

Can a Paradox Approach Bridge Polarization?

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Professional Development Workshop

Can a Paradox Approach Bridge Polarization?**Balancing Rationality, Emotions, and Actions**

Primary sponsor: OMT

Possible Co-sponsors: CM, MOC

As polarization—the division of opposites into extremes—increasingly disrupts business and society, organizational scholars seek approaches to bridge the divides it engenders. Paradox theory, with its tradition of integrating competing perspectives, offers promising pathways for navigating polarization. However, its underpinning raises critical questions: Can paradox theory address the deep interactional, positional, and affective roots of polarization, or does it risk reducing the complex interplay of rationality, emotion, and action to overly simplistic—or even naïve—frameworks? Amid rising conflict and polarization, paradox theory’s call to embrace opposing viewpoints warrants re-evaluation. By bridging insights from conflict management and paradox scholarship, this PDW aims to examine avenues to manage polarization within organizations. Targeted at OMT, CM, MOC and related divisions, this PDW fosters productive discussions on paradox and polarization. Part 1 of the session will feature expert panelists in paradox and conflict management who will share theoretical and practical insights and explore key questions, such as: What are the implications of paradox research for addressing societal polarization? What are its limitations in balancing rationality and empathy, and how do these limitations affect individuals and society in polarizing contexts? How are current efforts to address polarization creating more divides than bridges? In Part 2, participants will engage in interactive workshops in round tables, applying their own research, brainstorming solutions and future research directions while fostering safe, empathy-driven dialogue. The interdisciplinarity of this PDW appeals to a broader audience interested in tensions, contradictions, and polarization in organizational settings.

Organizers:

Angela Greco, TU Delft, Netherlands (a.greco@tudelft.nl)

Eriselda Danaj, Macquarie University, Australia (eriselda.danaj@mq.edu.au)

Panelists:

Ella Miron-Spektor, INSEAD, France

Julia Bear, Stony Brook University, U.S.A.

Josh Keller, University of New South Wales, Australia

Linda Putnam, UC Santa Barbara, U.S.A.

Oana Brindusa Albu, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark

Discussant:

Marco Berti, NOVA University, Lisbon

WHY WE BELIEVE THIS WORKSHOP SHOULD BE OF INTEREST TO THE PROPOSED SPONSORING DIVISIONS

We are asking the OMT, CM, and MOC divisions to sponsor this workshop, given the prominent position of paradox scholarship and its tradition of contributing to several of these divisions core themes. Similar PDWs on the cross fertilization of paradox theory and other disciplines have attracted hundreds of participants over the past years. This year's PDW might attract an even larger audience by exploring how paradox theory can inform polarization. By integrating theoretical rigor with practical relevance, the workshop aligns with **OMT's** mission to advance insights into organizational dynamics, addressing contemporary challenges, and appealing to members from diverse disciplines. Competing demands are inherent to the modern workplace, and studying tensions extends beyond paradox scholarship, offering opportunities to engage with adjacent fields for mutual learning and development. This PDW brings together some of the best scholars contributing to related literatures, in particular the **CM** division (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2024), and the **MOC** interest group (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). Indeed, this PDW will interest CM and MOC division members given the connections between paradox theory and conflict management at interpersonal and organizational levels, such as balancing competition and collaboration (Fousiani et al., 2021), conflict intensity and entrenchment (Weingart et al., 2015), and managing negotiation impasses (Schweinsberg et al., 2022). Paradox navigation is rooted in sense-making and emotions (e.g., Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Pradies, 2022) key to inform the study of decision-making, cognition, and learning in complex, polarized contexts. We are confident that the quality *and* diverse backgrounds of our panelists and table facilitators will ensure participation and foster constructive dialogue for the members of the proposed divisions, and beyond.

WORKSHOP FORMAT

Time (min)	Activities: Part I
0-5	<p><i>Welcome and Program Outline</i></p> <p>Angela Greco</p>
5-45	<p><i>Panel Discussion: Opportunities and Dangers of Paradox in Bridging Polarization</i></p> <p>Josh Keller, University of New South Wales, Australia</p> <p>Julia Bear, Stony Brook University, U.S.A.</p> <p>Linda Putnam, UC Santa Barbara, U.S.A.</p> <p>Oana Brindusa Albu, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark</p> <p>Ella Miron-Spektor, INSEAD, France</p>
45-60	<p><i>Synthesis and Food for Thought</i></p> <p>Marco Berti, NOVA University, Lisbon</p>
60-65	<p><i>Takeaways</i></p> <p>Eriselda Danaj</p>
65-75	<p><i>Break</i></p>
75 – 135	<p><i>Research Incubator: Small Group Discussions</i></p> <p>Josh Keller, University of New South Wales, Australia</p> <p>Julia Bear, Stony Brook University, U.S.A.</p> <p>Linda Putnam, UC Santa Barbara, U.S.A.</p> <p>Oana Brindusa Albu, Copenhagen Business School, Denmark</p> <p>Ella Miron-Spektor, INSEAD, France</p> <p>Marco Berti, NOVA University, Lisbon</p> <p>Eriselda Danaj, Macquarie University, Australia</p>
135 – 140	<p><i>Concluding remarks</i></p> <p>Angela Greco</p>

WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

Polarization has been identified as one of the most pressing societal threats, with ideological differences cited as a primary driver in advanced economies (World Economic Forum, 2024). Defined as the division of opposites into extreme, antithetical positions (Kayser, Seidler, & Johnson, 2017), polarization often leads to the loss of a middle ground and efforts to negate the opposite poles. As polarization increasingly challenges business and society, such as inducing distrust in institutions, organizations, and between ethnic groups—as seen in US elections, the Middle East conflict, or gender dynamics in South Korea—its effects extend beyond societal structures, profoundly influencing organizational dynamics and decision-making processes. Factors like the use of social media at work, diversity and inclusion efforts, and calls for politically active CSR further blur the boundaries between societal and organizational polarization.

As business and society grapple with ideological divides, paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011) offers a compelling lens for understanding and navigating these tensions. The theory has expanded significantly in recent years (Pradies, Pina e Cunha, Rego, Tunarosa, & Clegg, 2022; Sparr, Miron-Spektor, Lewis, & Smith, 2022), and paradox scholars are increasingly turning their attention to the complexities of polarization (Greco, Torres, Danaj, & Smith, 2024; Kayser et al., 2017; Putnam, 2024, Stephenson, 2024). Paradox theory's emphasis on managing competing tensions, such as rationality and emotion or unity and diversity, positions its theories, tools, and approaches as uniquely suited to tackle the multifaceted challenges of polarization. Yet, applying paradox theory to polarization raises critical questions: Can it address the emotional and systemic roots of societal divides, or does it risk oversimplifying these challenges? How can scholars integrate insights from related fields, such

as conflict management, into paradox research to offer actionable solutions? How can organizations leverage the healthy aspects of polarization while containing its negative impacts? Despite the detrimental effects of polarization, its perpetuation may provide psychological comfort for many, as it allows individuals to rationalize deeper tensions by fostering a sense of belonging through the delineation and opposition of an "other" side (West & Iyengar, 2022). This phenomenon, known as affective polarization, emphasizes emotional and identity-driven divides beyond mere ideological disagreements. Individuals often develop strong in-group biases, leading to negative perceptions of out-groups, which exacerbates societal polarization (Kish Bar-On, Dimant, Lelkes, & Rand, 2024). Paradoxically, this comfort may entrench polarization further, complicating paradoxical approaches by enforcing superficial tension management and undermining their depth, efficacy, and transformative potential. In light of growing conflict and polarization, we believe that paradox theory, which traditionally advocates for embracing opposing perspectives in pursuit of transcendence, needs to be revisited. While embracing competing goals and perspectives can foster dialogue, inclusion, and innovation, in highly polarized societies, emotionally charged experiences often hinder such dialogues from taking place or may even lead to counterproductive outcomes.

This PDW aims to advance these conversations by fostering dialogue among paradox scholars and broader communities studying polarization. It seeks to create a space for rigorous discussion and actionable strategies for addressing polarization in both research and practice. We invited a panel of renowned scholars with expertise in paradox theory and polarization to share their insights, challenges, and research practices.

We will first introduce our panel and delineate the goals of the workshop. Then, for Part 1 we will invite each panelist to give a brief presentation on a specific polarization angle based

on theoretical and practical insights from their particular areas. Next, our discussant will reflect on the shared experience of the panelists, and provide additional insights on the theoretical and practical challenges of studying and advancing polarization. In Part 2, participants are invited to join a round table discussion on ongoing questions and projects on polarization with the aim to craft a shared set of research avenues that will be shared planarly at the end of the workshop. The participants will be asked to apply their own research to key questions collectively prepared with the panelists, and highlighted by the discussion in part 1. Building on the feedback received in past years' PDW on paradox, Part 2 will remain open to all Part 1 workshop participants, regardless of whether they have an ongoing project they want to share. This allows junior scholars who may not have developed (yet) a project on paradox but could still benefit from the small group discussions. The format includes several round tables that will provide participants with the opportunity to engage in smaller group discussions and exchange ideas regarding issues raised by both panelists and participants. The main objective of the second part of the workshop is to invite everyone to think practically and translate the learning points from Part 1 into actionable research practices.

Part 1: Opportunities and Dangers of Paradox in Bridging Polarization

The choice of panelists was made with two goals in mind: (1) to expand the application of paradox theory – while challenging its limitations – in addressing polarization through interdisciplinary perspectives, and (2) to provide participants with theoretical and practical expertise on how polarization can be understood and studied. Part 1 of our workshop seeks to foster exchange, learning, and reflection regarding polarization in a time in which paradox as a field is expanding, pushing the boundary conditions of paradox theory, and engaging in interdisciplinary dialogs with adjacent scholarly communities.

We will start with **Ella Miron-Spektor** (INSEAD), who will speak to the issue of balancing rational and emotional responses of individuals and teams in polarized society. She will share insights from her recent work on how a paradox mindset facilitates bridge-building in polarized societies. This includes findings on the impact of contact circles in polarized organizations, highlighting their influence on participants' paradox mindset, identity, and well-being. Additionally, she will discuss research showing how team members with a paradox mindset enhance their team's confidence and performance amidst disruptive, polarizing conflicts. Adopting a paradox mindset enables the reappraisal of emotional reactions in polarized situations and fosters the pursuit of synergistic both/and solutions. She will also discuss the boundary conditions that limit the effectiveness of a paradox mindset in coping with polarization. Next, **Julia Bear** (Stony Brook University) will discuss the ways in which theories of conflict and negotiation relate to paradox theory, and how considering these theories together has both theoretical and practical implications for understanding polarization. Her expertise will shed light on how understanding the cognitive and affective dimensions of conflict, as well as related constructs including avoidance, entrenchment, and impasses, can enhance paradox theory's capacity to address polarization, fostering pathways that balance competing perspectives while navigating deeply entrenched divides. **Josh Keller** (University of New South Wales) will shift the discussion to an individual perspective of polarization, juxtaposing macro-level grand challenges with the lived experience of polarization within organizations. By exploring the interplay between micro-level dynamics and systemic tensions, Keller's insights contribute to a deeper comprehension of polarization's roots and potential strategies for mitigating its impacts in organizational contexts. Next, **Linda Putnam** (University of California, Santa Barbara) will bring a communication perspective to the workshop, focusing on discursive practices that align

opposites with moral orders, entangle tensions in knots, and push poles to extremes. Using examples from essays on paradox and the pandemic, she will show how knotted tensions amplify, escalate, and interweave in ways that silence voices and paralyze actions. Then, drawing on conflict framing and collaborative negotiation, she will explore the dynamics of unified diversity that create novel relationships and liminal spaces between extremes. These reflective practices and collaborative dialogue, in turn, illuminate pathways for transforming divisive narratives into constructive engagement. In this way, she will show how paradox theory can be leveraged to transcend boundaries between extremes, situate poles in a new relationship, and develop third spaces for connection in polarized situations. In relation to this, **Oana Brindusa Albu** (Copenhagen Business School) will bring a critical organizational lens to the workshop, emphasizing the role of digital technologies and mediated interactions in shaping polarization. Her work explores how organizational communication and digital platforms can both amplify and mitigate polarizing dynamics, highlighting the paradoxical nature of technology as a tool for connection and division.

Following the panel discussion, our discussant, **Marco Berti** (NOVA University), will tackle the challenges and opportunities of paradox theory in navigating polarization. He will connect the different perspectives offered by the panelists and offer a number of ideas to fuel part 2 of the workshop, paving the way for future scholarly advancements.

Although each of our invited scholars will address specific limitations and opportunities of paradox in navigating polarizing contexts, together, they will present a holistic perspective to help the audience identify opportunities for advancing research.

Part 2: Research Incubator

The research incubator will focus on providing opportunities for brainstorming, validating ongoing research designs, and boosting the development of new research on polarization. The invited scholars will first introduce the main arguments that will be discussed in each table, and allow participants a few minutes to make their choice. Each roundtable is thought as a research incubator, hence the facilitators will challenge participants to go beyond theoretical discussions and engage in brief exercises and/or concrete examples on implementing the lessons learned from Part 1. Participants are recommended to join with a preliminary research idea, but that is not a pre-requisite. We will collect the main insights in a report that we will share with all participants after the workshop, hoping that it will prompt them to continue the conversation in different formats, beyond the workshop. We aim to create an open and friendly space conducive of exchange, hoping that it will spark future collaborations that harness the potential of paradox in advanced approaches to tackle polarization.

AGREEMENTS TO PARTICIPATE

We have received email statements from all intended participants agreeing to participate in the entire workshop, AND that these participants are not in violation of the Rule of Three + Three.

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APPENDIX

Short-bio of Panelists, Table Facilitators, and organizers

Ella Miron-Spektor is a Professor of Organizational Behavior and the INSEAD Dutch Alumni in Leadership, Diversity and Governance Fellow. She is broadly interested in how individuals and teams innovate and learn and how they cope with tensions and competing demands. Her work has been published in top management and psychology journals, including *Organization Science*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Academy of Management Annals*, *Academy of Management Discoveries*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior*

and Human Decision Processes, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, and Harvard Business Review.

Julia Bear is Professor of Organizational Behavior at Stony Brook University. Her research focuses on gender and negotiation, as well as understanding gender gaps in organizations more broadly. Her research has been published in top management and psychology journals and books.

Josh Keller, is Associate Professor and UNSW and his primary research interest is studying how managers respond to strategic paradoxes, including how to cooperate and compete, how to learn new endeavors and take advantage of knowledge of existing endeavors, and how to be both global and local. He also examines cross-cultural differences in approaches to paradoxes. His work has been published in multiple top-tier managerial journals, including *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, *Human Relations* and *Organizational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes*.

Linda L. Putnam is a Distinguished Research Professor Emerita at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research interests include paradoxes and contradictions, negotiation, organizational conflict, and organizational discourse analysis. She is the co-author of one book, co-editor of thirteen books, and author/co-author of over 200 articles and book chapters. Her articles appear in such journals as *Academy of Management Annals*, *Human Relations*, *Organization Studies*, *Strategic Organization*, *Negotiation Journal*, *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, and *Communication Monographs*. She is a fellow of the Academy of Management and of the International Communication Association, a distinguished scholar of the National Communication Association, a recipient of life-time achievement awards from the International Association for

Conflict Management and *Management Communication Quarterly*, and a recipient of Honorary Doctorates from the University of Montreal in Canada and Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland.

Oana Albu is Associate Professor at Copenhagen Business School (CBS). She is also a research fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies (Sweden). Dr. Albu's research focuses on critical management, social movements, and emerging technologies. Her research interests revolve around how different actors navigate tensions and paradoxes resulting from the use of emerging technologies for communication and organization. Dr. Albu is Associate Editor at the journal *Management Communication Quarterly*. Dr. Albu is Vice Chair of the Organizational Communication Division of the International Communication Association. Dr. Albu's research is published in peer reviewed international research outlets such as *Organization*, *Business and Society*, and *Management Communication Quarterly*.

Marco Berti is Professor of Management at Nova SBE (Portugal). He was previously Associate Professor at UTS Business School (Australia), where he is ongoing visiting scholar. He joined academia in 2015, after a 20+ years international career as a management consultant specialized in organizational development and strategy. He earned his Ph.D. in Organization studies at University of Technology Sydney. His research focuses on organizational complexity, including navigating tensions and paradoxes, organizational power dynamics, and on emergent forms of organizing. His research has been published (among other journals) in *Academy of Management Review*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Studies*, *Academy of Management Learning and Education*.