

## On the Practicality of Resisting Pragmatic Paradoxes

We welcome Li's (2020b) critical commentary on our article on pragmatic paradoxes (Berti & Simpson 2020), both because it offers the opportunity to clarify some fundamental concepts and implications of our contribution and also because it stimulates further exploration of organizational paradoxes. In our paper (Berti & Simpson 2020), we drew attention to a phenomena known as pragmatic paradoxes—those situations in which power differentials and lack of agency hinder an actor in negotiating contradictory managerial demands. Theorizing pragmatic paradoxes, which have been overlooked in organizational paradox theory, allowed us to stimulate a “critical shift” in this increasingly influential theory. The pathological situations that pragmatic paradoxes represent, though theorized as mostly experienced by individuals in subordinate positions, can also affect managers and entire organizations. We proposed that, since pervasive and persistent contradictions are inherent to organizing (Hahn & Knight 2019; Smith & Lewis 2011), it is necessary to address the excessive power differentials that underpin them. Li (2020b) criticized our suggestion, arguing it to be impractical, because of the impossibility of reforming a system characterized by strong power differentials. The alternative Li (2020b: 4) suggested is one of “expectation reduction by giving up some elements of such an unrealistically high expectation.” He used the example of Google pragmatically lowering its expectations in relation to a powerful actor (the Chinese government), thus avoiding being locked into a destructive power struggle, choosing instead to play a “long game.”

Ironically, considering that we are debating paradox, it is possible to demonstrate that Li's (2020b) critique is both right and wrong. We will first highlight the theoretical, pragmatic and ethical limitations of Li's suggestion for dealing with pragmatic paradoxes by lowering expectations. We will then reconsider his argument, showing that it also has conceptual merit in that it can help advance paradox scholarship in two ways: (a) by signaling the need to determine boundary conditions for the manifestation of pragmatic paradoxes (a limitation of our original paper), and (b) by highlighting the role of actor expectations in socially constructing paradoxes.

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## RESISTANCE IS NOT FUTILE

Li's (2020b) criticism is based on a logical fallacy, a *reductio ad absurdum* of our argument on redressing power differentials. We did not suggest (as he claimed) that pragmatic paradoxes are caused by *any* power differential; rather, they only manifest in extreme situations, where power conditions severely hinder agency, defined as the capacity to act creatively. While Google, as an organizational actor, might be less powerful than the state actor, China, Google's key decision-makers certainly did not lack agency. Google was still free to operate in the rest of the world, with the loss of the Chinese market not representing an existential threat to the company. By contrast, we theorized that the necessary precondition for pragmatic paradoxes is when a subject is involved in a relatively inescapable and intense relationship (Watzlawick, Jackson, & Bavelas, 1967) characterized by great inequities in resource control, normative commitment, and severely limited alternatives. An example would be that of an aged and unskilled laborer made redundant in a time of pandemic, when unemployment is rife and opportunities are minuscule, heightening the fundamental paradox of a labor market in which free time and labor power can only be sold on terms skewed by the structural inequality between many sellers and few buyers—a topic to which we shall return. When applied to the cases of those relatively powerless actors that cannot easily choose to “walk out” of a relationship without suffering severe material consequences, Li's (2020b) recommendation of “reducing one's expectations” amounts to victim blaming.

The Black Lives Matter movement offers a vivid illustration of both the reality of pragmatic paradoxes and the importance and possibility of redressing the excessive power differentials that underpin them through collective resistance. The murder of George Floyd during his arrest represents a most graphic demonstration of what constitutes a pragmatic paradox: the unfortunate victim of this horrific police abuse had no possible way out of his predicament. “Accepting” a police officer's knee on his throat meant dying of suffocation, but resisting would have attracted further injury and, given survival, likely more serious charges. The existence of racial biases that increase the likelihood of Black citizens experiencing hostile encounters with law enforcement (Ross, Winterhalder, & McElreath, 2018) exposes a significant portion of the population of many countries in which White people unjustly outnumber “others” to analogous pragmatic paradoxes. Nevertheless, the public outcry over this and similar cases shows that, even if individual resistance is impossible, collective struggle can stimulate reform

and a shift the dominant discourse toward reevaluating the ways in which Black citizens are represented (and represent themselves).

Li (2020b: 7) also objected that, “in the business world, there is no *inescapable* relationship.” We beg to differ. The existence of modern slavery (Davidson, 2015; Nolan, 2019), and the evidence of unresolved human rights issues in the operation of the global value chain (Clarke & Boersma, 2017) demonstrate that in the contemporary business world even the most basic individual freedoms cannot be taken for granted. Rather, the workplace provides precisely the sociocultural conditions under which pragmatic paradoxes may flourish or flounder, be condoned or condemned. A recent study by Padavic, Ely, and Reid (2020) showed that, while both men and women experience distress due to excessively long work hours, social expectations make the opposition between work and family duties more intense for female staff. Organizational policies offering flexibility to working women (without addressing the underlying problem of excessive workloads for all staff members) end up exposing them to a pragmatic work–life paradox: if they choose to privilege family duties they must give up career opportunities, thus reducing their independence and capacity to provide for their family. If, on the other hand, they prioritize work, they risk being regarded with suspicion for failing in their caring role, which might even impair their career. Indeed, for decades working women have coped with this pragmatic paradox by following Li’s (2020b) advice, reducing their expectations in relation to their roles in work and society.

In all circumstances where victims of workplace pragmatic paradoxes are not sufficiently strong, courageous or well-resourced to just walk away, “like Google,” this will happen. It may happen because families depend on these people for food and shelter; it may happen because there is a high probability of experiencing the same systemic oppression in the next work environment. The current COVID-19-influenced economy has revealed that, for many, this predicament is—sadly—common. For example, higher COVID-19 mortality rates among Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) people in the United Kingdom (Patel, Hiam, Sowemimo, Devakumar, & McKee, 2020), illustrate how systemic conditions of high power differentials and constrained agency limits this group’s work–life choices. “Essential” workers performing roles with less opportunity for shielding from the pandemic (carers, nurses, staff in security and logistics, taxi drivers) have a higher-than-average likelihood of being from a BAME background (Francis-Devine, 2020; Office for National Statistics, 2020). Those who cannot afford to stop work for fear of losing their jobs due to a

lack of personal savings (Farquharson, Rasul, & Si-bieta, 2020) cannot simply “walk away,” especially in the current context of high unemployment. While there might be isolated instances within such communities where a victim is strong, courageous, and lucky enough to change their expectations and achieve independence, such exceptions do not justify the continued operation of oppressive systems.

Even when individuals are free to choose, “reducing one’s expectations” leaves the systems underpinning pragmatic paradoxes, along with their managerial perpetrators, in place to oppress those who are neither as strong nor as fortunate. Such a situation is not beneficial for the victims nor for the system (individual manager, organization, or society) because any community or society is only as strong as its weakest link. An organization or society that tolerates abusive behavior by its managers or leaders does a disservice not only to their victims but to the organization as a whole, morally as well as socially. The social costs include diminished trust, health, engagement, enthusiasm, and loyalty, while the organizational costs can be counted in terms of employees’ discretionary effort, improvisation, innovation, growth, and performance (Nguyen, Teo, Grover, & Nguyen, 2019). By ignoring abuse from managers, organizations permit self-sabotage in terms of higher turnover, absenteeism, disengagement, politicking, injuries, and compensation claims (Kline & Lewis, 2019). It is therefore imperative for organizations and communities to resist systems of abuse that perpetrate pragmatic managerial paradoxes and not put all the responsibility on victims to reframe, by “reducing expectations” and accepting abuse.

## EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PRAGMATIC PARADOX

### Boundary Conditions

Despite these serious flaws in Li’s (2020b) line of reasoning, his critique offered two important concepts to the discussion on paradox. First, it (implicitly) highlighted a limitation in our discussion of pragmatic paradox, which, due to space constraints, did not discuss the boundary conditions that delimit the manifestation of pragmatic paradoxes. In other words: When are the power differentials so great, and agency so curtailed, that the experience of contradictory managerial demands will lead to the manifestation of a pragmatic paradox? Or, conversely, what is the minimum amount of agency necessary to mount a response that can harness the generative, synergistic potential of a paradoxical tension?

To address these questions, it would be particularly useful to identify the systemic conditions that

determine disempowerment. These variables have been well articulated by Crane (2013: 51) in his description of “modern slavery,” which he defined as “the attempt to underprice a key resource (labor) through illegitimate means: forced threat, ownership/control through abuse, dehumanisation, constrained freedom, economic exploitation.” He identified enabling conditions (such as industry, cultural, and regulatory contexts), exploiting and insulating capabilities (such as access to violence, debt management, accounting capacity, and labor supply chain management), and sustaining capabilities (moral legitimization and domain maintenance). Empirical research on pragmatic paradoxes could use Crane (2013) framework to better understand the systemic enabling conditions underpinning pragmatic paradoxes. It is important to note, however, that for many marginal workers, especially in the sweatshops of the world, there is little difference between being a slave and being a “wage slave” (Sandel 1998).

Li’s (2020b) use of the case of Google and China also brings attention to pragmatic paradoxes experienced at other levels than that of the individual worker–manager relationship, broadening theorizing to include organizational and state actors. For example, it would also be useful to identify the conditions under which organizations participating in a supply chain could be so deprived of the possibility of freely choosing and adopting alternative strategies that they end up being exposed to pragmatic paradoxes. It is likely that excessive reliance on a single client, the presence of strong regulatory bonds, and a lack of reliable systemic legal redress could cause such conditions.

### The Role of Expectations in (Generative) Paradox Management

A second valid point made by Li (2020b) concerns the role of expectations in shaping perception and responses to paradox. Paradox theory puts stock in the role of “mindsets” in determining contradiction responses (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Empirical research has shown that actors who can freely choose alternative strategies in the face of a paradox “feel comfortable with and energized by tensions” (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis, 2018: 38), which correlates with synergetic paradox management. It is certainly plausible that, in such conditions, “the asymmetry between one’s capacity and expectation” (Li, 2020a: 8) plays a role in response determination. A sense of self-efficacy is necessary for tackling the challenge; for instance, believing it is possible to synergistically accommodate contradictory elements without being paralyzed by their inconsistency is a precondition for “accepting”

paradoxes. From this perspective, Li’s (2020b) claim that pragmatic paradoxes can be solved by reducing expectations could turn out to be literally correct. Within an organization, such pathological situations can be removed if those managers who issue directives learn to lower their expectations either in relation to subordinates’ capacity for dealing with contradictory demands or in relation to the desire to maintain autocratic control over an organizational unit.

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## Quantum Approach to Organizational Paradox: A Copenhagen Perspective

This paper comments on Tobias Hahn and Eric Knight's (2019) quantum approach to the ontology of organizational paradox. By addressing the problems of their application of quantum physics to organizational paradox research, I aim to move the mainstream thinking on organizational paradox beyond the dominant “both/and” toward a “neither/nor” approach that is the essence of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory. I posit that embracing the “neither/nor” thinking, just like the shift from “either/or” to “both/and,” affords management scholars a much broader cognitive space in which resolving paradox may not be, as the mainstream organizational paradox scholars currently consider it, impossible. In my alternative quantum approach to organizational paradox, any paradox or paradoxical tension is caused by the asymmetry between one's capacity and expectation (ACE), and the principle of paradox resolution is then the reduction of the asymmetry through either increasing one's capacities or decreasing one's expectations, or by doing both simultaneously.

In an attempt to reconcile the debate between the inherent and constitutive (social constructivist) views on the ontology of organizational paradox, Hahn and Knight (2019) applied principles of quantum mechanics to advance a “both/and” synthesis of the debate, arguing that organizational paradox is ontologically both inherent and constitutive. In so doing, they have made a timely contribution to the advancement of “the paradox lens” (Smith & Lewis, 2011). While I appreciate and commend Hahn and Knight's effort to draw our attention to one of the most fundamental issues regarding organizational paradox, I am not convinced by their representation of the thinking pattern of quantum theory and their application of quantum principles of superposition and wave function collapse to organizational paradox. In what follows, I will first explain why the underlying thinking of quantum physics is not “both/and” but “neither/nor”. Then, I will point out the problems of Hahn and Knight's quantum approach, and more precisely, their application of some quantum principles to organizational paradox. And finally, I will propose an alternative quantum approach to