

Organizational tensions, paradoxes, and contradictory demands in flexible work systems

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ABSTRACT

The spread of flexible work systems, epitomized by continuously changing structures and work anytime / anywhere, intensifies goal conflicts in organizations. In particular, increasing work performance and maintaining employee health are incompatible, if delegated to supervisors and employees without required resources and empowerment to determine situationally adequate ways to define, balance, and pursue associated objectives. Drawing on different theoretical approaches – paradox theory, role theory, action regulation theory, leadership theory – we try to integrate concepts of organizational tensions, role conflicts, contradictory work demands, and ambivalences in leadership and employee behavior with a focus on performance and health. We argue that top-down work design or ambidextrous leadership are insufficient to reconcile contradictory objectives, whereas idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) offer a promising approach to align diverging interest. Traditional divisions of authority, responsibilities, and resources between top-management and supervisors/employees are bound to catalyze role conflicts and contradictory demands. These manifest in tensions and paradoxes at different organizational levels, contribute to widespread detrimental phenomena like self-exploitative work behavior and psycho-mental disease. I-deals between supervisors and employees offer secondary elasticities in HR systems to buffer or alleviate tensions. Integrating theoretical approaches from a multilevel perspective on organizations, work design, leadership, and work behavior, we shed light on tensions, role conflicts, and contradictory demands imposed on supervisors and employees in contemporary flexible work systems. Ways to align and balance individual health and organizational performance through idiosyncratic deals are proposed.

Keywords

Organizational tensions – paradoxes – role conflicts – contradictory demands – idiosyncratic deals – work design

During the last decades, aggravated global competition and structural transformation from mass-production to customized modes of production and services have been observed in numerous industrialized economies (e.g., Felstead & Jewson, 1999; Oeij & Wiezer, 2002). Accordingly, organizations and employees face increasing requirements for flexibility. Organizations make more and more use of non-traditional work arrangements beyond conventional full-time and permanent contracts, flanked by flexible work scheduling to enhance numerical and temporal flexibility (e.g., Allvin, Aronsson, Hagström, Johansson & Lundberg, 2011). New forms of work organization and managerial practices deemphasize direct control, centralization, and formalization in favor of capitalizing on employee self-organization and self-control as prerequisites for functional flexibility (e.g., Mills, 1985; Pongratz & Voß,

2005). These developments have changed the nature of work, employment relationships, and career paths substantially. Empirical results on the impact of flexible work on employees, however, draw an ambiguous picture (e.g., Höge & Hornung, 2015). Some aspects may offer opportunities for personal initiative and self-actualization, thus contributing to employee well-being. Overall, however, benefits seem outweighed by negative consequences, such as work-intensification, job insecurity, and blurred boundaries between work and private life. Hence, the paradigm of flexibility opens up a Pandora's Box of tensions and paradoxes for employees in contemporary organizations (Gouliquer, 2000).

The main objective of this paper is to draw attention to psychological consequences of tensions and paradoxes of flexible work in terms of work design and

employee health at work. From the perspective of work design, grounded in action regulation theory (Hacker, 2005), we will argue, that organizational tensions and paradoxes – if not resolved at the top management level – will translate into role conflicts and contradictory work demands for employees and supervisors. Such contradictory working conditions at the organizational level will manifest at the individual level in terms of impaired action-regulation, self-hazardous work behavior and adverse health effects, associated with outcomes like absenteeism and performance reduction in the longer term. We will shed light on the „paradox role“ of supervisors, responsible to manage employee performance and health in an „ambidextrous“ way. We will argue that supervisors need organizational support to manage such tensions successfully. To be specific, idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) are proposed as suitable instruments to improve fit between individual needs and aspirations (e.g., family, recovery, development) and organizational demands and conditions (e.g., work load, work organization, social relationships). Thus, the present study seeks to advance the stream of research on organizational tensions and paradoxes as potential sources of work stress from a psychological point of view.

Tensions and paradoxes in organizations

The emerging perspective on tensions and paradoxes in human resource management (Aust, Brandl & Keegan, 2015) signifies growing awareness of the contradictory demands and ambiguities organizations are confronted with, and in turn, impose on their members. The work of Putnam, Myers and Gailliard (2014) has examined tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes in the workplace. Accordingly, organizational *tensions* result from opposite concepts or behaviors (e.g., integration vs. differentiation; stability vs. change; Seo, Putnam & Bartunek, 2004). *Contradictions* occur when these opposites are mutually exclusive or each negates the other (Tracy, 2004). Recurring contradictions lead to *paradoxes*, when (inter-)actions to manage tensions result in the opposite of what was intended (Putnam et al., 2014), e.g., flextime arrangements to enhance life domain balance make employees work longer and harder. From the employee (and supervisor) perspective, paradoxes thus are experienced as being trapped in a double-bind situation, where action regulation is impaired due to high role conflict and ambiguity (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964; Hornung, Lampert & Glaser, 2016). In their synthesis of the literature, Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 387) define *paradox* as „contradictory yet interrelated elements (dualities) that exist simultaneously and persist over time“. Research on organizational paradoxes acknowl-

edges that competing goals and interests, trade-offs between desirable (or undesirable) outcomes, and inconsistencies or ambiguity in organizational practices are inherent features of organizing in complex and dynamic environments – rather than regrettable shortcomings, isolated cases of malpractice, or symptoms of mismanagement (e.g., Jarzabkowski, Lê & van de Ven, 2015). Accordingly, a core task of management is responding to „inevitable“ tensions and dualities in ways that embrace and reconcile underlying contradictory tendencies. Research on paradoxes and tensions has focused on challenges for organizations and those in charge of organizing. However, contradictory messages conveyed by inconsistent or incongruous organizational practices may turn employees and supervisors into victims of ambiguity (e.g., Tracy, 2004).

Subsuming organizational tensions and contradictions, Smith and Lewis (2011) have suggested a system of organizational paradoxes within and between the four domains of *performing*, *organizing*, *belonging*, and *learning* to integrate previous categorizations of tensions and contradictions in contemporary organizations. Accordingly, *performing paradoxes* at the organizational level arise from tensions between multiple and partly incompatible institutional goals. A prime example for this type of paradox is the conflict between objectives of short-term economic profitability and longer-term social and environmental responsibility. *Organizing paradoxes* refer to the processes implemented to achieve organizational goals. Competing ways of organizing complex work systems give rise to conflicts or problems of misalignment among management practices fostering collaboration or competition, empowerment or control, flexibility or standardization, etc. *Belonging paradoxes* stem from tensions of identity, emanating from the tendency of individuals and groups to seek both social cohesion and distinction, resulting in conflicting work roles, values, and goals within and among different groups of employees, such as rank-and-file workers, management, and board members. *Learning paradoxes* are attributed to the need for organizations to continuously adapt, improve, and innovate their structures, processes and products. The imperative of change necessitates not only continuous assimilation of new knowledge and competencies for the development of future organizational capabilities, but also overcoming the status quo, and abandoning the ways in which the organization has operated in the past. In addition to these four main categories, paradoxes can also manifest in contradictory tendencies *across* the distinguished domains. For example, *Performing/belonging paradoxes* might result from the different evaluation and prioritization of organizational goals by various groups of stakeholders (e.g., shareholder value and worker health). Overall, the importance of this conceptual contribution for

Table 1: Translation of organizational paradoxes (Smith & Lewis, 2011) to the individual level.

Organizational Level	Performing	Organizing	Belonging	Learning
	Competing organizational time horizons (e.g., economic performance vs. employee health)	Contradictory effects of management and HR practices (e.g., corrosion effect of flexibility)	Competing values, identities and roles of stakeholders (e.g., labor-management conflict)	Stabilizing past achievements and innovating for future (e.g., incremental vs. radical change)
Individual Level	Performing	Organizing	Belonging	Learning
	Autonomy-control paradox (e.g., self-hazardous work behavior vs. recovery)	Experience of role conflicts at work (e.g., contradictory work demands)	Conflicts between life domains and work vs. non-work roles (e.g., work-family conflict)	Conflicts between demands for learning and consolidation (e.g., resistance to change)

a more systematic study of organizational paradoxes notwithstanding, the suggested categorization of paradoxes is at a rather high level of abstraction, leaving considerable room for interpretation. Table 1 shows examples of our attempts to „translate“ abstract notions of organizational paradoxes to the more concrete level of the work experience of individual employees. Against this backdrop of a preliminary allocation of individual-level topics to the major organizational paradoxes described by Smith and Lewis (2011), we will next review some suggested approaches and strategies to manage organizational tensions and paradoxes, particularly directing our attention to the ambivalent roles of lower-level management and line-supervisors.

Organizational attempts to manage tensions and paradoxes

The most comprehensive review of approaches and strategies to manage organizational tensions, so far, has been presented by Putnam et al. (2014). According to these authors, the first and typically preferred (although not necessarily functional) approach is *selection*, where one pole is favored, while the opposite (the other „side“ of the problem) is ignored. In contrast, *separation* (vacillation) means shifting back and forth between the poles at different times, in different locations or situations (Poole & van de Ven, 1989). Going further, *integration* forces a trade-off between the two poles through a middle-of-the-road approach. Putnam et al. (2014) argue that these common „problem-solving“ approaches actually increase the likelihood that the burden of the respective paradoxes is reallocated (externalized or internalized, depending on the perspective) from the organization to its employees, putting them in ambiguous double-bind situations without viable choices. Instead, it has been suggested that new relationships between opposites can be found to transcend dualities by analyzing a reformulated whole

(*reframing*) or holding opposites against each other, attributing them equal legitimacy (*continual connection*) and seeking energy from the ensuing dynamic tensions. Specifically, these approaches have been proposed as two additional, more fruitful paths to manage organizational tensions without reinforcing contradictions (Seo et al., 2004). However, while reframing and continual connection may help to avoid increasing organizational tensions and/or to make it easier for employees to endure the associated contradictions, these strategies hardly resolve the underlying problems.

Most recently, *paradox mindset* was suggested as a „key to unlock the potential of organizational tensions“ and defined as „the extent to which one is accepting of and energized by tensions“ (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith & Lewis, 2018, p. 26). Indeed newer studies show that resource scarcity predicts experienced tensions, which decrease in-role performance. Higher paradox mindset values (embracing, accepting, and feeling comfortable with contradictions) were shown to buffer the negative relationships between resource scarcity and performance. Thus, a pronounced paradox mindset may be helpful to cope with resource scarcities. However, from our condition-oriented view, such a subjective mindset is unlikely to resolve objective underlying contradictions between goals and resources.

Similarly, drawing upon paradox theory, Bledow, Frese, Anderson, Erez and Farr (2009) provided the concept of *ambidextrous leadership* as a new approach to manage conflicting demands and to support innovation in organizations. Ambidextrous leadership refers to the challenge to be aware of the dynamic nature of task demands and to switch between different mind and action sets (Bledow et al., 2009). The flexible switching between modes of exploration and exploitation, i.e. „opening and closing leader behaviors“ as the situation requires, is „not organized sequentially, but rather complex and unpredictably“ (Rosing, Frese & Bausch, 2011, p. 968). However, continuous

monitoring of relevant information indicating the need to switch between different (opposing) leadership behaviors, might be overtaxing for supervisors – leaving plenty of room for gut decisions. Such spontaneous, seemingly contradictory leadership behavior, in turn, can also be a source of role ambiguities and conflicts for employees.

Ambidextrous leadership is an example for a separation approach (Poole & van de Ven, 1989) in the context of leadership and innovation. As already mentioned, this approach to managing organizational tensions holds a high risk to make paradoxes more pronounced or manifest (Putnam et al., 2014) by creating additional behavioral double binds for employees. With respect to flexible work systems, such double binds might imply taking responsibility for one's own life-domain balance but also meeting performance expectations under conditions of resource scarcity and unrealistic goals. The underlying „autonomy-control paradox“ (Evans, Kunda & Barley, 2004; Putnam et al., 2014) may lead employees to „voluntarily“ work longer and harder, eventually, orienting their whole life and identity according to job requirements – a phenomenon described as a psychologically corrosive effect of flexible work (Sennett, 1998). Such new forms of „self-exploitative“ flexible work are characterized by partly self-imposed work intensification and extensification (Allvin et al., 2011; Höge & Hornung, 2013; Michel, 2011). Increasing prevalence and incidence of psycho-mental disorders, like burnout and depression (Eurofound, 2010; Wittchen et al., 2011), are indicators for the transformation of the „autonomy-control paradox“ into a „performance-health paradox“ within the logic of flexible work systems.

The „performance health paradox“

We have argued that a central paradox of flexible work systems concerns tensions between performance-oriented vs. health-oriented management practices (e.g., Kashefi, 2009). As psychosocial job characteristics are important predictors of illness, employee health has to be seen as partly a function of work and organizational design (e.g., Lawson, Noblet & Rodwell, 2009). Adverse working conditions in terms of high job demands (e.g., work overload) and low resources (e.g., lack of job control), high effort (e.g., excessive work hours) and low rewards (e.g., low recognition), or organizational mistreatment and injustice have been established in prospective studies as risk factors for developing cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, and depression (Kivimäki et al., 2012; Lang, Ochsmann, Kraus & Lang, 2012; Nieuwenhuijsen, Bruinvels & Frings-Dresen, 2010). Health-oriented management systems recognize employee well-being

as a legitimate independent goal in its own right, as well as a way to ensure sustainable organizational performance, for example, by providing sufficient buffers, latitudes, and resources to employees to ensure stress-free action regulation and adequate recovery from work (e.g., Chu et al., 2000). The paradox of workplace health-promotion is the aspiration to design human-centered organizations in a profit-centered environment. Trade-offs between economic performance and employee health most commonly manifest in work intensification, that is, constantly increasing quantitative workload, implemented through various forms of performance-driven rationalization (e.g., increasing performance standards or extending tasks and responsibilities; Allan, O'Donnell & Peetz, 1999; Burchell, Lapido & Wilkinson, 2002). More radical displays of rationalization are observable in events or phases of organizational downsizing, mergers and acquisitions, outsourcing, and related forms of corporate restructuring (e.g., Burke & Cooper, 2000).

In contrast to economic performance goals, which often are treated as self-evident and beyond questioning, health-oriented objectives of work system design typically require more justification (e.g., Chu et al., 2000). Driven by demographic changes in developed economies, the design of work systems that support (or at least do not impair) the health and work ability of ageing workforces has become a pressing problem. The tried-and-tested strategy of organizations to externalize the costs of work-related illnesses to social welfare systems by hiring young and healthy workers to replace those with weaker performance dispositions, is bound to prove unsustainable for an increasing range of qualified professions (e.g., Allan et al., 1999). Health and work-life-balance issues are increasingly important factors for the ability of organizations to attract and retain a qualified workforce. In particular, younger and well-qualified job applicants from the generation of the so-called „digital natives“ are looking for a good, if not a great place to work (e.g., Ng, Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). Occupational health-promotion thus becomes an integral aspect of „employer branding“ and corporate social responsibility. Organizations are not only morally, but legally obligated to maintain health and work ability of employees (e.g., Chu et al., 2000). Despite broad-based tendencies towards deregulation of labor and employment laws, legislation passed in German-speaking countries has strengthened employer responsibilities for employee health by requiring a mandatory assessment of hazards and risks arising from physical and psychosocial working conditions.

The performance health paradox manifests at an individual level in contradictory goals related to performance and goal achievement versus need for recovery to protect personal health and opportunities

to pursue non-work interests. Conflicts between work and family roles, reduced psychological detachment from work, and recovery problems are widely discussed in current psychological research (e.g., Byron, 2005; Sonnentag, 2003). For example, the positive relationship between work-home interference and burnout is stronger for intensive smartphone users (Derks & Bakker, 2012). Off-the-job recovery is precondition for recuperation of energy and relief of negative strain reactions. Excessive job demands may inhibit recovery experiences in the longer-term (Kinnunen & Feldt, 2013). Employee-oriented forms of flexible HRM practices have been advocated as self-determined employee control over work activities, working hours, and work location in order to create supportive conditions for work performance, to facilitate balance between life domains, and to reduce psychologically stressful work-family conflicts (e.g., Shockley & Allen, 2007). The beneficial effects of increased self-determination and autonomous regulation of work activities notwithstanding (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1987), these advantages run a risk of being compromised or outpaced by the emerging „boundarylessness“ of work, including requirements to work at any time and any place (e.g., Allvin et al., 2011). Little attention in organizational behavior research is given to the fact that not only demanding job characteristics, but likewise self-initiated performance-related behavior of employees can be a source of conflicts and job stress (Bergeron, 2007). For instance, organizationally desirable forms of contextual performance or organizational citizenship behavior (e.g., supporting the organization through extra work or helping coworkers) have been shown to relate positively to experienced strain and work-family conflict (Bolino & Turnley, 2005). Proactive performance concepts, such as personal initiative and taking charge, require psychological resources and efforts and thus imply risks and costs for the focal employee (Grant & Ashford, 2008; McAllister, Kamdar, Wolfe Morrison & Turban, 2007). Thus, broader job demands and normative influences may result in self-hazardous work behavior by employees in response to organizational flexibility requirements (Höge & Hornung, 2013).

Organizational tensions and paradoxes through the lens of work design

So far, we examined organizational tensions and paradoxes at an organizational level and – in terms of a performance-health paradox – discussed negative consequences for both individual performance and health. Further, adopting a multi-level approach to organizational diagnosis (Büssing, 1992), specific working tasks and conditions can be identified, which mediate the translation of organizational characteristics (like

tensions and paradoxes) onto the individual action. Functional action regulation of work tasks is driven by goals, processed in a hierarchical-sequential way, supported by organizational rules and resources (Hacker, 2003). In a *taxonomy of contradictory work demands*, Moldaschl (2005) proposed a differentiated analysis of possible dysfunctions of action regulation in terms of contradictions between *goals*, *rules*, and *resources* at work. Different goals, e.g., divergent performance standards, might lead to the common „quality-quantity dilemma“. Contradictions between goals and resources can manifest in staff shortages, overtime work, or overtaxing tasks (e.g., new technology without adequate qualification). Contradictions between goals and rules might necessitate rule violations or risky behavior in trying to fulfill tasks without the necessary authority to do so. Contradictions between rules and resources are quite common symptoms of resource scarcity and work intensification. Vivid examples for these conjectures can be found in the daily conflicts of nurses in modern profit-driven nursing homes to either fulfill societal rules of adequate human interaction with patients or the predetermined work functions per hour.

The mentioned taxonomy of contradictory work demands (Moldaschl, 2005) was developed against the background of two concepts of action regulation theory – regulation requirements and regulation problems at work (Leitner, Lüders, Greiner, Ducki, Niedermeier & Volpert, 1993). Regulation requirements address alternating work demands as options to enhance personality development. Regulation problems subsume contradictions between work goals and working conditions, e.g., work interruptions, informational or motoric impediments, leading to additional or enhanced effort or risky work behavior (Greiner, Ragland, Krause, Syme & Fisher, 1997). By adding contradictions between goals, rules, and resources, Moldaschl (2005) has extended the approach of regulation problems and inspired work analysis approaches to include contradictory demands at work. For instance, an entire section of the work analysis instrument for hospitals (Büssing & Glaser, 2002) is grounded in this taxonomy, examining contradictory work demands in nursing in terms of work overload, contradictory goals, work interruptions, additional effort, etc. Detrimental effects of contradictory work demands on psycho-mental health of nurses have been widely substantiated (e.g., Büssing & Glaser, 2000; Glaser & Büssing, 1996). In addition to contradictory demands at work, learning demands (e.g., task variety, cognitive demands) and work-related resources (e.g., autonomy, social support) have been established as predictors of intrinsic motivation and creativity at work. Further, work-related resources buffer adverse effects of job stressors on employee health (e.g., Glaser, Seubert, Hornung & Herbig, 2015).

Through this work psychological lens, separation and ambidexterity to manage organizational tensions and paradoxes are bound to impair employee health and performance, manifesting role conflicts and contradictory demands at the task level in the daily work activities of supervisors and employees. As a way to cope with contradictory work demands, paradox theory promotes the approach of *acceptance*. However, reviewing research on paradoxes and tensions in organizations, Hargrave and van de Ven (2017) integrated the approaches to manage tensions advocated by paradox theory with approaches from dialectic theory into a typology and process model. They differentiate between acceptance (paradox theory) and resistance approaches (dialectic theory) and include mutual adjustment and conflict (dialectic theory) as additional and more problem-focused strategies beyond synergy or assimilation (paradox theory). Out of those, mutual adjustment by bargaining for diverging interests offers the most promising approach to avoid or reduce conflict. In contrast, organizational tensions that are managed by strategies preferring one pole of a duality (e.g., performance vs. health), likely lead to contradictory work demands, resource scarcity and health impairment, and, eventually and paradoxically, to performance losses for the organization. Neither a paradoxical mindset and acceptance nor ambidextrous leadership address the underlying contradictory demands and their detrimental consequences. Agreeing with the need for dialectic approaches to manage tensions and paradoxes in organizations, we put forward the suggestion that, in analogy to processes of collective bargaining at the organizational or societal level, idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) can be used to reconcile

or reduce conflicting interests in employment at the individual level.

Figure 1 shows our preliminary integration of the individual mindsets and associated strategies proposed by paradox theory and dialectic theory (see Hargraves & van de Ven, 2017), integrated with the action-regulation-based taxonomy of stressful demands as contradictions between goals, rules, and resources proposed (Moldaschl, 2005). From a multi-level perspective on organizations (Büssing, 1992; Rousseau, 1985; van de Ven & Ferry, 1980) downward cascading processes reproducing and translating organizational tensions and paradoxes from the organizational level via the task level into psychological consequences at the individual level are assumed. We argue that adopting a paradox mindset and related strategies (synergy, assimilation) does not alleviate, but, instead, likely increase performance-health paradoxes, as associated psychological processes of introjection and self-exploitation are detrimental to occupational health and performance in the longer run. Instead, we suggest that interpersonal negotiation can potentially offer a dialectic approach to balance divergent interests at the individual level. As a form of individual bargaining i-deals might be a way to transcend self-exploitation and overcome stagnation or resignation by balancing divergent interests, making the work experience more personally tolerable, enjoyable or rewarding. For instance, the manifestation of organizational tensions and paradoxes at the individual level may be reduced or resolved by agreements to change individual goals, rules, and/or resources. Ideally, i-deals are amendments supplementing a protective general framework of labor laws, institutions, and collective agreements, historically

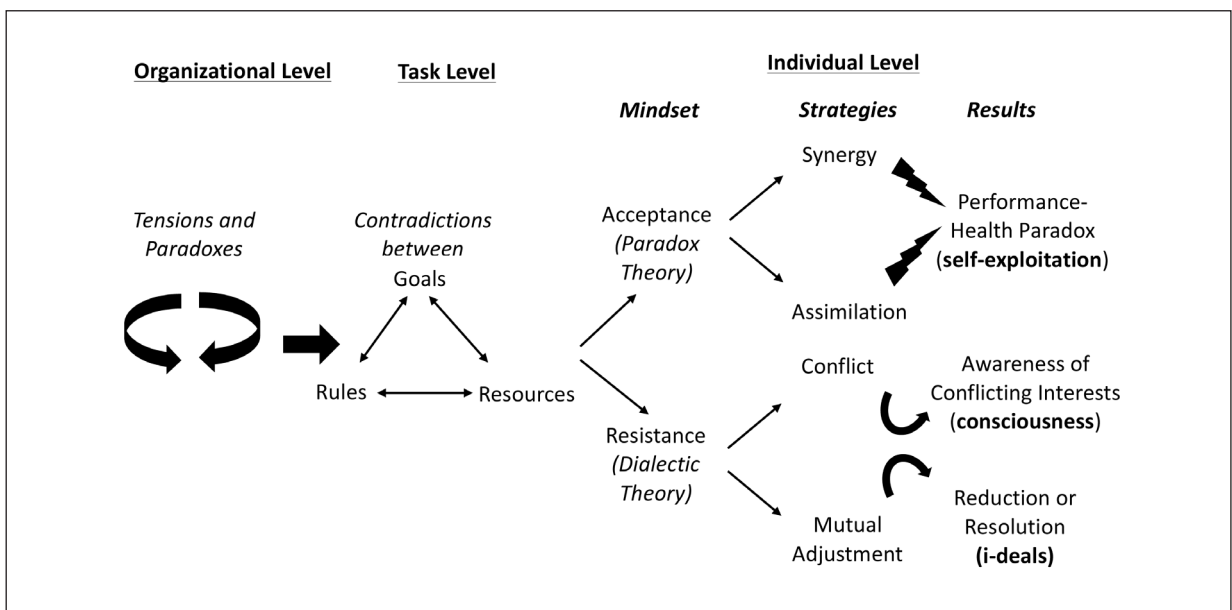


Figure 1: Suggested role of idiosyncratic deals in managing organizational tensions and paradoxes (adapted from Hargrave & van de Ven, 2017).

established in a dialectic process through strategies of conflict escalation and resolution through solidarity and collective action. However, we call critical attention to new paradoxes arising from the contemporary „Subjectification“ of industrial relations, whereby processes on the collective level are not complemented or reflected but rather ideologically redefined and projected or displaced at the individual level. A further advantage of the perspective of dialectic theory is that it raises awareness among employees for underlying conflicts of interests in employment and consciousness regarding new mechanisms of rationalization und HR utilization.

Idiosyncratic deals to reconcile or reduce conflicting interests

Idiosyncratic deals (i-deals), established by Rousseau (2005), are voluntary, personalized agreements negotiated between individual employees and their employers regarding terms that benefit each party. To operationalize the definitional feature voluntariness and mutual consent, research has focused on personalized arrangements where the initiative to seek out special terms is taken by individual employees and authorization is granted by supervisors or HR managers acting as legitimate representatives (or agents) of the employing organization (Hornung, Rousseau & Glaser, 2009). I-deals are instruments of employee-oriented management, suitable to accommodate both organizational and worker interests in flexible HRM (Rousseau, Ho & Greenberg, 2006). As employees place a different value on certain conditions of their work (e.g., work schedule, location, job content, and career paths), i-deals involve not fixed-pie transactions, but rather a more need-efficient allocation of resources, based on the customization of job features according to diverse personal dispositions and preferences. Empirical research (e.g., Hornung, Rousseau & Glaser, 2008) has focused on two forms of personalized work arrangements: *Developmental i-deals* refer to customized opportunities to develop skills and learning as well as career opportunities (e.g., special work tasks and responsibilities); *flexibility i-deals* allow for a customized scheduling of work (e.g., start and ending of the workday). I-deals are dialectical in the sense that these arrangements highlight central tensions between organizational and employee interests and goals (Rousseau, 2005). Individual negotiation of personalized features in work and employment conditions create a synthesis or reconciliation of these tensions and can be analyzed on different levels, depending on the focus on the overall organization as a socio-technical system, the workforce as a collective entity, the level of supervisors or management, or the level of individual workers (Rousseau, 2005).

I-deals offer a way for employees to obtain work-related resources not available to them through standard HR practices (e.g., support to develop specialized skills or opportunities to do work from home). Successfully negotiated developmental i-deals, such as learning support and customized work tasks have been shown to be associated with higher work motivation, affective commitment, and increased job performance, whereas successful negotiation of flexibility i-deals improve work-life balance of employees (Hornung et al., 2008, 2009). However, paradoxical tensions might exist between associated goals of development vs. balancing life domains: Development arrangements typically imply higher investments on the side of the individual employee, such as additional time, effort, and engagement; flexibility i-deals, on the other hand, reduce the dependence on temporal organizational working patterns and resulting working time-related demands. Thus, through the combination of development and flexibility i-deals, workers may be able to balance their level of involvement in the work domain according to their personal needs and preferences (Hornung et al., 2008). Such a personal equilibrium strategy, however, may be disrupted when employee requests for special arrangements are turned down by employers, resulting in negative affective responses and impaired well-being (Hornung, Glaser & Rousseau, 2010). Although research has shown that successful negotiation of i-deals is associated with positive employee responses, personalized work arrangements also imply the risk of increasing interpersonal tensions among employees, in particular if organizational settings emphasize competition for limited resources, rather than cooperation and solidarity among employees (Hornung, et al., 2010; Lai, Rousseau & Chang, 2009).

Supervisors and HR managers play a central role in the negotiation of i-deals, as they typically act as bargaining partners for other employees seeking out customized work and employment conditions (Hornung et al., 2009; Rosen, Slater, Chang & Johnson, 2015). Managers are assumed to act as honest agents of the employer to ensure that personalized arrangements are functional and beneficial for all involved parties (Rousseau et al., 2006). In authorizing i-deals they have to balance organizational interests (e.g., developing skills or retaining valued employees) and requests of employees (e.g., special tasks or working time arrangements). Simultaneously, they have to ensure that negotiated deals are manageable and do not disadvantage or relatively deprive other colleagues (Greenberg, Roberge, Ho & Rousseau, 2004; Lai et al., 2009). The construct of i-deals highlights a positional role conflict of supervisors and lower level managers as agents and brokers of both organizational and employee interests. Considerations regarding procedural and distributive justice as well as interactional justice are among the

demands that the negotiation of i-deals imposes on supervisors and managers. Authorizing deviations from normally applicable practices, policies, or regulations in the broader interest of the organization puts supervisors into a paradox position. Uncertainty regarding authority to negotiate and approve non-standard conditions and/or ambiguity concerning organizational endorsement or sanctioning of such arrangements are likely to make individual negotiations with employees a stressful experience for supervisors (Rousseau, 2005). Offloading associated responsibilities to supervisors without matching supportive resources is bound to yield undesirable results, depending on leadership abilities of managers and work relationships within respective organizational units. Thus, implementing i-deals as a management practice may also lead to work intensification and increased role conflict at the supervisor level. Organizational initiatives to promote health-oriented leadership (e.g., Wegge, Shemla & Haslam, 2014) need support by supervisors, who are confronted with the somewhat paradox task of taking responsibility not only for work performance, but also the health of employees. Meeting expectations of higher-level management in terms of attaining performance goals thus can undermine the designated function of supervisors to protect team members against insufficient detachment and recovery from work, job stress, burnout, and other forms of work-related illness.

Discussion

A main objective of this paper was to outline research on flexibility-related psychological tensions against the backdrop of paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011). We have expanded the perspective of paradox theory by focusing at the level of individual workers and supervisors. Against the background of tensions between performance and health, we have argued that high-performance work systems and occupational health management represent partly diverging organizational goals, focusing either on maximization of economic returns or development of the workforce including employee well-being (e.g., Chu et al., 2000). The decisive duality involves a performance-health paradox, which can be framed as tensions between short-term economic gains (e.g., cost-cutting and rationalization) and longer-term returns of investments into a sustainable HRM system (e.g., capacity building and health-promotion). At the individual level, this paradox is reflected in contradictory work demands (e.g., goal achievement vs. recovery from work strain). Supervisors, in particular, have to behave as agents of shareholder interests, and simultaneously act as representatives of their team and as advocates of employee concerns.

They play a vital role in „managing“ paradoxes based on own positional role, decision-authority, available resources, but also in accordance with own personal values, aspirations, and abilities. Tensions arising from conflicting demands to represent both organizational and employee goals and interests, however, hold the risk of turning supervisors and HRM managers into victims of structural ambiguity and conflicts, who can satisfy neither one nor the other side (Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014).

Expected to act as role models for healthy and effective work behavior, supervisors are important agents in the design of psychosocial work characteristics (e.g., learning demands, task and social resources, lack of job stressors). They have to manage tensions between imposing additional demands and providing support to employees (e.g., Renwick, 2003). This includes attentiveness to motivational states, protection from work overload and health impairment, and reintegration of team members returning from sickness absence. Supervisors may be able to resolve this paradox through stimulating work engagement and sustainable performance of employees by contributing to physically and psychologically healthy working conditions, including suitable learning demands (e.g., task variety and complexity) and work-related resources like job autonomy and social support (Glaser et al., 2015). However, the complexity of people management tasks is aggravated by contextual influences, such as ageing workforces, generational change of work-related attitudes and values (e.g., Protestant work ethic vs. leisure-orientation), and increasing importance of psychosocial factors for employee health and productivity (e.g., absenteeism and turnover). Considering this truly Herculean task, supervisors need all the support they can get from management and HR departments to be able to cope with such role conflicts and ubiquitous contradictory demands. Specifically, lower subordinate-to-manager ratios, additional time and opportunity to communicate with team members, more systematic qualification and training (e.g., knowledge on psychosocial work characteristics and employee health), or less ambitious performance goals may allow balancing organizational and employee-centered concerns.

Fundamental tensions in personalized work arrangements relate to questions regarding scope, range, and scale of employment features that are (or should be) subject to individual negotiation. The construct of idiosyncratic deals (i-deals) relies on the optimistic assumption that tensions can be reconciled or at least better aligned through processes of individual negotiation (Greenberg et al., 2004; Rousseau et al., 2006). Prerequisites for realizing positive potentials of more customized jobs and human-centered organizations, however, are high standards regarding the over-

all quality of working conditions and employment relationships. Research on i-deals suggests that beneficial effects of personalized work arrangements are most pronounced when negotiations are embedded in a network of high quality relationships among workers, between employees and their supervisors, as well as between individuals and the organization as a whole (Lai, Rousseau & Chang, 2009; Rosen et al., 2013).

Central themes of Marxist critiques of capitalism and its institutions have identified inner contradictions and antagonisms (e.g., the tendency of the profit rate to decline with rising capital investments) as drivers of the development and periodic destruction of productive forces in recurring phases of accumulation and crisis (e.g., Adler, 1990). Pointing out this parallel directs attention to effects of organizational paradoxes on workers, which has been the main theme of this paper. Anchoring an explicitly employee-oriented perspective in the paradox literature seems particularly important as, according to the social critique of the political economy, workers as stakeholders are disadvantaged and most negatively affected by contradictions characterizing profit-oriented work organizations in competitive markets (e.g., Gouliquer, 2000; Kalleberg, 2005). Drawing on similar assumptions, critical streams in organizational research have long maintained that employers deliberately subject workers to uncertainty and conflicting demands (e.g., job insecurity and unrealistic performance goals) as a form of labor utilization to increase economic profitability (e.g., Allan et al., 1999). The criticism formulated in these more radical conceptions of organizational paradoxes is, to some extent, echoed by mainstream research on work stress, which has identified conflicting demands as important sources of job strain (e.g., Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Approaches of acceptance to manage such tensions and contradictions, which have been suggested by paradox theory in terms of synergy and assimilation (Smith & Lewis, 2011), ambidextrous leadership (Rosing et al., 2011) or paradox mindset (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018) are bound to fall short in the longer term. Further dialectic approaches like bargaining and conflict (Hargrave & van de Ven, 2017) are needed to reduce or resolve underlying conflicts of interests, instead of obscuring or „normalizing“ the underlying contradictions through logics of neoliberal ideology (Bal & Doci, 2018).

I-deals bargained between supervisors and employees offer promising approaches to balance diverging interests and resolve contradictory demands due to underlying tensions and paradoxes. Nonetheless, it would be overly simplistic to advocate i-deals as a universal solution to the tensions and contradictions employees are exposed to in contemporary organizations. In particular, it should not be forgotten that individual negotiation of work and employment features involves

a number of paradoxes, which require close attention if the potentially beneficial effects of i-deals as a management practice are not to be undermined by negative side-effects (e.g., relative deprivation and social tensions among colleagues). What remains decisive is the spirit in which such arrangements are made. Few if any positive stimuli may be expected from deals that are based predominantly on a market-logic. Arrangements that are made in good-faith to accommodate the specific needs and situation of individual employees, however, may provide an impetus towards more human-oriented organizations.

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