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Solving Paradox by Reducing Expectation

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Abstract

This paper critiques Berti and Simpson's argument that since pragmatic paradoxes are created by power differentials the solution to such paradoxes has to be to redress these power asymmetries. We discuss why their prescription is often impractical and argue that, even in the face of paradoxes created by huge power asymmetries, there is always a solution to paradox to be found in reducing one's expectations. We use the example of how Google dealt with Chinese government's demand for Internet censorship to illustrate our argument.

In attempt to initiate a ‘critical’ shift in the paradox literature, Berti & Simpson (2019) argue that the orthodox theory of organizational paradox has two limitations, namely, a “presupposition that individuals are free and able to choose how to engage with paradoxical tensions” (p. 3) and “insufficient attention given to power and domination effects” (p. 4). In contrast, they claim, the experience of organizational paradox is not power-neutral but shaped by power relations; organizational members are not free to act according to their wills, because “oppressive power conditions restrict the ability for organizational members to make legitimate choices in the face of interdependent contradictions (paradoxes)” (p. 4); and “Powerless stakeholders, not in a position to question the status quo (e.g., employees and customers), accordingly experience helplessness, meaninglessness and paralysis” (p. 22). They posit, the remedies for such “pathological experience of pragmatic paradoxes” (p. 5) are either “attempts to ‘reform’ the system” that can “purposefully be planned and implemented” or “more ‘revolutionary’ transformations that can spontaneously emerge to disrupt the status quo” (p. 30).

While we appreciate and commend Berti and Simpson’s effort to draw our attention to the role of power in organizational paradox, we are not convinced by their central conclusion that since pragmatic paradoxes are created by power differentials, the solution to such paradoxes has to be to redress these power asymmetries. In our view, Berti and Simpson’s prescription is often *impractical* because reforming a system that is characterized by “strong power differentials” (p. 30) is extremely difficult if not impossible. As Berti and Simpson themselves reckon, “if pragmatic paradoxes are part of a domination strategy, deeply seated in systemic forms of power and supported by a large cohort of powerful agents, it is unlikely any attempt to ‘reform’ or mitigate the effect of domination will succeed” (p. 33). The powerful agents actually have recourse to various forms of organizational power (i.e., coercion, manipulation, domination, and subjectification, as Berti and Simpson have

analyzed) to prevent or hinder any unwanted reforms. So, even if such a system reform is something worth fighting for, the likely lengthy process means it should be treated as a long-term goal that is of little help in meeting one's immediate need for dealing with the paradoxical tension. Similarly, the hope for spontaneous disruption to the status quo often seems a longshot.

Berti & Simpson's (2019) solution can be associated with the notion of problem-focused coping with stressful situation in the psychology literature. According to Richard S. Lazarus, one of the most eminent psychologists of the 20th century and a pioneer in the study of stress and emotion, psychological stress is "a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 19); coping is "cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984: 141); and the two main classes of coping strategies are "solving problems and regulating the emotions that these problems bring about", labelled as "problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping" respectively (Lazarus & Lazarus, 2006: 57).

According to Lazarus' theory, a person who adopts problem-focused coping strategies focuses his or her attention on what can be done to change the situation to reduce or eliminate the stress; in contrast, a person who adopts emotion-focused coping strategies makes little or no effort to change the situation and focuses attention on dealing with his or her emotional distress. Lazarus points out that, if it is unlikely to succeed in changing the situation, then emotion-focused coping may be effective in reducing stress. One such emotion-focused coping strategy is positive reappraisal (of the situation). Lazarus argues that, positive reappraisal may be more effective than other emotion-focused coping strategies such as defensive denial, and, if by doing positive reappraisal, "we are truly comfortable rather than

conflicted about the situation, then it could be said that we have found a rational and emotionally helpful solution” (Lazarus & Lazarus, 2006: 57).

In our view, crossing the chasm between focusing on problem solving and positively reappraising the situation necessitates a change of expectation. Changing our expectations may enable us to accept that some problems may not be changed in the short to medium term, or to feel that the problems are not worth bothering about, or even to appreciate that while some ‘problems’ bring individuals inconveniences they may have some positive impacts on society as a whole.

In the context of organizational paradox research, the biggest expectation or desire of many paradox scholars is to design a solution that enables one to achieve or integrate, *at the same time in the same space and to the fullest extent*, both of two things that are often defined as *mutually exclusive*. In our view, contemplating such an omnipotent solution seems to be the search for the ‘holy grail’ because such an expectation is unrealistic. Interestingly, many solutions proposed in the organizational paradox literature are essentially results of expectation reduction by giving up some elements of such an unrealistically high expectation. For example, the ambidexterity approach gives up the expectation for meeting competing demands at the same time or in the same space (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996); the Zhong-Yong balancing approach gives up the expectation for holding both of Yin-Yang opposites to the fullest extent (Li, 2018); and the ‘dynamic equilibrium’ approach proposed by Smith & Lewis (2011: 389) gives up the expectation for integrating opposing forces simultaneously by prescribing “iterating responses of splitting and integration”.

Now, it is not difficult to see the problem of Berti & Simpson’s (2019) assertion that, without redressing the power asymmetry, “sometimes, individuals facing paradoxical demands are left without any legitimate course of action” (p. 3). Our view is, for anyone who

is in a powerless position, he or she might indeed find many situations too thorny to handle, however, there is *always* a solution to paradox to be found in reducing one's expectations. Here, we use Google's dealing with China as an illustration of our argument.

In 2006, two years after it went public in its home country, Google launched its Chinese search engine www.google.cn. In order to gain a foothold in the world's most populous internet market, Google, an information technology (IT) giant with a motto of "Don't be evil", had to agree with the Chinese government to censor the search results shown to Chinese users. While the Chinese government was demanding, Google's global prestige and technological prowess gave it some leverage. For instance, without asking the Chinese government for permission, Google adopted a practice of noticing Chinese users that some results were deleted from the search for censored content on www.google.cn. While the Chinese government hated this practice, it did not order Google to remove it. Although it wasn't popular with the Chinese regulators, such a practice was soon followed by Chinese domestic search engines.

It seems, initially, there was more or less a balance of power between Google and the Chinese government as each side needed the other. However, over time, the rapid development of Chinese economy and domestic IT sector gradually tilted the balance of power toward the Chinese government. In 2009, the Chinese government repeatedly criticized Google for failing to remove pornographic content from its search results. After Google appeared to resist the order to suspend some functions, the Chinese government punished the company, for example, by blocking its global website www.google.com in China. By the end of 2009, Google was caught in, what Berti and Simpson would call, a pathological paradox between the Chinese government's demand for implementing stricter internet censorship and its home country strategic stakeholders' demand for protecting the freedom of expression and information.

On 12 January 2010, Google announced, “We have decided we are no longer willing to continue censoring our results on Google.cn, and so over the next few weeks we will be discussing with the Chinese government the basis on which we could operate an unfiltered search engine within the law, if at all.” What happened afterwards is that the Chinese government did not concede and Google then abandoned its www.google.cn later that year. Commenting on the decision, Google’s then CEO Eric Schmidt said that it’s very important for Google to be in China but it would only operate in China in a way that does not violate Google’s fundamental principles (Boorstin, 2010).

Clearly, in the face of paradox caused by the huge power asymmetry, unlike what Berti and Simpson would predict, Google was not left without any legitimate course of action, instead, Google made a clear-minded choice. When realizing it is an unrealistic expectation to meet contradictory demands from both host and home countries, Google pragmatically reduced its expectation and decided that it was more important to be true to themselves than to expect to dominate China¹.

In 2010, Google’s co-founder Sergey Brin was reported to hope that Google’s decision not to bow to the Chinese government’s censorship demands would help stimulate progress towards a more open internet in China (Beaumont, 2010). And in 2012, the company’s then chairman Eric Schmidt once said “I personally believe that you cannot build a modern knowledge society with that kind of [censorship]” and “In a long enough time period, do I think that this kind of regime approach will end? I think absolutely” (Sheehan, 2018).

However, since 2010 after Google pulled out of China, China’s technology sector, instead of languishing under stringent censorship, has boomed and been rapidly developing, and today China has become a formidable challenger to the US technological leadership (The

¹ We thank Professor Jay Barney for making this point explicit.

Economist, 2020). After missing almost a decade of business opportunities, Google seems to have changed its expectation about the future of the Chinese regime and begun to search for ways back into China.

In conclusion, the reason why Berti & Simpson (2019) prescribe no other solution than to redress power asymmetry might be that they have confined their thinking “within the context of an inescapable relationship, where one ‘is prevented from stepping outside the frame set by [power]’” (p. 3). However, in the business world, there is no *inescapable* relationship and no one is fully prevented from stepping outside the power relations. In fact, it is the individual (victim)’s own choice to stay inside an “oppressive power relations” (p. 19) due to his or her expectation or desire for reaping the potential benefits of being an insider. Ultimately, it is one’s own expectation, and nothing else, that decides whether he or she can step outside a stressful paradoxical situation (cf. Li, 2019).

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