

Applicability of both/and thinking in international sustainable business studies

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Applicability of Both/and Thinking in International Sustainable Business Studies

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to provide a methodological demonstration making use of the both/and thinking (BAT) framework to perform analysis of intertemporal tensions. The BAT framework as an analytical tool is able to holistically examine complex multi-level business problems that involve tensions, contradictions and paradox that could be useful to others. Engaging the BAT framework in international sustainable business studies can be a challenging choice as it requires holistic understanding of the affects in the separation of contradictory elements across time and distance to shape research inquiry and direction. The approach considers that while paradoxes deal with contradictions, as a methodological process it enables a strategy for juxtaposing apparent opposites using an integrative lens embedded in BAT. As such, the use of BAT is discussed using a constructionist approach to gain insight and understanding on surfacing intertemporal tensions exemplified by the socio-business case study that is situated in the chocolate industry. The article draws on BAT primary and sub-themes and discusses implications and applications as a technique to frame the grappling of tensions. The findings are guided by the existing literature and the analysis from the empirical case study providing contributions in practice to further support the use of the BAT framework. Paradoxes examined in this article are based on affects for the themes of organizing, belonging, performing and learning. This article provides understanding of the findings to gain insight from an empirical and theoretical perspective to illustrate the practical implications of the methodological approach. As such, the principles of paradox theory are placed in the context of the BAT framework which are exemplified by making use of the empirical case study data to surface the potential applicability of the approach for future research. This article aims to contribute to the business and management methodological literature by demonstrating the use of the BAT approach and contributes with specificity in relation to the paradox taxonomy and the use of the BAT framework. Despite certain limitations, the BAT framework can be an excellent choice for qualitative sustainable business research that deals with contradictory demands.

Keywords: Both/and, Business, Methodology, Paradoxes, Sustainability

1. Introduction

Organizations experience tensions arising from managing business priorities and socio-environmental interests in flux with one another. Balancing the contradictions shapes the dynamics of the both/and thinking (BAT) approach from Smith and Lewis (2022: 39). We demonstrate its use to gain understanding of intertemporal tensions situated in a case study of the chocolate industry (Gómez, 2023), emphasising the performance and effectiveness of the approach. The insights gained demonstrate practical implications for business practitioners and provide guidance for managers and policymakers grappling with the management of tensions and addressing real-world problems. Our demonstrative case study followed a complex and rigorous research process with some ethnographic elements having unusual access to field data from Costa Rica and Ecuador. The case study enabled understanding of how sustainable business priorities shape social and business case logics surfacing the trade-based tensions in the chocolate industry. As such, the main line of argument rests on how monetary gains in conventional trade treats cocoa as a commodity, affecting the livelihood of the actors in the producing-south nations. Chocolate as a popular and luxury product has over utilized and exploited resources (such as, ecosystems, communities and economic systems). A market-driven decline in resources led by global commodity price setting has expanded the economic divide between the consuming-north and the producing-south nations facilitating neglect of social needs at local levels. Consequent short-term pressures surface tensions for the actors across the chocolate chain making it hard to satisfy both present and future needs of all actors. While some studies have examined paradoxical tensions in practice (e.g., Lewis, 2000; Reinecke and Ansari, 2015; Sharma and Bansal, 2017), we depart slightly to exemplify tensions that arise from actors being in a trade relationship, having a certain role while adopting multiple roles at different levels of primary business activities. We offer methodological insights into the dynamics that actors experience when entangled in a system of paradoxes including, shaping the intertemporal tensions and how these interactions fit within a BAT framework.

2. Methodology

We adopt a constructionist paradigm as in most paradox research, primarily since paradoxes arise when they become salient to those involved in social interactions where contradictions are weighted against one another. Methodologically, the demonstrative case study offers a social construction in the sustainable business trade relationships. As such, we engage the BAT framework developed by Smith and Lewis (2022) and contribute to the use of the framework in such a way that the case study's findings provide early evidence of the way the framework can be applied to evaluate the performance on the use of its components. Making use of the BAT framework and in relation to the case findings and theory, the discussion and analysis outlines the position of: structuring of boundaries to contain the tensions; enabling dynamics to unleash and surface the unknown tensions; shifting to both/and assumptions from the traditional trade-off approach; and, accepting and embracing of the paradoxical tensions. The discussion enables understanding and meaning of a workable strategy in organization (Smith and Lewis, 2011) to value competing demands within sustainable business while honouring their independence (Lewis, 2000).

3. Discussion: BAT Action System

The BAT framework are tools as described by Smith and Lewis that support contribution to theory answering the questions of what, how, why, and who, when, where (Whetten, 1989). These tools include two axes, *context* that deals with the situation of the business case balancing the short-term versus long-term or past, present and future (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Slawinski and Bansal, 2017), and, *people* that enable sensemaking as process to obtain alignment by scanning, interpreting and responding to situations (Hahn et al., 2014). These two axes are divided into two areas each with opposing poles, for a total of four areas. The axis of *context* runs vertically and embraces boundaries and dynamics where the opposing forces of stability and change foster synergies, while the axis of *people* runs horizontally and embraces assumptions and comfort, engaging conflicting poles such as emotions and knowledge. As a system, the axes support a paradoxical BAT approach to manage contradictory yet interrelated objectives that are guided by the context areas of boundaries on how actors approach situations (such as, structuring) and containing the tensions (see Section 3.1), across dynamics related to how actors enable and adapt to practice (such as, experimenting and learning; see Section 3.2), and, assumptions that deal with shifts on how actors think and adopt a both/and approach (such as, knowledge and priorities; see Section 3.3), across comfort, based on how actors feel (such as, discomfort and perspective; see Section 3.4). Following, we make use of the four BAT areas allowing the empirical case findings to emerge and obtain fit within the BAT system through a set of leadership tasks that embeds *context* and *people*.

3.1 Boundaries to Contain Tensions

Business leaders grapple with managing challenges that are inherent of interrelated and contradictory objectives (Smith and Lewis, 2022). A classic example of businesses exploring and exploiting is presented by O'Reilly and Tushman (2008); they investigate the consequences of unique capabilities and the ability of businesses to explore and exploit opportunities at the same time. In our case study, actors made use of exploring and exploiting opportunities to improve products (such as, yield), processes (land management), technologies (payment methods) and systems (pension systems). Informants created boundaries (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Smith and Lewis, 2022) to ensure a balance between the opposing poles is maintained while navigating the tensions. Guardrails allow separation of the interrelated objectives without going too far against one pole or the other. Producers explored increasing tree yield by applying changes to soil management but the experiment was limited to certain trees. While poles can be separated temporarily, tensions were persistent and the contradictions remained since the limited exploration did not allow for exploiting of the resources.

3.1.1 Connecting tensions

Smith and Lewis (2022) suggest connecting the tension of the business by giving individuals a higher-purpose with holistic strategies and creating synergies for linking people and the business case (Smith and Tushman, 2005). In our case study, an informant was grappling with the business case but also the personal case, in that the future success of the plantation was based on the wishes of a close family member that had recently passed away. The informant insisted that enabling success in the business meant keeping the wishes of the family member alive. The informant demonstrated a deep level of personal grief while being content with his business (social-commercial logics). Establishing purpose assists in navigating paradoxes by: providing stimulus for striving with competing demands (Smith and Lewis, 2011), enabling a process of interpreting contradictions

as being interrelated such as “to effectively embrace, rather than avoid, contradictions” (Smith and Tushman, 2005: 533), and providing future orientation to align short-term decisions towards long-term outcomes (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) such as those of society and financial business needs.

3.1.2 Separating and connecting interrelated and contradictory objectives

Embracing contradictions requires separating and connecting interrelated poles in tensions (Smith and Tushman, 2005). This allows a paradoxical frame that treats tensions with acceptance in the business case (Hahn et al., 2014), linking context and people (Smith and Lewis, 2022). In the most challenging situations separation of practices, exploration of independent goals and allowing for different decision processes enabled informants to deal with tensions that were intertwined and at first appeared difficult to separate. Most informants assumed multiple trade roles (such as, being a producer and a chocolate maker). By adopting multiple roles, informants made sense and understood complexity in the value chain to better deal with the tensions and shift from a trade-off approach to attaining balance between multiple objectives. For example, a chocolate maker and a producer negotiated the terms of cacao processing and the quality expected, the chocolate maker was able to communicate expectations to the producer using experience; this enabled her to make sense of the situation by framing the producer’s resources while recasting the methods and obtaining alignment to the expectations as a chocolate maker. This reframing and shift from individual effort to collective problem solving (Smith, 2014) effort allowed satisfying a negotiation agreement in the trade relationship. Adopting multiple positions along the value chain enables actors to embrace and transcend problem solving tensions.

3.1.3 Establishing guardrails

While embracing contradictions requires separating and connecting of contradictory poles, tasks may introduce separation and isolation; pulling the poles apart too far leads to isolating one pole over another. This isolation creates implications that hide “synergies and connections” (Smith and Lewis, 2022: 143) and disables transcending as a process between the imbalances of the polarities (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022) such as, iterations of alternatives of short-term versus long-term objectives (Slawinski and Bansal, 2017) to enable unification of opposites (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Sharma and Bansal (2017) demonstrate a successful approach of integrating opposing poles simultaneously as both/and by exploring the paradox of the business case and social value. In our case study the involvement of children in cacao plantations was of concern. It was admitted that logistic providers require producers to sign a document to participate in the trade process. The logistic provider uses a guardrail to satisfy chocolate makers by having producers sign documents against the use of children working on plantations. The guardrail is a mechanism, in physical form it is the document that contains the attestation text and is signed and dated by the producers. This mechanism, allows logistic providers to purchase cacao from producers with sourcing guarantees to chocolate makers while at the same time reducing the liability and increasing their ethical commitments. However, the guardrail may prove to be intermittent as logistic providers do not, in practice, persistently examine the producers’ practices, rendering the process unenforceable most of the time. In their study, Wilhelm et al. (2016: 43) problematize this practice as “merely ceremonial compliance” since upstream actors may defy the agreed terms of engagement in the relationship. While this guardrail provides a temporary means to manage the tension that is salient, it raises a latent tension, as providing sourcing guarantees for multiple producers, across multiple countries becomes a challenge since the logistic provider is unable to monitor practices in space and time as the number of producers expands in the trade process. Smith and Lewis (2022) suggest engaging stakeholders while setting goals that are relevant to the role of the actors. Theoretically, the diverse actors working together are better at meeting all the sustainable business objectives and avoiding neglecting ones that have future implications.

3.2 Enabling Dynamics

Businesses need tools that create dynamism to unleash the tensions (Smith and Lewis, 2022). Dynamism includes actions that leads businesses towards advantages (O’Reilly and Tushman, 2008) that propels learning (Lewis, 2000) by reducing ambiguity (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; O’Reilly and Tushman, 2008), enables adaptation (O’Reilly and Tushman, 2008; Reinecke and Ansari, 2015; Smith and Lewis, 2011), and encourages oscillation between the competing demands (Hahn et al., 2014; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Hahn et al. (2014) argue that rather than accepting competing demands; the interplay between actors that pivots on awareness of the tensions appears to be of importance, as actors navigate known and unknown tensions to solve conflict between sub-systems, such as lack of economic resources in the present and pension systems for the future of producers. Chocolate makers interplayed salient and latent tensions during experimentation for the creation

of new products (Hahn et al., 2015) reinforcing learning (Lewis; Lewis and Smith, 2000; 2014) in exploring and exploiting opportunities.

3.2.1 Experimenting

Lewis and Smith (2014: 131) suggest that “learning involves experimenting” in a quest to find novelty and capabilities. Engaging current skills in the present while acquiring new skills for the future was challenging for some producers since they sought information from other competing producers. Smith and Lewis (2022) suggest breaking larger steps into smaller and more achievable objectives (such as, learning to make chocolate paste), testing new ideas with low-cost initiatives (such as, testing organic fertilization) and obtaining feedback from others allows actors to move forward from a position of uncertainty towards certainty. Producers and consolidators were observed collaborating on experimenting with tree growth and flowering density patterns. The consolidator provided exploring by researching and sourcing available options that adhered to organic requirements and being of relative low cost, while the producer used his land by segregating a row of trees to apply the compound and monitor patterns with minimal cost. While the tension of exploring and exploiting was active, both informants engaged by up-taking a role in the relationship and the experimentation and managing each opposing end of the tension (*see section 3.1, Boundaries to Contain Tensions*). This experimental activity allowed them to leap from practice and process to learning and adaption, moving towards a stage of preparing for serendipity.

3.2.2 Preparing for serendipity

Smith and Lewis (2022) posit that being open to engage new opportunities unlocks potential for innovation and change through purposeful exploration. Producers grappled with tensions such as finding new ways to improve livelihood to bring back how ‘life used to be’ and trying new ways to derive value from raw material to reduce market pricing dependency. This included driving solutions that involved practice and process while being able to apply learning and adaption. A technical expert recalled the case of a producer unwilling to take advice to improve production yields, yet there is greater emphasis on producing cacao than increasing value-add opportunities for other products that are derived from cacao. Some producers held back while others admitted to be in the process of experimenting to make cacao paste – waiting for serendipity, lacking the practice-process knowledge of a chocolate maker to elaborate a cacao paste. She was engaging the process of learning-to-unlearn by tracing back her steps and recasting the steps over again (Smith and Lewis, 2011) but with a different process formulation. Learning encourages business towards sustainable business as the processes reshapes and enhances understanding by embracing a learning paradox that aims for a better future.

3.2.3 Learning to unlearn

Learning to unlearn is “findings ways to let go of our old mental models to make space for new ones, allowing us more flexibility in navigating paradoxes” (Smith and Lewis, 2022: 191). This allows balancing the acceptance of uncertainties, discarding certainties by making sense of the situation (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Informants’ decisions were made purposefully such as through experimentation and obtaining feedback. Informants were willing to learn and adapt the process to get it right as she stated ‘this is my first attempt, it’s not what I prefer but it’s an opportunity for us to stop working only with the cacao beans’. The informant’s expectations were not met and were realigned and reformulated (Schad et al., 2016). Learning and adapting prepares actors for serendipity. Smith and Lewis (2022) suggest encouraging experimentation by having low-cost experiments, decisions that are based on desired results, and being able to shut-down failure.

3.3 Shifting to Both/and Assumptions

Problems need to be reframed to question the underlying assumptions of how to manage the tensions (Smith and Lewis, 2022), moving from dichotomous thinking (such as, narrow or binary choices) towards integrative approaches that allow both/and thinking (such as, appreciation of contradictions and mutual reinforcement; Smith and Tushman, 2005). These approaches are affected by the extent of the tensions experienced and the extent of adoption of a paradox mindset. Smith and Lewis (2022) suggest that increased tensions are experienced in settings that have faster rather than slower change, higher rather than lower plurality, and faster rather than slower scarcity.

3.3.1 Accepting knowledge as containing multiple truths

Lewis (2000) posits that paradoxical tensions are constructions from actors that are subject to biases. Informants attempted to deal with ambiguities by framing contradictions through a process of alignment of logic that is bounded by knowledge (Smith and Tushman, 2005; Tushman et al., 2011). Chocolate makers were inclined to pay higher premiums to producers if the quality of the cacao was better as it decreases sorting cost and wastage. Producers were not willing to receive feedback from chocolate makers, so while producers want to earn more, the increase in premiums is conditional on the level of satisfaction from the chocolate maker that is willing to provide feedback. This tension exemplifies differences in perceptions and while both producers and chocolate makers may argue to be right about product characteristics, the informants operate with different truths. This suggests that the framing may have inconsistencies and the saliency of contradictions may differ across informants based on different experiences and knowledge. Actors' cognitive frames undergo a process of filtering and explanations of truth are based on experiences as actors attempt to obtain fit when reconciling differences (Smith and Tushman, 2005; Tushman et al., 2011).

3.3.2 Framing resources as abundant

A paradox mindsets view resources in abundance rather than as being scarce by seeking value and opportunity (Smith and Lewis, 2022). Informants grapple with the tension of introducing bioengineered varieties or keeping ancestral trees. Informants considered future yields, however, while weighting the differences in years to come on which tree provides a higher yield, informants came to the conclusion that ancestral tree are healthy and cloning was a proposed solution to resolve the tension, effectively keeping both types of trees – without having to sacrifice the genetic material of one or the other. The tension was temporarily solved by prospectively grafting as a technique; however, while informants attempt to balance certainty against uncertainty, the tension remains persistent without resolve. While scarcity enables triggers that surface latent paradoxical tensions as salient due to resource limitations (Smith and Lewis, 2011); framing resources as abundant rather than scarce, enables possibilities to manage demands in novel ways by redefining resource value (Gladwin et al., 1995; Sharma and Bansal, 2017), including: natural, financial, social, and cultural.

3.3.3 Problem solving as coping

A paradox mindset shifts the approach for the treatment of tensions from a position of controlling to coping (Smith and Lewis, 2022). Controlling implies favouring one pole of the tension over another; while, the other pole is unattended leading to loss of control. This approach is closely related to reduction of uncertainty (Hahn et al., 2015; Slawinski and Bansal, 2017) as actors attempt to gain an understanding of what is going on (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014); however, it is not synonymous with acceptance of unresolvable tensions. Research conducted by Reinecke and Ansari (2015) on temporal brokerage surfaces the tensions from informants of increasing certainty while grappling with unresolved tensions when evaluating suppliers. Informants described feeling a responsibility guided by 'control' to change the conditions of how opportunistic actors operate in the market that pays producers extremely low premiums – polarizing livelihood (Gladwin et al., 1995) and hence contributing to economic exploitation (Crane, 2012). The conventional trade system has allowed for this unresolvable tension to persist over time and control appears to be less than more of an option. Surfacing the tension is the first step to finding balance between the opposing poles Consolidators want closer relationships with producers that do not want intermediaries to retain premiums; when orders are large, they struggle to find product to fill an order, when orders are small, they struggle with the investment to maintain the relationship. As these two tensions are intertwined, tensions are unable to balance. As such, enabling capacity and financial resources will provide balance from decisions that contribute to market practice and premiums benefiting producers.

3.4 Comfort in Discomfort

Smith and Lewis (2022) suggest that finding comfort in being open to tensions also means accepting the discomfort that arises from uncertainty. Informants grappled with the discomfort of price guarantees that spiral from market uncertainty and very low premiums. Producers have switched to growing other crops; yet, producers are not willing to give up cacao since some chocolate makers pay triple the market premiums. This tension creates uncertainty for livelihoods as managing resources to cultivate in the present may not hold value in the future. Acceptance of emotions in dealing with uncertainty by the informants has led towards finding comfort in discomfort in order to accept and respond to competing demands. Smith and Lewis (2022) suggest three tools to address uncertainty and discomfort through acceptance and finding comfort: building in a pause, accepting discomfort, and broadening perspective.

3.4.1 Building in a pause

While a pause enabled informants a moment to reflect and digest the situation at hand, a pause may be triggered by making sense of the situation (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014) and attaining meaning. Some producers have found comfort by evaluating options. Producer decided not to give up cacao but rather to reduce the uncertainty by becoming consolidators. When faced with discomfort, a pause allows for evaluating a situation and making sense at the individual level while enabling a process to move from individual towards collective perspectives. A producer searching for an export market is collectively inclined to provide benefits for the local community, rather than individual self. Comfort comes from collectively addressing the tensions.

3.4.2 Accepting discomfort

Reconsidering the underlying assumptions by building a pause enables acceptance of discomfort while allowing emotions to subside over time. The acceptance of emotions is easier to accomplish with others rather than oneself (Smith and Lewis, 2022). Accepting the discomfort led producers to new ways of thinking. A chocolate maker led a private pension system for workers using natural resources. The informants projected into the future knowing that the government pension would not maintain livelihood. Therefore, the chocolate maker engaged in a project where the financial proceeds are invested in the workers' private pension. The initiative was possible by broadening the perspective and accepting alternative solutions to current economic challenges. Addressing sustainable business trade-based tensions can be done with creative future thinking ideas that use short term gains for different purposes by broadening the perspective and making sense of a possible future.

3.4.3 Broadening perspective

Accepting the discomfort enables shifting from a trade-off approach to achieving multiple objectives through the generation of ideas and alternatives. A chocolate maker described that one of the main concerns of producers is a mindset change, allowing options for the producers to forge a new future. Smith and Lewis (2022) suggest honoring the discomfort by welcoming vulnerability and inviting workers to contribute with solutions to reduce fear, discomfort and uncertainty, and, training leaders with the skills to harness benefits from conflict. The chocolate maker coached to balance the tensions, not by eliminating the conflict, by introducing boundaries to contain the tensions projecting onto a possible future by making sense of past situations in the present.

4. Conclusion

We engaged Smith and Lewis (2022) BAT framework to provide synthesis while adding richness with further support of the literature, and using the system as a technique to frame the grappling of the tensions found in the sustainable business case study of the chocolate industry in hopes to surface greater future research potential. By making use of empirical findings in relation to the BAT system, we contribute to the call for research on naming the tensions and the useful engagement of social-business tensions that deal with institutional logics, as requested by Margolis and Walsh (2003). Having parsed the empirical findings, we offer key observations: guardrails acted as a mechanism that while dealing with salient tensions raised latent tensions in space and time that may be unable to transcend in the longer-term; salient tensions were interplayed to unleash and balance sustainable demands in the business case; latent tensions may become salient by using prospective sensemaking to ground a future that can be lived in the present, yet distant at the moment of reframing; and, accepting comfort in discomfort may lead to reduction of uncertainty, however, broadening the perspective avoids stagnation in the future and encourages the transcending of tensions.

5. Directions for Future Research

From a methodological stance, opportunities exist to better understand trade-based tensions that are specific to sub-systems and shed light on the transition of latency to saliency of tensions and the exploration of models influencing collective approaches to balance the tensions.

6. Limitations and Implications

While our methods use a constructionist approach, this relies on the interpretation of the findings and researcher bias cannot be ignored. The empirical case data originates from a broad and complex multidisciplinary study, much of the data collected took considerable time to process; however, the data was

fact-checked between the informants and were given meaning, increasing trustworthiness by using a rigorous and logical process.

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