes can be integrated with examples from HRM research to illustrate the efficacy of this framework from an HRM perspective.

Figure 1: Categorization of organizational tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383) with examples from HRM research



HRM and paradoxes of performing. Few concepts have been as controversial in HRM theorizing in the past decade as that of performance. While the search for the links between HRM and performance has absorbed enormous energy and resources and

caused controversy (Ramsay, Scholarios & Harley, 2000), it is by now increasingly accepted that performance is not unidimensional. Pursuing performance can be a source of considerable tensions. Actors in organizational systems face performance paradoxes arising from “multiple and competing goals as stakeholders seek divergent organizational success” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383; see also Ehnert, 2009). Based on our Table 1 above, we extend this view, arguing that multiple HRM purposes directed towards both ends and means in organizations can be a source of HRM performance paradoxes. The contingency view of performance as an outcome of optimal alignment of HRM to some internal or external conditions is therefore substituted with a focus on the paradoxicality of HRM performances seen from the perspectives of different groups and individuals. This redirects attention to HRM actors’ perceptions of, and pursuit of, different types of performance for HRM policies and practices.

An example is the contradiction between achieving high levels of production, operating or financial performance on the one hand, and maintaining health related employee well-being on the other, which in HPWS (high performance work systems) has been shown to be difficult to achieve simultaneously (e.g. van de Voorde, 2010). These multiple competing goals or purposes (‘bottom lines’) for HRM practice and HRM policy (Ehnert, 2009) create tensions for HRM actors because they are frequently in conflict. As Table 1 shows, a paradox perspective on HRM and performance assumes a perspective on employees as human beings rather than performance producing factors of production and therefore makes visible that achieving performance is not a static, simple, and unidimensional goal but involves plurality, tensions and multiple bottom lines. A paradox lens is better able to apprehend these aspects than a contingency perspective where performance is an assumed outcome of optimal HRM alignment to external or internal contingencies. A paradox lens highlights tensions between performance goals of different actors and employees are appreciated as human beings with their own goals that may not always be aligned with managerial goals. This presents challenges for developing HRM policies and practices.

HRM and paradoxes of organizing. Organizing paradoxes refer to competing designs that for example “foster collaboration and competition, empowerment and direction, control and flexibility” (Smith & Lewis 2011, p. 383). HRM actors face increasingly complex organizational designs and paradoxes of organizing as HRM moves beyond HRM departments and also beyond line management (Brandl et al., 2012; Keegan et al., 2012). In HRM, organizing paradoxes are, for example, related to decisions on the design of work. One field of work design in which tensions emerge is in job design. Job design issues produce tensions between specializing tasks and integrating them in a holistic manner to improve organizational effectiveness. While the (psychological) HRM literature tends to advocate holistic job designs for improving the quality of work (e.g. advocating the discretion of employees over scheduling work), organizations are also pressurized in terms of the costs implications of job design. As organizations become more complex, management may prioritize specializing tasks to ensure efficiency and predictability, over holistic task design. Paradoxes of performing and of organizing are often interlinked, and are strongly linked to a third type of paradoxes identified by Smith and Lewis (2011), paradoxes of belonging which are driven by plurality and complexity.

HRM and paradoxes of belonging (identity). Belonging paradoxes emerge as individuals and groups in an organization aim at achieving both homogeneity and distinction (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Smith and Lewis (2011) assert that “identity fosters tensions between the individual and the collective and between competing values, roles and memberships” (p. 383). Employees (organizational members) act on behalf of the organization and are required to take on different roles and perform in different settings. In the contemporary HRM context, organizational boundaries have become increasingly blurred and organizational relationships with the environment have become simultaneously competitive and collaborative. For HRM, employment relations have become more complex as mutual exchange relationships are combined with increasing tendencies towards individualized and idiosyncratic psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1997). A tendency for employees to work across organizational boundaries (e.g., Marchington, Cooke & Hebson, 2010) might indicate that paradoxes of belonging will increase as a consequence of challenges presented by new forms of organizing and their implications for employees’ feelings of belongingness (Den Hartog, de Hoogh and Keegan, 2007). Paradox theory provides a more systematic lens and language for exploring associated HRM tensions.

HRM and paradoxes of learning. Paradoxes of learning are defined by Smith and Lewis (2011) with respect to “efforts to adjust, renew, change and innovate” as these “foster tensions between building upon and destroying the past to create the future” (p. 383). Paradoxes of learning are associated with changes in approaches to managing employees. These changes can be transformational (e.g., from compliance to commitment based HRM systems) or involve adjustments within existing systems (e.g., decrease/increase in the proportion of variable pay in the compensation package). Contributions to understanding paradoxes of learning in HRM have so far come from the literature on organizational ambidexterity (e.g. Kang & Snell, 2009; Prieto & Pérez Santana, 2012). However, these approaches generally do not go beyond the ‘fit’ paradigm. Kang and Snell (2009), for example, develop a conceptual framework for two HR configurations corresponding to exploration-exploitation for ambidextrous learning and Prieto and Pérez Santana (2012) explore empirically how HRM practices influence the social climate that facilitates organizational learning. The ‘fit’ perspective on learning tensions asks how much organizations should invest in the elaboration of existing HRM systems and how much should they be open to changing to different HRM systems under particular circumstances (Boxall & Purcell, 2011, p. 29).

Looking at change from a paradox perspective reveals the difficulties involved in decision-making on adjustments to the HR system when plurality and scarcity are taken into consideration. For example, when developing new products or entering new markets, organizations tend to use temporary employment contracts that facilitate downsizing if business strategies fail (Boxall & Purcell, 2011, p. 29). When strategies start to succeed, employees have earned a reputation and may move on to other organizations that offer more stable employment conditions. The contingency perspective answer to this case would be to offer long-term employment contracts for retaining talented employees. But this strategy would neglect crucial questions once we introduce change, plurality and scarcity, issues which are at the heart of a paradox perspective on tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Will the product market continue to prosper? Will the

organization be able to reach enough customers, especially when it needs to transfer increased labor costs to product prices?

To summarize this section, using examples from HRM theorizing, we have illustrated how a more comprehensive view of tensions in HRM can be achieved by adopting a paradox perspective that seeks to avoid an either/or logic to choices facing HRM actors and which acknowledges dynamic changes. We acknowledge however that tensions in HRM exist at different levels of analysis - individual, group, organizational and beyond - and that our examples have covered these levels only selectively. In the next section, we continue following Lewis' (2000) and Smith and Lewis' (2011) paradox framework, by addressing how to make the tensions and paradoxes 'manageable' for HRM actors.

Responding to HRM tensions from a paradox perspective

How can tensions in HRM, the like of which we described above, be made 'manageable' in the sense of 'coped with' by actors in HRM systems? To respond to this question, we highlight the importance of all organization members *learning* how to deal with paradoxes in particular for sustainable organizing (see also Kozica & Ehnert, 2015). Quite unlike contingency thinking or resource-based perspectives on HRM, the solutions to tensions from a paradox perspective do not necessarily reside in management levels where strategies for fixing tensions are assumed to be designed and subsequently rolled out to employees.

Previous theorizing (e.g. Legge, 1978; Watson, 1977) has shown that some HRM tensions seem to recur time and again, such as for example tensions between the business facing and employee facing aspects of HRM work, between the 'personnel' and the 'management', the 'human' and the 'resource', and between investing in human 'resources' or viewing people as 'costs'. These tensions recur, we suggest, because they are paradoxical, i.e. contain contradictory elements that exist simultaneously and are persistently interrelated (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p.382). From a paradox theory perspective, we can see these tensions as reinforcing cycles (Smith & Lewis, 2011) characterized by their repetitive, loop-like nature and by their regular and recurring appearance over time. The tensions between 'people' versus 'profit' and 'hard' versus 'soft' HRM in organizations can persist even after organizational actors have gone through the same cycle for a second or multiple times. Organizational actors are not always aware of these cycles nor why they occur and how to influence them. Surprisingly, explicit theorizing on self-reinforcing vicious cycles is rare in HRM literature with notable exceptions including the work of Legge (1978, 1995). Even in broader organizational theory (e.g. Gouldner, 1954; Crozier, 1964; Weick, 1979) ideas about how to get out of or to redirect them are, at least until recently, quite rare (Masuch, 1985). Smith and Lewis (2011) argue that in the face of paradoxes, the 'roots' of vicious cycles stem from both individual factors such as "cognitive and behavioral forces for consistency, emotional anxiety, and defensiveness (p. 391)" and from organizational factors fostering inertia such as structure, routines, processes and capabilities "where the future becomes beholden to the past" (p. 391). This explains why working through paradoxical HRM tensions must involve actors at different levels of the organization and attend to cognitive, perceptual and structural issues and how these are intertwined in organiza-

tions. Accepting this is a clear reason to doubt the sustainability of HRM solutions designed from a 'fit' optic (Ehnert, 2009; Evans, 1999) and from a purely managerial perspective.

The recent literature on paradox theorizing also provides some answers on how to escape from vicious cycles. These include the following guidelines (a) that actors need to learn to work with or 'go through' tensions associated with simultaneously occurring elements, that are persistently interrelated and contradictory, at an explicit level, even when this causes discomfort and ambiguity for actors involved (e.g. Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011); (b) that actors need to pursue seemingly counterintuitive reactions to escape reinforcing cycles (Cameron & Quinn, 1988); (c) that actors need to immerse themselves in paradoxical tensions to overcome the paralyzing emotions (Smith & Berg, 1987) which echoes findings from Huy (2002) on dealing with emotion management during change processes. More generally, proponents of a paradox perspective argue that there are different modes for dealing with paradoxes including active and passive modes associated with different strategies such as ignoring, splitting, and transcendence (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Depending on which mode (or combination of modes) is chosen, more or less favorable outcomes (in particular sustainability) can be expected. All of the papers in the Special Issue address why HRM tensions occur and how actors cope with and work through paradoxes. We turn now to these contributions, and following that we build on those insights, and insights from previous paradox theory, to offer suggestions for future paradox HRM research.

The articles in this Special Issue

Each of the articles in this Special Issue addresses a specific HRM topic from a paradox perspective and demonstrates what can be gained both for scholars and practitioners from applying such a perspective.

The article written by *Fabiola Gerpott*, entitled 'The right strategy? Examining the business partner model's functionality for resolving Human Resource Management tensions and discussing alternative directions', sheds light on an old debate about the role of HR from a new perspective. In her conceptual paper, the author uses the paradox perspective to identify and categorize HRM paradoxes of identity, learning, performing and organizing. The author skillfully shows that the business partner model – which is widely accepted in practice via its interpretation as a 'three-legged stool' model – helps actors to cope with the paradoxes involved in the HR role in the short-term by using 'splitting' techniques (i.e. temporal and/or spatial separation of the tensions). This relieves tensions for HR managers, at least temporarily. However, by ignoring the opposing forces inherent in HRM work, the splitting strategy creates new paradoxes for HR managers which re-emerge suggesting that splitting is not a sustainable coping strategy in the long-run. Critically, the author discusses the shortcomings of the business partner model from a paradox perspective and makes suggestions for how HR actors can go beyond current theorizing and reframe HRM tensions to embrace the multifaceted nature of the function on a more sustainable basis.

In the article 'Can employability do the trick? Revealing paradoxical tensions and responses in the process of adopting innovative employability enhancing policies

and practices in organizations' *Pascale Peters* and *Willem Lam* present a qualitative, multiple-level multiple-actor/multiple-case study using a paradox lens to explore the effectiveness of employability policies and practices (EP&Ps) and why they are underutilized by line managers and employees. The authors identify three HRM paradoxes in the adoption of EP&Ps i.e. the (1) '(inverted) flexibility/commitment paradox'; (2) 'self-management/human-resource management paradox'; and (3) the 'sustainability/ efficiency paradox' which are influenced by the complexities of the Dutch context. They analyze how these paradoxes are interrelated at organizational and micro levels and how actors respond to them by (not) adopting EP&Ps and in particular how HR professionals try to stimulate the adoption of EP&Ps by 'working through paradox'. This paper is one of the first studies using a paradox lens to analyze paradoxical tensions which can be frequently observed in HRM practice and the authors show how both academics and practitioners can profit from this lens to develop more collective, creative and sustainable responses to employability challenges.

The article 'German Human Resource Management professionals under tensions: A Bourdieusian approach' by *Rainhart Lang* and *Kerstin Rego*, on the one hand treads familiar ground, echoing Legge's (1978) seminal contribution to ambiguities facing HR (or personnel management) professionals. On the other hand, it offers novel theoretical insights on familiar tensions by drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's Theory of Practice. This article is an innovative analysis of HR managers' responses to tensions between HR as a profession and the pressure on these professionals to maintain organizational power all the while cognizant of organizational structural constraints. The authors show how HR managers through their daily practice actively contest both their own as well as their groups' interests without losing sight of structural influences embedded in their context. Their study depicts three main sources of tensions HR managers perceive within their organizations: their various 'sandwich' positions, scarce resources, and conflicts with line management. Four coping strategies are used by HR managers, which are the 'strategic consultant strategy', the 'active HR service provider strategy', the 'HR controller strategy' and the 'qualification strategy'. Interestingly, and unlike previous work on HRM managers coping with tensions, the authors conclude that all strategies enable HR professionals to maintain or even broaden the power position of HRM within their organization. This work draws less directly on recent paradox theory than the other contributions but provides an extension to current paradox research by emphasizing the inherently tension-filled nature of HRM work, the importance of power, and highlighting strategies for coping with paradoxes in the context of particular professional and organizational fields.

The article by *Karin Link* and *Barbara Müller*, entitled 'Delegating HR Work to the Line. Emerging Tensions and Insights from a Paradox Perspective', presents the reader an investigation of tensions in the context of devolving responsibilities for managing HR activities to line managers. The article builds on research that addresses the multi-faceted problems of allocating HR responsibilities to multiple actors. The authors use a case study of a retailing company to show that in the context of devolution of HR activities to the line, line managers face tensions between compliance to regulations on the one hand and self-directed learning and performing on the other. Link and Müller discuss possible alternatives for coping with these tensions and outline the conse-

quences of these strategies for the professionalization of HR work as well as for the viability of the organization. They use the paradox perspective to argue that tension-handling strategies need to be proactive rather than defensive to positively influence outcomes. In particular, when line managers suppress, ignore and avoid tensions this results in perpetuation of tensions and vicious cycles.

In the article ‘Translating as Response to Paradoxes – when implementing HRM strategies in service organizations’, *Mette Sandoff* and *Gill Widell* present a study of tensions between top managerial rationalities concerning HRM strategies and local managerial rationalities in the context of the Swedish service sector. The article builds on the observation that tensions between top and local rationalities are a key obstacle to the implementation of intended HRM strategies. The authors’ main point is to show that local HR actors address such tensions by translating top management decisions into alternatives that fit different local settings. Using data from an investigation of a Swedish university hospital and twelve hotels, the Sandoff and Widell argue that ‘translating’ facilitates the implementation of HRM strategies despite paradoxical tensions between top and local rationalities. In an inductive analysis of interviews with HR actors and local managers, the authors identify two conditions under which HR actors can practice translation work successfully. First, HR actors develop translation skills when they have repeatedly encountered tensions between top managerial and local managerial rationalities. Second, HR actors require a trustful relationship with local managers.

Collectively, the papers in this Special Issue highlight the importance of re-examining tensions in HRM in a more systematic form and they also show the potential of doing so particularly from a paradox lens. Overall, they add to a growing body of literature in organization and management on paradoxes and tensions (Guilmot & Ehnert, 2014). In particular, these studies show which tensions in HRM are paradoxical and what responses to paradoxical tensions fostering virtuous cycles might look like. While the articles in this Special Issue highlight important aspects of the theorizing processes related to using paradox theory to study HRM tensions, and point, collectively to important issues HRM researchers should consider to extend this research further, they do not cover all aspects that are worthwhile exploring. We therefore build on their contributions now by developing an agenda for future research on paradox HRM.

A research agenda for paradox HRM

From HRM dualities to paradox HRM

To deepen awareness of paradoxes in HRM and to explore ways of coping with them, it will be essential for researchers to go beyond the mapping of ‘simple’ dualities that have tended to dominate the field (e.g. hard/soft HRM) and the identification/naming of problems associated with such dualities. One way for HRM researchers to sharpen the theoretical underpinnings of the debate on tensions in HRM is therefore by moving from duality to paradoxicality. By this we mean that naming and exploring the negative aspects of tensions, although at times valuable, is not a sufficient basis for offering practical research based insights to actors in HRM systems confronted on a daily basis with paradoxes. Paradox theory can inspire a deeper and more complex

analysis of HRM tensions beyond simple bi-polar oppositions to include tensions interrelated at different levels and in different timeframes. Smith and Lewis' (2011) categorization of organizational paradoxes illustrates their interconnectedness at different levels. Empirical research building on their framework, for example Jarzabkowski and colleagues (2013), suggests the utility of addressing the interlinked nature of paradoxical tensions and what happens as actors try to work through them. With the exceptions of Watson (1986) and Boxall and Purcell (2011), HRM scholars have generally not addressed tensions in this way. Future research on HRM tensions would benefit from shifting the focus from duality to paradoxicality leading to an increased appreciation of the complexity facing actors working through tensions that do not present themselves as neat bi-polar oppositions. HRM theorizing might become requisitely complex for appreciating the cyclical, interrelated and contradictory elements facing HR actors as well as possible strategies for coping with them. Future research should address questions such as: How are HRM tensions at the individual, group and societal levels interrelated? How do tensions at different levels co-evolve? When do HR actors focus attention on paradoxicality instead of dualities? How can organizational systems, including those for communication, enable HRM actors to be aware of the paradoxicality of HRM goals at different levels? Finally, what research designs are best suited to exploring cyclical, interrelated tensions facing HRM actors and ways of coping with them?

Paradox HRM and organizational sustainability

We also see important research opportunities in exploring and explaining the link between HRM, paradoxical tensions and organizational sustainability. Sustainability 'entails the preservation, regeneration, and development of the ecological, economic, and social resources of a system' (Senna & Shani, 2009, p. 84). Smith, Lewis, and Tushman (2011) define organizational sustainability as "achieving peak performance today while creating conditions to thrive tomorrow" (p. 799). More explicitly, organizational sustainability goes beyond the financial bottom line of the firm (Hahn et al., 2015) and also includes social and environmental firm performance and impact (Ehnert, Harry & Zink, 2014). To pay attention to all sustainability dimensions simultaneously is, however, very challenging and can create multiple paradoxical tensions (e.g. Ehnert, 2009; Hahn et al., 2014) for actors within and outside of the organization. So far, Hahn and colleagues (2014) identified important paradoxical tensions organizations have to deal with if they wish to pursue organizational sustainability. For HRM, Ehnert (2009), Guerci and colleagues (2015) and the article by Peters and Lam (2015) identify relevant paradoxical tensions when the objective of the organization and/or HRM is to become and remain sustainable.

Some authors therefore argue that organizational and HRM sustainability can be achieved by leveraging strategic paradox (Ehnert, 2009; Smith et al., 2011; Hahn et al., 2014) and by learning sustainability through paying attention to simultaneous exploration and exploitation with regard to economic, ecological, social and human dimensions (Kozica & Ehnert, 2015). For example, Kozica and Ehnert (2015) argue that organizations need to learn sustainability through exploration and exploitation not only on the ecological dimension but also on the ecological, social and human dimension.

This requires that all actors learn how to translate, for example, ecological exploration and exploitation into their daily decision-making processes. This is only one example of an area in HRM that could profit from insights from paradox theory.

Future HRM research should look into identifying further paradoxical HRM tensions created in organizations which strive for sustainability on different performance levels and dimensions. Important research questions are: What are typical paradoxical tensions in organizations striving for sustainability? What are the short- and long-term consequences (vicious/virtuous cycles; neglect of sustainability goals etc.) of these tensions? How do actors respond effectively, creatively and actively to paradoxical sustainability tensions? Which coping strategies foster/hinder the achievement of sustainability goals in HRM/the organization?

Skills and capabilities for coping with paradoxical tensions

Recent work by Ehnert (2009), Jarzabkowski and colleagues (2013), Denison, Hooijberg and Quinn (1995) and Jay (2013) suggests opportunities for research at the intersection of skills and capabilities, and paradoxical tensions. Here, we outline some research opportunities relating to skills and routines on the one hand, and successful navigation of paradoxical tensions on the other hand.

Individual skills. Researchers who closely interact with practitioners recognize that HR actors differ in their success in navigating paradoxical tensions. The question arises however as to why some HR actors are able to contribute to virtuous cycles while the actions of other HR actors appears to reinforce vicious cycles? Research on individual skills for navigating paradoxical tensions emphasizes cognitive as well as behavioral complexity and views leadership as a portfolio of capabilities (Denison et al. 1995, p. 526). Quinn (1988) developed a leadership approach that can be linked to a paradox lens which suggests that leaders need to take into account incompatible extremes (e.g., both flexibility and stability) and that a high level of leadership development is characterized by the ability to reconcile these extremes whereas a low leadership development level is characterized by the lack of such ability.

Possessing cognitive and behavioral complexity seems to be a necessary factor for HR actors to navigate paradoxes. The article by Sandoff and Widell (2015) suggests that translating skills and trust are part of this and HR actors acquire these skills as they repeatedly encounter paradoxical tensions. More research on the conditions for behavioral complexity is needed to understand why some HR actors succeed while others fail in their activities for managing paradoxical tensions and how action repertoires can be improved. In addition to identifying and categorizing navigation strategies and their effectiveness for managing paradoxical tensions, studying the level of leadership development of HR actors may provide useful insights on the choice of coping practices available to actors and the enablers and constraints of their drawing on these practices. Topics that deserve attention when researching conditions for behavioral complexity include to what extent educational training programs for HR managers support the idea of managing paradoxical tensions, which particular training approaches can develop a mindset and action strategies for navigating such tensions, how these skills can be transmitted to HR actors beyond specialists (e.g., line managers, employees, works councilors) and how to use insights from research on individual

traits for studying how HR actors navigate paradoxical tensions and the practical implications from such research.

Organizational routines. Organizational routines and schemata can influence the navigation of paradoxical tensions by shaping how individual HR actors perceive tensions and by influencing their motivation to handle tensions (Stiles et al., 2015). Recent case studies on managing employee performance explain how schemata offer collective understandings to line managers and employees on how to align persistently competing demands (Stiles et al., 2015, Kozica & Brandl, 2015). These collective understandings are beneficial for individuals as well as for organizations: individual HR actors don't need to invent navigation strategies individually, which is a costly activity (Kozica & Brandl, 2015). Collective understandings enable organizations to establish navigation strategies on a broader base beyond relying on (few) skillful individuals.

While HR scholars often tend to focus individual skills, more research is needed that addresses how organizational routines support the navigation of paradoxical tensions. On the one hand, scholars interested in organizational routines have been interested in types of tensions (e.g., exploitation vs. exploration) that are different from the tensions that are relevant within the domain of HRM research (e.g., legitimacy, performance). On the other hand, the broad range of tension types in HRM and the multiple actors involved demands a macro organizational approach for analyzing how individuals navigate tensions. Thus, for understanding how individual HR actors perceive paradoxical tensions and respond to them we call for more attention at the level of the organizational context, including organizational identity and how this identity motivates the actions of individuals. Research questions that arise are: What skills do HR actors require to cope with paradoxical tensions? Are there different types of skills (such as the 'translating skills' in Sandoff & Widell (this Special Issue) for different HR actors? How does the organization enable/constrain the development and enactment of paradox coping skills?

Research design implications

Following from the previous section, what does a paradox perspective mean for HRM research designs? We propose that fruitful research on paradox HRM needs to incorporate the following features: qualitatively rich research methodologies, taking into account contexts, multi-level analyses of paradoxical HRM tensions, multi-actor perspectives on paradoxical HRM tensions, processual analyses of how actors work through tensions as well as a multidisciplinary approach to HRM.

At this point in time, paradox HRM studies are rare (cf. Ehnert, 2009; Guerci et al., 2015; Kozica & Brandl, 2015) and we know little about how actors respond to paradoxical HRM tensions, nor the coping strategies, skills or capabilities that might support active responses to paradoxes that move from latent to salient due to change, scarcity and plurality (Smith & Lewis, 2011). To advance understanding of this field, qualitatively rich research methodologies that incorporate a focus on *contextual features* as well as individual level skills and capabilities would be valuable. The paper of Peters and Lam (2015) exemplifies the value of this approach for exploring the unfolding and intertwined nature of paradoxes, where contextual richness is important for clarifying

how paradoxes emerge and evolve, at different levels, and for different actors, over time.

The institutional and organizational contexts are essential for advancing paradox HRM studies. Jackson, Schuler, and Jiang (2014, p. 31) argue that ‘empirical studies have generally ignored the embedded and contextualized nature of HRM’. We suggest that addressing the impact of contextual features of types of paradoxes and ways of coping with them should be a central concern in future HRM research. The construction and response to paradoxes in HRM likely relates to institutional norms regarding employment (Godard, 2014; Watson, 1986) and as well as organizational level conventions (cf. Kozica & Brandl, 2015). Institutional norms may influence managerial *cognitive maps and sensemaking processes* (Watson, 2010) for handling HRM tensions which may enable or constrain the development, jointly with employees, of both/and responses to paradoxical HRM tensions. Smith and Lewis (2011) propose that cognitive rigidities in framing tensions as either/or dualities can lead to tensions being suppressed and ignored and ultimately to vicious cycles. Institutional analysis of HRM paradoxes can reveal if norms and expectations regarding collaboration and co-operation between employees and employers influence the emergence of paradoxical tensions and approaches to tensions and strategies for coping.

In advancing a paradox HRM agenda, *multi-level analyses* can bring rich insights. Researchers might therefore consider the impact of the broader institutional environment of HRM as an environment that shapes the relationships between employees and employers (Godard, 2014) at individual and dyadic levels and how these actors construct and respond to tensions in ways shaped by the broader institutional environment and its impact of employment relationships. Qualitatively rich contextual studies could shed light on how the actions of managers, employees, and HR specialists, unfold within the broader organizational and institutional context aiding understanding of the choices that managers make, and the barriers they face, when managing HRM related tensions (see also Godard, 2014; Jackson et al., 2014).

A *multi-actor HRM perspective* (Keegan et al., 2012) is also critically important in shedding light on possibilities employees have, individually and collectively, for influencing HRM systems (Jackson et al., 2014) and proposing creative solutions to tensions as they perceive them. Factors including the approach to dialogue in organizations and how this enables employers and employees to work through tensions constructively with others are only beginning to feature in HRM studies and more work is needed (Francis et al., 2013). Meijerink, Bondarouk, and Kees Looise (2013) propose that employees are key actors in HRM technological innovations as opposed to mere passive recipients and that employees should be incorporated as active agents into analyses of HRM systems. This can easily be extended to considering how multiple actors in the employment relationship work through HRM tensions.

Since paradoxical tensions cannot be fixed due to their persistent, interrelatedness and their contradictory logics (Smith & Lewis, 2011), but only worked through, *processual studies* are also promising and offer a chance to trace this contextually embedded ‘working through process’ as described in case study research in broader organization studies. For example, process oriented empirical studies of paradoxes in organizations, (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jay, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) can add to the as yet

underexplored domain of paradoxical HRM tensions. Action research designs (cf. Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) can also increase the relevance of HRM research by incorporating insights from partnerships between HRM actors and researchers. Preliminary findings from qualitatively rich contextual studies, and from action research, as well as from longitudinal process studies can provide insights that form the basis of research designs aimed at testing (emergent) hypothesis in more deductively inspired studies.

Finally, a *multidisciplinary* approach to HRM can underpin these proposed research studies, re-contextualizing HRM practice within the broader domains that shape it, and are shaped by it, and using insights from adjoining social science disciplines (Watson, 2004; Delbridge & Keenoy, 2010; Godard, 2014) such as sociology of work, industrial and labor relations and critical theory (e.g. Lang & Rego, 2015) to enrich the study of tensions in developing a paradox perspective on HRM.

Conclusion

While tensions are a well researched topic in HRM, theorizing to date has tended to focus on bi-polar oppositions, dualities, and the negative outcomes associated with these as well as how to avoid them. The recent paradox perspective in organization theory provides a new perspective on HRM tensions and opens up possibilities for understanding the complexity of tensions as well as active and constructive strategies for managing tensions so that the sustainability of the organization and HRM systems might be advanced. The objective of this Special Issue is to enrich the discussion on tensions in HRM by exploring how a paradox perspective on HRM can underpin a more systematic treatment of types of tensions and related coping strategies. In this introduction, we outlined core characteristics of the paradox perspective, contrasted it with other theories, and explained how it can inform future research on tensions in HRM. We hope that this Special Issue is the beginning of a new and fruitful debate on a well-known topic in HRM – but from a new paradox perspective.

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