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REVISITING ACTION RESEARCH: LEVERAGING PARADOX FOR RESPONSIBLE THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPACTS

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ABSTRACT

As calls for research with practical impact intensify, Action Research (AR) promises to combine scholarly inquiry and organizational change. Yet it faces two key criticisms: limited theoretical generalizability and overly optimistic assumptions about its effects. Drawing on a multi-year AR project, we argue that AR's deep engagement with organizational life surfaces paradoxes—persistent, interrelated tensions central to organizing. These paradoxes offer a double-edged potential: they can yield rich, theory-extending insights or, if mismanaged, produce harmful consequences. We propose a paradox-aware approach to AR, positioning paradox management as a critical methodological practice for generating responsible impact and advancing theoretically meaningful contributions.

INTRODUCTION

Calls for research that meaningfully addresses global challenges—like climate change, inequality, and war—are multiplying (Umphress, Greer, Muir, & Knight, 2021; Williams, Harley, Walls, Whiteman, & Dowell, 2024). In response, Action Research (AR), a collaborative method committed to systemic impact by bridging theory and practice (Lewin; 1946), is regaining popularity. Its methods are participatory and iterative, based on a collaboration between researchers and practitioners to enact change, driven by the belief that understanding a system requires actively transforming it and examining the effects of this intervention (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Coghlan, 2011), thus producing context-sensitive insights (Greco, Nielsen, & Eikelenboom, 2023).

Despite its long tradition, AR remains underappreciated and marginalized in top-tier journals (Zandee & Coghlan, 2025), mostly because its problem-solving ethos is deemed atheoretical and too context-specific to produce valid, generalizable knowledge (Cornish et al., 2023; Hambrick, 2007; Pratt, Kaplan, & Whittington, 2020). A second, less discussed issue, is the possibility that action research may have a dark side, because it may reproduce, rather than challenge an hegemonic status quo, it can stir up conflicts and it can produce unintended consequences (Bartels & Friedman, 2022).

We propose to employ the conceptual framework offered by paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Berti et al, 2021) to consider both these issues, with the intent of enhancing both the potential contribution to knowledge and the positive impact of AR interventions. We argue that AR has a distinctive, inherent capacity to surface and leverage organizational paradoxes—

persistent, interdependent tensions inherent to systems undergoing change (Smith & Lewis, 2011). These paradoxes should not be considered as collateral effects, but as central mechanisms that shape both the research process and its theoretical and practical outcomes. According to paradox theory, paradoxes become harmful when ignored or mishandled (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Greco & Long; 2022); when embraced and adaptively navigated (Luscher & Lewis, 2008), instead, they can trigger generative breakdowns—moments that unsettle taken-for-granted practices and open up new possibilities (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009).

We build on an action research project with a Dutch housing association, a hybrid organization managing the business-society paradox through organizational change (Greco, 2024). Our data show that making paradoxes visible and discussable can enhance theoretical contributions and create responsible, contextually attuned impact. This because, by revealing contrasting polarities and faultlines, and activating sensemaking processes that help actors to cope with them, AR offers the opportunity to surface and understand complex dynamics that can be generalizable beyond the case at hand. Moreover, adopting a paradox perspective can also help surfacing with due care, knowing that lived paradoxes are not just logical conundrums (Berti, 2021), but entail political and identity struggles (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023) and can have pathological manifestations (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Berti & Cunha, 2023). Therefore, our methodological approach aims to support researchers using AR to identify, leverage, and regulate paradox-related dynamics. By doing so, we contribute to three key debates: (1) how AR can generate theory through practical engagement; (2) how paradox awareness can serve as both lens and safeguard in complex interventions; and (3) how to evaluate research impact not just in terms of outcomes, but in terms of who benefits, who bears the cost, and what dynamics are set in motion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Paradox theory posits that interdependent and persistent contradictions are inherent to organizing and best addressed through both-and responses (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Yet paradoxes rarely appear as neat dualities. To organizational actors, they manifest as diverse “presenting dilemmas”—ranging from solvable trade-offs to absurd or unactionable situations (Lewis & Smith, 2022; Berti & Cunha, 2023). Paradoxes are therefore not just cognitive puzzles but lived experiences entangled in identity, politics, and the material practices of organizing (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2023). As such, paradoxes are not merely uncovered, they are enacted, also through roles, structures, and performance metrics (Hahn & Knight, 2021). However, the processes through which latent, underlying tensions that potentially affect organizations are enacted and performed are multiple and not easy to observe (Berti & Cunha, 2023)

Action Research (AR) is uniquely positioned to reveal tensions. Its orientation toward organizational change naturally activates latent contradictions—between continuity and transformation, control and autonomy, consensus and dissensus (Cornish et al., 2023). By disrupting routines and inviting reflection, AR generates breakdowns that bring taken-for-granted assumptions into view (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). Its participatory ethos also draws in diverse voices, often surfacing power-laden conflicts that are embodied, affective, and

historically silenced. For this reason AR holds the potential to generate both locally useful insights (how to harness conflict and tension as a source of desirable transformation) and theoretically generative knowledge (understanding latent tensions and dynamics through their impact on organizational decisions and actions).

However, to deploy this potential, it is essential to recognize and effectively cope with paradoxes. When paradoxes are ignored or misdiagnosed as design flaws or behavioral problems, learning stalls (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Defensive responses—like denying one pole of the tension—may suppress innovation or harm participants (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Paradox salience without adequate support can amplify confusion, stress, or conflict—especially among actors lacking power or cognitive tools to engage them (Berti & Simpson, 2021; Gaim et al., 2021). We argue that AR can benefit from the insights of paradox theory, both to deepen its diagnostic lens and to anticipate unintended consequences. Action researchers must assess how their interventions will surface paradoxes, whether this should be done explicitly or implicitly, and how to support actors through this exposure, while engaging in interventions aimed at visibilizing paradoxes (Tuckermann, 2019), or staging polarities (Greco, Torres, Danaj, & Smith, 2025). We draw on an empirical AR study that explicitly engaged a paradox perspective to illustrate these dynamics and offer methodological guidance. Our aim is to integrate paradox awareness into AR, not just to manage risk, but to unlock its full theoretical and impact potential.

RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHOD

We conducted an action research (AR) project at a Dutch social housing association, hereby named Alpha. This hybrid organization (Mitzinneck & Greco, 2021) manages around 20,000 homes, balancing social goals with financial viability (Pamphile, 2022). It also emerged as a frontrunner in the energy transition, aiming for energy neutrality by 2030 (two decades ahead of national targets). This bold environmental move surfaced growing paradoxical tensions and contradictory outcomes exemplified by tenant dissatisfaction, internal conflicts, financial strain, employee turnover, and critical media coverage. To support a strategic reorientation, the first author began with ethnographic immersion in 2017. Over six months, she shadowed Alpha's strategy team, conducted 35 interviews, and observed tenant engagement events, revealing tensions between Alpha's multiple objectives and logics. These findings catalyzed a participative AR project aimed at a collaborative strategy redesign, co-led by the first author, which included 8 strategy workshops (held over 10 months), involving Alpha's top management, complemented by weekly debriefs with Alpha's strategy manager and co-creation workshops (Sharma, Greco, Grewatsch, & Bansal, 2022). Following the intervention, the first author maintained observations to evaluate changes and collaboratively designed community engagement activities to identify and capitalize on AR temporal impacts (Greco, Nielsen, & Eikelenboom, 2023). This immersive, iterative approach enabled us to theorize how AR surfaces and reshapes paradoxes—highlighting both its transformative potential and its unintended consequences.

RESULTS

The action research process at Alpha revealed a dual dynamic: while it enabled important strategic shifts, it also triggered organizational tensions that were not always productive. On the one hand, the collaborative process reframed Alpha's sustainability goals from a top-down environmental ambition to a more integrated vision that incorporated social equity and tenant needs. This reframing led to the launch of several new initiatives, including a "future house" to support tenant engagement and cross-departmental working groups that explored new models of inclusive refurbishment. The process also fostered a more reflexive organizational culture, where frontline staff and managers began to question inherited assumptions and experiment with alternative narratives around sustainability. At the same time, making organizational paradoxes salient proved risky. Several employees, particularly those in departments not initially included in the strategy workshops, experienced increased frustration and disengagement. For some, the heightened visibility of tensions between social, financial, and environmental priorities felt overwhelming and destabilizing. These reactions were not just individual responses but reflected deeper positional asymmetries in how different actors could engage with paradox. We observed that actors' responses to paradox varied based on their power, professional background, and framing. Some embraced the complexity and used it to drive innovation. Others felt disempowered or exposed by it. In a few instances, paradox salience unintentionally intensified conflicts. These divergent responses led us to develop a typology of engagement with paradox—highlighting how individuals may experience the same tensions as opportunities, burdens, or tools of control. Critically, we found that paradox visibility alone was not sufficient for transformation. Without adequate reflexive capacity and organizational support, efforts to surface tension risked causing more harm than insight. These insights shaped our emerging model for paradox-aware action research.

DISCUSSION

Our study shows that paradoxes are not just byproducts of AR; they are its inherent feature. When surfaced and engaged with care, paradoxes become catalysts for both theoretical insight and responsible organizational transformation. They expose the limits of taken-for-granted assumptions, prompting inquiry into the deeper structures and logics that shape organizational life. Our research shows that paradoxes offer a generative space for theorizing: they reveal how actors navigate persistent tensions between competing goals, such as sustainability and affordability, or learning and control. This process surfaces patterns that transcend local context, enriching theory with grounded complexity. At the same time, paradoxes also signal risk. When ignored or mishandled—especially by those with limited agency—they can create harm, amplify conflict, or entrench dysfunction. To harness paradoxes without doing harm, we propose a paradox-aware approach to AR. This includes early diagnosis of latent tensions, continuous monitoring of participant responses, and a deliberate exit strategy that does not abandon

unresolved conflict. Rather than treating tensions as noise or obstacles, this approach positions them as signposts—markers of deeper dilemmas that, if worked through, can unlock both learning and innovation.

By positioning paradox not as a byproduct but as a generative force at the core of AR, we argue that embracing its tensions is essential—not only for cultivating richer theory but also for ensuring that our scholarly interventions are as responsible as they are relevant.

ENDNOTES

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