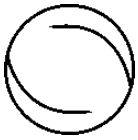

Article

Organization Studies
2017, Vol. 38(3-4) 433–462

DOI: 10.1177/0170840616640846
www.egosnet.org/os

We Have To Do This *and* That? You Must be Joking: Constructing and Responding to Paradox Through Humor

Paula A. Jarzabkowski
City University London, UK

Jane K. Lê
The University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract

This paper adopts a practice approach to paradox, examining the role of micro-practices in shaping constructions of and responses to paradox. Our approach is inductively motivated. During an ethnographic study of an organization implementing paradoxical goals we noticed a strong incidence of humor, joking, and laughter. Examining this practice closely, we realized that humor was used to surface, bring attention to, and make communicable experience of paradox in the moment by drawing out some specific contradiction in their work. Humor thus allowed actors to socially construct paradox, as well as—in interaction with others—construct potential responses to the multiple small incidences of paradox in their everyday work. In doing so, humor cast the interactional dynamics that were integral in constructing two response paths: (i) **entrenching a response**, whereby an existing response was affirmed, thereby continuing on a particular response path, and (ii) **shifting a response**, whereby actors moved from one response to paradox to another, thereby altering how the team collectively responded to paradoxical issues. Drawing on these findings, we reconceptualize paradox as a characteristic of everyday life, which is constructed and responded to in the moment.

Keywords

humor, strategy-as-practice, ethnography, paradox, practice theory, contradiction

This paper was inspired by an observation we made a few months into our ethnographic study of a telecommunications firm beset with paradox: people make a lot of jokes about paradoxical conditions. We increasingly found ourselves sharing things participants had been laughing about, as we

Corresponding author:
Paula A. Jarzabkowski, Cass Business School, City University London, 106 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8TZ.
Email: Paula.Jarzabkowski.1@city.ac.uk

checked in with each other after fieldwork. For example, one particular day, managers were working with the paradoxical tensions occasioned by trying to implement a joined-up technology across divisions that had to maintain strict structural separation to comply with regulation. Tensions were running high as they discussed a *piece robot* technology that might get around the problem without co-locating their engineers. Suddenly, laughing, one of them suggested that what they really needed was a *peace robot* to help settle the tensions between them in trying to do their jobs in this paradoxical structural context. The others in the meeting quickly joined the joke, laughing and making peace signs in the air, insisting the peace robot should be included in the resulting action plans. Laughing, the team leader agreed and the meeting progressed with a better will to work with the paradoxical conditions to implement the joined-up technology. Sure enough, there was a humorous picture of a robot with a peace symbol on its chest and doves on its shoulders in the action plans, which occasioned further laughter at the next meeting.

Revisiting our notes, we often found ourselves chuckling at such humorous incidents. These managers were dealing with paradoxical and often directly conflicting goals, delivering complex technological tasks under tight deadlines to meet a strategy mandated by the regulator, with very tough penalties for failure; so, *why* were they so funny? Our interest piqued, we began considering the role of humor in paradox, particularly for those actors who perform paradoxical roles and tasks as part of their everyday work. The origin of this paper is thus inductive, building from our initial observation (see also Whiteman & Cooper, 2011).

Paradox is a pervasive characteristic of organizational life. Most organizations contain interrelated elements that seem consistent in isolation but incompatible or contradictory in conjunction (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011), such as differentiation and integration or exploitation and exploration (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Smith, 2014). For example, managers must devote resources to exploring new opportunities while exploiting existing opportunities, taking care not to cannibalize their current sources of revenue (March, 1991; Smith & Tushman, 2005). While equally important, such goals often involve conflicting strategies and use of resources, and so are difficult to implement simultaneously. However, in organizations navigating complex strategic landscapes, such paradoxes are becoming ever more "prevalent, challenging and consequential" (Smith, 2014, p. 7; also Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011).

While paradox creates challenges for organizations, whether a paradox has positive or negative effects depends on how it is constructed by actors and their responses to it, rather than its innate properties. Studies have demonstrated that paradoxes may elicit a range of responses within organizations (e.g. Abdallah, Denis, & Langley, 2011; Beech, Burns, de Caestecker, MacIntosh, & MacLean, 2004; Clegg, Cunha, & Cunha, 2002; Jay, 2013; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Lewis, 2000; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, less attention has been paid to how such tensions are actually constructed in the micro-interactions through which people *perform* their contradictory tasks and roles (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Yet these micro-interactions within which actors socially construct paradox are likely to be consequential to their responses and, hence, to how the paradox will be played out within the wider organization. That is the focus of this paper. Specifically, we examine humor as a means of socially constructing paradox that shapes the way actors formulate and legitimate their responses to that paradox.

Adopting a practice approach (e.g. Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Jarzabkowski, Balogun, & Seidl, 2007; Nicolini, 2009; Whittington, Molloy, Mayer, & Smith, 2006), we suggest that paradox will most likely be experienced in people's everyday interactions around work tasks, as it manifests through contradiction in their roles and activities (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Paradox is embedded in the everyday actions and interactions of actors (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), and reflected in their micro-practices, such as the humor that was so prevalent in our case. Indeed, humor, with

its documented role in working with contradiction is theoretically relevant for illuminating how people construct and respond to paradox (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993; also Martin, 2004). We therefore ask: (1) *How does humor construct paradox within everyday work*; and (2) *How do these constructions shape the responses that actors make to paradox?*

We explore these questions in a salient case of paradox: the tension between market and regulatory demands experienced by a telecommunications company as it separated its distribution network and its retail assets. Such regulated but publicly traded companies operate in a paradoxical environment, in which regulatory requirements mitigate the market power afforded by their structural advantage of owning the distribution network on which their competitors must rely (Marcus & Geffen, 1998). Using a real-time longitudinal, observational study, we show how managers construct and respond to paradox in their practice. In particular, consistent with our inductive approach, noticing a strong incidence of humor, jokes and laughter around paradoxical tasks, we analyzed the way that managers construct and respond to paradox through their everyday practice of humor. Our findings show that humor is central to the interactional dynamic in which actors (i) construct paradox within any particular task; (ii) formulate their responses to that paradox; and (iii) legitimate that response. Furthermore, we found that humor is an important enrolling mechanism, as actors co-construct the paradox in ways that either further entrench existing responses or generate the context for shifting these responses. Our work thus provides a central contribution to understanding the paradoxes of performing within which actors formulate their responses to paradoxes, and show how these are both shaped by but also shape paradoxical conditions that might have originated at organizational or environmental levels.

Theoretical Framing

Paradox as a pervasive characteristic of organizational life

Organizations are inherently paradoxical, filled with "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 382). Paradoxes, ever-present across multiple levels (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000), are generally categorized into four types: organizing, belonging, performing, and learning. At the macro-level, paradoxes of *organizing* exist between the numerous subsystems that must act independently within an interdependent overarching organizational system (Clegg et al., 2002; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Smith & Lewis, 2011), occasioning parts/whole tensions between structure and action (Clegg et al., 2002), and between organizational stability and change (Abdallah et al., 2011; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). At the meso-level, actors experience paradoxes of *belonging* arising from different divisional and group memberships, loyalties and identities, often working towards different visions of success and failure (Jay, 2013) that are difficult to reconcile (Lewis, 2000). At the micro-level, people experience paradoxes of *performing* through opposing roles and tasks (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith & Lewis, 2011), which are driven by complex goals and differentiated units (Denis, Langley, & Rouleau, 2007; Jarzabkowski & Fenton, 2006; Smith & Lewis, 2011) but manifest in contradictory interpretations and actions as actors perform their work (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Embedded in and reaching across these paradoxes is the paradox of learning (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), based in the need to both build on and destroy the past to move forward (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Naturally, there are ramifications across these different levels as actors and organizations attempt to cope with paradox (e.g. Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jay, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). In this paper, we take a practice approach (Feldman & Orlikowski 2011), focusing primarily on the paradox of performing as it plays out in the interaction between actors in their everyday work.

Table 1. Repertoire of Responses to Paradox.

Response	Definition
Splitting*	A response that involves separating contradictory elements either temporally (dealing with one, then the other) or spatially (compartmentalizing elements into different areas or groups)
Regression*	A response that involves returning to past understandings or actions
Repression*	A response that involves denial, i.e. blocking awareness of paradoxes and subsequent tension
Projection*	A response that involves transferring paradoxical elements or tensions to a scapegoat
Reaction Formation*	A response that involves focusing on only one element by excessively engaging in practices aligned with that element and opposing the other element
Ambivalence*	A response that involves quick but marginal compromises
Acceptance*	A response that involves understanding contradiction, tension and ambiguity as natural conditions of work
Confrontation*	A response that involves bringing tension to the fore and critically discussing it
Transcendence*	A response that involves altering or reframing thinking to see elements of the paradox as necessary and complementary (both/and thinking)
Suppressing**	A response that involves dominating or overriding one element of the paradox while fostering the other
Opposing**	A response that involves parties working to each side of the paradox asserting their own needs, despite evidence that these would oppose the needs of the other party and occasion head-on confrontation
Adjusting**	A response that involves recognizing that both poles are important, interdependent and have to be achieved

*Original responses from Lewis (2000).
**Responses added by Jarzabkowski et al. (2013).

The literature has identified a number of responses to paradox (e.g. Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). These responses are generally clustered according to largely negative or positive implications, such as defensive, avoidance-based responses that, at best, provide short-term relief from paradoxical tension, or proactive responses that try to deal with paradox on a longer-term basis (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). For example, defensive responses reported include splitting, regression, repression, projection, reaction formation, ambivalence, suppressing, and opposing (see Lewis, 2000; also Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Proactive responses reported include acceptance, confrontation, transcendence, and adjusting (see Lewis, 2000; also Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). These responses are explained in Table 1.

Irrespective of type of response, responding to paradox is an iterative and dynamic process that actors negotiate as they experience situations as paradoxical, often shifting from one response to another (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Indeed, as paradox is a persistent underlying or endemic condition of organizations (Lewis, 2000), it is neither possible nor desirable to resolve the paradox; rather, paradox requires *ongoing* response (Abdallah et al., 2011; Smith & Lewis, 2011). People in organizations enact this ongoing process within their everyday practice (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013).

We therefore argue that the existing focus on responses, while insightful, has two limitations. First, it tends to overlook the social construction within which such responses are formulated and that, hence, must be a precondition of any response. Yet paradox is avowedly social in its construction (Benson, 1977; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987), necessitating greater focus on the

particular interactional dynamics within which paradox is constructed and how this shapes responses. Second, while paradox creates challenges within organizations, neither it nor actors' responses to it are inherently good or bad. Studies suggest that the impact depends very much on how paradox is constructed (Hatch, 1997; Jay, 2013). Contradictory elements are always present, lying dormant or becoming salient according to how they are constructed at particular moments within organizational processes (Werner & Baxter, 1994). Indeed, the very purpose of hosting contradictory elements is to take advantage of their co-presence and levy mutual benefits (Lewis, 2000; Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015; Thompson, 1967), even where this also occasions tension. Hence, it is important to shift from a primary focus on responses to paradox to understanding how these responses are constructed within everyday practice.

Practice lens: Ongoing micro-responses to paradox

A practice theory approach conceptualizes paradoxes as continuously unfolding as actors construct and respond to paradox within ongoing interactions (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Nicolini, 2009; Seidl, 2007). These everyday interactions bring paradoxes into being, giving them salience and invoking responses (Dameron & Torset, 2014; Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2011). We therefore focus in this paper on paradoxes of performing, which is where people experience paradox in their everyday roles (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

While the responses to paradox identified in the literature may be large decisive actions—for example, decisions to restructure the organization, develop new organizational units, or pursue a different strategy—a practice perspective suggests that responses may also be constructed within micro, everyday actions. For instance, the response of splitting (Lewis, 2000), which involves separating paradoxical elements, may comprise compartmentalizing different goals into different divisions. However, splitting may also be accomplished by asking someone to leave a meeting when sensitive information s/he should not be privy to is discussed or by not answering a phone call from someone with whom one should not have contact (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Similarly, the transcendence response (Lewis, 2000), which involves altering or reframing thinking to see paradoxical elements as complementary (Bartunek, 1984), may involve changing incentive and reward systems, or it might simply involve someone juxtaposing the goals in discussion during a meeting (Hatch, 1997; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007). Thus, many of the reported responses may be formulated within quite micro social constructions that have been somewhat obscured by the focus on more overt decisions or organizational-level responses.

Yet, small responses matter. Indeed, a practice perspective suggests that these smaller responses carry critical importance because the organization is ultimately a culmination of what people do (Nicolini, 2009; Schatzki, 2010). For example, strategic goals can only be reframed successfully if actors enact them in their everyday practice (Balogun & Johnson, 2004, 2005; Rouleau, 2005). That is, while the reframing necessary for transcendence of paradox (Bartunek, 1984; Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004) can occur at any level, transcendence itself can only occur when it is enacted in practice. We thus need greater focus on the actions and interactions of people in organizations.

At this micro-level, responses will be shaped by the way people construct paradox. For example, "reaction formation" (Lewis, 2000) may be born out of frustration, as people cannot reconcile or balance contradictory elements, and—in an effort to avoid this frustration—choose to focus on only one element of the paradox. While such undercurrents are touched upon, existing literature does not lay bare the dynamics of how people, through the way they socially construct paradoxes, come to accept, confront or transcend them.

However, there is some empirical support for the existence and importance of micro-elements of response to paradox. For instance, Beech et al.'s (2004) study of the UK National Health Service

show how playful managerial action enables actors to keep paradox open rather than attempting to close off an essentially irresolvable condition. Such playful actions are consequential in changing responses, as the authors note; "it is not necessarily the case that radically different actions are undertaken… rather playful actions can be simulacra of mundane actions in which there is a transformation of meaning that enables a transformation of taken-for-granted boundaries of behavior" (Beech et al., 2004, p. 1328). Other studies demonstrate how actors' sensemaking about paradoxical outcomes, such as how they define success and failure, can enable them to combine organizational means and ends in new ways, resulting in the emergence of innovative practices (Jay, 2013); and that leadership practices supporting both sides of the paradox through domain-specific and integrative roles sustain attention to strategic paradoxes over time (Smith, 2014).

Constructing and responding to paradox through humor

These few studies of micro responses to paradox suggest that it is constructed through rhetorical (Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007) or discursive interactions (Abdallah et al., 2011) that exploit the ambiguities present in contradictory contexts (Sillince, Jarzabkowski, & Shaw, 2012). Playful or humorous interactions are an important part of this everyday practice. For example, Beech et al. (2004) highlight the prevalence of playful interaction in keeping conversations about paradox open, while Hatch (1997) demonstrates the recursive relationship between humor and contradiction. In particular, Hatch (1997, p. 283) suggests that ironic forms of humor "constitute contradictory realities and encourage switching between them… it can support stability and change as contradictory realities and may even help us to understand the paradoxical relationship between them that has been commented upon by other researchers (e.g., Quinn and Cameron 1988, Van de Ven and Poole 1988)." Indeed, humor is noted to be dualistic (Berger, 1976; Hatch, 1997; Martin, 2004), enabling the juxtaposing of otherwise incongruous or contradictory elements and so allowing for them to be re-conceptualized as both/and rather than either/or.

Building on this work, we suggest that humor, as a key means through which actors construct paradox, is a critical micro-precursor to shaping the responses that are also socially constructed. In other words, humor is instrumental in both constructing paradox and, hence, in responding to paradox. From a practice perspective, such constructions and responses may occur within the moment, all within a single utterance or interaction, as an actor constructs the paradox through humor and, in doing so, generates the context in which different responses may be discussed and legitimated.

So, what do we already know about humor and its association with paradox? Despite receiving significant research attention, humor remains poorly understood and variously defined (Cooper, 2008; Holmes, 2000). This is at least partially because, being easier to describe than define, "humor does not lend itself easily to definition" (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993, p. 505). Yet, definitions are important for consistent empirical identification. We therefore define humor as "utterances…intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants" (Holmes, 2000, p. 163; see also Cooper, 2008; Hay, 2000; Holmes & Marra, 2002). This definition operationalizes humor by facilitating the identification of "instances of humour…on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues" (Holmes, 2000, p. 163) and is consistent with a practice-based approach to the discursive construction of organizations (for a review, see Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara, 2014).

Existing theories propose three main reasons for humor: incongruity, superiority, and relief (Monro, 1954). Incongruity theories suggest that humor is a response to ambiguity, irrelevance, impossibility, inappropriateness, or surprise (Hutcheson, 1750; Kierkegaard, 1846; Martin, 1987; McGhee, 1979; Monro, 1954; Morreall, 1987; Schopenhauer, 1818). Superiority theories suggest humor arises from a "sudden glory" felt in recognizing superiority over others (Bergson, 1911; Hobbes, 1651; Pascal, 1660; Gruner, 1997). Relief theories suggest humor relieves nervous energy,

describing it as a tension-release mechanism (Freud, 1905; Spencer, 1860). The organizational literature on humor adds a fourth purpose, whereby humor performs a "social function," for instance, establishing group boundaries and identity (Lynch, 2010).

These reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and multiple, often simultaneous, purposes of humor may exist (Holmes, 2000). Indeed, humor could fulfill all four purposes in constructing paradox. First, paradox is characterized by contradiction (Lewis, 2000), which may be seen as impossible or inappropriate. Thus, humor can signal the recognition of paradox (see also Hatch, 1997; Martin, 2004). Next, paradox tends to be compartmentalized into different organizational units or actors (Lewis, 2000; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989), each of which may view their elements of paradox as superior and seek to assert this superiority, for instance, humor might act to suppress one element of the paradox (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). Further, as paradox is often associated with tension (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000), humor might be one way to relieve or make less threatening such tension (Hatch, 1997). Finally, humor may facilitate social processes (Lynch, 2010) within the context of a paradoxical setting by either bonding people in different groups together or enabling them to solidify their separateness.

The literature on organizational humor has produced some interesting results that have implications for the way that constructing paradox might shape actors' responses. As "workers enact humor to negotiate and navigate their emerging organizational lives" (Lynch, 2010, p. 128), it is central to their everyday practice. Humor does not remove the paradoxical condition, which is by definition irresolvable, but provides a moment of playful or stress-relieving interaction (Collinson, 2002; Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993; Martin, 2004; Yovitch, Dale, & Hudak, 1990), within which actors have the potential to either reproduce *or* transform their response to organizational paradoxes (Dixon, 1980; Lynch, 2010). In short, "humor is more than a coping device in order to do your job; it is a means through which the workers actually make sense of and perform their organizing role" (Lynch, 2010, p. 154), including performing paradoxical roles and tasks.

Indeed, humor is "capable of revealing the nature and substance of paradox… [and thus offers a] means to address everyday experience in organizations" (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993, p. 505). For instance, Hatch and Ehrlich (1993), in their study of a management team, find that humor demonstrates the recognition of paradox. Furthermore, humor is a way to deal with multiplicity and contradiction that goes beyond the tools available in serious discourse (Mulkay, 1988). In permitting the recognition of contradiction, it may contribute to acknowledging and sustaining paradoxical states (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993). Martin (2004) draws similar conclusions in her study of female middle managers struggling with paradoxes of identity, in particular how to reconcile being female and being managers. She shows women using humor to negotiate their identities and reframe situations; "by turning a provocative and offensive statement into a slightly ironic or nonsensical expression, the worker shows, in subtle and unobtrusive fashion, a fresh, balanced perspective" (Martin, 2004, p. 342). In short, humor assisted the women in blurring boundaries between their roles, transcending paradox, and negotiating new meanings.

Humor as a micro means of socially constructing paradox is central to our understanding of responses to paradox. Yet surprisingly few studies have examined the link between humor and paradox. That is the focus of this paper. Based on the above literature review, we address two theoretically informed research questions: (1) *How does humor construct paradox within everyday work*; and (2) *How do these constructions shape the responses that actors make to paradox?*

Method

As is common in practice-based interpretive research, we use a single in-depth case study to examine the phenomenon of interest. We first contextualize our study by describing the case setting,

then review our data sources, and finally outline the rigorous analytical process we followed to arrive at our findings.

The case organization

Our study follows the case of Telco,[1] a regulated but publicly-traded European telecommunications company implementing a complex new strategy with inherently paradoxical elements. Such major restructuring efforts offer opportunity to observe salient paradoxes (Abdallah et al., 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jay, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Seo & Creed, 2002; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Indeed, the complex nature of the new strategy meant that Telco struggled with paradoxical tensions between regulatory and market goals. On the one hand, the strategy incorporated regulatory elements. Specifically, it responded to a new government requirement of granting all industry players fair access to the Telco distribution network. This was a major strategic and structural change involving three key elements: (1) creating a new independent business division, Distribution, which would house all distribution network assets and personnel and act as an independent supplier to industry; (2) trading all Distribution products on a fair and equal basis by separating all the complex products and services Telco offered through its integrated value chain; (3) changing existing working practices and relationships between Distribution and other Telco divisions to make these fair and equal to those between Distribution and industry, as Distribution could no longer share commercial information nor allow its decision-making to be affected by overarching Telco commercial objectives. In essence, to meet regulatory goals Telco had to virtually disintegrate its value chain by unbundling products and services, relationships, processes, and practices that crossed divisional thresholds. If it failed to do so the consequences were severe: it would be subject to a government inquiry and fines for unfair trading; and it might be required to actually sell its Distribution assets or division.

At the same time, the strategy incorporated market elements that were often contradictory with or even in direct opposition to these regulatory goals. Telco was a key market player in telecommunications, holding the largest market share for all key telecoms products/services. Telco had maximized its previously integrated value chain, leveraging its ownership of the distribution network to offer a differentiated service package that made it the market leader for quality service. Telco thus had an interest in ensuring that the restructuring improved or at least did not adversely affect its service offering, which would be difficult while relinquishing control of the distribution network. A key part of the strategy was therefore to implement the regulatory requirements for fair and equal trading without negatively affecting the ability of internal divisions to compete on service differentiation in the marketplace. Despite these paradoxical goals of commercial service differentiation and regulation-based fair trading being contained in different divisions, they clashed frequently as actors from different divisions interacted to implement the restructuring.

Data sources

We collected real-time longitudinal qualitative data over 24 months as Telco implemented the new strategy. Our main data comes from non-participant observation of meetings in which the implementation team came together to oversee the process (N=71): Implementation Board. Implementation Board was a serial meeting that took place approximately every two weeks, more frequently if needed. These meetings were typically two hours long and attended by middle and senior managers across all Telco divisions and the corporate center. We took extensive notes during observations and also produced full verbatim transcriptions of the meetings from audio recordings. Implementation Board meetings were appropriate to study because the purpose of the meeting was

to implement the new paradoxical strategy and, consequently, meetings brought together representatives from both sides of the paradox. This forms our core data source for the purposes of this paper; all data extracts and analysis come from these 71 meetings. However, in order to contextualize paradox and humor, we also draw on a larger dataset consisting of additional meeting observations, 125 interviews, 16 days of job shadowing, documents, interactions, feedback sessions, and social functions. While these data do not feature explicitly in our analysis, they necessarily inform our interpretation, as they provide a deep knowledge of the case.

Analysis

In order to make sense of our meeting data, we engaged in an iterative analytic process. First, we wrote a *chronological case story* of the strategy implementation in Telco (Langley, 1999, 2007), employing a thick description mode of analysis (Geertz, 1973). The case story captured the unfolding interactions between actors and provided evidence of paradoxes by identifying contradictory yet interrelated elements of implementing the new strategy (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Having been selected specifically for its paradoxical condition—expressed through simultaneous commercial objectives to exploit the competitive advantage afforded to it by its integrated value chain and regulatory objectives to mitigate this competitive advantage by providing equivalent access to network products and services to other telecoms companies (Marcus & Geffen, 1998)—our context was rife with micro-examples of paradoxes of performing. For instance, the structural separation caused contradictions in performing tasks and roles because divisions *had to collaborate* on the tasks for some regulatory deliveries, yet regulation sometimes *prevented them from collaborating* (see also example 4 below). These paradoxes of performing continuously surfaced throughout our period of observation.

Second, as we were interested in better understanding how micro-practices construct paradoxes of performing and responses to such paradoxes, and humor had been identified as a prominent micro-practice linked to paradox (see also Hatch, 1997; Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993; Lynch, 2010; Martin, 2004), we *identified all episodes of humor* in the meeting series. We used the following definition as the basis for identifying humor: "Instances of humour […] are utterances which are identified by the analyst, on the basis of paralinguistic, prosodic and discoursal clues, as intended by the speaker(s) to be amusing and perceived to be amusing by at least some participants [other than the speaker]" (Holmes, 2000, p. 163; text in brackets added). This meant that text was only coded as humor if: (a) it was clearly intended to be humorous by the speaker, as indicated through changes in intonation, pitch, volume, language use, smirks, etc.; and (b) if at least one person other than the speaker audibly smirked or laughed (see also Hatch, 1997). The definition thus excluded all purely accidental or situational incidents that were perceived as humorous, e.g. technological failures or linguistic slips. However, if such failures or slips spurred additional intentional joking by participants that met our criteria, these were included in the corpus of data. Consistent with our definition, we only analyzed those humor episodes that were perceived to be humorous by someone other than the originator because "the absence of laughter indicates a lack of group involvement in the production of the humor" (Hatch, 1997, p. 279). However, if self-appreciated jokes were then followed by additional humor from others, these were also included in the corpus of data. As is common practice in humor research, we used deep field immersion and peer debriefing to authenticate our observations of humor (see Lynch, 2010). We also noted that many of the humorous topics were touched upon and joked about in subsequent meetings and interviews, indicating that they were indeed perceived as humorous by participants, thereby acting as informal member checks. Further, being sensitive to possible cultural influences on understandings of humor, we noted that the participants in our meeting were all born in the same country and were

long-term participants within the telecoms sector in that country, many in Telco. Their easy and frequent laughter thus conveyed their familiarity with the cultural mores of humor within this national, industry and company context.

We applied Hendry and Seidl's (2003) concepts of initiation, conduct, and termination to demarcate humor episodes. A humor episode began when a humorous comment was issued and at least one person other than the speaker responded with amusement (i.e. s/he laughed or smirked). The episode ended when the conversation reverted to "normal" discussion for at least 60 seconds, meaning it no longer conveyed humor. If another episode followed some time later, this would be coded as a separate humor episode. Following this method produced a list of 889 humor episodes across the set of 71 meetings.

Third, we *checked each humor episode for evidence of performing paradoxes*. We used three important mechanisms as signals for the presence of paradox. Our first indicator of paradox was linguistic clues (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993), such as language of opposites, contradiction, and contrast. Our second indicator of paradox was emotion such as frustration, anger, and urgency, which might reflect the moments of tension often associated with paradox (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jay, 2013). Our third indicator was developed abductively by continuously moving between our data and the literature (Locke, Golden-Biddle, & Feldman, 2008) to compare our incidents of paradox with those previously suggested in the literature. Though our detailed empirical material necessarily meant that our evidence was more nuanced than existing categories of responses (see also Jay, 2013, on service paradox), we found that 57% of the humor data (N = 507) could be categorized as linked to paradox. In addition, we found relatively generic humor (43%; N = 382). This "generic" humor included humor related to workload, personal teasing, weather, etc. As this type of humor could occur in any context and was not specifically relevant to paradox, we excluded it from our analysis. The analytic database we use for this paper thus consists of 507 humor incidents specifically associated with paradoxes of performing, grounded in the paradoxical tension between regulation-based equivalence goals and market-based service goals, as these representative examples show:

Carl reports on the Connectif delivery. It is "red" or "at risk" because there are ongoing concerns about the capacity to handle operational service issues despite the need to continue increasing product uptake to meet equivalence deadlines.
Jack (outraged): "…they have pulled the [feature] and have absolutely no right to do it…"
Sally and Max smirk "…That's the story on Connectif. And now we're going to have to red-status all our Connectif capability into additional product spec, equivalent spec, that can be bought by Wholesale and others" (**switches tone from serious to absurd**) "…Basically we've got a product that's equivalent, which can't be made to work" **John and Trevor laugh loudly**

In this snippet, the actors position the regulatory goal of having an equivalent product against the market goal of having a product that works. Here the use of the word "can't" presents doing both things as an impossibility; they can *either* have a product that is equivalent *or* a product that works. Language use thus signals paradox. Similarly, the "red" or "at risk" status also signals the urgency and tension associated with paradoxes of performing. Further, we see an expression of emotion through Carl's outrage over the issues. Of course, sometimes the paradoxes of performing were acknowledged more subtly, as the following example shows:

Fritz says they explained the problems they have on a specific delivery to the regulator and raised the possibility of a modification request. The regulator didn't react adversely.
Fritz: "When we raised the wonderful issue (**sarcastic**) around the delivery and said

"whoops, we're about to f-ck up again". Yes, that is a technical regulatory term…" Jody **laughs** "…I did it fairly low key, asking would they consider some modification. They didn't immediately say…"
John: "…'in your dreams'…" **Snigger**
Fritz (**amused**): "…'in your dreams, you're in breach [of regulation]!' I don't think for a moment that this means they're going to accept it but what they did say was 'you put in a written request and we'll consider it'. Which, quite frankly, I think was obviously [due to] the skill with which I raised the prospect." **Sally laughs**
Jack (**sarcastically**): "I think it is all based on the major success of delivering Connectif three month late!" **Jack, Sally, John, Fritz, and Eric laugh riotously**

In this extract, managers foreground the difficulty associated with balancing paradoxical goals, which is not easy and can lead to failure. Using crass language as is done here when Fritz says they will "f-ck up" acts to highlight such tensions. The phrase "in your dreams" further expresses the ridiculous nature of the situation: the need to stringently adhere to regulatory requirements means they cannot collaborate over ways to separate without disrupting service, which in turn leads to delays in delivery that mean they fail to meet the regulatory timetable. As these examples show, humor episodes are innately embedded in the context in which they occur. Therefore, in the findings we present each humor episode within its surrounding context to enhance understanding of the specific paradoxes of performing in which it occurred.

Fourth, we *examined humor incidents for how they constructed paradoxes of performing*. Like others (see Hatch, 1997; Martin, 2004), we found that humor constructed paradoxes in different ways. By surfacing, bringing attention to, and making communicable paradox in the moment, it allowed people to draw out specific contradictions in their work and position them in certain ways. For instance, paradoxical elements could be positioned as mutually exclusive either/or propositions, whereby achieving one element necessarily means not achieving the other (see example 3). A different humor incident might construct paradoxical elements as held in enduring tension (see example 2), while at another time, humor might construct certain issues as creating (see example 4) or exacerbating (see example 1) existing tension. Thus, through humorous interactions, people in organizations co-constructed paradox in a way that set the interactional context for how they responded to paradox in their everyday work.

Fifth, we *coded humor against known responses to paradox* (see Table 1; see Lewis, 2000; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Smith & Lewis, 2011). We found that constructions of humor were largely associated with responding to paradox, alerting us to the fact that responses are not reified as agreed ways of dealing with paradox that actors then implement. Rather, in their humorous constructions, people respond to paradox on an ongoing basis as part of the mundane performance of their roles. This finding made sense for two reasons: (1) since Implementation Board was charged with the implementation of the new strategic initiative, which advanced paradoxical goals within the organization, its job was very much to respond to paradoxical conditions; and (2) since responses to paradoxes of performing occur at the micro-level as part of regular work, these responses are mundane, fluid, and pluralistic. That is, people might iterate between different responses at different times, from accepting a paradoxical situation as a "fait accompli" (example 4), to confronting the paradox by engaging senior managers in improving the conditions that are causing tension (example 4), to projecting tensions onto a scapegoat by ridiculing the internal audit team (example 1).

Sixth, we revisited humor episodes, *carefully comparing and contrasting humor*, in order to *establish patterns in how humor constructed responses to paradox* in everyday practice. We found that humor was involved in two different paths of responding to paradoxes of performing in everyday work: entrenching and shifting. In *entrenching*, humor reinforced existing responses to

paradox as appropriate. In *shifting*, humor facilitated a move from the existing response to paradox to a different response. We found that it was not the response per se, that mattered, as any type of response could be either entrenched or shifted. Rather, the way in which humor constructed the paradox was the *explanatory mechanism* for whether a response might become entrenched or be shifted. Critically, we found that each humor episode created an enrolling interactional dynamic that did three things: (i) construct paradox within a particular task; (ii) formulate a response to that paradox; (iii) legitimate that response within the actions that people took. Humor episodes that entrenched an existing response were consistent with and affirmed an existing response pattern, while humor episodes that shifted a response created a moment of disruption to an existing response pattern—whereby the interactional pattern was to ridicule, problematize, or question the existing response, followed by formulating and legitimating an alternative response. The interactional pattern shaped by humor is thus critical in responding to paradoxes.

Our iterative analysis enabled us to understand how actors formulate responses to paradoxes of performing through the micro-practice of humor, within their everyday work. By bringing paradox to the surface and socially constructing it in interaction, humor shaped the interactional context of organizational members and therefore laid the foundation for potential responses, including shifts in responses. Indeed, in shaping and shifting responses in-the-moment, humor affected the way that managers collectively responded to paradoxical issues through their actions. This *in-the-moment construction* of paradox is thus a critical part of responding to paradoxes of performing.

Findings

We now provide four representative examples that explain how the construction of paradox and responses to paradox emerge within humorous micro-interactional dynamics that result in either *entrenching* or *shifting* patterns of response. We offer two examples of each to demonstrate that these are not isolated examples but, rather, representative of the broader corpus of data in which they are embedded. Our illustrations begin by providing the context for each humor episode. Next, we present the interactional dynamics contained in the humor incident in rich detail. We then outline how the humor incident constructed a specific point of paradoxical tension. Finally, we explain how this laid the foundation for either the entrenchment of, or a shift in, the response to paradox. While we separate these elements analytically in order to offer a clearer illustration of the dynamics we wish to illuminate, these dynamics are entwined in practice. That is, actors engaged in humor, construction of paradox, and construction of response simultaneously in their everyday work, rather than approaching these in the ordered linear that we use as an analytic and presentational device.

Entrenching Response to Paradox

The construction of humor through paradox often reinforced existing responses, entrenching them as the "right" way to respond and maintaining continuity of response. Any response could be entrenched through humor. We now provide two representative examples.

Example 1: The 28 MB audit submission

Humor episode. This humor episode took place two weeks after the first major regulatory deadline, some six months into the implementation program. The deadline mainly concerned the delivery of one specific product (Connectif), which was jointly delivered by Wholesale and Distribution. The delivery was ambitious and difficult, as it involved the separation of products, systems, services, and relationships formerly shared between divisions, which had to be reassembled in a new way so that the Distribution division could provide Connectif on an equivalent basis to Wholesale and

competing Service Providers (SPs). Connectif was a key market product, used by virtually every Telco customer, and thus hugely visible and important—both for Telco and for the communications market more broadly. Telco had to deliver this major product restructuring to tight deadlines, while safeguarding service levels for existing customers. While project managers believed they had met this delivery, significant paradoxical tension arose between the regulatory goal to deliver the new products as quickly as possible in order to correct an existing market non-equivalence and the commercial goal to progress slowly enough to maintain high service levels.

In addition, as with all changes mandated under the new regulatory framework, independent internal auditors would audit the Connectif delivery. Telco was responsible for demonstrating that it had met its regulatory requirements. This meant that the Connectif delivery had to be documented to prove that the equivalence requirements were met, including providing specific detail about product, technology, and process changes, to demonstrate that Telco would have no unfair market advantage either through the redesigned product, or the systems and processes used to deliver it. This involved considerable work in what was already a very tight delivery. Members of the Implementation Board were working evenings and weekends to keep up with the workload. To compound the issue, the internal auditors were known to be exceptionally picky about success criteria and to make onerous information requests, even for "goodwill deliveries" that were not legally mandated or areas that were exempt from regulation altogether. This quickly earned the internal auditor the title of "the enemy within." The humor episode that follows is set within this context.

Sally is reporting for Distribution; she is talking about the amount of work the internal audit function is creating and, in particular, the size of some of the files she is sending the internal audit team to provide evidence that they have met the equivalence deliveries on Connectif. Internal audit is seen as interpreting the equivalence requirements too strictly, being non-pragmatic and creating additional work. Indeed Implementation Board members often blame the internal audit function for tension between equivalence and service goals.

Sally: "We are about to submit our audit files…" (**smirk**) "…28 MB of zipped files."

John: "28MB of zipped files?" (**laughs**)

Sally: "No, no, no. The 28MB of zipped file is only the Connectif audit…"

John: "Alright. Sorry."

Sally (**amused**): "So, I've got 28Meg of zipped—within zipped—files."

Carl (**smirks**): "2.3 forests apparently." **Wendy laughs loudly**

John (**amused**): "Did we mention that we're sending copies of the success criteria to them on paper (**emphasized**). Have you got it there, Bob?"

Sally: "Just make sure it's in a Distribution van!" **Sally laughs, John sniggers**

John (**smiling**): "Yea. This is the Wholesale one." **He throws the document on the table with a thud. Sally laughs**. "And it's just the highlights." **Sally laughs**. "That's not all of it."

Fritz: "Sounds like they're gunna need all those extra people then." **Sally laughs**

Bob (**smirking**): "There were 740 pages of process diagrams, but I left them off." **Wendy and John giggle**

John (**feigning incredulity**): "What? I thought they'd enjoy those." **John, Sally and Bob laugh loudly**

Jack (**amused**): "Wow—That's almost as much as Sally sent!"

Sally (**cynically amused**): "And I have gone for quality, not quantity, Bob." **Wendy laughs**

Andy (**to Bob**): "Oh—right—Got [the diagrams] whittled down to six."

Fritz: "Actually, I'm not sure [the auditor] has even read that." **Fritz laughs**

Andy (**insisting**): "Oh, no, he has." **Andy and Fritz laugh** "He has!" **Andy and Simon laugh** "I've checked (**deeply emphasized**)." **Wendy laughs**

30 Fritz: "Oh. Good! I want him to read every single piece that Wholesale sends. Of this
31 huge, huge report." **Wendy, Andy, and Graham laugh**.
32 *They turn to discussing the actual delivery more seriously, again making it clear that they*
33 *have met the requirements of the delivery. They then move on to discuss other deliveries.*

Constructing paradox: Highlighting that audit exacerbates paradoxical tension

In this episode, humor constructs paradoxical tension between the regulatory goal of delivering quickly to correct an existing market non-equivalence and the commercial goal of progressing slowly to maintain good service. Specifically, it constructs the audit function as exacerbating tension by taking resources away from delivering "real" regulatory or commercial outputs—in this case the Connectif product—thus making it more difficult to achieve both regulatory and commercial goals. Indeed, paradoxically, the regulatory requirement for audit was a structural mechanism that actually inhibited the commercial and regulatory requirement to deliver the product. Humor thus constructs the tension in a familiar way that is consistent with existing practice (L5–6). Sally's humor emphasizes and makes seem incredible the volume of evidence being submitted for the audit (L8, 10, 12). Picking up on this dynamic, others support her through further humorous remarks about how much information is being sent to the auditor (Carl, L13; John, L14; John, L17; Jack, L24; Fritz, L30). Sally jokes that, as the auditor is known to be picky, they must make sure the audit is delivered by the appropriate division in a branded vehicle (L16), thereby further proving to the auditor that they are kept separate. Her joking makes this idea—and the auditor itself—sound ridiculous. Fritz adds to the ridicule by indicating that the audit team is relatively overstaffed (L19), implicitly contrasting with this team, which works overtime to keep deliveries on track. He also suggests that their work is futile because the auditor will not read the submission (L27), at least not without prompting (L28–31). This interactional dynamic constructs the paradoxical tensions of performing these tasks as challenging and, because of new structures implemented, such as internal auditing, often quite absurd. In their humorous talk, actors share and co-construct their frustration with such structural demands and the way these exacerbate tensions over performing in a paradoxical context. This construction aligned with their existing pattern of responding to paradoxical tension as something exacerbated by the auditor (L5–6).

Constructing response: Entrenching projection

Our example shows some of the important micro-dynamics through which humor reinforces an existing response to paradox, in this case engaging in *projection* by blaming the internal audit function for the tension (L1–6). Humor—through its construction of paradox and legitimation of the response—reinforces this response, making it acceptable to continue to ridicule and scapegoat the audit team, thereby entrenching projection as a response. Specifically, in line with their existing responses (L5–6), Implementation Board members project blame onto the internal auditors for the tension between equivalence and service goals, implying that their task would be easier without the internal audit's overly strict interpretation of equivalence and evidence that they are meeting its requirements (L1–6; also L16–19). Humor socially constructs the absurdity of the audit requirements and so legitimates members' projection of their feelings of tension onto the audit function (L8–13). Sally's construction and projecting response establishes an interactional dynamic in which other managers can join in the projecting response (Carl, L13; John, L14; Jack, L24). In reinforcing this projecting response, the humor also reinforces the appropriateness of specific actions, such as engaging in displacement activity or political behavior to overload the internal audit function with information and slow its progress (L8–10, 14–15, 20). Building on Sally's

initial humorous remarks, Carl, John, and Jack join in the humor. Thus, they further co-construct their joint response to project the paradoxical tension onto internal audit, and to swamp them by sending an incredible amount of information (L8–12), including hardcopy paper files (L14–15) and/or unnecessary detail in the reports (L20–23). Laughing legitimates these actions and absolves managers from taking responsibility for their actions in working with paradox; tensions can be projected onto the internal auditors. Humor can thus perpetuate existing constructions of paradox, enrolling managers in reinforcing existing responses and entrenching them as appropriate, without necessarily thinking through the implications. In this example, humor constructed paradox as consistent with existing constructions and responses, thereby further embedding this response pattern.

Example 2: Complaining about the broken complaints process

Humor episode. The humor episode below occurred a few months into the establishment of Implementation Board, when team members were still working out the complexities involved in delivering the Regulatory Framework. In particular, they were becoming aware that the regulatory goal of creating equivalent products was at odds with the commercial goal of maintaining differentiated service quality, because implementing the regulatory change necessarily caused service disruption. They were thus beginning to design processes to address these unexpected and undesirable commercial implications, including developing complaint procedures and escalation processes, but these had "teething issues." For instance, an 0800 number installed specifically to take complaints that was meant to direct complainants to a dedicated complaints team, instead diverted the calls to John, the Implementation Board leader, creating several awkward situations. Further, Implementation Board meetings regularly featured reports, whereby Board members would update each other on program deliveries in various degrees of detail. During this particular meeting, Trevor was supposed to present an update on the INT37 delivery, which focused on corporate clients' communications networks and associated services. This delivery was particularly contentious because there were problems translating the regulatory requirements into technological solutions that could produce the complex product features and service levels required commercially. This particular humor episode occurred approximately 10 minutes into the meeting, when Trevor joined.

They need an update about the INT37 delivery but Trevor, who is leading the delivery, has not yet joined the meeting. No apologies were received, leading team members to speculate about reasons for his absence. They are in midst of another report when Trevor joins.
John: "Ahhh! [**as if to say 'there he is'**] I was just about to give you a ring, Trevor."
Trevor: "It's time to 'blame Telco' because my access card wasn't working" **Sally laughs**
John: "I assumed there must be some kind of technical problem." **Sally keeps laughing**
Trevor: "There must be complaints process somewhere" **John and Sally laugh**
John: "And there are so many complaints. You know, I've had another one of those 0800 calls?" **Sally giggles**
Sally (**interested**): "Oh really?"
John: "Yeah, errm, [name of well-known TV personality]. The TV bloke. His office. He was trying to move house and he got given an 0800 number by Telco. Thought they were getting through to the regulator and it's been directed through to my phone." **Sally giggles** "So…"
Trevor (**mimicking the voice of the TV personality**): "Who would work on a program like this?" **Sally and John laugh loudly**
Sally: "Very good [impression]!" **Sally sniggers**
John: "It's the third one. I'm going to have to find out what's going on. I tried to get

switchboard to sort it out. They said they sorted it but haven't…" **Sally giggles; Jack snorts**
Jack (**pretending to be John**): "I'm just the man to sort your problems. I'm right in the
middle of it!" **John, Sally, Trevor, and Jack laugh riotously**
John (**laughing as he says this**): "I was glaring rather at Jack there." **John laughs**
(**continues, directed at Jack, feigning annoyance**) "We'll have a chat later!"
They discuss more seriously why this occurred, deliberating various origins of error, and
note the fact that this is a common occurrence in the program, which they are quickly
getting used to. It is the status quo for things to go a bit awry.

Constructing paradox: Goals as in enduring tension; commercial goals suffering

In this example, humor constructs paradox as incompatibility between the regulatory goal of creating equivalent products and the commercial goal of maintaining high service levels. Humor centers on the introduction of technologies to enable the move to equivalent products, which have created service disruption. Thus, when Trevor says that the "access card wasn't working" (L5) and John suggests that it was due to a "technical problem" (L6), it is humorous because it draws parallels with and makes salient this tension, which they are already experiencing in the INT37 delivery, bringing focus to the commercial problems created by trying to implement the technological solution to regulation. The construction is thus aligned with existing ways to construct this tension as enduring—in this case evidenced by recurring technological failures (L6). Trevor and John's exchange provides the basis for further joking around these issues, e.g. referring to the "complaints process" (L7), which exists to filter and respond to complaints on regulatory deliveries. This snowballs into a series of jokes about the complaints process, with which there are also problems (L11–21)—in short, there is a problem with the process designed to address problems! By drawing parallels from this situational incident to their actual difficulties with the delivery, they highlight the context of paradoxical tension in which they operate on a daily basis. Statements like "I assumed it was" (L6) indicates that this was the most probable scenario based on what they all know about the implementation program; that the many technological problems (L6) mean core services are not available when needed (L5). Similarly, emphasizing that there are "so many complaints" (L8) that a "complaints process" is needed (L7), and that he already received "three" complaints personally (L17), constructs the paradox as an enduring problem for the Board. This creates an interactional dynamic into which others are enrolled (Trevor, L5; Sally, L5; Jack, L18). Thus, the interactional dynamic co-constructs the paradox as an enduring tension they collectively face in their work, which has negative commercial impact, through technological problems (L6), blame (L5), and complaints (L7). This construction of paradox as enduring was aligned with the existing way of constructing paradox (L6). Responses were made in the context of and in line with this construction.

Constructing response: Entrenching an acceptance response

This example shows some of the important micro-practices through which humor reinforces an existing response to paradox. In this episode, humor legitimates *acceptance*, thereby entrenching the existing response of recognizing paradox as a natural and persistent condition of work. Specifically, team members are indicating their acceptance of the paradoxical nature of their work; they understand the contradictions and tensions inherent in it, such as technological problems (L5–6) or complaints (L8), and accept that paradox is an ongoing tension that will recur throughout the implementation (L17–18, 23–25). This construction of paradox as enduring is consistent with existing constructions and responses (L6). Indeed, through humor

actors acknowledge these challenges and accept that they must simply work pragmatically within paradoxical conditions (L7, 17–18). The complaints serve as micro-indicator of consequences associated with their inability to concurrently address both elements of the paradox: in this case, providing stable technology to deliver reliable service (L5–6, 11–12). In using humor to construct the inevitability of these paradoxical conditions—here, technological problems—John (L6) and Trevor (L7) create an interactional dynamic that quickly enrolls others into expressing their acceptance of the situation. Humor socially constructs the absurdity of these issues, thereby also providing a context in which to feel and accept tensions. The humor reinforces the appropriateness of the response by emphasizing multiple examples of tension, including repeat occurrence of the same issue (L6, L17). Participants in the meeting implicitly agree with the view they are co-constructing, for example, by laughing (e.g. Sally, L5), giggling (e.g. Sally, L9) or snorting (e.g. Jack, L18), so entrenching the response of accepting the enduring paradoxical tension. Humor can thus support the construction of and response to paradox by legitimating and embedding it within interactional dynamics. In this case, humor again constructs paradox as consistent with existing responses, thereby reinforcing an existing pattern of response.

Shifting Response to Paradox

Humor could also shift existing responses to paradox, by proposing and legitimating alternative responses. In these episodes, the construction of paradox through humor disrupted continuity of response, often fundamentally altering the nature of the group's response. Any response could be shifted through humor. We provide two representative examples below.

Example 3: Sneakily extending all contracts prior to the deadline

Humor episode. The following episode occurred one year into implementation, when the practical implications of the regulation were becoming increasingly clear. While most parts of the regulatory framework were implemented successfully, they also threw up some interesting challenges. In particular, it became clear to Telco and the Regulator that not all regulatory requirements were possible and/or appropriate to implement as originally envisioned, because some problems had not been foreseen, some scenarios had not been anticipated, it was simply not technologically possible, or the marketplace had changed as a result of the implementation effort. To address this matter, the two parties began to negotiate some "enhancements" to specific framework requirements and "exemptions" from others. One critical issue was the case of existing customers. Telco had the largest market share and thus a significant existing customer base. Existing Telco customers—particularly "elite customers" such as government, military, and public sector organizations—benefited from exceptional service, often negotiated on an individual basis, containing bespoke terms and conditions, and contractually guaranteed. Such service differentiation was, obviously, not equivalent, and hence usually exacerbated the paradoxical tension between commercial and regulatory goals. However, acknowledging that a notable degeneration of service levels for such customers was not in the regulatory interest, the renegotiated framework specified that existing contracts were exempt from meeting regulatory requirements. This meant that customers on valid contracts could be supplied in the old way until the contract had to be renewed, allowing for a less abrupt transition to the new products, services, and systems. The humor episode we reproduce below picks up on this condition.

The conversation moves on to talks they are having with the regulator in order to exempt them from some regulatory requirements for existing customers. They want to work out a reasonable compromise to ensure they can satisfy service and equivalence goals. Specifically, they are negotiating which engineering services they can offer to whom after the deadline.
Carl: "We need to find a sensible way forward."
John (**cheekily**): "Can we go around and refresh all the contracts before then and make them longer-term?" **Eric smirks audibly ("hm")**
Fritz (**flustered**): "Err, I think they'll wise to that one!" **John and Sally giggle** "…which is why —Oh, I was hoping not to do all two pages of details. We're getting there anyway…" **Sally and Eric laugh** "…There are certain contracts which clearly have provision for extension…" **Others murmur agreement**
Fritz (**jovially**) "…Indiscreet responses were 'Telco shouldn't be allowed to extend them'…" **John laughs** "I bet you're really sorry you asked this question! The regulator thinks it has legal agreement that we won't extend them but actually the legal wording that we have done is that we will not seek to extend them but if there are perfectly legitimate provisions in the contract, which the body we've contracted with wishes to supply, we can't breach our contract, nor indeed can the regulator force us to."
John (**cheekily**): "But driving a specific sales activity, which is what I had in mind, would probably not be helpful."
Fritz (**conspiratorially**): "Indeed—Although, of course, I didn't hear that!" **Sally, John and Fritz laugh loudly. Others smile or smirk**
They express the need for careful consideration and expert advice on this complex and important issue. They agree to internally circulate a list of existing customer contracts using services no longer available under the new regulation. They also agree to "make sure we are lined up."

Constructing paradox: Goals as mutually exclusive; commercial goals prioritized

In this episode, humor is used to construct a particular point of paradoxical tension. Specifically, it highlights the incompatibility between the regulatory goal to minimize the period of non-equivalence with other SPs, which means not extending any contracts unnecessarily, and the commercial goal to extend as many contracts as possible in order to appease customers by providing differentiated, high quality service. When John suggests renewing the contracts before the deadline to get around the regulatory requirement (L6, see also L18), he implicitly positions the two goals as mutually exclusive. By suggesting refreshing contracts before they can expire as an alternative (L6–9) to the "sensible way forward" of not renewing expiring contracts (L3, 5), he is casting these two as an either/or choice. This represents a shift away from the existing construction of paradox in which both goals are viewed as needing to be achieved. Further, John is foregrounding the commercial goal by putting forward a solution based solely on maximizing service advantage through existing contracts, which ignores the regulatory goal of limiting non-equivalence by establishing new contracts. This different construction disrupts the original interactional dynamic and creates a dynamic in which others (L8, Fritz) are enrolled in the construction of paradox as an either/or choice, with preference for the commercial option (L10–17). John reinforces this construction toward the end of the episode (L18–19), prompting Fritz to implicitly agree (L20) and, through their assenting laughter, other participants to co-construct the paradox (L21) in the same way. This different construction, which positions paradoxical goals as either/or propositions, sets the interactional context for responses to also shift.

Constructing response: Shifting from adjusting to opposing

Constructing paradox through humor generates an interactional dynamic in which responses to paradox are established and legitimated between participants. This particular episode demonstrates how, through humor, managers shifted their response from *adjusting* to *opposing*. The early part of the discussion, prior to the introduction of humor, focuses on how to make adjustments, recognizing that both goals are important, interdependent, and have to be incorporated. While the actors cannot both extend and also not extend contracts, they are looking for a solution (L1–5) that may enable them not to extend contracts (regulatory goal) and still meet customer requirements (commercial goal). This adjustment-focused talk is interrupted by humor (L6), which introduces a different construction of the paradox and generates an interactional dynamic that moves the discussion away from the adjusting response toward an opposing response. The initial humorous comment explicitly suggests that Telco actors focus on their service needs, by extending contracts while still possible (L6), despite recognizing that such a response is focused on only the commercial element of the paradox and explicitly counter to the regulatory objectives (L6–7, 13–17, 18–19). This disruption, which introduces a different construction of paradox and a new response to paradox, lays the groundwork for a shift in response. Following John's humorous expression of his preference for such a one-sided response, others are enrolled into considering subversive responses (e.g. John enrolls Fritz, L10; and others, L11). The initial adjusting response as a "sensible way forward" was discarded and the new response of subtly opposing the regulatory goal through their contractual wording gained momentum. The interactional dynamic was thus altered, providing a context in which it was acceptable for managers to shift from adjusting towards an opposing response. Interactions no longer focused on whether this was sustainable in the longer term as a way forward but rather gave impetus to opposing the regulatory goal in order to advance the commercial goal. Indeed, opposing became the main focus of the discussion (L14–17). Humor thus fundamentally altered the nature of the group's response, legitimating an action that would support the commercial goal in opposition to the regulatory goal. Humor thus introduced a construction of paradox that differed from the existing construction, and proposed an alternative response, thereby disrupting the interactional dynamic, and laying the groundwork for a shift in response.

Example 4: The "not so light touch" governance arrangement

Humor episode. The following episode took place 18 months into implementation, when some of the deliveries were starting to move into "business as usual." While many key parts of the regulatory framework had been implemented, there was still difficulty associated with managing all of the separate implementation tasks as one integrated program. In particular, Telco was looking for an efficient and effective way to coordinate horizontally across all of the different implementation tasks and vertically across all of the different divisions. Coordinating activity between divisions had been extremely challenging throughout the implementation because regulatory requirements restricted information sharing. Thus, while the divisions had to deliver both regulatory and commercial objectives between them, they were limited in how they could work together. This created a paradoxical situation in which it was difficult for individual Telco managers to understand when they could or could not work with Distribution managers (and vice versa). To address this issue, Telco senior managers introduced an overarching governance arrangement, "The Matrix." This mechanism was designed to pull together all of the work done in all divisions and on all regulatory deliveries through a joint reporting mechanism, thereby implicitly integrating regulatory and commercial goals. Implementation Board members were

unhappy about this development because (i) as the team delivering the implementation, they were responsible for coordinating activity, including negotiating between the different goals as tensions arose, whereas the new joint mechanism appeared to be about reporting without any way of negotiating between goals; (ii) the new structure required Implementation Board members to report into the Matrix team, increasing the Board's administrative load at a time when they were still heavily involved in the implementation which continued to throw up multiple paradoxical tensions. The following humor incident occurred after the new matrix structure had been explained to Implementation Board, as they reflected on the new initiative. Essentially, they were not convinced the new structure would address the paradoxical tensions arising from the ongoing structural separation, since joint reporting would not necessarily involve resolution of tensions between goals.

There is discussion of the "Matrix" governance mechanism and the implications for the team's ability to implement ongoing projects. Team members talk about how their resources are disappearing and how they will settle disputes under the restructuring. They lament being able to do nothing about it, because it has been decided by senior managers and presented as a "fait accompli" that they think has not considered the structural problems they work with.

Max: "Let's go into that changed world consciously with an agreed structure that we think works rather than fall into it, which seems to me we're doing at the moment. I don't know who is doing the notes, but…" **Sally and John laugh** "…try not to be flippant this time, Trev!"

Trevor, Sally, and John laugh

Trevor (**amused**): "Can you all imagine me being flippant?" **Max, John, Sally, Trev laugh**

Max (**seriously**): "My suggestion for a note here, and excuse me if I caught the mood wrong; I think there's been concern expressed by everyone about how the structure fits with the existing implementation program and that we need further discussions on that."

Several people concur

Trevor: "Excellent summary, Max." **Trevor, Sally, and Max chuckle**

Max: "Are you being flippant again?" **Riotous laughter—Max, Trevor, Sally, Barry, Bob**

Sally (**sarcastically, talking over the laughter, while also laughing**): "They are good colleagues, aren't they?" **Riotous laughter** continues

Max… "You could perhaps add that there was support for a light touch program but what we're seeing doesn't seem to be light touch."

Several people concur

Barry (**smirking**): "Do I mention this bit about 'only divisions' [need to be coordinated]?"

Max (**chuckling**): "Well, 'coordinating divisions'; that's jumping into solutions. …"

Trevor: "You could note that that's for consideration…"

Others grin at the "only divisions" terminology in the proposed Matrix structure

Trevor: "Okay, Barry, thanks."

Max: "In which case you should also note that Barry is going down [to] the job center [to look for a new job]!" **Sally, John, Trevor, and Barry laugh loudly**

Trevor (**smirking***)*: "No, that (**emphasized**) would be flippant, Max." **Wendy laughs**

Bob (**excitedly to John**): "However, the boss will be at your door soon…" **Max laughs**

"… 'Wait, you don't need to hire staff, you've got plenty of people'."

Max (**to Barry**): "Can you show me where to go [to get a job] as well?" **Bob giggles**

They discuss the next steps in getting across to senior management that they need to confront the structural issues they face in implementing the rest of the framework. They then close the meeting, after what was a pretty emotive discussion of a fairly sensitive issue.

Constructing paradox: Creating tension by trying to balance tensions

In this episode, humor highlights the tension arising from trying to balance multiple paradoxical goals. In this case, specific regulatory and commercial deliveries were implemented across divisions that had to communicate to deliver on the regulatory framework, but were restricted in their communication by that very framework. Efforts to manage this incompatibility by developing one "Matrix" governance structure that oversaw and integrated all of the different deliveries only acted to enhance tension. Max highlights that they do need to address the structural change (L6–7) *and* the need for seriousness in this situation in a lighthearted way (L8). This sets the stage for further humor and joking, bringing others into a humorous interactional dynamic (Sally & John, L8; then Trevor, L9; and finally Barry & Bob, L16) that acknowledges the additional tension created by the new structures. This represents a shift away from the existing construction, in which tension created by the Matrix structure was accepted as simply more of the structural tensions they were experiencing, opening the door to actually critique the structure. In particular, the proposed new structure, rather than alleviating the paradoxical tensions created by working with the existing structural separation, creates additional burden because it is not particularly light touch (L20), is naïve about the problems of coordinating structurally separated divisions (L22–25) and distracts resources from already strained programs (L31) that still have significant deliverables to achieve. Together this produces an interactional dynamic in which the paradoxical tensions of meeting both goals in the remaining implementation tasks was co-constructed as challenging, particularly because of the "absurd" structural Matrix approach introduced, which was not addressing the real issues of coordinating structurally separated divisions that worked to different goals (L22–25). Constructing the paradoxical conditions in this different way, i.e. as inappropriate and amendable through a different approach to structuring, sets the interactional context for responses to shift.

Constructing response: Shifting from accepting to confronting

The interactional dynamic generated through humor legitimated among participants a new response to mechanisms for coping with paradoxical tension, i.e. pushing back against the Matrix structure, thereby simultaneously problematizing the existing response of begrudgingly accepting the ongoing structural division problems or pretending the Matrix structure would be a solution. This particular humor episode thus demonstrates how managers shifted their response to paradox from *acceptance* to *confrontation*. In particular, prior to the introduction of humor, the debate was very serious and tense (L1–5), and focused on how to "fall into" the new structure (L7). The structure was presented and accepted as very much a "fait accompli" (L4–5). Max shifts this dynamic toward confrontation by suggesting that they need an "*agreed* structure" (L6) and "further discussions" (L13), so recommending they push back at senior managers about the Matrix structure. Introducing a different construction of paradox and a different response to paradox disrupts the interactional dynamic and provides the basis for a shift in response. Specifically, Max questions simply accepting the structure (L6–7), using humor to both soften how this stance is presented and yet emphasizing the need for seriousness (L8–9). In so doing, he picks up on a running joke: Trevor is known to capture funny comments or put cartoons into the meeting minutes (L8, 10, 16; see also opening vignette). This opens the discussion to seeking an alternative approach to governance that actually addresses the problem of coordinating goals across separate divisions (L19–25), which is solidified through further humorous remarks (L27–32). This altered interactional dynamic sets the stage for managers to engage in confrontation of their paradoxical structural conditions; indeed, the

discussion becomes centered on securing an alternative approach to balancing tension (L11–24). Humor thus significantly changed the nature of the group's response, legitimating the action of challenging the existing structure with murmurs of agreement (L14, 21, 25) and laughter (L8–10, 15–18, 28–31), despite noting potential personal consequences (L27, 30, 32). This provides another example of how humor introduces a different construction of and response to paradox, thus disrupting the existing interactional dynamic, and enabling a shift in response.

Summary of dynamic

The above findings show that, in constructing paradox through humor, actors generate an interactional dynamic in which they either entrench or shift responses to paradox. *Entrenching* involves reaffirming an existing pattern of construction and response to paradox, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the response. *Shifting* involves a moment of disruption that ridiculed, problematized, or questioned the existing pattern of construction and response, laying the grounds for proposing an alternative response and legitimating that response.

Discussion

This paper was inductively motivated by our field observation that people performing roles within a context fraught with paradoxical tensions used a great deal of humor as part of their daily interactions about these paradoxes. We thus set out to address how humor constructs paradox within everyday work; and how these constructions shape the responses that actors make to paradox. Our aim was to gain theoretical insight into the interactional dynamics of paradoxes of performing, being those tensions that arise as actors perform multiple contradictory and often inconsistent roles and tasks (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Much of the paradox literature has focused on organizational and environmental paradoxes, so examining largely organizational and structural responses to paradox (Gupta, Smith, & Shalley, 2006; Smith & Tushman, 2005). By contrast, an explicit focus on paradoxes of performing has enabled us to tease out the interactional dynamics through which actors: (i) socially construct paradox within moments of humor about particular tasks; (ii) formulate their responses to that paradox; and (iii) legitimate those responses in ways that shape the actions these actors then take. We show that these constructions of paradox may follow two paths, leading to either entrenchment or shifting of responses, based on whether humor enrolls actors into supporting existing responses or disrupts those responses. We now draw our findings together into a conceptual process framework (see Figure 1) of how humor is engaged in the dynamic construction of paradox and its responses as actors perform their work roles. While we reference our case to explain the framework, we expect it to have wider conceptual application for paradoxes of performing in other contexts.

First, actors experience tensions as they endeavor to perform their roles and tasks within paradoxical contexts (Figure 1, 1). Such tensions typically arise from the wider paradoxical conditions, such as, in our case, the organizing paradoxes occasioned by the regulatory environment, which required structural separation of divisions into groups with different, often contradictory goals. Second, actors socially construct these paradoxes, often using humor as part of their everyday interactions over the tensions they are experiencing in performing their tasks (Figure 1, 2). Humor is an effective means of social construction when actors have to interact over paradoxical tasks because it allows them to juxtapose incongruous issues (Hatch, 1997) in ways that diffuse tension (Martin, 2004) and facilitate the social processes of interaction (Lynch, 2010). For example, our case showed that actors could accept a difficult situation in which they were experiencing a high volume of complaints—including to one of the team member's personal telephone line—as

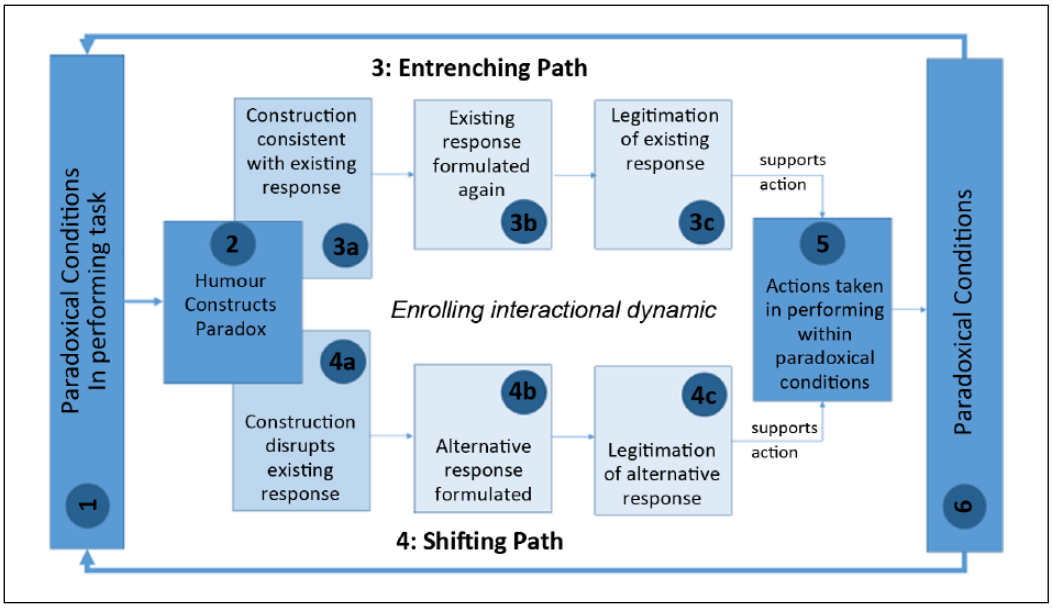

Figure 1. Constructing and responding to paradoxes of performing.

simply part of the conditions of performing their role. Naturally, such constructions are not always benign, since humor also enables actors to relieve tension about their task by venting frustration about the intolerability of their situation or attributing blame for it to others, as with the audit example, where actors constructed the paradox as exacerbated by the unreasonable demands put upon them.

This leads to our third point; that the construction of humor shapes the responses that people make to paradox. As our process framework shows, responses may follow two different paths—an entrenching path (Figure 1, 3a–3c) or a shifting path (Figure 1, 4a–4c). Specifically, by constructing paradox, humor also shapes the formulation of a response and its legitimation. The effects of humor on the interactional dynamic are enrolling; as people join the laughter and jokes about the paradoxical nature of their tasks, they also, tacitly, join in the constructions of ways to perform those tasks. Hence, which path responses follow depends on whether humor constructs the paradox as consistent with the existing response (Figure 1, 3a) or whether it disrupts that existing response (Figure 1, 4a). In the entrenching path, because humor has an enrolling social effect (Johnson, Mumby, & Westwood, 2007; Lynch, 2010), actors cohere around and affirm their existing response, so continuing to formulate it (Figure 1, 3b) as the legitimate response and, consequently, condoning and supporting the actions being taken around that response (Figure 1, 3c). For example, we saw that actors entrenched their response of projecting blame for the paradoxical tensions involved in performing their tasks onto a third party (example 1), thereby supporting their political actions of overloading the third party with information. However, they also entrenched a response of acceptance of paradox in a different episode (example 2).

By contrast, humor is also able to construct paradox by interjecting a note of incongruity, difference, or inconsistency into the interactional dynamic (Hatch, 1997; Martin, 2004), so disrupting the existing response (Figure 1, 4a). Humor provides a safe way to reveal participant's dissatisfaction (Martin, 2004) with the existing response. Because humor has an enrolling social effect (Lynch, 2010), participants can then consider this disruption and use it to formulate an alternative

response to the current path (Figure 1, 4b) and to legitimate that response as right by endorsing the actions suggested (Figure 1, 4c), as shown in our case, where actors shifted from adjusting to opposing responses over client contracts (see example 3) and also shifted from acceptance to confrontation of unacceptable structural conditions for performing their tasks (see example 4).

Such responses, while constructed within micro moments of interaction, are not trivial or inconsequential. Rather, they are played out in the actions taken (Figure 1, 5), which are consequential for the organization, feeding back, recursively, into the very context in which such paradoxes arise (Figure 1, 6). We thus show how the interactional dynamics in which paradoxes of performing are constructed are consequential for the responses formulated and legitimated in the moment, and also shape the paradoxical conditions of the organization at a wider level (see also Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jay, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Importantly, we show that the way paradox is dealt with may be shaped not only by large, structural decisions and environmental conditions, but also by micro, in-the-moment interactions by actors. Further, we show that these interactions are not stable, largely consistent paths, but can fluctuate in the moment, according to the interactional dynamics in which they are constructed.

Contributions to paradox theory

Our conceptual process framework makes several important contributions to paradox theory. First, we demonstrate that the construction of paradox and associated responses are two separate concepts that are entwined in practice. While others have demonstrated that paradoxes are socially constructed (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993; Lüscher, Lewis, & Ingram, 2006), our work goes beyond these studies by showing that this construction also critically underpins the process of responding to paradoxes. Specifically, we show that responses to paradox depend on how they are constructed. Hence, construction of and response to paradox can only be understood in conjunction and must be studied together. Yet, despite acknowledging the socially constructed nature of paradox (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993; Lüscher et al., 2006), to date the dominant focus in the literature has been on responses to paradox. This is perhaps unsurprising as such responses are often expressed through organizational structures or policies (see Smith, 2014) and thus more readily observable. Focusing on micro-level paradoxes and using rich ethnographic data has enabled us to tease out both the construction and the response, and show the processual association between them (see Figure 1).

Second, we show that the interactional dynamics of constructing paradox are consequential for the wider actions that are taken in response to paradox. While others have hinted at the role of social interaction in managing paradox (e.g. Abdallah et al., 2011; Jay, 2013; Lüscher et al., 2006), for instance showing how conversational "sparring sessions" can help actors make sense of and cope with paradoxes (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), the implications of this process of co-construction have gone largely unexplored. Our observation about the interactional dynamics in which paradox is constructed is critical, as it suggests that even when major decisions are made, for instance deciding to split an organization to compartmentalize goals (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), the very people making these decisions are also engaging in micro-interactions of construction and response. That is, even structural solutions to paradox arise out of people's actions and interactions (for instance, see Abdallah et al., 2011; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jay, 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008; Lüscher et al., 2006). Thus, as the recursive loop in our framework shows, any paradoxical conditions will be based in the interactional dynamics of actors performing specific tasks and roles. Others offer indicative evidence of this link between micro-practices and macro-structures. For instance, Lüscher and Lewis (2008) highlight the "trickle down pattern" of mixed messages, whereby messages about paradoxical conditions get passed

down to subordinates, thereby perpetuating paradox at lower levels (see also Smith, 2014, on top management decisions). Indeed, the mutually constitutive relationship between paradoxes (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013) suggests that practices may have "trickle down" and "trickle up" effects. In focusing on the micro paradoxes of performing, our framework provides much needed attention to how paradoxes are constructed and responded to in practice, and provides grounds for further study into the wider implications of such micro actions and interactions for overarching responses to paradox.

Third, our findings show that responses are often constructed in-the-moment, as part of everyday work. In particular, we show that responses to paradoxes of performing are much more micro and dynamic than prior literature suggests (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Such in-the-moment responses may consist of many small instances, including discursively splitting or juxtaposing paradoxical elements (Abdallah et al., 2011; Jarzabkowski & Sillince, 2007; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008), labeling a task as "at risk" to give focus to another element of the paradox (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013), or working to redefine success (Jay, 2013). Our practice-level conceptualization suggests that actors construct paradox in the moment of interaction and legitimate their actions, without necessarily considering the long-term consequences of such actions. Indeed, as interactional dynamics provide the grounds for shifting response in the moment, responses are not necessarily stable. We show that humorous everyday interactions may achieve the same effect as "sparring sessions" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) by disrupting existing processes and provoking a shift in response. Hence, such sparring sessions, while influential in shifting understanding of paradox, may be only one way among many, even more micro and everyday ways of shifting response to paradox. Furthermore, responses to paradox such as transcendence (e.g. Smith & Lewis, 2011) are not stable once attained; rather, such responses need to be continuously worked at. By showing how responses may reinforce each other in stabilizing ways through specific interactional dynamics of entrenchment, we go beyond existing work on reinforcing responses (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). Overall our framework thus points to a much more fluid and dynamic process of constructing and responding to paradox than previously indicated.

Our practice approach suggests that, much like the conditions of paradox themselves, responses to paradox are not innately positive or negative. This goes against the normative literature, which tends to evaluate responses, placing greater value on some responses over others. For instance, projecting and opposing are generally considered negative or defensive ways of responding to paradox (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Berg, 1987; Westenholz, 1993), while adjusting, acceptance, and confrontation are considered positive or active responses (Ford & Ford, 1994; Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993; Lewis, 2000; Murnighan & Conlon, 1999; Smith & Berg, 1987). However, re-conceptualizing responses to paradox as constructed and reconstructed on an ongoing basis, unfolding in multiple moments of interaction, pushes us to reconsider this prominent active–defensive dichotomy. Our findings suggest that the same responses may be considered positive or negative at different times according to the specific situations in which they arise for particular actors and the tasks they are performing. Thus, at the micro-level, all responses are in their own way "active" responses.[2] This challenges the dominant view in the paradox literature and suggests that, rather than focusing on the valence or value of a response in its own right, we must seek to understand response paths as they are enacted in practice. If we want to better understand maintenance and change, we need to understand serial constructions of and responses to paradox, and how these align with or deviate from existing responses.

Fourth, we extend the link between humor and paradox (Hatch, 1997; Martin, 2004). In particular, we show that humor does much more than simply signaling, surfacing, or making paradox salient (Hatch, 1997; Martin, 2004). Rather, humorous constructions help people to reveal the nature and substance of the paradoxical tensions they are actually experiencing in *performing*

specific tasks (Lynch, 2010), thus facilitating the formulation of responses to paradox. This allows us to show how humor enables actors to sustain paradoxical states (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993) not only in their discursive interactions but also in the actions that these legitimate. It also suggests we re-examine existing studies of paradox and humor. For instance, when Martin (2004) shows female managers using humor to reframe situations, we propose that rather than simply a construction of paradox, it is actually also a response to paradox, which allows female managers to transcend the perceived contradictions inherent in their roles as female and manager, and perform their role. In so doing, we highlight the role of micro-practices, such as humor, in the construction of and response to paradox.

These theoretical contributions provide grounds for future research. In particular, we ask scholars to pay greater heed to social construction (Hatch & Ehrlich, 1993; Lüscher et al., 2006), extending our work in order to examine the social construction of paradoxes of organizing, belonging, and learning (Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011) and whether and how the dynamics of construction and response play out across these different levels of paradoxes. Such studies are critical, because paradoxes of performing at the micro-level have wider consequences as they are not only shaped by, but also shape, paradoxes operating at different levels, such as the mesa-level paradoxes of belonging (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Lüscher & Lewis, 2008) and macro-level paradoxes of organizing (Abdallah et al., 2011; Smith, 2014). We hope that our study also motivates paradox scholars to study other processes of co-constructing paradox in interaction (Abdallah et al., 2011; Jay, 2013; Lüscher et al., 2006); for example, examining micro-moves such as linguistic turns (e.g. Samra-Fredericks, 2003), discursive practices (e.g. Abdallah et al., 2011; Lüscher et al., 2006), and specific leadership practices (Smith, 2014) to better understand the important role of micro-interactional dynamics in constructing paradox. While we examined only the role of humor, we anticipate that a study of other micro-practices, particularly looking at these in interaction as bundles of micro-practices (e.g. Schatzki, 2010), may provide new insights into how we understand the construction of and response to paradox. Finally, we ask scholars to revisit humor. Just as paradox is a multi-level concept, humor might be considered both a micro-practice and also a meta-language or discourse (Billig, 2005; Jaworksi, Coupland, & Galasiński, 2004). There is thus value in future research about how humor is a linguistic indicator of paradox at a broader and, potentially, cultural level.

Of course, as is the case with any study, our contributions must be considered in light of the bounds of our work. While single case studies provide deep insight into phenomena, they do not offer empirical generalizability (Yin, 1994). We thus do not claim that our findings will hold true universally across all contexts. However, we would expect theoretical generalizability across comparable contexts. Similar dynamics may be expected, for instance, in other organizations characterized by durable employee tenure, including other regulated utilities and government organizations, where actors might be expected to have long-standing relationships and consistent understandings of humor. Other scholars might examine the broader applicability of our findings by replicating our work in different contexts, including non-regulated corporations, or highly culturally diverse or short-tenure organizations where a consistent basis for humor might not be so pertinent.

Conclusion

Our practice approach to paradox has highlighted the importance of paying attention to the micro-level of interaction around work tasks. In particular, we have developed a conceptual process framework that shows how the micro-practice of humor creates an interactional dynamic in which actors construct specific paradoxes, formulate responses to those paradoxes, and legitimate those responses. Therein our work makes central contribution to paradox theory: (1)

highlighting that construction and response are interlinked, and giving critical emphasis to the interactional dynamics that underpin the process of constructing and responding; (2) illuminating paradoxes of performing by demonstrating that responses consists of many small but active instances of response, which entrench or shift an existing response path; this breaks down the active–defensive dichotomy in the existing literature; and (3) demonstrating the importance of micro-practices such as humor in shaping how actors perform their organizational tasks, in ways that have implications for the actions they take, and, thus, how paradox plays out at multiple organizational levels. We expect that our framework will have conceptual application across other contexts, in terms of examining micro paradoxes of performing and their implications, as well as providing the grounds for future research that we have suggested. We hope our study stimulates further work in this area.

Funding

The authors gratefully acknowledge funding from the Advanced Institute of Management/Economic and Social Research Council (Grant RES-331-25-3013), the British Academy (SG-45273), and the University of Sydney Business School ARC Bridging Fund. We would also like to thank our excellent anonymous reviewers, our diligent editor and the participants in the 2014 EGOS paradox sub-theme (Sub-theme 32: Leveraging a Paradox Perspective to Reimagine, Rethink and Reshape Organization Tensions) for their feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

Notes

1. In order to preserve anonymity, we have disguised specific dates, names, products, and other contextual features. However, the nature and sequence of events is faithfully reproduced.
2. We are indebted to the anonymous reviewer who challenged the distinction between active and defensive responses, and pushed our thinking in this direction.

References

Abdallah, C., Denis, J.-L., & Langley, A. (2011). Having your cake and eating it too: Discourses of transcendence and their role in organizational change dynamics. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *24*, 333–348.

Andriopoulos, C., & Lewis, M. W. (2009). Exploitation-exploration tensions and organizational ambidexterity: Managing paradoxes of innovation. *Organization Science*, *20*, 696–717.

Balogun, J., Jacobs, C., Jarzabkowski, P., Mantere, S., & Vaara, E. (2014). Placing strategy discourse in context: Sociomateriality, sensemaking and power. *Journal of Management Studies*, *51*, 175–201.

Balogun, J., & Johnson, G. (2004). Organizational restructuring and middle manager sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal*, *47*, 523–549.

Balogun, J., & Johnson, G. (2005). From intended strategy to unintended outcomes: The impact of change recipient sensemaking. *Organization Studies*, *26*, 1573–1602.

Bartunek, J. M. (1984). Changing interpretive schemes and organization restructuring: The example of a religious order. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *29*, 335–372.

Beech, N., Burns, H., de Caestecker, L., MacIntosh, R., & MacLean, D. (2004). Paradox as invitation to act in problematic change situations. *Human Relations*, *57*, 1313–1332.

Benson, J. K. (1977). Organizations: A dialectical view. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *22*, 3–21.

Berger, A. (1976). Anatomy of a joke. *Journal of Communication*, *26*, 113–115.

Bergson, H. (1911) *Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic*. New York: Macmillan.

Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. London: SAGE Publications.

Clegg, S., Cunha, J. V., & Cunha, M. P. (2002). Management paradoxes: A relational view. *Human Relations*, *55*, 483–503.

Collinson, D. L. (2002). Managing humour. *Journal of Management Studies*, *39*, 269–288.

Cooper, C. (2008). Elucidating the bonds of workplace humor: A relational process model. *Human Relations*, *61*, 1087–1115.

Dameron, S., & Torset, C. (2014). The discursive construction of strategists' subjectivities: Toward a paradox lens on strategy. *Journal of Management Studies*, *51*, 291–319.

Denis, J.-L., Langley, A., & Rouleau, L. (2007). Strategizing in pluralistic contexts: Rethinking theoretical frames. *Human Relations 60*(1): 179–215.

Dixon, N. (1980). Humor: A cognitive alternative to stress? In Irwin G. Sarason & Charles D. Spielberger (Eds.), *Stress and anxiety*, volume 7, 281–289. Washington, DC: Hemisphere.

Feldman, M., & Orlikowski, W. (2011). Theorising practice and practicing theory. *Organization Science*, *22*, 1240–1253.

Ford, J. D., & Ford, L. W. (1994). Logics of identity, contradiction, and attraction in change. *Academy of Management Review*, *19*, 756–795.

Freud, S. [1905] (1991) *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. New York: Basic Books.

Gruner, C. R. (1997). *The game of humor: A comprehensive theory of why we laugh*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Gupta, A. K., Smith, K. G., & Shalley, C. E. (2006). The interplay between exploration and exploitation. *Academy of Management Journal*, *49*, 693–706.

Hatch, M. J. (1997). Irony and the social construction of contradiction in the humor of a management team. *Organization Science*, *8*, 275–288.

Hatch, M. J., & Ehrlich, S. B. (1993). Spontaneous humor as an indicator of paradox and ambiguity in organisations. *Organisation Studies*, *14*, 505–527.

Hay, J. (2000). Functions of humor in the conversation of men and women. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *32*, 709–742.

Hendry, J., & Seidl, D. (2003). The structure and significance of strategic episodes: Social systems theory and the routine practices of strategic change. *Journal of Management Studies*, *40*, 175–196.

Hobbes, T. [1651] (1957) *Leviathan*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Holmes, J. (2000). Politeness, power and provocation: How humour functions in the workplace. *Discourse Studies*, *2*(2), 159.

Holmes, J., & Marra, M. (2002). Over the edge? Subversive humour between colleagues and friends. *Humor*, *15*, 65–87.

Hutcheson, F. (1750). *Reflections upon laughter, and remarks on the fable of the bees*. Glasgow.

Jarzabkowski, P., Balogun, J., & Seidl, D. (2007). Strategizing: The challenges of a practice perspective. *Human Relations*, *60*, 5–27.

Jarzabkowski, P., & Fenton, E. (2006). Strategizing and organizing in pluralistic contexts. *Long Range Planning*, *39*, 631–648.

Jarzabkowski, P., Lê, J. K., & Van de Ven, A. H. (2013). Responding to competing strategic demands: How organizing, belonging, and performing paradoxes coevolve. *Strategic Organization*, *11*, 245–280.

Jarzabkowski, P., & Sillince, J. (2007). A rhetoric-in-context approach to shaping commitment to multiple strategic goals. *Organization Studies*, *28*, 1639–1665.

Jaworksi, A., Coupland, N., & Galasiński, D. (2004). *Metalanguage: Social and ideological perspectives*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Jay, J. (2013). Navigating paradox as a mechanism of change and innovation in hybrid organizations. *Academy of Management Journal*, *56*, 137–159.

Johnson, A., Mumby, D., & Westwood, R. (2007). Representing the unrepresentable: Gender, humour and organization. In Robert Westwood & Carl Rhodes (Eds.), *Humour, work and organization* (pp. 113–138). London: Routledge.

Kierkegaard, S. (1941) [1846]. *Concluding unscientific postscript*. D. Swenson & W. Lowrie (Tr.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Langley, A. (1999). Strategies for theorizing from process data. *Academy of Management Review*, *24*, 691–710.

Langley, A. (2007). Process thinking in strategic organization. *Strategic Organization*, *5*, 271–282.
Lawrence, P. R., & Lorsch, J. W. (1967). *Organization and environment: Managing differentiation and integration*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
Lewis, M. W. (2000). Exploring paradox: Toward a more comprehensive guide. *Academy of Management Review*, *25*, 760–776.
Locke, K., Golden-Biddle, K., & Feldman, M. S. (2008). Making doubt generative: Rethinking the role of doubt in the research process. *Organization Science*, *19*, 907–918.
Lüscher, L., & Lewis, M. W. (2008). Organizational change and managerial sensemaking: Working through paradox. *Academy of Management Journal*, *51*, 221–240.
Lüscher, L., Lewis, M. W., & Ingram, A. (2006). The social construction of organizational change paradoxes. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, *19*, 491–502.
Lynch, O. (2010). Cooking with humor: In-group humor as social organization. *Humor*, *23*, 127–159.
March, J. (1991). Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization Science*, *2*, 71–87.
Marcus, A., & Geffen, D. (1998). The dialectics of competency acquisition: Pollution prevention in electric generation. *Strategic Management Journal*, *19*, 1145–1168.
Martin, D. (2004). Humor in middle management: Women negotiating the paradoxes of organizational life. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *32*, 147–170.
Martin, M. W. (1987). Humor and the aesthetic enjoyment of incongruities. In John Morreall (Ed.), *The philosophy of laughter and humor* (pp. 172–186). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
McGhee, P. E. (1979). *Humor: Its origin and development*. San Francisco: Freeman (selected sections).
Monro, D. H. (1954). *Argument of laughter*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
Morreall, J. (Ed.) (1987). *The philosophy of laughter and humor*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
Mulkay, M. (1988). *On humor: Its nature and its place in modern society*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Murnighan, J. K., & Conlon, D. E. (1991). The dynamics of intense work groups: A study of British string quartets. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *36*, 165–186.
Nicolini, D. (2009). Zooming in and out: Studying practices by switching theoretical lenses and trailing connections. *Organization Studies*, *30*, 1391–1418.
Pascal, B. (1660). *Pensées*. W. F. Trotter (Tr.).
Poole, M. S., & Van de Ven, A. H. (1989). Using paradox to build management and organization theories. *Academy of Management Review*, *14*, 562–578.
Quinn, R. E., & Cameron, K. S. (1988). *Paradox and transformation: Toward a theory of change in organization and management*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
Rouleau, L. (2005). Micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving: How middle managers interpret and sell change every day. *Journal of Management Studies*, *42*, 1413–1441.
Samra-Fredericks, D. (2003). Strategizing as lived experience and strategists' everyday efforts to shape strategic direction. *Journal of Management Studies*, *40*, 141–174.
Schatzki, T. R. (2010). *Site of the social: A philosophical account of the constitution of social life and change*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press.
Schopenhauer, A. [1818] (1957) *The world as will and idea. Vol. I*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Seidl, D. (2007). General strategy concepts and the ecology of strategy discourses: A systemic-discursive perspective. *Organization Studies*, *28*, 197–218.
Seo, M., & Creed, W. E. D. (2002). Institutional contradictions, praxis, and institutional change: A dialectical perspective. *Academy of Management Review*, *27*, 222–47.
Seo, M., Putnam, L., & Bartunek, J. M. (2004). Dualities and tensions of planned organizational change. In M. S. Poole & A. H. Van de Ven (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational change and innovation* (pp. 73–109). New York: Oxford University Press.
Sillince, J., Jarzabkowski, P., & Shaw, D. (2012). Shaping strategic action through the rhetorical construction and exploitation of ambiguity. *Organization Science*, *23*, 743–757.
Smets, M., Jarzabkowski, P., Burke, G., & Spee, A. P. (2015). Reinsurance trading in Lloyd's of London: Balancing conflicting yet complementary logics in practice. *Academy of Management Journal*, *58*, 932–970.

Smith, K. K., & Berg, D. N. (1987). *Paradoxes of group life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
Smith, W. K. (2014). Dynamic decision making: A model of senior leaders managing strategic paradoxes. *Academy of Management Journal*, *57*, 1592–1623.
Smith, W. K., & Lewis, M. W. (2011). Toward a theory of paradox: A dynamic equilibrium model of organizing. *Academy of Management Review*, *36*, 381–403.
Smith, W. K., & Tushman, M. L. (2005). Managing strategic contradictions: A top management model for managing innovation streams. *Organization Science*, *16*, 522–536.
Spee, A. P., & Jarzabkowski, P. A. (2011). Strategic planning as communicative process. *Organization Studies*, *32*, 1217–1245.
Spencer, H. [1860] (1977). On the physiology of laughter. In *Essays on education and kindred subjects*. New York: AMS Press.
Thompson, J. (1967). *Organizations in action*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
Van de Ven, A. H., & Poole, M. S. (1988). Paradoxical requirements for a theory of organizational change. In R. Quinn & K. Cameron (Eds.), *Paradox and transformation: Toward a theory of change in organization and management* (pp. 19–80). New York: HarperCollins.
Werner, C. M., & Baxter, L. A. (1994). Temporal qualities of relationships: Organismic, transactional, and dialectical views. In M. Knapp & G. R. Miller (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (2nd edition) (pp. 323–379). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
Westenholz, A. (1993). Paradoxical thinking and change in frames of reference. *Organization Studies*, *14*, 37–58.
Whiteman, G. M., & Cooper, W. H. (2011). Ecological sensemaking. *Academy of Management Journal*, *54*, 889–911.
Whittington, R., Molloy, E., Mayer, M., & Smith, A. (2006). Practices of strategising/organising: Broadening strategy work. *Long Range Planning*, *39*, 615–629.
Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research*. London: SAGE Publications.
Yovitch, N., Dale, A., & Hudak, M. (1990). Benefits of humour in reducing of threat-induced anxiety. *Psychological Reports*, *66*, 51–58.

Author biographies

Paula Jarzabkowski is a Professor of Strategic Management at Cass Business School, City University London. Her research focuses on strategy-as-practice in complex and pluralistic contexts such as regulated infrastructure firms, third sector organizations and financial services, particularly insurance and reinsurance. She has conducted extensive, internationally comparative audio and video ethnographic studies in a range of business contexts. Her work has appeared in leading journals including *Academy of Management Journal, Organization Science*, and *Strategic Management Journal*. Her first book, *Strategy as Practice: An Activity-Based Approach*, was published by Sage in 2005 and her most recent book, *Making a Market for Acts of God*, was published in 2015.

Jane K. Lê is a Senior Lecturer in Work and Organisational Studies at the University of Sydney. She studies organizational practices and processes in complex, dynamic, and pluralistic organizations. Jane is particularly interested in understanding how organizations respond to competing strategic goals. Jane received her PhD from the Aston Business School. She has published in *Organization Science, Organization Studies, Strategic Organization, British Journal of Management, and the International Journal of Human Resource Management*, and is currently serving on the editorial board of *Organizational Research Methods.*