

Practical Steps for Conceptualizing Paradoxes: Strengths, Limitations and New Directions

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ABSTRACT

Though we appear to be living in an age of paradox (Handy, 1994; Farson, 1996; Farson & Keyes, 2002), it remains difficult to conceptualize these seemingly contradictory yet interrelated constructs (Lewis, 2000). In an article forthcoming in the November, 2004 issue of the journal, *Human Relations*, Ofori-Dankwa & Julian proposed a novel way (based on diversity and similarity curves notion) for scholars to conceptualize social science paradoxes. The approach could also be used by managers and professors as a pedagogical tool for explaining paradox. They used the work/play and theory novelty/continuity paradoxes to illustrate. This paper builds on the above and spells out the seven practical steps for developing paradox curves

Though we appear to be living in an age of paradox (Handy, 1994; Farson, 1996; Farson & Keyes, 2002), it remains difficult to conceptualize these seemingly contradictory yet interrelated constructs (Lewis, 2000). There are several reasons why it is important to be able to effectively conceptualize paradoxical phenomena and situations. First, researchers need conceptual tools to assist in theory building about paradox. Managers also need practical tools that enable them to comprehend and better manage these emerging contradictions. Finally college instructors and students need visual frameworks to help them better describe and more fully understand the implications of paradoxical situations.

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Practical Steps in Constructing Paradox Curves

We have used the two paradoxes of work/play and novelty/continuity to illustrate the efficacy of the DSC curves model in conceptualizing paradoxical situations in the social sciences. In this section we describe suggested steps that scholars interested in constructing paradox curves could take.

Step One: Decide on the Paradox to Conceptualize

Initially, the researcher must decide on which paradoxical situation to investigate

and conceptualize. Without a doubt, there exist numerous paradoxes in the social sciences. For example, Lewis (2000) describes several paradoxical situations associated with globalization, innovation and sense-making. Ofori-Dankwa and Julian (2003) also suggest that the model could be used to capture other potential paradoxes such as: the co-existence of local and global considerations in structuring multinational corporations (Phatak, 1994); chaordicity in the competitive strategies of organizations (Hock, 1999) and the co-existence of family and work influences on individual's level of job satisfaction and productivity (White, 1999; Clark, 2000).

Step Two: Decide on Relevant Paradox Outcomes

Associated with any particular paradox are several potential outcomes. The DSC model permits the examination of two of these. Consequently, the second step is to decide on the two relevant outcomes that are to be associated with the paradox.

In selecting the two relevant outcomes, three criteria must be borne in mind. First, the researcher must make sure that the chosen outcomes are tied to and derived from the relevant literature. The researcher must therefore immerse himself/herself in the literature associated with the paradox that is being conceptualized and generate several potential outcomes that are associated with the paradox. Second, the researcher must assess pairs of outcomes they have generated for the exhibition of tension between them, irrespective of the paradox itself. For example, there is a tension between job stress and creativity. Too much or too little job stress does not generate creativity. The researcher must therefore winnow out pairs of outcomes that do not have such a tension between them. Third, the researcher must use disciplined imagination (Weick, 1989; Weick, 2002) to narrow down the list of potential outcomes to those two that are clearly most important

in understanding the paradox and that also will make the most sense when used.

Step Three: Decide on Y-axis and X-axis

The third step is to decide which outcome will be on the Y-axis and which will be on the X-axis. In reflecting paradox, however, it is important that very high and very low levels associated with the outcome selected for the Y-axis should be seen as logically associated with very low levels of the outcome that is selected for the X-axis. This relationship between the two outcomes should be independent of the particular paradox being explored.

Step Four: Check on the Logic of Upward and Downward Sloping Curves

Once the outcomes that go on the X- and Y-axes are decided, the next step is to decide on which of the variables making up the paradox itself will have a downward sloping curve and which will have an upward sloping curve. We can test this by examining the logic of the curves. It is necessary to show that, for both the upward and downward sloping curves, high and low levels associated with the outcome constructs, on the Y-axis correspond to a low level of the outcome construct on the X-axis.

For example, with the work/play paradox, the upper section of the downward sloping work curve was associated with high levels of stress (on the Y-axis) and low levels of creativity (on the X-axis). At the same time on the lower section of the work curve low levels of job stress (on the Y-axis) was associated with low levels of creativity (on the X-axis).

Step Five: Identify Shift Factors Associated with the Curves

The next step is to identify the factors or conditions that will cause both the upward and downward sloping curves to shift inward and outward. For example, with the

work/play paradox we identified factors such as changes in federal legislation on working conditions and competition intensity as causing the work curve to shift and also identified factors such as changes in formal and informal organization policies as causing the play curve to shift.

Step Six: Check on the Logic of the Shifting Curves

After identifying shift factors, researchers should check the logic of the shifting curves. Researchers must assume that *ceteris paribus*, one curve is held constant to explore the implications of a change in factor/s that cause a shift in the other curve. The logical validity of the resulting shift and its implications on the two paradox outcomes can be examined. For example, with the work/play paradox, researchers can hold the play curve constant and examine the implications of shifting the work curve outwards and inwards to make sure that the implications with respect to the two outcomes (job stress and task creativity) have face validity and are logically consistent.

Step Seven: Undertake an Informed Audience Check

Finally, the nature and implications of the curves can be presented to faculty colleagues, to students during class lectures and to management conferences such as the Academy of Management's Annual Conference to get first hand feedback as to the extent to which the model is understandable, internally consistent and logical, and helps to explain the paradox being conceptualized.

Merits and Limitations of the Current Approach

Future Directions

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