Contradictions, Dialectics, and Paradoxes as Discursive Approaches to Organizational Analysis

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Organizational Discourse Studies

- Discourse—study of texts, intertexts, and discursive practices in organizational life
  - Language, symbols, and material features
  - Texts as patterns or constellations of language, interactions across time and space
- Not just a research method or technique
- Focuses on what discourse is doing
  - How discourse constructs interactions, actions, and organizational practices?
  - How text, intertextuality and materiality interface in patterned ways across time and space and contexts?

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Purpose of Talk

- Define contradictions, dialectical tensions, and paradoxes as discursive processes
- Overview theoretical threads and roots of this work
- Examine steps for doing analysis of tensions in organizational setting
- Analyze relationships and families that develop among tensions
- Use example of real estate negotiation to illustrate analysis of contradictions and tensions
- Examining the ways organizational actors manage tensions and contradictions

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Defining Contradictions, Dialectics, and Paradoxes

- **Contradiction** — co-existence of opposites, often socially constructed as incompatible

- **Dialectical tensions** - opposites exist in a struggle and are pitted against each other

- **Paradoxes** — double binds, polar opposites reflect back on each other

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Theoretical Perspectives

- Dialectical materialism—(Marx, Hegel, Benson)
- Dialectics of control (Giddens)
  - Constraining and enabling aspects of society
  - Unintended consequences of choice points in managing the dialectics
- Deconstruction—poststructuralist (Derrida, Hall)
Theoretical Perspectives

- Pragmatic paradoxes--double binds, logical types (Bateson)
- Literary and symbolic approaches--contradictions, irony (Burke, Booth, Brown)
- Dialectical tensions--relational dialectics and dialogue (Bakhtin, Baxter & Montgomery)
Analysis of Dialectical Tensions

• Centers on oppositional discourses, texts, and intertexts
• Centers on the tensions
  – Push-pull between opposites
  – Choices for managing the push-pull
  – Ways these choices co-constructed systems of meaning
Explicit Oppositional Tensions

- **Explicit contradictions**--mixed messages
  - “Make your own decision by following what I want you to do.” (independent-dependent)
  - “I want merit based on individual work, but teams are the source of productivity.” (individual-team)
  - “We need union solidarity to oppose management, but our union leadership is out of touch with its membership.” (united-divided)
Implicit Oppositional Tensions

- **Implicit Tensions** — unarticulated poles; one pole is expressed, the other implicit; requires seeing patterns across words, phrases, and texts
  - Attack vs. defend — “defending the profession is the first priority of the profession” “there are relentless attacks of a hostile management group”
  - Fight vs. surrender — “surrender will reduce our ability to preserve our profession,” “a strike on this issue is worth the fight”
Steps in the Analysis of Oppositional Tensions

• Follow a hunch or a puzzle
• Identify the type of opposition patterns
• Characterize the relationships among the tensions
• Diagnosis how actors and organizations respond to the tensions
• Interpret interrelated findings
Follow a Hunch or Puzzle

- **Punch**—the discursive equivalent of significance; “that’s interesting,” “something is going on here”
- **Puzzle**—the unusual patterns that pose inquires and require investigation
  - What is the attack against the pilots and who led it?
  - How does the absence of an explicit counterargument from union leadership or from management help create an “attack”?

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Real Estate Pre-Negotiation

• Telephone conversation between two real estate agents (Kate—buyer’s agent and Frank—seller’s agent)

• Offers and counteroffers, buyer qualifications

• Buyer’s underlying issues
  – Possession—before closing, before loan approved
  – Appraisal—$65,000 or lower
  – Points—seller pay 3.5 pts at time of loan application
Real Estate Pre-Negotiation

• Proposed deal
  – Buyer pay closing cost, VA tax, title policy, $67,275
  – Seller allow buyer take possession before loan approved, agreed to pay 3.5 pts. at the time loan approves

• Overall characterization
  – Cooperative and integrative
  – Language of flexibility
Puzzle or Hunch

• What is the risk and how risky is this potential deal?
• How is risk enacted?
• How do oppositional tensions and the management of them play into interaction control and discursive closure?
Identify Discourse Patterns of Opposition

• Find words, phrases, texts, and/or actions that stand in opposition to each other
  – **Inductive** — emergent, grounded, constant comparison across texts, arises from the discourse
  – **Deductive** — linked to concepts and theories, preexisting categories of opposites
    • Control-resistant
    • Stability-Change
    • Autonomy-Connected
Real Estate: Discourse Patterns of Opposition

• The meaning of risk is negotiated through interactions that frame types of oppositional tensions
  – Certainty vs. uncertainty
  – Loss vs. gain
    • Slow vs. fast
    • Negotiable items vs. nonnegotiable items
Problematic of Risk

• *Frank*--Huh, hh heh heh. Well? What uh- (clears throat) possession before loan approved huh?

• *Kate*--You know I don’t normally like that, Frank, but I just feel real comfortable that there shouldn’t be a problem in the world on their being approved on their loan
Certainty vs. Uncertainty

- **Enacting certainty** — repetition, use of adjectives ("real," "solid,"), talk overs
- Kate: I’m Real real comfortable about their qualifying
- Frank: (throat clear) Won’t have any problems ‘un qualifying?
- Kate: [Oh, he’s been with] the same company for seventeen years.
- Kate: Y’know seventeen years with the same company.
- Kate: uh, they’re solid. I feel Real comfortable in that.
Certainty vs. Uncertainty

- **Enacting uncertainty** — pronoun shift to the agent, use of hedges, nervous laughter, one-word question, “What?”

- **Frank:** we’d have tuh, we’d the problem would be you know if for some reason something did go wrong with the loan then we’d have a lot of back tracking to do cause you know heh, heh, heh …that could get pretty hairy. (hedges and nervous laughter)

- **Kate:** But I, the only problem I see is the house appraising out (topic shift) I think he’ll put some money down.
Identify the Type of Oppositional Pattern

• **Simple contradiction**—(*either-or choice*)
  meaning systems that instantiate opposites as incompatibilities, e.g., dark vs. light, men vs. women

• **Dialectical tensions**—(*both-and choice*)—hold opposites together; both poles are essential; retain the push-pull tension; hold them together

• **Paradox**—(*impossible to choose between poles*)—reflexive relationship between bi-polar pairs; become entrapped; damned if you do, damned if you don’t
Type of Oppositional Tensions

- **Simple contradiction** — logical oppositions; Kate persuading Frank to go with certainty
- **Loss vs. gain** — Kate— “you know we’re gonna lose if we don’t get a loan application tomorrow”
  - **Fast vs. slow** — Frank— “so you need to do it fast?”
  - **Folding fast into gain and slow into loss** — Kate— “we’re gonna lose ahh hopefully we can get the credit report ordered. We’ve lost; I don’t know if we can afford to lose that much time.”

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Analyzing Relationships among the Tensions

- **Co-occurring tensions**
  - *Family of tensions* — embedded and nested
  - *Hierarchical relationships* — nested relationships develop ordering pattern
  - *Knotted relationships* — multiple tensions become entangled, woven together, like a bowl of spaghetti
Relationships Among Tensions

- **Family of tensions** — interrelated and informing each other; reaffirming each other
  - Low vs. high risk
  - Certainty vs. uncertainty
  - Gain vs. loss

- **Hierarchical relationships** — nested tensions; fold into each other; define each other
  - Gain vs. loss
    - Fast vs. slow
    - Nonnegotiable vs negotiable
Non-negotiable vs. negotiable

Gain is rooted in defining issues as non-negotiable; naming of issues

Kate: And because it’s the VA, the seller has to pay the discount points

Frank: What?

Kate: Because it’s the VA the seller has to pay the points.

Kate: We can’t work around that.
Diagnosis How Actors and Organizations Respond

- **Selection** — denial, selection of one pole
- **Vacillation** — separates poles but deals with each in turn
  - Source split
  - Time split
- **Reframe** — transcend opposition, frame as compatible; rename; shift frames
- **Withdrawal** — avoid choice, can create double bind
Managing the Contradictions

• **Selection** — select one pole; reject the other
• Pit one pole against the other—certainty vs. uncertainty
  – Fold one pole into the other—slow into loss and fast into gain
  – Engage in discursive closure to make one pole salient positive and the other negative
    • Slow=loss; uncertainty is loss
    • Fast=gain; certainty is gain

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Drawing Conclusions

• Producing *pseudo-certainty* — parties minimize high-probability information and accented certainty claims

• Use of simple contradictions to close off other possible interpretations

• Uncertainty framed as certainty; slow folded into loss; fast into gain; nonnegotiable into gain
  – Emphasis on loss framing made bargainers engage in high risk-seeking patterns
  – Deal favored the buyer
Drawing Conclusions

• Enacting a different negotiation
  – Embrace dialectical tensions -- Frank hold onto uncertainty and develop ways to define the certainty-uncertainty in tandem
  – Reframe – challenge Kate’s framing of the situation
    • Emphasize the seller’s needs
    • Discuss the property itself
    • Suggest other issues for negotiation
General Conclusions

• System of concertive control
  – Enacting the locus of power
  – Silencing Frank in terms of co-developing the deal
  – Revealing how tensions become layered in families of relationships and hierarchies that sediment them in interactions

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Importance and Use of Analysis

• **Oppositional tensions** — a key to understanding our postmodern world
  – Fragmented and ever-changing organizations
  – Age of paradox and ironic outcomes
  – Rooted in struggles among opposites
  – Can be used for both micro and macro analysis; interface both
  – Able to decipher underlying roots of problems

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