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# LEARNING TO “LIVE THE PARADOX” IN A DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZATION: A DELIBERATIVE APPROACH TO PARADOX MINDSETS

‘It still feels incredibly strange in a democratic organization to be making these decisions primarily by myself’ *Research diary, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016*

Paradox is pervasive within organizational life (Clegg, da Cunha, & Cunha, 2002). Leaders are regularly confronted with a range of situations involving complex and intertwined tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). This, in turn, requires individuals and groups to think through paradoxes, a capacity which has recently been referred to as having a “paradox mindset” (Liu, Xu, & Zhang, 2020; Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018; Sleesman, 2019). There is widespread agreement in the literature that such a mindset involves “working through paradox by exploring conflicting feelings, practices, and perspectives in search of more encompassing understanding ...[t]here is [also] a need to elaborate on what is meant by ‘working through’” (Lewis & Dehler, 2000: 710). Two approaches to ‘working through’ are apparent: individualistic and relational. The dominant individualistic approach examines the “underlying cognitive micro-processes that shape individuals’ thinking and reasoning” (Keller & Sadler-Smith, 2019: 165). It explores how individuals make sense of, and learn through, the paradoxes they experience (Zheng, Kark, & Meister, 2018), focusing on the strategic choices individuals make when confronted with paradox (Smith, 2014), and considering the cognitive and behavioral awareness around these tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Recently attention has focused on the *relational* factors within paradox mindsets (Pamphile, 2021; Sheep, Fairhurst, & Khazanchi, 2017), particularly how paradoxes are made more salient within the collective context (Huq, Reay, & Chreim, 2017; Knight & Paroutis, 2017). Hahn and Knight (2021), argue that paradoxes are simultaneously inherent, existing independent of organizational actors’ *and* socially constructed, and emerge only through

discourse (also see Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Furthermore Pradies, Tunarosa, Lewis, and Courtois (2021: 1244) suggest that “competing demands are deeply intertwined in a social context”, thus highlighting the need for “paradox studies to investigate how contextual conditions may influence management practices” particularly “the role of social processes and shared meanings in the construction of reality”. If paradoxes are latent within a system but come into focus through this interaction, it is important to understand how paradox and paradox mindsets operate at the collective level.

However, despite this move towards a more relational understanding of a paradox mindset, Raisch, Hargrave, and Van De Ven (2018: 1508) suggest further work is required to “unpack the learning processes through which organizational members and collectives build their capacity to understand and cope with complex tensions over time.” This article focuses on understanding these processes. In particular, we wish to draw attention to how individuals draw upon deliberative practices to work through paradox collectively. Such a focus, we argue, can help reveal the social and power relations that constitute organization and so help ‘work through’ paradox more productively. This article seeks to answer two related questions: i) How does a paradox experienced by individuals become more comprehensible within the collective group context? ii) How do deliberative processes in a democratic organization contribute towards ‘working through’ paradox? In answering these questions we explore how a paradox mindset (and the paradoxes being confronted) becomes socialized within a collective over time by way of a structured deliberative process.

Building on existing paradox research (i.e. Knight & Paroutis, 2017; Lewis & Dehler, 2000; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Besharov, 2019) we propose a *deliberative* understanding of paradox mindsets, integrating the individual and relational levels as mutually reinforcing and entwined. We propose a deliberative process model based upon a four year, ethnographic study of a democratic organization, where we grappled with different

paradoxical situations, engaging with deliberative processes that are encouraged and developed through situated learning (Reynolds & Vince, 2004). Our study extended our understanding of how one learns to both live with, and to make use, of paradox (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), including all its uncertainty and doubt (Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012; Vince, 2010; Vince, Abbey, Langenhan, & Bell, 2018).

Our major contribution, therefore, is a deliberative process model of learning through paradox mindsets that integrates individual and relational development with the novel forms of collective deliberation that are a feature of democratic organizations. For the purposes of this article we define democratic organizations as incorporating the key features of collective decision making and governance, whilst upholding the values of equity and individual autonomy within everyday practices and interactions (Parker & Parker, 2017). We have chosen to focus on democratic organizations as these sites offer a particularly salient illustration of the collective deliberative processes underlying paradox mindsets. We present a model of decision-making which foregrounds the central role of emotion, tension and anxiety in learning and how these may be productive, as individuals build confidence in collective deliberative practices. Our model, as we discuss later, suggests novel lines of theoretical enquiry. It also acts as a practical tool in both the analysis the capabilities to think about paradox in organizations and in the design of appropriate deliberative strategies aimed at maximizing the utility of paradox in organizational life. Our model thus encourages individuals to work relationally through paradoxes by way of collective deliberation – encouraging us to think differently about how we approach teaching about “working through” paradox in both an organizational and management education context (Reedy & Learmonth, 2009).

This article proceeds as follows. We begin with a discussion of existing literature on paradox where we evaluate existing scholarship exploring the individualistic and relational

approaches to paradox mindsets. This provides a foundation for our own alternative deliberative approach to paradox mindsets. We discuss how the commitment of democratic organizations to develop inclusive deliberative forms of organizing and learning can contribute new insights to these debates, in particular how we draw on these collective processes to develop paradox mindsets. Next, we present our empirical study including our methodological rationale and a series of illustrative vignettes that represent the richness of our ethnographic data as a set of integrated individual and collective learning processes within democratic organizing. We then present our deliberative model of paradox mindsets derived both from our study and existing paradox theory. In doing so, we show how deliberative democratic processes can be utilized to more effectively engage individually and collectively with paradox, relieving the anxieties and burdens associated with ‘working through’ tensions in organizational life.

### **PARADOX MINDSETS**

Paradoxes are generally understood as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that appear simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 382). Paradox theory thus assumes that paradoxes are non-resolvable tensions (Sheep et al., 2017), inherent throughout organizational life (Clegg et al., 2002), where “organizational actors have no choice but to deal with them” (Knight & Paroutis, 2017: 404). As such paradoxes are persistent, never fully resolvable, and often complex, with multiple paradoxes knotted together (Sheep et al., 2017). Consequently, Lewis argues that individuals need to embrace paradox to make sense of “an increasingly intricate, ambiguous and ever changing world” (2000: 761). Thus, the capacity to recognize, understand and work through co-existing, contradictory forces (Knight & Paroutis, 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) is an essential skill for individual practitioners to thrive within organizations. Avoiding such tensions can be counter-productive, leading to defensiveness, frustration, and conflict (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Vince & Broussine,

1996). Conversely, engaging productively with paradoxes can produce opportunities for creativity, innovation and improved performance (Sleesman, 2019). Learning to work with paradoxes, therefore, is a core organizational skill for practitioners (particularly managers), essential for surviving *and* thriving in the workplace (Liu et al., 2020).

### *An Individualistic Approach to Paradox Mindsets*

Paradox theory tends to focus on the individual's capacity to successfully respond to paradoxical situations which is, dependent on how practitioners think and reason (Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith, 2016). This has recently been captured through the notion of *paradox mindsets* which Miron-Spektor and colleagues define as “the extent to which one is accepting of and energized by tensions [and the extent to which]...individuals [can] leverage them to improve in-role job performance and innovation” (2018: 26). By embracing, rather than rejecting tensions, it is argued that paradox mindsets enable managers to “shift their expectations from rationality and linearity to accept paradoxes as persistent and unsolvable puzzles” (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 385) and to work creatively and productively with tensions towards integrated thinking (Bloodgood & Chae, 2010), unlocking their positive potential (Liu et al., 2020). In doing so, they “transcend their contradictory elements to achieve higher levels of learning and discovery” (Sleesman, 2019: 84), seeing such tensions “as opportunities for synergy, learning and growth” (Keller & Sadler-Smith, 2019: 165).

We recognize the valuable work examining the individual processes of ‘working through’ paradox, capturing the micro-foundations of paradox thinking (see for instance Audebrand, Camus, & Michaud, 2017; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith et al., 2012; Vince et al., 2018). One strand of this work, examines the “underlying cognitive micro-processes that shape individuals’ thinking and reasoning” (Keller & Sadler-Smith, 2019: 165), asking how individuals make sense of the paradoxes they experience (Zheng et al., 2018). Hahn and Knight (2021), for instance, explore how paradoxes can become salient to individuals (Knight

& Hahn, 2020; Knight & Paroutis, 2017), whilst others explore the role of increased cognitive and behavioral awareness (Smith & Lewis, 2011) and the centrality of regulating emotions, including the potentially paralyzing effects of anxiety (Vince & Broussine, 1996).

A central debate here is whether paradox mindsets are fixed traits or can be learnt over time. Much of the literature, as Berti and Simpson (2021) state, sees paradox mindsets as fixed traits, exploring individuals' cognitive abilities enabling them to cope with paradox (Zheng et al., 2018) shaping how individuals experience and react to tensions (Keller, Loewenstein, & Yan, 2017; Liu et al., 2020; Slesman, 2019). Within individualistic accounts, one seems to either have the capacity to work through paradox or not. Less attention has been directed to whether one can learn a paradox mindset and the role that context, and working with others, can play in shaping that learning (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018: 39). This article seeks to focus on this learning process, exploring the extent to which paradox mindsets are emergent states developed with others.

#### *A Relational Approach to Paradox Mindsets*

The above work predominately focusses on paradox mindsets as an individual trait, or individual resource (see for instance Liu et al., 2020), and, as Pamphile argues, “it provides little insight into how contextual factors affect one’s mindset” (2021: 7). Recent contributions, however, have highlighted the relational, socially constructed and socio-material context of paradox thinking (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Pradies et al., 2021). Such perspectives stress how paradoxes surface and are understood socially, through interactions with others (see Huq et al., 2017; Knight & Paroutis, 2017; Lê & Bednarek, 2017; Pamphile, 2021 and Sheep et al., 2017 for examples). For instance Jarzabkowski and Lê (2017) show how humor with others is used to surface and co-construct the paradox and Pamphile (2021: 1) shows how “paradox peers”, work together in “ongoing, cooperative connections to individuals external to one’s organization but facing similar paradoxical challenges”. This

relational approach to paradox mindsets reveals the dialogical learning processes enabling organizational members to cope with change (Smith, 2014).

More broadly, the relational view demonstrates that the processes through which paradoxes are made salient is situational and contextually constrained, informed and shaped by systemic power and the sociomaterial context (Cunha & Putnam, 2019). Berti and Simpson (2021: 253), specifically warn against the ‘dark side of paradox’ highlighting the “oppressive power conditions [that might] restrict the ability for organizational members to make legitimate choices in the face of interdependent contradictions (paradoxes).” They argue that whilst all individuals might be exposed to paradoxical situations, their capacity to formulate responses are constrained due to the social context within which they are embedded. Huq et al. (2017), for instance, demonstrate how higher status individuals are often over-represented in collective decision-making, and so have greater influence in shaping how paradoxes are understood. Hierarchical position (both formal and informal social relations) thus shapes the capacity of powerful individuals to determine how others understand paradox highlighting the need to examine closely the power-laden processes through which paradoxes are collectively defined.

However, whilst the individualistic and relational approaches to paradox mindsets are increasingly explored, a significant gap remains in understanding how the individual and social learning processes interact. Examining the dynamics of individual-collective paradox learning as it occurs within everyday organizational settings might extend our knowledge of how paradoxical learning could develop (Lewis & Dehler, 2000; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Slesman, 2019). Practically, such an enhanced understanding could enable both existing practitioners and management educators to better facilitate the learning of paradox mindsets (Simpson, Berti, Cunha, & Clegg, 2021). We believe this requires a shift to a *deliberative*



understanding of the development of paradox mindsets that better reflects the interaction between the collective and individual levels.

### *A Deliberative Approach to Paradox Mindsets*

In this article, we embrace the shift in focus from paradox mindsets as a primarily individual cognitive or behavioral phenomenon to a social, relational one occurring collectively between individuals within groups (Pamphile, 2021; Pradies et al., 2021). However, we wish to push one step further towards a deliberative understanding of paradoxical mindsets in which learning with others is not just emergent (through interaction with others) but reciprocal, shifting towards the intersubjective, dynamic nature of paradox as it reveals itself through the collective in organizational life (Smith & Besharov, 2019). This sociological approach to paradox mindsets does not exclude the idea of individual reflection and learning or the relational interaction between peers, but rather places them in the context of collective deliberative processes, whereby complex paradoxes emerge and are recognized by members of the group as they seek to grapple together with specific problems.

We suggest that democratic organizations are particularly fruitful environments to study such learning, because the “cooperative business model is characterized by inherent tensions that readily and powerfully demonstrate the pervasiveness of paradox in organizational life” thus offering powerful opportunities for learning (Audebrand et al., 2017: 218). The participatory nature of such organizations (Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016) requires organizational members to work through paradoxes collectively as “it is not possible to blame any failures on a bad supervisor” (Kociatkiewicz, Kostera, & Parker, 2021: 948), thus managing paradox is the responsibility of *all* members not just those at the top of the hierarchy.

Additionally specific paradoxes arise from seeking to organize more democratically, such as the tensions between control and autonomy (King & Land, 2018) or collective

participation and speedy decision-making (Reedy et al., 2016), which are both individual and collective. Practitioners within democratic organizations are often cognizant of many of the paradoxes they face and articulate at expressing them (Kociatkiewicz et al., 2021; Polletta, 2002; Reedy et al., 2016). Democratic organizations are thus particularly revealing of how paradox mindsets are influenced by the social conditions within which they develop, and the role of deliberative strategies employed to address them. However, this collective dimension also applies, if less obviously, to all organizations. We cannot work through paradoxes as individuals without the collaboration and understanding of our fellow group members and paradox is an ever-present shared experience of organizational life. It is to our study and our direct involvement in these democratic processes of ‘working through’ paradox that we now turn.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **The Context**

Our study focuses on Martyn and Daniel’s experiences working with the Sociocratic Practitioner Alliance (SPA) and the paradoxes that arose through our participation in a democratically run organization. The SPA is a global network of consultants, academics and practitioners interested in supporting workplace democracy. Martyn’s involvement in the SPA began in 2015 as part of a series of action research investigations exploring the tension and obstacles that led to failures of democratic organizing, for a 3-year funded research project. In the process of interviewing consultants focusing on democratic organizational practices for this project, Martyn became part of a network of consultants across the US, UK and Continental Europe, trained in ‘sociocratic’ principles and seeking to form an organization with practitioners and academics to facilitate joint learning and collaboration. As a result, Martyn was asked to help build the academic wing of the embryonic SPA. Martyn was soon after joined by Daniel, given Daniel’s longstanding interest in engaged critical

scholarship (Daniel 2006), with the goal of building connections with interested academics (see vignette 1). Our data and their presentation as vignettes below arise from our participation.

The SPA is a ‘sociocratic’ organization. Sociocracy aims at inclusive forms of organizational governance (Buck & Villines, 2007), where every voice matters (Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018). The SPA’s events and meetings are prefigurative, in that the way they are organized is intended to provide exemplars of good democratic practice more widely (Reedy et al., 2016). As our narration shows we sought to democratically bring about workplace democracy (King & Land, 2018) through our engagement with the SPA, an approach which produced a number of paradoxes explored below.

### **Auto-ethnographic Inquiry**

The purpose of our study is to explore how paradoxes are made more salient on the collective level through deliberative processes. As argued above, we believe that democratic organizations such as the SPA (with clear deliberative structures throughout), are ideal sites of study for paradox. Indeed, throughout our time with the SPA we experienced many occasions where we were confronted with paradoxes and had to work through them with others. Our longitudinal immersion within the field provided a solid basis of trust and access, giving Martyn and Daniel a unique inside perspective balanced by Patrick’s involvement as an external critical friend with experience of researching other democratic organizations. We detail this team approach to ethnography below. Our vignettes represent the typical paradoxes that arose within this form of organization. In summary, the SPA provided an ideal location to experience and further theorize how the learning processes of developing paradox mindsets can be developed within a supportive collective arena.

As direct participants in these learning processes (Pradies et al., 2021) we have deployed auto-ethnography as the most appropriate method to vividly communicate the

experiences and emotions of experiencing and working through paradoxes within deliberative environments. It is our contention that understanding the complexity of paradox through deliberative processes is best achieved through the immersion of the researcher within the given context (Bell & King, 2010; Coghlan & Brannick, 2014), something not otherwise easily accessible for non-participants (Coffey, 1999). Once we began considering how to present the tensions we personally experienced (already documented within Martyn's diary) we decided upon autoethnography as the best way to experience and understand paradox at different levels from the inside. We encountered the usual difficulties of presenting such extensive rich ethnographic description within the confines of a journal paper (Van Maanen, 2010). Our solution is to use vignettes, a well-established way of communicating the context and 'feel' of ethnographic data (Barter & Renold, 2000), particularly auto-ethnographic data (Humphreys, 2005). A vignette is "a short, carefully constructed description of a person, object, or situation, representing a systematic combination of characteristics" (Atzmüller & Steiner, 2010: 128), used to illustrate aspects of a phenomenon (Reay, Zafar, Monteiro, & Glaser, 2019). Within auto-ethnographic research they are designed to capture moments in time that are meaningful, paying attention to feelings, thoughts and emotions (Ellis & Bochner, 1992) and reflecting on the wider context (Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012). They are used to "reconstruct scenes (the vignettes) that make readers feel like they are there" (Reay et al., 2019: 208). The vignettes have been written to illustrate our experiences of the paradoxes that we have faced (Gorli, Nicolini, & Scaratti, 2015), to capture the *feel* of the experience of living through them (Humphreys, 2005), particularly the emotionally-laden nature of working with paradox, including the anxieties (Vince, 2018) and uncertainties, as we grappled with the challenges we faced.

Auto-ethnography is, therefore, a highly appropriate method of generating theoretical insights from insider experience but only if steps are taken to ensure sufficient rigor in terms

of analysis. Whilst a number of criteria have been suggested to ensure the rigor of auto-ethnography (see Belkhir, Brouard, Brunk, Dalmoro, Ferreira, Figueiredo et al., 2019 for a discussion), we here follow Learmonth and Humphreys' (2012) combination of evocative and analytical auto-ethnography as it is particularly aimed at the generation of theory from experience. Denzin provides a useful summary of our own approach, proposing that auto-ethnography is ethnographic work where one is "(a) is a full member in a research group or setting; (b) uses analytic reflexivity; (c) has a visible narrative presence in the written text; (c) [sic] engages in dialogue with informants beyond the self; (d) is committed to an analytical research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (2006: 375).

Martyn and Daniel were positioned as researchers in exactly this way as full members of the SPA, recording their experiences and reflections in detail in diaries which were the basis for the narratives presented in the paper as vignettes. Patrick provided an outsider perspective, acting as a "devil's advocate to improve theorizing" (Strike & Rerup, 2016: 888) and debriefing between the authors (Crosina & Pratt, 2019), thus providing a degree of objectivity and critical analysis leading to a robust set of interpretations that we present below.

Our interpretive strategy followed three phases, *exploration*, *experience*, and *reflection*. The *exploration* phase occurred where Martyn contacted democratic organizations whilst developing a research project. The *experience* phase occurred where Martyn and Daniel gradually became more engaged within the SPA and were confronted with paradoxes and *reflective* phase occurred where Martyn and Daniel, often aided by Patrick, and sensitized by the paradox literature and Patrick's wider knowledge of democratic organizations, worked to unearth and work through issues that were arising. This approach

was iterative and cyclical, particularly as Martyn & Daniel's awareness of the paradoxes they were experiencing was heightened throughout the project.

### **Data Collection**

The research presented in this paper was conducted between 2015-2019, and is drawn from four sources: 1) Extended participant engagement - Martyn and Daniel attended 47 meetings, with network members over Google Hangouts and Zoom, each lasting between 30-120 minutes, with most minuted using sociocratic record keeping formats, captured live during the meetings (see Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018 for a discussion); 2) Documentary analysis of the SPA's 68 policy and operational documents to check the veracity of the events; 3) Fieldwork diaries, with 42 entries (19,127 words overall) documenting key incidents and reflections, emotional reactions and nascent and emerging insights (see Muncey, 2010: 91-96 for a discussion for the practices of diary writing for auto-ethnography). Initially these diary entries focused on the processes and practices of democratic organizing, but increasingly they explore paradox as this emerged as our central focus. Entries capture the organizational processes which occurred, but also Martyn's emotional reactions and experiences, which formed the basis for the understanding of the experience of paradox; 4) Eight in-depth recordings of discussions between Martyn and Daniel reflecting on experiences they had, and the post-event de-briefs between the organizing group, totaling 407 minutes of recording.

### **Analysis**

Our first stage of analysis involved collaboratively developing the vignettes. Martyn and Daniel, as the research team members embedded within the field constructed them jointly, as a way "to gain a collective understanding of [our] shared experiences" (Belkhir et al., 2019: 265). First we separately read the meeting minutes, transcribed audio recordings and reflexive diaries, examining the paradoxical experiences that were most salient to us individually (Hay, 2014), particularly focusing on the experiences that met the criteria suggested by Tracy

(2010: 839-848), that they were ‘worthy topic, rich rigour, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethical, meaningful coherence’ and Le Roux’s first two criteria of subjectivity and self-reflexivity (2017). In rereading and discussing the data we were attentive to those moments where we experienced moments of tension where we were grappling with challenges and felt there was no obvious way forward, and moments where we experienced moments of paradox thinking, where we could see things from different perspectives.

Second, having identified these meaningful moments we individually crafted them into ethnographic stories, focusing “self-consciously” and “self-reflexively” on our roles and relationship to the research (Le Roux, 2017) and why these experiences illustrated the experiences of paradox. We decided to craft them into vignettes at this point as we felt this was the best way to capture these experiences in ways we hoped would resonate with readers. The vignettes emerged, therefore, as the most succinct way of illustrating common issues that arose from the cycles of discussion and interpretation between the three authors.

Third we co-constructed them, passing it between us to gain our joint insights and perspective. Martyn or Daniel would draft a vignette, based on their experiences, reflections and notes, and then sent it the other author who was in the field, add or amend the vignette. This was a recursive process (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016) with Martyn and Daniel revising the vignette before sending to Patrick for comments, reflections, and feedback. This joint construction enabled us to gain richer insights see gaps each other’s knowledge, moving between individual introspective and group discussion (see Belkhir et al., 2019: 269). Fourth we “performed” the vignettes (Ellis & Bochner, 1992) at academic and practitioner conferences and seminars, exploring which aspects resonated, subjecting them to critical scrutiny and reflection. This approach is important to gain what Guba and Lincoln (1989)

‘authenticity criteria’ by which of our experiences resonated with others, thus meeting Le Roux’s third and fourth criteria of resonance and credibility (2017).

Finally, in collaboration with Patrick, we re-read the stories, fieldnotes and reflexive diaries, analyzing them based on the paradox literature, to ensure that they met Le Roux’s final criteria of contribution (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014; 2017). Patrick acted as a critical friend. Our ‘team approach to ethnography’ (Fortune & Mair, 2011: 458; Reedy & King, 2019) was particularly useful in moving from the auto-ethnographic narratives to the drafting of our model as an encapsulation of the processes we experienced in the field. Martyn and 2’s close engagement with the SPA sometimes made it difficult to see beyond the details of their experience. Patrick provided an ‘expert outsider’, questioning and challenging Martyn and Daniel’s interpretation, playing the role of “devil’s advocate” (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013: 19), suggesting alternative interpretations and enhancing the rigor and relevance of the research and through this providing an early internal peer-review (Roy & Uekusa, 2020). Patrick was therefore well-placed to develop the deliberative process model for paradox mindset learning that we present as figure 1. From initial drafting all three of us met regularly to discuss the emerging model, iteratively going between the data and the literature, which, consistent with Corley and Gioia (2004: 183-184) formed a “recursive, process-oriented, analytic procedure” (Locke, 1996: 240) that continued until we had a model that incorporated the key emerging theoretical relationships we discuss below.

The vignettes are presented sequentially, as the purpose of the following account is to describe how Martyn and Daniel became integrated with and worked alongside democratic organizations using deliberative decision-making processes that makes paradoxical thinking more salient and collectivized. Building on the work of Pratt (2008, 2009) we have selected the vignettes we considered the most compelling for our results section – what we call Power Vignettes. Power quotes occur where “the informant is so poetic, concise, or insightful, that



the author could not do a better job of making the same point' (Pratt, 2008: 501). For us power vignettes occur when the situation described succinctly captures the experience that we were seeking to represent. Similarly Proof Vignettes, like proof quotes "are used to show the prevalence of a point" (Pratt, 2008: 501), reflect a range of paradoxes encountered and the resulting development of collective paradox mindsets [INSERT LINK TO TABLE HERE]. We developed 16 vignettes in total which are presented in this paper.

Before we present this model in full we turn to our vignettes. We, indicate which model stages each of the vignettes most relate to as a way of introducing the reader to our deliberative approach to paradox mindsets.

## **FINDINGS: THE DELIBERATIVE DEVELOPMENT OF A PARADOX MINDSET**

### **Vignette 1: A Paradox Emerges – A desire for democratic purity whilst recognizing a need for pragmatic hierarchy and status**

#### **Model Stages: Individual Cycle – Awareness of anxiety/paralysis, recognition of paradox, referral to deliberation**

*A telephone call between Martyn and Daniel to discuss sending out an invitation to academics potentially interested in a collaborative democratic organization:*

*'So I sent this blurb to John and James [two established professors – both regularly published in top journals, highly networked and respected within the field] to get their views and they like it' says Martyn, 'but they think we shouldn't just send it out on the Listserve like this but first get a few eminent names lined up as signatures which will carry more weight'. We had been discussing the draft 'Pitch' of the invite to the SPA for a while and thought that we would send it to a few trusted colleagues for their input prior to sending it out. We were taken aback by the response. 'They think' continued Martyn, 'that academics get so many emails that if we just send it out without having a few "big names" on it then it will just get lost in the system'.*

*'But that goes against the whole idea of being non-hierarchical', Daniel replies. 'I mean we are meant to be trying explicitly challenge classic hierarchical forms of organizing'. 'I know', responds Martyn. 'It does seem contradictory doesn't it. If we sign it, or get some 'big names' to sign it then we would be putting ourselves as leaders of a non-hierarchical democratic movement. Yet if we leave it blank we might not get much interest'.*

When we began this project, we had little idea that something as simple as the signatories to an email would provoke a crisis. A project intended to create a democratic organization had quickly led to a potential deference to existing hierarchies. We now faced a paradox between our desire for purity, retaining an ethical commitment to the democratic ethos and a pragmatism, drawing upon the status and social capital of established figures to increase the chances of success (and so undermining the democratic ethos). Thus, the debate represented in the vignette gave rise to a great deal of anxiety, paralysis and uncertainty about how to proceed. Without yet being consciously aware of a paradox, we felt a clear tension between the pursuit of a democratic ideal and the most effective way of recruiting others through the reassurance of seeing leading figures already involved. Our debates highlighted that the process we followed in writing this email (who we targeted it at and how we signed it off) was important as a practical expression of the project's values. We were conscious of that this process itself should express the democratic ethos that we were seeking to promote, yet we also wanted the project to be a success.

However, it became increasingly clear, as we drafted potential lists of individuals who might help us to secure more allies, that the names were pre-dominantly male, almost exclusively white, and primarily based in UK institutions. And yet, these were the faces we knew, (including the established professors that we asked advice from) they were the familiar, and as noted in the diary 'at times it feels like the easiest route to success.'

Worryingly, Martyn and Daniel were fully conscious of the power imbalance on our actions, but felt unable to think a way through these tensions. Indeed, following Berti and Simpson (2021) we worried that the power differential potentially undermined our individual agency and restricted a fully deliberative solution to the paradoxes being experienced. For instance, reflecting further on this within the research diary at the time Martyn noted the ‘confusion’ and ‘frustration’ at being torn in different directions – albeit never identifying those different directions as paradoxes. At this stage, **anxiety** emerged and **paralysis** set in. We dithered for three weeks feeling unable to make a decision.

A few months later reflecting on the above and other experiences of anxiety and tension (see the proof vignettes in the supplementary files) Martyn and Daniel had seen calls for papers for the EGOS conference (see the timeline in the supplementary files) and began the process of thinking of such issues as paradoxes. This perspective suggested that an integral part of a process for **recognizing paradox** was the individual experience of anxiety and paralysis. It also gave rise to the **referral to deliberation** that subsequently occurred in which the paradox could be worked through collectively within democratic processes. Initially in this case as discussion between Martyn and Daniel as peers but later more broadly in a larger assembly where we began to formulate other aspects of our understanding of the learning process of paradox mindsets.

**Vignette 2: Introducing the paradox mindset – A desire for authenticity whilst recognizing the need for efficiency**

**Model Stages: Collective Cycle – initial deliberation and paradox recognition, collective framing, selection of deliberative strategy, generation of alternatives.**

*‘So are there any questions?’ Daniel asks to the audience of 20 on Zoom as we conclude our presentation. We are giving a webinar to sociocratic practitioners, consultants and interested members of the public describing our experiences described*

*in vignette 1. We outlined ideas for the network and our desire to work as democratically as possible, but also the challenges we faced seeking to do this even with something as simple as sending an email. There is a pause. Some practitioners say how much our experiences resonated with their own attempts at working democratically. They talked about how they often struggled with competing demands of wanting to be non-hierarchical yet often finding themselves in positions of leadership. Others suggest practical work-arounds for the problem, for example, for every 'big name' we invite we also put a junior academic on the list to even things out. 'If you embrace sociocracy and the principles that guide us within the circle', continues Frank, 'then you need to see yourself as elected operational leaders and as already empowered to make these decisions'.*

*As the webinar ends Daniel messages Martyn. 'So how do you think that went?' he asks. 'Good', Martyn begins. 'It was interesting that they related to our experiences. It has made me think', he continues, 'that what we are going through not only is not unique, it is not our fault, because we have not designed it right, but rather a normal, or even inevitable part of trying to set something like this up'. 'OK then', continues Martyn 'what we are experiencing is a paradox'. 'Or even knotted paradox', chipped in Daniel. 'We want to be authentic in the values of seeing up the SPA, but we also want it to be effective. So, what do we do? Is there any solution to this?'*

Presenting our experiences to the collective assembly through an **initial deliberation** was simultaneously cathartic and illuminating. By narrating and discussing our experiences – **collectively framing** them as **paradoxes** – we were relieved of the guilt and anxiety, the sense of a personal failing. We began to see our experience in context of shared problems and wider reflections about democratic work (King & Learmonth, 2015; Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014). In other words, in the process of sharing these experiences we

began to reframe them not as uniquely experienced by us but as paradoxes widely experienced by other organizational actors. The paradox literature we turned to enabled us to more precisely frame the tension between our commitment to the ideals of democracy (authenticity) and the need to make our project work (success) as inherently paradoxical. Through a careful **selection of deliberative strategies**, the inclusive deliberative form of the webinar invited the sharing of experience and helped shift our understanding of it being caught in an either/or choice (Sleesman, 2019) towards an understanding that the paradox enabled us to generate possible alternatives and accommodations (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018).

The collective deliberation stimulated a realization that our experience did not amount to a failure of a transition to democracy, but rather that the process of ‘doing’ democracy was inherently paradoxical and this recognition constituted a collective learning process (Reynolds & Vince, 2004). An awareness of the intersection of multiple paradoxes (or knotted paradoxes (Sheep et al., 2017) also emerged from the collective deliberation of the webinar. The ways that different power relations in the group and between various actors became more visible and understandable through the act of deliberation with others. In short, bringing the paradox to the collective deliberative process enabled learning about what we were ‘working through’ that was empowering in and of itself.

Thus, referring our individual situation to collective deliberation relieved us from the feeling that we had to choose between two incompatible goals, led to a **reduction in anxiety** and led to a sense of **empowerment** to cope with paradox both through collective deliberation and individual reflection.

**Vignette 3: The Individual/Collective Interface of Paradox Learning – A Desire to be more collective whilst yearning to individualize**

**Model Stages:**

- a) **Individual – Reduction in anxiety/empowerment, enhancement of resilience, agency and skills.**
- b) **Collective – Implementation of resolutions/coping mechanisms, enhancement of collective deliberative skills.**

*“Why don’t we just do it by ourselves” states Martyn, “it would be so much easier if we just set it up by ourselves, I am getting fed up with all these meetings, they just take so much time. I have the money from the grant, we could just set up our own new organization. I mean, do we even need them? Won’t it be just so much easier if we did it our own way?”*

*“But ...” begins Daniel, slightly horrified by the suggestion, “the whole point of this is about setting up a democratic organization, which by implication should be collective. If we abandon the SPA, won’t we be giving up on the whole ethos of what we are trying to do?”*

*We had been meeting as the SPA for some months, gradually being made more prominent members, with first Martyn then Daniel invited to join the “Top Circle” Yet progress had been slow, as our fellow members, all freelance consultants, struggled to make time for the voluntary work of the SPA. Frustrated by the lack of progress, we began to worry that the SPA project might fail.*

*We decided to take our feelings and concerns to the group although we were somewhat fearful of the reaction we would face. Consequently, we tentatively stated our frustration at the next meeting, trying to couch it in more positive language than we really felt so not to offend, but still bringing out the tensions that we were experiencing. We stated that we really appreciated the work that the SPA were doing, but wanted to see things move more quickly.*

*Much to our surprise and relief, our concerns were not dismissed but rather validated. Our contribution led to an outpouring of emotion (in ways that we sometimes felt uncomfortable with). One-by-one our colleagues in the SPA stated the tensions and emotions they too were feeling, naming, and acknowledging tensions arising from their experiences in the SPA. We observed that this outpouring had a cathartic effect as it forged a stronger collective identity and aim, i.e. setting up an event bringing 45 academics, practitioners, and consultants together to explore sociocracy and democratic work.*

The vignette illustrates Martyn's struggles with the deliberative processes and the temptation to either individually work through the paradox or do so relationally with Daniel. It reflects the struggles that exist at the individual-collective interface where it can appear easier to simply "go it alone" and create a simplistic "quick fix" rather than choosing the more difficult (but potentially longer lasting) route of collectively working through paradox together. One of the central reasons for doing so is that we will hear a broader array of ideas through the collective learning process. Inherent to the sociocratic decision-making tools employed as the deliberative strategy is a commitment to all having a voice and collective ownership (Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018). The "rounds" system ensured that the collective deliberation gave voice to everyone, ensuring that one by one (without cross talking or interruption) people within the circle had the opportunity to speak about the tensions they were experiencing. Listening to others and often hearing similar stories of frustration but a desire to continue enabled us to work through the paradox of the difficulties of complex collective processes potentially hindering rather than enhancing individual coping with tensions and arrive at a better resolution than would otherwise have been possible. Indeed, confidence in our collective and individual capacities to handle paradox through a paradox

mindset was enhanced by our joining commitment to the deliberative process, we were all in this together, working through similar paradoxes.

Our collective deliberation enabled the identification of a range of not immediately obvious knotted (Sheep et al., 2017) paradoxes that included: care of the self vs self-exploitation, project funding both enabling but constraining the autonomy of the group, inclusion of all in decision-making vs the efficiency of the decision-making process. Our learning within the SPA corresponded with that observed in other democratic forms of organizations (Reedy et al., 2016). Working with experienced practitioners through this deliberative-collective process enabled us to move beyond the seeming impossibility of paradox and to see them as stimuli to productive and creative outcomes (Liu et al., 2020). For example, we jointly identified the paradoxes mentioned above and then we collectively worked through them. In doing so, we not only experienced an **enhancement of collective deliberative skills** but an **enhancement of resilience and agency** in doing so. One solution arrived at was the election of Martyn and Daniel as the main event organizers but in a strictly defined way that retained democratic oversight but enabled a more efficient way of making things happen. This meant that the decisions could be made collectively, without restricting a required level of individual autonomy, as we were able to act freely within our specific domain as decided and consented to by the group. Finally, and counterintuitively for us (as least before the meeting), by giving up authority, and allowing the group to decide, Martyn, who was responsible for the research project funding that would pay for the event, was able to retain control through being given a time-limited and content-bounded role. Thus, the deliberative movement between individual and collective processes of learning about the paradox enabled us both to unravel the knots of the immediate problems and to develop our individual and collective capacities for future issues.



**Vignette 4: Collective paradoxical learning in action – A desire to have a firm plan whilst yearning for flexibility and change**

**Model Stage: Rather than focusing on individual stages of our model this vignette illustrates the dynamic and complex interactions between different aspects of the two cycles and emphasizes the central role of emotion within this learning process, as such the vignette illustrates the culmination of the two cycles of learning – the learning of a paradox mindset.**

In the weeks following our collective decision the SPA met regularly to decide on how the event should be organized, according to sociocratic principles. The three-day event was designed to collectively work through the challenges six invited democratic workplaces were experiencing. The intention was that by working together, academics, practitioners and consultants would develop proposals helpful to the organizations. A fuller account of the event is available at <https://www.democracytocome.org/>. As our final vignette demonstrates, the event while successful, gave rise to emergence of unforeseen paradoxes which had to be resolved and learnt from. The dialogue below took place at the end of the first day when the organizers met to review progress. The meeting rapidly became tense as things had not altogether gone to plan. The vignette is compiled from a recording we made of the meeting.

*Francis (consultant): So, it felt like we weren't giving them justice ... There were many stories that they could have told given the time. So, I feel like – I'm not so happy with that. I notice that I feel responsible for it, so that doesn't feel good right now...*

*Dexter (consultant): I agree, it was rushed, we had a lot of questions...*

*Julian (consultant): Personally, I'm not seeing that much value in what has come out on paper. Maybe the questions were useful. So I'm just – I don't know how to*

*evaluate that session, how to facilitate it without having heard from them. So that leads me to not know what to do with this...*

These comments alluded to a dawning realization of a paradox related to the rigidity of the day's timetable vs a desire to respond to the emergent concerns of participants. Once this paradox became clear, alternatives were then proposed by the group in a similar circular fashion, taking it in turns to talk:

*Frank (consultant): The situation that Francis was dealing with in terms of holding space for that group had deeply hidden layers in it. So that was my experience, there was a lot of stuff happening there. So, I can concur with what you were saying that it may be wise for that group that we spend tomorrow just processing what emerged today.*

*Dexter (consultant): When I'm thinking about a final shared learning session for tomorrow, I want to structure it so that there's more moving around and more of an opportunity for people learning together, you know. Maybe an Open Space?*

*Martyn: Open space sounds brilliant, because you're right, we had some fantastic conversations. I'm really in favor of that. But I'm also really quite keen to get organizational outcomes. Because at the end of the day, going back to the grant, I'm sorry, and the people who are funding us all being here in this fancy place, that's what I promised I would do. And if I walk away from this place without that then I can't tick a box to them and they'll say, what the hell were you spending the money on?*

It was then important to find a way forward, through these remaining paradoxes, as we worked collectively, recognizing them, and slowly unbinding them from the process:

*Daniel: I mean, what that really reinforces for me just how impossible it is to plan or to facilitate in advance. It is important to have plans from the outset of course, but it becomes totally dependent on the context and what's emerging as the experiment unfolds.*

*Dexter: Yeah, just to back up that experiment aspect. That's what I've got underlined here, this is an experiment for the first time with a lot of people who've never come together before. It's going to be difficult, there's going to be problems. But overall, I think we should be patting ourselves on the back a bit more than we are at the moment in some ways, it's been a good day I think overall.*

*Francis: So [with the plan we have for open space sessions] we really start to see what's common between us, what is the oneness that we're all – you know. And then we can see the uniqueness that each of us brings that adds value to each other. So that would be what I'd put into the middle as a possibility.*

We found this meeting intense. Being in the middle of the event, that we had planned for so long, yet hearing these concerns was difficult. As the conversation unfolded, the consultants identified and named their experiences, bringing out various, knotted (Sheep et al., 2017) paradoxes that was shaping the event. Looking back, we see that different aspects of these paradoxes were expressed by different people and these were all intertwined in complex ways that needed unravelling. Yet by working together, through skilled facilitation and deliberative democratic process, these paradoxes were not only expressed, but invited, named, acknowledged, and explicitly worked through. In rounds of deliberation in which all were given time and space to express themselves and articulate what they felt, it helped to tease out where the tensions lie and what the alternatives might exist. In many respects, this deliberative **development of a paradox mindset** involved collectively unravelling knotted

paradoxes together, locating the knots and rather than wildly pulling in multiple directions (and making the situation worse) deliberating about how best to undo and work through them. It is through this deliberative process a creative solution began to emerge.

Much to our surprise Dexter, who had spent a long-time designing the workshop, based on the discussion, abandoned the structure for day two, and instead proposed using Open Space Technology (OST), a meeting format which allows individuals to pitch topics and participants to self-organize, joining discussions where they feel they can contribute (Owen, 2008). OST enabled the meeting both to retain the ideals of democracy and be more effective, allowing collective decisions to be made whilst retaining the autonomy of participants to decide which sessions to attend. This solution also incorporated key outcomes required for the grant insofar as it enabled sessions to be proposed within the format that reflected on practical outcomes for the organizations.

This is not to say that it was a complete success. Some of the participants, notably the older, white male academics (who we had been keen to invite in vignette 1) seemed to physically or emotionally withdraw. In solving some paradoxes we thus developed new ones that we are still reflecting on through post-event interviews to be explored elsewhere. Yet the second day, based on the feedback, was significantly more successful than we could have hoped at the end of day one.

### **Paradox Mindset Deliberative Process Model**

Our vignettes above illustrate how individuals within groups can bring contradictory and competing tensions to the collective in order to ‘work through’ paradox more effectively (Lewis & Dehler, 2000). They show how the adoption of a paradox mindset can often become messy and complex and that this can be aided by the utilization of deliberative techniques developed within democratic organizations in general and sociocratic organizing in particular. In this section we combine our earlier theoretical arguments with these

experiences to propose a more general model of the deliberative development of paradox mindsets applicable more widely within organizations (figure 1). The model is designed to emphasize the interrelated and mutually reinforcing learning processes that occur at both individual and collective levels when developing paradoxical mindsets, as people to ‘work through’ paradox (Lewis, 2000). We follow Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart (2016) in emphasizing the importance of understanding tensions on multiple levels and in so doing, preserving multiple voices that in alternative models are often bypassed (see also Fairhurst, Smith, Banghart, Lewis, Putnam, Raisch et al., 2016).

[INSERT FIGURE ONE ABOUT HERE]

Our model reflects the complex interactions between individuals and groups insofar as the boxes contain dynamic and emergent processes that, for instance, tend towards the next stage in the cycles, rather than static states being experienced by atomized individuals (Raisch et al., 2018). The deliberative model is a contextual one that emphasizes the ongoing interconnection between the individual and collective cycles – an interconnection that we believe is most likely to occur at the point at which individuals *recognize* that their experiences indicate an emergent paradox (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Based on our experiences in democratic organizations, we stress that recognizing and referring paradoxes to the collective deliberative process aids with the generation of various coping, resolution, or synthesizing options appropriate to the individual issue. Of course, this may also happen within traditional non-democratic organizations although we believe that the ethos of collective responsibility and inclusiveness in democratic organizations provides a discursive ‘safe space’ where individuals are more likely to feel secure in sharing the anxieties and tensions generated by the experience of paradox. Our final vignette illustrates just such a secure discursive space.

The transition from individual discomfort (or at least limited to discussion between Martyn and Daniel in vignette 1) and the referral of an emerging paradox for collective deliberation in vignette 2 provides one example of the linkage between individual and collective levels. Consequently, we show a single connection lines at this point between individual and collective parts of the two cycles in order to aid clarity. However, in practice, there may well be more points of connection and the cycles are likely, in any case, as our vignettes illustrate, to frequently operate on a ‘two-steps-forward, one-step-back’ mode as individuals converge and diverge in terms of their understanding and interpretation of the paradoxes that are being encountered (Raisch et al., 2018).

We have also integrated the role of emotion and reflective sensitivity into our model (Vince & Broussine, 1996). The initial awareness of, and appropriate response to, the discomfort generated by emerging paradox (the tension of contradiction) by individuals initiates the interlinked processes of generating individual paradox reflection and collective paradox deliberation. Similarly, the mutual support available via effective reciprocating deliberation will, we believe, lead to reduced anxiety regarding the experience of paradox thus enabling effective responses and a growing confidence regarding thriving in conditions of paradox on the part of individuals. Rather than reduce our expectations in the face of difficult paradoxes therefore (Li, 2020), through recognizing the centrality of the collective deliberation for developing paradox mindsets, we might be able to carve out spaces of agency for individuals (Berti & Simpson, 2021). This approach contrasts with the paralyzing nature of anxiety inherent to experience of paradox without the availability of mutual support and collective forms of resolution based on democratic forms of deliberation.

Our model moves from the initial recognition of paradox in which individuals will begin to understand that their emotional state, increased anxiety and discomfort results from a potential paradox (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). Reflective practices and learning were

essential for us during this stage of the process, helping us to think through the paradoxes more concretely. Reading the paradox literature specifically those referring to democratic organizations (Blee, 2012; Bryer, 2020; King & Land, 2018; Reedy et al., 2016; Wilson, 2013) acted as a primer to help us understand that the paradoxes we were experiencing were not ours alone (King & Learmonth, 2015), but part of democratic organizing.

Once the individual undergoes initial reflection on the potential paradox, including initial scoping and framing of the paradox, they are (as our vignettes reflect) in a position to articulate it to others and enable collective deliberation. This is the point at which the paradox is most likely to move into the collective part of the learning cycle. Before this happens, of course, other individuals have the opportunity to deliberate over their understanding of this paradox and may choose to bring other interpretations of it or perhaps other paradoxes to the collective group that they recognize that are indeed knotted. For this to be enabled there needs to be a deliberative structure and process in place for referral and the triggering of a collective response. The most effective way of ensuring that individuals are aware of the option of collective paradox resolution and confident in it, is for them to have previously positively experienced participation in the ensuing deliberative processes.

This first stage of collective paradox recognition may be envisaged as either *informal*, an individual raises their concerns and thoughts with others outside of formal deliberative structures, or may be *incidental*, that is raised as part of deliberation about other issues. In either case, the confidence to share discomfort and difficulty to resolve tensions on the part of the individual requires a high level of trust in the likelihood of mutual support (as was witnessed towards the authors via Frank in Vignette 2 – indeed this could be seen as a development of paradox mindset within leadership teams of the kind documented by Smith (2014). It is after this that the paradox begins to be collectively framed within the group so that it is explored and gradually better understood. This occurs through a variety of more or

less formal channels between individuals (through a range of deliberative strategies), within fora dedicated to more general forms of organizing and so on. Vignette 3 nicely captures this stage of the model in which members of the group all surfaced tensions being felt and began to frame them in a more collective manner rather than keeping them buried individually. As Miron-Spektor et al. (2018: 11) suggest, ‘a paradox mindset shapes the way we make sense of tensions...individuals who embrace tensions have a greater propensity to proactively confront them and become comfortable.’ We agree with this insight but suggest that the additional shift to the collective deliberation stage in which the paradox becomes a *shared* group responsibility alleviates the threat and fear still more, making people even more comfortable to address paradox improving their collective deliberative skills and their capacities to deal with paradoxes.

To summarize, we see our deliberative model as essentially heuristic – continuously moving between individual and collective levels of analysis and decision-making. It begins to explore how the individual and the collective interact and work together to make these tensions more understandable and less problematic. A deliberative approach lends itself to distributed consensual and dynamic forms of leadership leading to more flexible, innovative and creative forms of thinking suited to the productive use of paradox within organizations. The relational and emotional aspects of the process are central. i.e. mutual support and consensus decision-making fosters anxiety reduction and reduces paralysis at the individual level and so empowers both individual and collective forms of agency. Rather than the usual suppressing of uncomfortable emotions during organizational processes they can be surfaced in mutually supportive social environments leading to higher quality decision-making that can foster democratic organizational values. In the following section, we now reflect on the contribution of our deliberative process model to understanding how paradox can be made more salient at the collective level.



## DISCUSSION

The contribution of our study is a deliberative model of paradox mindsets. In providing this model we have shown how collective democratic processes can be utilized to more effectively engage individually and collectively with paradox. Our model therefore recognizes the power of working through paradox both individually (through monological deliberation) *and* relationally (through dialogical deliberation). Most importantly, however, the deliberative model we offer emphasizes the *interconnection* of these two levels and the processes involved in shifting between the individual and the relational. It therefore builds on previous research (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017) which has begun to show how individuals collectively shape responses to paradox and do so through discursive practice (Lê & Bednarek, 2017) and interaction with peers (Pamphile, 2021). The uniqueness of the deliberative approach is that it purposefully embraces mechanisms of democratic decision making for these interactions to take place so that the whole organization can contribute to understanding paradoxes. It is these deliberative processes which enable a paradox mindset that structures a deep and thoughtful consideration of the multiple perspectives, interpretations and consequences of tensions in organizational life in a way that we have shown can be liberating.

For the remainder of the discussion we now consider three central ways that the deliberative model of paradox mindsets can enhance our capacity to work through tensions. We then consider the implications of a deliberative model on business schools and management learning.

*The deliberative model can help relieve anxiety and share the burden of paradox*

The experience of a paradox mindset on an individual level can be isolating and lonely, limiting the potential to learn. As our vignettes (and deliberative model) illustrate, as organizational actors become aware of an emerging contradiction or a seemingly

insurmountable set of tensions, one likely response is anxiety. This anxiety experienced by individuals can have a number of negative consequences including simple paralysis, the inability to see a way out of the contradiction (Vince, 2018; Vince & Broussine, 1996). However, the possibility of exploring the paradox deliberately and collectively with others, is an important way of recognizing that others might feel the same way as we do. It helps us to work through paradox by relating our experiences to others. Whilst previous attempts to explore this have used leadership teams (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009) or “interprofessional” communication (Huq et al., 2017) as ways of considering a collective component, none go so far as to consider the effects of a wider collective deliberative democratic process and how this might shape how individuals bring the individually experienced paradox (and the anxiety they feel) in to a collective deliberative process. Instead, they focused on more temporary, fluctuating collective measures that come together to share or “collectively brainstorm responses” (Pamphile, 2021: 4) to move towards a more relational model (Clegg et al., 2002). Our model, conversely, fully reflects the centrality of individuals as part of a collective, working through paradox together through clear deliberative processes, that are permanently weaved into the fabric of the organization.

In many organizations rooted in individual competitiveness, the sharing of vulnerability in this way might lead to a weakening of the individual’s status due to a perception of weakness and inability to cope (Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, in democratic organizations that explicitly rely on strong bonds of trust and the principles of inclusivity and reciprocity, it is much more likely that this essential process within the development of paradox mindsets will occur (Bryer, 2020). Furthermore, the engagement of individuals in the collective process, if managed well, has the potential to enhance the confidence of individuals to refer their emotional discomforts to the group and of group members to provide a supportive response to such sharing. As Keller and Sadler-Smith (2019) suggest,

experiencing tensions can be an opportunity for learning and growth. We feel this potential is increased even further when learning becomes collective through the kinds of deliberative processes explored here. This was certainly the case for Martyn and Daniel, who learned that sharing their uncomfortable feelings about paradoxes with each other and the group brought them much more confidence to deal with them in the future.

Additionally, by engaging in the collective deliberative process, the skills, confidence, and resilience of individuals will we expect (over time) be enhanced. Following our immersion in these collective processes and regularly working through tensions we became more sensitive to emergent paradoxes. Our deliberative model captures the processes by which individuals may develop a range of emotional and cognitive strategies for ‘facing-up-to-paradox’ and of framing it in ways that can then be communicated to others relationally (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). In other words, an important outcome of engaging in these deliberative practices is not only the potential resolutions of paradox but also both individual and collective learning. This development will enhance the efficacy of future cycles and so lead to the growth of the paradox mindsets we are advocating. Importantly, then, our model incorporates opportunities for both individual (as reflected in vignette 1) and collective (as reflected in vignettes 2 and 3) learning. We experienced this learning process ourselves, as our vignettes illustrate, as we continued to recognize tensions individually, then take them to the collective and then proceed around the model again and again, being confronted with new tensions but also feeling more confident through experience about how to investigate and respond to them individually and collectively.

This is not to say that our work is ever done, we will continue to evolve our understanding of how different tensions should be approached and worked through as a group and with different groups (with different compositions). The deliberative model therefore embodies a form of situated learning (Zhu & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2013) in which we acquire

the skills of the paradox mindset by immersing ourselves in a community of practice that instinctually brings tensions to a collective forum to work through on a daily basis. Again, whilst such processes are not only to be found in democratic organizations, their emphasis on inclusive deliberation makes them significant sites of experimentation and learning in the development of paradox mindsets as it prioritizes the active participation and engagement of all actors in a supportive deliberative space. This is particularly the case when attempting to acquire new deliberative capacities that might require dialogical engagement, humility and greater empathy. Democratic theorists such as Bohman (1997) have long suggested that individuals require more equal capacities if they are to operate successfully within deliberative structures including working through paradox on a daily basis.

*The deliberative model can make power relations and abuse of power more visible*

Recent studies suggest that there is a potential dark side of paradox that emerges due to the asymmetries of power in organizational life (Berti & Simpson, 2021). Our deliberative model, by reflecting an integrated individual and relational response to paradox through collective processes can play a central role in enabling people to identify and work through paradoxes that might otherwise have been kept hidden or suppressed by those in positions of power. Of course, no deliberative model dealing with paradox in the workplace can be a panacea, a magic bullet removing abuses of power and domination from the organization all together. However, if the deliberative process has norms of equity, inclusion, transparency etc at its heart (as the deliberative processes we worked with within our experiences), then it is more likely that power will become more visible. In this sense, through a deliberative model of this kind it is less likely that paradoxes will be misrepresented (Huq et al., 2017) than if we simply have managers, or even teams, telling us what paradoxes we faced with very little deliberation. In this sense, democratic processes are not immune to abuses of power but they

contain opportunities for checks and balances that more individualistic and even many relational accounts of “working through” paradox simply do not (Audebrand et al., 2017).

This is important as individuals and groups using the deliberative process must have the confidence (in each other and the system) to share discomfort and difficulty to resolve tensions through their interactions (Sheep et al., 2017). And this, in turn, requires a high level of trust in the likelihood of mutual support. In many organizations rooted in individual competitiveness, the sharing of vulnerability in this way might lead to a weakening of the individual’s status due to a perception of weakness and inability to cope. However, in organizations using more deliberative democratic approaches that explicitly rely on strong bonds of trust and the principles of reciprocity, it is much more likely that this essential process within the development of paradox mindsets will occur. Furthermore, the engagement of individuals in the collective process, if managed well, has the potential to enhance the confidence of individuals to refer their emotional discomforts to the group and of group members to provide a supportive response to such sharing (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). This, again, was certainly the case for Martyn and Daniel in our deliberative environment, who learned that sharing their uncomfortable feelings about paradoxes with each other and the group brought them much more confidence to deal with them in the future.

*The deliberative model provides a deeper understanding of the nature of a paradox*

A third contribution of our model is that it not only recognizes the inherent nature of paradox in organizational life (Clegg et al., 2002; Schad & Bansal, 2018) but also that it is socially constructed (Pradies et al., 2021; Putnam et al., 2016; Tuckermann, 2019). Following Hahn and Knight (2021), and their quantum approach to paradox, we also believe that this represents a broader, multi-dimensional understanding of the nature of paradox. One example of the social construction of paradox is the way we tend to use routinize and script responses to reduce the discomfort produced by novel situations (Lee, Mazmanian, & Perlow, 2020).

To routinize the response of the discomfort generated by the experience of paradox may thus close-down the reflection required in a full ‘facing-up-to-paradox’. Whilst some models suggest individual responses to using rationalization to encourage emotional intuition (Calabretta, Gemser, & Wijnberg, 2017), and more recent approaches highlight the value of relational approaches we feel that deliberative, collective processes have a central role in aiding this process, making the social construction of paradox more visible and the nature of the paradox more understandable. Our deliberative model provides the availability of mutual support in the collective cycle and the individual skills gained through engaging in collective deliberation that empower individuals to make productive use of things like anxiety in paradox recognition rather than its suppression.

However, our deliberative model stresses that paradoxes are socially constructed as we encounter them, and shaped through the kinds of collective processes we use to discuss them. It clearly helps to discuss the experience of paradox with peers or in teams but if we fail to use collective deliberative processes to understand them, then the social construction of paradox often goes unnoticed and will fall in line with the dominant view which may be historically embedded in an organization (Pierides, Clegg, & Cunha, 2021). The collective process selected then, offers different pathways for working through paradox depending on its characteristics. Our study has focused on democratic forms of organizing because they have a particular concern with inclusive forms of deliberation that enable all participants to contribute and that are grounded in strong interpersonal bonds of trust and reciprocity. They focus on one particular model of collective decision making (sociocracy) built around consent, equity of voice and circular organizing. Practitioners within democratic organizations have developed quite sophisticated tools to aid discussions and decision-making (Polletta, 2002; Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018; Reedy et al., 2016). For instance, our election as delegatory leaders, i.e. time-limited for the duration of running the event, with

clear mandate, but within constraints, indicates some of the more agile thinking as ways through the paradoxes that we were facing.

However, it is important that there should be a range of collective decision-making processes we can draw on depending on the difficulty of the paradox being worked through and the composition of the group. This is reflected in our model at the collective stage where we collectively decided the intractable and knotted (Sheep et al., 2017) nature of the paradoxes being experienced required an Open Space approach to collective deliberation (rather than the slightly more rigid sociocratic approach). We were in this sense learning how to learn about the paradoxes being experienced, not pulling or pushing too hard but letting go in order to let the paradox resolve itself in a more open format. Obviously, one of the key problems here is deciding on the most suitable model to work through paradox and ensuring that this is in itself an inclusive process. Our deliberative model emphasizes that rather than being an occasional piece of work recognizing the socially constructed nature of the paradox and the mindsets we use to work through them is a permanent ongoing process that we need to do with others all of the time within the workplace.

Nevertheless, because of the emotional elements we have identified in the individual response to emerging paradox, we believe that such forms of deliberation all require an emphasis on mutuality (Berti & Simpson, 2021). This is essential for making productive use of this emotional aspect and of preventing strong emotions leading to negative outcomes for the individual and the organization. There are many protocols for such forms of democratic deliberation and decision-making including open-space technology, affinity groups, horizontal decision-making, and sociocracy. Furthermore, Holacracy (as organizational system that is built on sociocracy), for instance, has a specific process of raising ‘tensions’, specifically set to improve decision-making (Robertson, 2015). All have their strengths for collectively working through paradoxes and further interdisciplinary research into how

different collective processes help or hinder working through paradox seems to us to be essential (Bednarek, Cunha, Schad, & Smith, 2021).

*The deliberative model and management learning within business schools*

A deliberative model of paradox mindsets can also be used productively within management education in a variety of ways. At present, business schools tend to focus (as much of the earlier paradox literature does) on preparing individuals to face dilemmas and tensions within their working lives (Simpson et al., 2021; Vince et al., 2018). Educators in modern business schools regularly ask students to individually consider and reflect on how leaders might produce more innovative solutions to such tensions and also how they might work within teams to come up with ideas together to work through problems. Less regularly (if at all) are students asked to work through deliberative and democratic processes that might encourage a much deeper engagement with the relational benefits of working and learning through tensions. Not only would this widen students' experience of the socially constructed nature of paradox (how others experience similar or widely different tensions to them in different ways promoting empathy) but it would also help them to be more alert to the effects of power differentials. When deliberating with norms of equity and inclusion (through clearly deliberative processes), it is much more difficult for students with the loudest voices and the most forceful opinions to simply stamp their own dominant view on a paradox. Instead, what paradoxes exists and even the ways of working through them become a co-creation that students learn through together.

The implications for the workplace for us are profound. If business schools are focused on teaching students in a predominantly individualistic manner, it is unsurprising perhaps that they might produce graduates who enter the world of work with an individualistic mindset. Our deliberative model is valuable to management learning in a broader sense as well. It encourages us to educate people with various deliberative practices



such as rounds and facilitation inherent to the sociocratic practices we relied upon to work through paradoxes in our experiences of democratic organizing. For instance, Martyn (in the course of this project) enrolled on a Holacracy practitioner course in which he was taught in an all-day session how to work through tensions in a group. This was facilitated by a certified expert in the area of this kind of democratic organizing who taught people how to notice tensions in the group, to call them out and work through them with others. The possibilities of a more relational and collective workplace within which people work together through paradox and other issues, is heavily reliant on a shift within business schools towards this kind of deliberative teaching model. As workplaces increasingly attempt to become more inclusive, shifts like this from within management education and business schools more generally seem to be important steps in the right direction.

### **CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS**

Dealing with paradoxes is widely seen as an essential skill in organizational life (Clegg et al., 2002; Lewis, 2000; Schad et al., 2016) which if not managed appropriately can lead to destructive behavior (Lewis, 2000) or missed opportunities for creativity and action (Keller & Sadler-Smith, 2019). Paradox mindsets have been suggested as a key skill for organizational practitioners (particularly managers) to cope with and even thrive with these paradoxes (Liu et al., 2020; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Slesman, 2019). Yet, there has been little consideration about how paradoxes, initially experienced by individuals, are made more salient at the collective, group level and the implications of this for participants.

Our research proposes an approach for the development of paradox mindsets that combines individual and collective dimensions within a deliberative process. We have argued that the inclusive deliberative processes central to the ethos of democratic organizations provides a rich site of enquiry and learning for a wider range of more conventional forms of organizing. Our model also identifies the organizational interface between individual

development and collective development as key. In terms of future research, we believe it would be particularly interesting to consider organizations that are recent adopters of democratic organizing with more longstanding ones in order to compare the relative development of paradox mindsets. Another interesting avenue of research could be to understand how different types of more or less democratic organizations (from consensus driven co-operatives to those operating with Holacracy) might approach paradoxes and tensions. One set of organizations might approach paradoxes sensitively through non-violent communication whereas others might approach them more dispassionately and coldly with an eye to working through more quickly and (at least in the short-term) effectively. The way in which democratic organizations seek to construct inclusive deliberative spaces for groups may also be of wider interest in conventionally managed organizations. Finally, having identified the broad processes involved in paradox mindset development, it would now be interesting to conduct studies at a more micro-level, particularly the connection points between individual reflection and collective deliberation.

Our model is also valuable to management education. Many business school students will inevitably encounter paradoxes in their working lives and having a greater insight in to how these can be productively worked through both individually and collectively will add to their understandings of this phenomenon. Practicing managers, such as MBA and DBA students in particular, could benefit from sharing experiences of paradoxes they have faced as individuals and considering how, drawing on our model, they might have collectivized these tensions to work through them and learn more productively. We feel that there is an overreliance in management education on individualistic solutions to what are inherently collective problems. Confronting paradoxes individually and taking the 'load' personally to deal with paradoxes can be an anxiety ridden process that can become a real burden for managers. Learning ways that they can collectively work through paradoxes might not only

be healthier and more productive for organizations but for individuals as well, helping them to move beyond an individualistic understanding of paradox towards one that integrates individual learning with collective support and deliberation.

By focusing exclusively on democratic organizations we have been able to highlight the deliberative approach to engaging in paradox which is central to our model. Yet we recognize that democratic organizations are a particularly felicitous context to experience this deliberative approach and consequently our model may not be generalizable to other situations that are not based within democratic work environments. Indeed, we invite others to explore if, and how, the model might be generalizable to other contexts and whether democratic working practices, such as those within sociocracy, might offer wider opportunities for management education to provide individuals with the tools to work cooperatively by developing participatory and deliberative skills.

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Figure I: **Interrelated cycles of individual and collective development of paradox mindsets**

