Multiparadigm inquiry: Exploring organizational pluralism and paradox
Marianne W. Lewis and Mihaela L. Kelemen

ABSTRACT
Organization studies is a robust field, replete with diverse, often contentious perspectives that may enrich understandings of pluralism and paradox. Yet polarization of modern paradigms and ruptures between modern and postmodern stances may inhibit researchers from tapping this potential. In response, this article delves into a provocative alternative – multiparadigm inquiry. First, we juxtapose modern, postmodern and multiparadigm approaches to contrast their underlying assumptions. We then review three multiparadigm strategies, exploring their objectives, exemplars and limitations. Our conclusion addresses how multiparadigm inquiry fosters greater reflexivity, while posing considerable challenges.

KEYWORDS
multiparadigm • paradigm • paradox • pluralism • reflexivity

Pluralism and paradox are inherent features of contemporary life. Dramatic technological and cultural changes continue to blur traditional boundaries – occupational, institutional and national – and complicate the social milieu. Organizations, for instance, face seemingly contradictory demands for control and autonomy, coordination and individuality, expansion and contraction (Bouchikhi, 1998). Meanwhile, to comprehend such tensions, researchers increasingly veer from the dominant positivist paradigm, exploring interpretivist, critical and postmodern perspectives.

Awareness of the uncertainty and flexibility of knowledge is energizing the social sciences (Holland, 1999). This energy is evident in the evolving
‘paradigm debate.’ Despite his varied definitions, Kuhn (1970) stressed that a paradigm provides a worldview. As such, a paradigm offers coherent assumptions regarding how the world should be studied – assumptions that attract an enduring community of scholars, yet remain sufficiently open-ended to encompass diverse research problems. Subsequent scholars (e.g. Burrell & Morgan, 1979) specified sets of assumptions to distinguish multiple and co-existing paradigms, fuelling arguments over paradigm dominance (e.g. Donaldson, 1998) and commensurability (e.g. Jackson & Carter, 1991). Postmodernists deepen the discussion, critiquing paradigm constraints in favor of eclectic and fluid discourses (e.g. Chia, 1996).

As the paradigm debate continues, the social sciences appear increasingly fragmented and reflexive. Organization studies offers a case in point. The field has become marked by numerous, deep-seated divisions, illustrated by conflicts over the roles of structure versus agency and causation versus meaning in research (Weaver & Gioia, 1994). Such tensions intensified in Europe during the 1980s and early 1990s, and recently gained relevance in North America. Despite their differences, most researchers on both sides of the Atlantic now recognize that a single paradigm is necessarily limiting, helping expose certain facets of organizations, while obscuring others (Burrell, 1996; Weick, 1999). This recognition has fostered growing interest in a provocative alternative – multiparadigm inquiry. Multiparadigm advocates use divergent paradigm lenses to contrast their varied representations and explore plurality and paradox (e.g. Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Schultz & Hatch, 1996; Ybema, 1996). Indeed Mingers (1997) praised organization studies for exemplifying reflexivity and encouraging multiparadigm interests in the ‘hard sciences’ (e.g. physics, biology, operations research).

Nevertheless, multiparadigm inquiry remains under-utilized for three primary reasons. First, exemplars have yet to articulate an explicit philosophical framework for this approach (Mingers, 1997). Scherer (1998) claimed that multiparadigm inquiry offers a midpoint between the extremes of modern dogmatism and postmodern relativism, but questioned the assumptions on which it is based. For if all approaches rely on an underlying ideology, ontology, and/or epistemology, then what are the foundations of a multiparadigm perspective? Second, researchers need further guidance regarding multiparadigm strategies. Recent works examine specific strategies (e.g. Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Schultz & Hatch, 1996), but researchers lack a deeper appreciation of their value and challenges (Mingers, 1997). Third, discussions of research implications have stopped short. Scholars need to engage in more ‘disciplined reflexivity’ (Weick, 1999), questioning the impact of multiparadigm inquiry on researchers’ perceptions of organizational life and their own work.
This article addresses each of these issues in turn, thereby extending understandings of multiparadigm inquiry. We begin by building a framework that contrasts multiparadigm assumptions with those of modern and postmodern stances. We then discuss three multiparadigm strategies, extending Lewis and Grimes’ (1999) recent review by further examining their merits and limitations. Selected and highly diverse exemplars illustrate how researchers have applied each strategy to explore plurality and paradox. Our conclusion delves into the implications of multiparadigm inquiry, its value as well as its philosophical, cognitive, and cultural challenges.

**Toward a multiparadigm framework**

The fate of our times, one might think, would be such as to encourage a profound pluralism with respect to interpretation . . . Yet pluralism need not mean nihilism; that anything is as good as anything else, that any interpretation will do. (Clegg, 1990: 16)

Seeking to comprehend rising organizational tensions, researchers have produced an explosion of varied, often contentious approaches. Modern and postmodern stances, for example, offer contrasting positions in the paradigm debate. Modern paradigms multiply, aiding construction of distinct and static representations (c.f. Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Morgan, 1997), as postmodernists question paradigm constraints, applying eclectic methods to expose contradictions and fluidity (c.f. Hassard & Parker, 1994; Kilduff & Mehra, 1997). Such theoretical diversity may enrich understandings of pluralism and paradox. Yet polarization of modern paradigms and ruptures between modern and postmodern stances inhibit researchers from tapping this potential.

In light of this challenge, Clegg (1990) claimed that role of researchers becomes that of ‘interpreters,’ translating, penetrating and investigating different modes of rationality. Multiparadigm inquiry facilitates this role, linking modern desires for order and stability with postmodern emphases on flux and fragmentation (Scherer, 1998). To clarify its philosophical underpinnings, we contrast multiparadigm inquiry with modern and postmodern stances. Our framework, summarized in Table 1, operates at a particularly high level of abstraction. For instance, while paradigms promote specific epistemological assumptions, modern and postmodern stances offer varied views of the nature of epistemology. Given their fictitious distinctions, however, modern, postmodern and paradigmatic labels are clearly problematic. We juxtapose these
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<td>Employ paradigm prescriptions systematically</td>
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<td>Construct cohesive representations to advance paradigm development</td>
<td>Reflect organizational tensions and encourage greater reflexivity</td>
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‘ideal types’ not to enforce social conventions, but to stress differences and interconnections relevant to multiparadigm inquiry. Furthermore, modern and postmodern distinctions are not meant to canvas all possible approaches to organization studies, but to accentuate opposing positions in the evolving paradigm debate.

**Modern paradigms: Cohesive and static representations**

For decades scholars have mapped paradigms, examining distinct sets of assumptions and their impacts on researcher’ worldviews. Burrell and Morgan (1979), for example, parsed four paradigms by delineating disparate ontological and epistemological assumptions. Others review extant studies to depict how empirically derived and socially constructed ideologies differentiate paradigm perspectives (e.g. Alvesson, 1987; Zey-Ferrell & Aiken, 1981). Despite many variations, such maps polarize paradigms into seemingly incommensurable sets of ideologies, ontologies and/or epistemologies. From postmodern stances, however, paradigms exhibit philosophical similarities based
on their common modernity. Modern paradigms share beliefs in Enlightenment notions of ‘progress’ and ‘reason,’ stressing the ability to logically discriminate among alternatives and construct cohesive and static representations of organizational life (Cooper & Burrell, 1988).

Ideology signifies assumptions regarding the focal point of research; assumptions that necessarily privilege some voices, beliefs and issues over others. From modernist stances, ideologies appear centered on the subject. The author assumes omnipotence, detailing certain facets of the subject, and ignoring others, to reduce uncertainty and deepen understandings. Some paradigms promote a selective focus because they are certain of its ‘truth claims’ (e.g. positivism as posed by Donaldson, 1998), others because such privileging is deemed a moral responsibility (e.g. critical theory as advocated by Parker, 1995). By sharpening researchers’ perspectives, modern paradigms may foster insights into particular organizational tensions. For example, a positivist lens helps address issues pertinent to managers. To enhance organizational performance, researchers may examine means of coping with the paradoxical need to divide and coordinate work. Yet modernism is not confined to a managerialist center, also encompassing paradigms that amplify typically silenced voices in hopes of igniting the emancipation potential of the Enlightenment (Hassard, 1994). A critical lens, for instance, may expose how labor interests oppose managerial prerogatives, highlighting the unintended consequences of power asymmetries in organizations.

Ontology denotes assumptions about the nature of reality. Modern paradigms promote strong ontologies, seeking to represent the essence of entities – e.g. structures, meanings, and myths – within discrete ‘states of being’ (Chia, 1995). This is not to say that modernists do not examine processes, for ideographic modernists certainly do. However, such processes as structuring, sense-making and mystifying are viewed as patterned interactions, and thereby are rendered abstract and static. From this position, phenomena appear as self-contained and comprehensible entities (e.g. social relations, cultural symbols, control mechanisms).

Epistemological assumptions address how researchers attempt to understand phenomena of interest, and what forms of knowledge are considered ‘scientific’ (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Adhering to a ‘paradigm mentality,’ modernists presume that epistemology is necessarily restricted – and restrictive – prescribing a way of knowing (i.e. research objectives, methods) appropriate for the respective subject of study and fitting the conventions espoused by a given research community (Grimes & Rood, 1995). By rigorously applying epistemological prescriptions, modernists construct internally consistent representations of organizational life. In this
way, research contributes insights that refute, support or extend extant knowledge, continuously advancing paradigm development.

Yet modern stances are under increasing fire. Critics argue that paradigms have lost their value in light of on-going cultural and technological changes. Whitehead (1985), for one, questioned modernist tendencies to reify objects of inquiry, naively mistaking research abstractions for reality, and producing biased and simplistic representations (Chia, 1995). To quell pluralism or resolve paradoxes, modernists often over-rationalize or separate contradictions. In contrast, postmodernists oppose dualistic thinking (e.g. discipline/empowerment, labor/management distinctions), which may privilege one side of a duality and marginalize the other (Knights, 1997).

Postmodernism: Fragmented and fluctuating discourses

Postmodernism spans numerous, often conflicting stances including French structuralism, romanticism, phenomenology, nihilism, existentialism, and hermeneutics (Strathern, 1987 in Rosenau, 1992). Its more skeptical proponents offer pessimistic assessments of the human condition and proclaim the impossibility of truth. In contrast, affirmative stances are oriented toward process and either open to political action (i.e. resistance) or content with the recognition of visionary, non-dogmatic projects, ranging from New Age religion to New Wave life styles (Rosenau, 1992). Given its diverse strands, postmodernism remains one of the most ambiguous approaches in academia. Yet recently researchers have attempted to sketch postmodern assumptions regarding ideology (Cooper & Burrell, 1988), ontology (Chia, 1995) and epistemology (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997). Applying their insights, we broadly depict postmodernism as a challenge to existing social science knowledge that stresses fluctuating and fragmented discourses. Its advocates draw on irony, parody and allusion, seeking to refine our sensitivity to differences and our ability to tolerate the paradoxical (Lyotard, 1984).

Postmodernism advocates de-centering stances toward ideology. Proponents reject the notion that the human subject is the center of meaning and proclaim the ‘death of the author’ (Derrida, 1978). Assumptions guiding research do not simply stem from rational and autonomous choices made by the researcher, but are constituted in the interplay of discourses in which the research subjects and the researcher participate. According to Lyotard (1984), subjects struggle with an infinite number of discourses (i.e. language games) as they attempt to bolster their identity in a tenuous environment. Thus postmodernists do not pursue knowledge to reduce uncertainty, as this
is an inherent feature of contemporary life. Rather they ‘call attention to the margins and away from some mythical center’ to expose irony, conflict and diversity (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997: 461).

Postmodern stances apply *weak* ontologies that assume an ephemeral and indeterminate reality. According to Cooper and Law (1995), modernism’s ‘ontology of being’ emphasizes outcomes, whereas postmodernism favors an ‘ontology of becoming’ that views reality as a process in continuous making. Commitment to an ontology of becoming implies that researchers treat ‘actions, relationships and processes as primary and therefore more “real” than social entities such as “individuals” or “organizations”’ (Chia, 1995: 601). ‘*Reality* is in perpetual flux and transformation and hence unrepresentable through any *static* conceptual framework or paradigm of thought’ (Chia, 1996: 46, italics in original). Representations are always mediated by the perceptions of the observer and the conventions of the extant knowledge systems (Calas & Smircich, 1999).

Postmodernists reject the possibility of neutral language, overarching metanarratives and a final representation of reality. Advocates assume epistemology is *eclectic*, freeing researchers to apply whatever methods they deem useful (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997). Questioning modernist claims to authority, postmodern stances encourage attempts to deconstruct taken-for-granted meanings by exploring contradictions in scientific texts and amplifying a cacophony of voices. Research helps expose the intricate cultural, historical and political contexts of organizational life, and the impacts of researchers’ identities and assumptions on their findings. In sum, postmodernists recognize that ‘knowledge can only be produced in “small stories” or “modest narratives,” mindful of their locality in space and time and capable of adapting or disappearing as needed’ (Calas & Smircich, 1999: 651).

Yet critics, typically targeting skeptical extremes, view postmodernism as a relativist quagmire, sparking jeers of irrelevance and purposeless critique. As Clegg and Hardy jest, by preferring the safety of esoteric theorizing, postmodernists may ‘not only free themselves from the chore of rendering their theories intelligible to individuals who might find it difficult to decipher the words of a postmodern text, let alone derive any meaning from it; they also absolve themselves of the responsibility for doing so’ (1996: 692). Likewise, Parker (1995) argued that by eschewing notions of ‘reason’ and ‘progress,’ postmodernists may disable the emancipatory project of modern critical theory. Furthermore, the collapse of distinctions debilitates the explanatory power of theory. Postmodern approaches to paradox and pluralism may foster ambivalence, losing the vitality of theoretical contradictions in praise of non-committed freedom (Koot et al., 1996).
Multiparadigm inquiry: A provocative alternative

Multiparadigm inquiry arose with early attempts to differentiate between modern paradigms and their worldviews (e.g. Alvesson, 1987; Smircich, 1983). Over time, however, multiparadigm strategies have become more varied, also seeking to employ and link divergent paradigm perspectives (see Lewis & Grimes, 1999). To clarify its underlying assumptions, we now contrast multiparadigm inquiry with modern and postmodern stances (see Table 1). This provocative alternative seeks to explore contrasting representations, which may offer ‘insights into the characteristic contradictions and tensions embodied in contemporary organizations’ (Reed, 1985: 201). In sum, the primary goals of a multiparadigm approach are twofold: (1) to encourage greater awareness of theoretical alternatives and thereby facilitate discourse and/or inquiry across paradigms, and (2) to foster greater understandings of organizational plurality and paradox.

Multiparadigm researchers apply an accommodating ideology, valuing paradigm perspectives for their potential to inform each other toward more encompassing theories. All modes of thought expose certain facets of organizational life by ignoring others: ‘The (postmodern) philosophers ignore everyone; the functionalists ignore workers; critical theorists ignore managers (even oppressed managers because, in the view of many of these theorists, there is no such thing). Even ethnographers distance themselves . . . ignoring the power structures that created not only the subject but also themselves’ (Clegg & Hardy, 1996: 693, parentheses in original). Multiparadigm inquiry strives to respect opposing approaches and juxtapose the partial understandings they inspire. Paradigm lenses may reveal seemingly disparate, but interdependent facets of complex phenomena.

Multiparadigm inquiry promotes a stratified ontology, assuming multiple dimensions of reality. Reality is at once ‘made’ and ‘in the making’ as advocates examine both entities and processes, rather than collapsing these dimensions. Social entities (e.g. structure, culture) denote contextualized heuristics, co-existing with the processes through which actors use, reproduce and transform these heuristics (Spender, 1998). According to Reed, entities and processes ‘operate at different levels of abstraction that tie into each other within a stratified, multilevel, and relational model of society’ (1997: 31). From this ontological foundation, organizations appear as social spaces torn in multiple directions (Bouchikhi, 1998); for despite the rise in (often subtle) entities for control, organizational actors increasingly pursue numerous, diverse, even contradictory goals.

In multiparadigm inquiry, a pluralist epistemology ‘rejects the notion of a single reference system in which we can establish truth’ as bounded
rationality binds us within our own learning processes, while allowing us to explore alternatives (Spender, 1998: 235). Advocates assume that paradigm lenses help construct alternative representations, exposing different dimensions of organizational life. As each lens offers a selective focus, researchers seek multiple perspectives of particularly complex and ambiguous phenomena. Contrasting modern representations may enable more insightful understandings – e.g. revealing forces pulling toward compliance and resistance, empowerment and discipline. Yet researchers also may tap postmodern sensibilities to critique socially constructed paradigm boundaries and encourage self-reflection on the research process (e.g. Hassard, 1993; Martin, 1992). Hence, exemplars use multiple perspectives to highlight the plurality and paradoxes of organizational life, as well as the uncertainties of knowledge.

Multiparadigm inquiry values the prescriptions offered by modern paradigms, yet simultaneously disavows the claim to a singular truth. This does not imply some idyllic, ‘best-of-both-worlds’ approach. On the contrary, multiparadigm researchers live in a glasshouse open to attack from modernists and postmodernists alike. Some modernists would strongly refute the notion that paradigms are sense-making heuristics, rather than ‘truth bearing’ (e.g. Donaldson, 1998); others would critique their use as fostering fictitious research (e.g. Parker & McHugh, 1991). Meanwhile, postmodernists stress that applying paradigmatic conventions may reify their hegemony and oversimplify, or worse homogenize, their disparate understandings (Burrell, 1996). The following sections explore multiparadigm inquiry further. We review three research strategies, then come full circle to reiterate the contributions and challenges of this provocative alternative.

A guide to multiparadigm strategies

Multiparadigm inquiry celebrates paradigm proliferation for providing theoretical richness, choice and opportunity. Yet strategies for applying multiple paradigms are varied and poorly understood, limiting their accessibility to researchers (Mingers, 1997). Recently, however, Lewis and Grimes (1999) distinguished three multiparadigm strategies: multiparadigm reviews, multiparadigm research, and metaparadigm theory building. They broadly described the strategies as follows:

Multiparadigm reviews involve recognition of divides and bridges in existing theory (e.g. characterizing paradigms X and Y), whereas multiparadigm research involves using paradigm lenses (X and Y) empirically to collect and analyze data and cultivate their diverse
representations of organizational phenomena. Lastly, in metaparadigm theory building, theorists strive to juxtapose and link conflicting paradigm insights (X and Y) within a novel understanding (Z).

(Lewis & Grimes, 1999: 673)

Building from our previous framework, this section extends Lewis and Grimes (1999) by detailing the underlying assumptions, objectives and limitations of these strategies and reviewing highly diverse exemplars (see Table 2). Although we discuss each strategy separately, Lewis and Grimes (1999) stressed their complementarity. Indeed, we view the strategies as fitting Brocklesby’s (1997) depiction of multiparadigm transformation: a process through which researchers learn to recognize, use, then accommodate diverse perspectives. Multiparadigm reviews first help raise researchers’ paradigm consciousness to foster greater awareness of the insights and blinders enabled by divergent lenses. Multiparadigm research then entails immersion within alternative paradigm cultures to learn experientially their languages and norms. Lastly, metaparadigm theory building helps researchers consider opposing views simultaneously, and thereby develop more accommodating understandings that reflect organizational plurality and paradox.

**Multiparadigm reviews: Raising paradigm consciousness**

Multiparadigm reviews examine existing literature to expose researchers’ underlying and typically taken-for-granted assumptions (Lewis & Grimes, 1999). The primary goal of this strategy is to raise researchers’ paradigm consciousness. According to Brocklesby (1997), most researchers operate within a single paradigm, but lack an acute sense of their theoretical predilections. Yet such awareness is critical as ‘what we know of as “reality” is an active projection of our own cognitive structure . . . we see the world in terms of ourselves’ (1997: 195). Multiparadigm reviews help address such questions as: What sets of assumptions do researchers apply when investigating an organizational phenomenon? And how do paradigm lenses influence what is seen/not seen? By making paradigm assumptions explicit, multiparadigm reviews may distinguish the value and limits of divergent perspectives, and foster greater self- and social reflection on the research process.

Multiparadigm reviews seek to explore the pluralism and paradoxes of social theory, highlighting tensions between varied theoretical viewpoints (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Reviewers depict paradigms as modern academic constructions that privilege – and, in turn, suppress or neglect – certain organizational voices and interests. By categorizing extant literature within a paradigm framework, reviewers distinguish the selective focus of different
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| Raise paradigm
consciousness by
distinguishing the
insights and blinding of
alternative lenses | Cultivate disparate
representations via
immersion within
alternative paradigm
cultures | Build more accommodating
understandings by juxtaposing
and linking disparate paradigm
representations |
| Challenges            |                        |                            |
| Potential for reinforcing a 'paradigm mentality';
need to avoid
promoting certain
lenses over others | Likelihood of
contaminating
representations with
pre-existing assumptions;
trials of learning different
cultural norms | Potential for resulting theory
to appear as a closed and
authoritative metanarrative;
difficulty of attaining a
metaparadigm perspective |
| Exemplars             |                        |                            |
| Organizations (Morgan,
1997); organizational
culture (Smircich,
1983); work (Alvesson,
1987); work and
technology design
(Grint, 1991);
structure (Giola & Pitre,
1990); total quality
management (Kelemen,
1995) | Work organization
(Hassard, 1993), small-
firm strategy
(Graham-Hill, 1996),
organization politics
(Bradshaw-Camball &
Murray, 1991),
organizational culture
(Martin, 1992) | Organizational culture
(Daymon, 2000; Shultz &
Hatch, 1996; Ybema,
1996), power
(Gaventa, 1980),
multidivisional organizations
(Clegg, 1990), advanced
manufacturing technology
(Lewis & Grimes, 1999) |

lenses. Highlighting paradigm diversity serves to open theoretical choice. As Morgan (1983) explained, research is necessarily a choice-making process, because all lenses are inherently exclusionary and parochial. By clarifying paradigm alternatives, researchers may compare their work to a wider realm of literature, recognize their theoretical predilections, and appreciate insights enabled by opposing viewpoints.

Phenomena amenable to review are open to myriad interpretations, typically demonstrated by a highly contested, fragmented and vast research domain (illustrated by the exemplars in Table 2). Reviewers examine the understandings contributed by different paradigm lenses, and critique the anomalies ignored or facets distorted at the periphery of each lens. To categorize literature within paradigms, reviewers scrutinize researchers’ language. Cannella and Paetzold explained, that ‘a person’s position regarding a paradigm becomes most clear when he or she uses terms, such as knowledge, as though all readers will implicitly hold shared meanings of them’
(1994: 333). Some reviewers also analyze the metaphors researchers employ. Smircich (1983) and Morgan (1997) detailed diverse organizational metaphors and the images they promote – e.g. organizations as machines, organisms, brains, political systems, and psychic prisons.

Several reviews model this multiparadigm strategy. Alvesson (1987), for instance, sought to explore conflicting views of contemporary work. He grouped extant research within three paradigms – consensus, control and critique – that emphasize work methods, power implications and value rationality, respectively. His work exposed how each lens relies on a different point of departure, impacting researchers’ depictions of the quality, degradation and self-regulation of work. Yet, in conjunction, these frames of reference help reveal the intricacies of organizational life. Similarly, Grint (1991) analyzed disparate assumptions regarding the design of work and technology. Positioning theories along a political continuum, he differentiated between technocratic and critical orientations and their resulting optimistic (i.e. skill upgrading) versus pessimistic (i.e. deskilling) representations, respectively. Along a determinist–interpretivist continuum, he distinguished paradigms according to the roles actors play in the design process, from passive observers at the mercy of inertia or macro socio-economic forces to active participants in social construction.

Gioia and Pitre (1990) reviewed alternative theory-building approaches, illustrating how opposing paradigms offer unique insights into organizational structure. Applying Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) typology, they described how a functionalist deductive focus highlights stable characteristics of structure; a radical structuralist dialectical analysis uncovers historically and politically embedded structural contradictions; interpretivist induction reveals structuring processes through which actors construct social meanings and roles; and radical humanist critiques expose reified deep structures and communicative distortions. Likewise, Kelemen (1995) explored tensions in the vast literature of total quality management (TQM). From a positivist perspective TQM is seen to be an objective phenomenon, which can be comprehended and therefore quantified and improved upon. She described TQM gurus (e.g. Juran, Deming, Peters) as applying positivist conventions to prescribe ‘best practices’ for implementing TQM and highlight its potential for empowerment and continuous organizational improvements. In contrast, a constructivist lens helps reveal the role of power and language in the social construction of TQM meanings and practices and the consequences these may have upon the identity making of managers and employees alike.

Critics, however, note two primary challenges of multiparadigm reviews. First, reviewers are placed in a tenuous position, seeking to accentuate paradigm diversity, but avoid reifying paradigmatic distinctions.
Ackroyd (1992) warned that multiparadigm reviews may reinforce a 'paradigm mentality' that fosters further polarization and fragmentation. Second, reviewers need to avoid promoting any particular paradigm, yet are always examining literature through their own lens. Donaldson (1998) claimed that multiparadigm reviews are simply another form of critique, whereby the reviewers bolster their favored radical approach and downplay more mainstream views. Yet 'its skill lies in the way it seems to offer an authoritative master framework that gives the impression of independence' (1998: 271). These limitations require reviewers to stress that paradigm distinctions serve as sense-making heuristics – useful guides for identifying alternative viewpoints (Lewis & Grimes, 1999). Reviewers also must remain acutely aware of their own predilections, stating their frame of reference up front and stressing the insights and biases enabled by each paradigm lens. These responses help balance the limits of multiparadigm reviews with their potential. For raising paradigm consciousness may help researchers 'question, possibly for the first time, the veracity of the claim that the social consensus surrounding a paradigm’s body of knowledge somehow represents proof of the truth' (Brocklesby, 1997: 200). Such awareness opens space for researchers to question, appreciate and even embrace alternative perspectives.

Multiparadigm research: Cultivating diverse representations

Paradigms aid construction of distinct explanations of phenomena; contestable and provisional representations dependent upon a researcher’s choice of lens (Knights, 1997). Multiparadigm research seeks to cultivate diverse representations, detailing the images highlighted by varied lenses. Applying the conventions prescribed by alternative paradigms, researchers develop contrasting or multi-sided accounts that may depict the ambiguity and complexity of organizational life. Morgan (1983) described the resulting representations as similar to Allison’s (1971) case studies of the Cuban Missile Crisis, but grounded in more disparate assumptions.

Multiparadigm research entails exploring paradigms from within, applying divergent lenses empirically to collect and analyze data. Using an anthropological metaphor, Hassard (1993) explained that researchers immerse themselves within varied paradigm cultures, familiarizing themselves with their differing linguistic and methodological norms. According to Brocklesby (1997), such immersion enables experiential learning that further elevates paradigm consciousness. By recognizing the viability of each representation, researchers may experience first-hand the tensions of theoretical pluralism and paradox. Ideally, this strategy engages researchers more fully in a quest for understanding – an understanding that encourages tolerance,
preserves theoretical diversity, and fosters non-obsessive uses of paradigm lenses (Flood & Romm, 1997).

Multiparadigm researchers immerse themselves within each chosen paradigm in turn. Keeping lenses and emerging representations separate helps respect the integrity of their disparate assumptions (Martin, 1992). Resulting representations seek to depict the organizational voices, concerns and interests magnified by opposing lenses. However, analyses of a common phenomenon may demonstrate that paradigm images need not operate at the extremes, but may overlap and foster counterintuitive insights. During the analytical process, researchers often comment that paradigm distinctions appear increasingly ambiguous and fluid, revealing their focus on interwoven dimensions of organizational life (Lewis & Grimes, 1999).

Illustrating this strategy, Hassard (1993) examined a work organization – a British Fire Service – using Burrell and Morgan's four 'analytic cameras.' To apply seemingly incommensurable lenses, he approached construction of multiple representations as an exploration into 'the language-games of everyday life.' Employing Wittgenstein's notions, paradigms appeared to accent diverse and equal discourses predicated upon their distinct cultural rules, yet sharing an overarching metalanguage. Whereas Hassard paired each lens with a different, paradigm-appropriate issue of work organization, Graham-Hill (1996) examined a common issue, small-firm strategy, across these paradigms. To write four stories of a family business, he conducted a series of free-flowing, stream-of-conscious interviews with its CEO, which he then analyzed using case study methods indicative of each lens. Similarly, Bradshaw-Camball and Murray (1991) used functionalist, interpretivist, and critical paradigms to investigate organizational politics. Using naturalist methods, they conducted an extensive study of hospital administration. They then analyzed the collected data using each lens, spinning three contrasting accounts of budgeting games and illusion making.

Martin (1992) applied an alternative set of lenses, avoiding Burrell and Morgan's (1979) strict emphasis on ontological and epistemological assumptions. By reviewing extant studies of culture, she identified three perspectives – integration, differentiation and fragmentation – grounded in disparate theoretical assumptions and focused on different facets of organizational culture. Using these perspectives, she sought to amplify the voices each privileged and explore their sensitivities to varied observations and explanations. Martin relied extensively on actors' quotations to represent each viewpoint, permitting each perspective to 'speak' without interruption and in its own words. The result was a paradoxical image of organizational culture as a source of harmony, a product of inherent conflicts of interest, and a reflection of contemporary ambiguities.
Not surprisingly, critiques of multiparadigm research abound. Parker and McHugh (1991) and Deetz (1996), for example, claimed that researchers’ ‘home’ paradigms contaminate their use of alternative perspectives. According to Jackson and Carter (1991), true immersion within different paradigms would require a quasi-religious conversion. Weaver and Gioia (1994) responded by noting how such criticisms rely on the incommensurability thesis, which posits that meaningful communication across paradigms is impossible. Using a common analogy, they argue that cross-cultural experiences are trying for anthropologists and ordinary persons alike, but this does not negate the possibility of learning foreign languages and practices. Advocates stress that journeys to other paradigms must be approached via a desire to learn new sets of explicit and implicit research premises (i.e. techniques and values). According to Hassard (1993), multiparadigm research demands an intense suspicion of personal assumptions. Researchers must question their roles in perpetuating self-fulfilling prophecies, as findings may reproduce pre-existing views. Yet sincere attempts may prove profoundly enlightening. Martin, for instance, described applying multiple lenses, particularly those farthest from your ‘home,’ as therapeutic, capable of shocking researchers out of their comfort zone and aiding examination of deeply repressed explanations (1992: 177).

Metaparadigm theory building: Accommodating paradigm diversity

Metaparadigm theory building strives to enhance theorists’ abilities to think paradoxically – to entertain conflicting knowledges simultaneously. According to Lewis and Grimes (1999), this strategy fosters more accommodating understandings by juxtaposing paradigm representations. Such accommodation does not imply integration, but a portrayal of theoretical tensions that reflects organizational plurality and paradox. Hence, theorists seek a higher level of abstraction from which they may explore paradigm disparity and complementarity (Gioia & Pitre, 1990).

Metaparadigm theory is comprised of second-order constructs, which provide a reference system for linking disparate representations (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Second-order constructs are more abstract than typical research variables, remaining open to interpretation from varied perspectives (Reed, 1997). The result is a theory of paradigm interplay. As Schultz and Hatch (1996) explained, interplay accentuates interconnections and differences among paradigm representations, fostering an appreciation of how paradigm insights and limitations are most apparent from an opposing view. Preserving opposition invokes a creative tension that may inspire theorists to break
free of traditional dualities and explore tensions, exemplified by their depicting culture as general and contextual, clear and ambiguous, stable and unstable.

Metatheorizing techniques help theorists juxtapose paradigm representations in search of conflicts and patterns. For instance, conjecture inversion entails reframing broad research questions within different paradigms to identify gaps and overlaps in understandings (Gioia & Pitre, 1990). Grimes and Rood (1995) suggested using conversation techniques, viewing paradigms as debating ‘voices,’ presenting their views, reacting to others, elaborating disagreements and possibly finding shared ground. Particularly heated debates, such as those between Marxist and functionalist views, may highlight contrasting interests. Theorists may then iterate between paradigms that provide the most relevant viewpoint, using switching rules based on Habermas’s (1971) knowledge-interest scheme. For instance, examining a new technology, a Marxist lens may expose concerns over labor control and skills, while a functionalist lens highlights issues of system reliability and performance.

Alternatively, Poole and Van de Ven (1989) proposed examining paradigm representations as revealing varied spatial and/or temporal dimensions. For instance, Bradshaw-Camball and Murray (1991) suggested that their lenses expose organizational politics at different depths. The functionalist lens may draw attention to the surface, revealing more conscious conflicts and bases of power. An interpretivist viewpoint may then accent more subconscious processes of structuring reality that maintain illusions of power. Lastly, the radical lens accentuates the deep structure of politics embedded in a larger social and ideological context of asymmetrical power relations. Similarly, Daymon (2000) applied Martin’s (1992) three perspectives, seeking to explore their interplay. She theorized that the viewpoints operate continuously, but their relative salience differs at certain times. In her study, integration took precedence during the start-up of a new television station while managerial activities emphasized cohesion; fragmentation then assumed primacy as conflicts intensified over the art versus science of broadcasting; while differentiation gradually gained salience as cultural ambiguity increasingly appeared inherent in daily organizational life.

Further exemplars illustrate diverse approaches to metaparadigm theory building. For instance, Gaventa’s (1980) metaparadigm theory of quiescence and rebellion in an Appalachian coal mine knits together contrasting accounts based on Lukes’ three dimensions of power. Similarly, Clegg (1990) used varied ‘modes of rationality’ to examine multidivisional organizations across national cultures. Seeking a theory of postmodern organizations, rather than a postmodern theory, he linked power and institutional perspectives to explore anomalies in organizational forms ignored by
contingency theory. Likewise, Ybema (1996) sought to extend Martin’s (1992) either/or representations, juxtaposing her cultural lenses to depict their interplay in a Dutch amusement park. He found that such conflicting views reveal shifting cultural and social relationships among workgroups, ‘paradoxical patterns of unity and disunity in organizations. Boundaries between people appear and disappear: they are marked or ignored depending on the ideas, interests, and identities that are at stake, and the setting in which the interactions take place’ (1996: 43).

Lewis and Grimes (1999) provided a particularly detailed example of metaparadigm theory building, which applies all three multiparadigm strategies. They first reviewed existing technology literature using Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) framework. They then applied the four paradigm lenses to analyze existing case studies, written from differing paradigm orientations, and construct alternative accounts of the design of advanced manufacturing technology (AMT). Using conjecture inversion and conversation techniques, they then juxtaposed the perspectives to highlight multiple dimensions of the design process. Accenting different spatial dimensions, regulation lenses voiced managerial interests in operational effectiveness, while radical change paradigms promoted labor concerns over potential domination and control. Exposing alternative temporal dimensions, objective paradigms highlighted stable institutional properties such as design specifications, while subjective lenses helped depict dynamic, underlying processes of their social construction. In conjunction, AMT design appeared as a disruptive and paradoxical social process that is simultaneously empowering and deskilling, determined and chosen.

Metaparadigm theory building is arguably the most provocative of multiparadigm strategies for two reasons. First, from postmodern stances, theorists open themselves to the criticism of having replaced paradigm representations with simply another, albeit more inclusive, metanarrative. In response, theorists often conclude by encouraging further inquiry, stressing that results are open to future critique, reinterpretation and elaboration (e.g. Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Ybema, 1996). Second, critics question where theorists ‘stand’ when applying a metaparadigm view (e.g. Scherer, 1998). According to Gioia and Pitre (1990: 596), a metavantage point exists ‘above the plane of paradigms.’ Yet they stress that the viewer typically is grounded in the assumptions of a particular paradigm. Theorists cannot shed their predisposition, but can contrast their favored representations with those of other paradigms. The goal is an expanded purview, which allows alternatives to co-exist and engage in potentially more insightful and creative interactions. As Morgan (1983) explained, theorists may learn to view (and depict) paradigms as detailing different layers of meanings. In this light, critical self-reflection, again, becomes vital. For the theory-building process will likely
invoke a deep sense of humility as theorists ‘become aware of the precarious quality of their knowledge’ (Brocklesby, 1997: 214).

**Implications of multiparadigm inquiry**

To render multiparadigm inquiry more appealing to organizational researchers, it is not enough to address its rationale (i.e. developing a philosophical framework) and workings (i.e. identifying specific multiparadigm strategies). It also requires identifying its deeper implications. We now unpack the potential contributions of multiparadigm inquiry, as well as its philosophical, cognitive, and cultural challenges.

**Potential contributions: Fostering greater relevance and reflexivity**

Reflexivity . . . the deepening of the self’s capacity to recognise that it views certain information as hostile, to recognise the various dodges that it uses to deny, ignore, or camouflage information that is hostile to it, and to strengthen its capacity to accept and to use hostile information. In short, what Reflexive Sociology seeks is not an insulation, but a transformation of the sociologist’s self, and hence, of his [sic] praxis in the world.

(Gouldner, 1973: 495)

The potential contributions of multiparadigm inquiry accrue on varied levels. On a pragmatic level, this approach aids the exploration of pluralism and paradox, facilitating the development of understandings more in tune with the diversity, complexity and ambiguity of organizational life. On a philosophical level, multiparadigm inquiry encourages greater reflexivity in research. Yet such benefits are intertwined: to capture organizational intricacies one must reflect on one’s own research practices and their potential impact upon the object of inquiry. Conversely, reflexivity may be fuelled as the researcher recognizes inherent tensions surrounding the phenomenon of inquiry.

Use of a single modern paradigm produces a potentially valuable, but narrow view, incapable of exposing the multi-faceted nature of organizational reality. Multiparadigm inquiry, in contrast, may foster ‘more comprehensive portraits of complex organizational phenomena’ (Gioia & Pitre, 1990: 587) by helping researchers confront and explore contradictions. By applying varied lenses, researchers are better equipped to shed light on tensions of
organizational life – e.g. exposing conflicting demands as complementary, and opposing interests as interwoven.

Moreover, engagement in multiparadigm inquiry fosters greater reflexivity. Holland (1999) identified four levels of reflexivity. ‘Reflexivity 1’ is a low-level version that downplays – or more likely, ignores – the role of paradigmatic assumptions in shaping scholarly practice. Rather, researchers question whether they have rigorously applied appropriate techniques to get closer to the ‘truth’ or to capture meaning within a certain context. Researchers do not question their underlying assumptions or their impacts. Yet, as Brocklesby noted, ‘it is only by constantly re-examining and questioning the foundational assumptions of various theories and practices that the discipline can avoid becoming trapped within a limited range of conceptual possibilities’ (1997: 192).

The subsequent three levels are promoted by each of the multiparadigm strategies in turn. ‘Reflexivity 2’ corresponds to multiparadigm reviews. Researchers learn to identify their own and others’ viewpoints, scrutinizing their underpinnings and influence on research (Flood & Romm, 1997). ‘Reflexivity 2’ rests on the belief that we can never expand our understandings unless we constantly examine our own assumptions in light of insights made available by other paradigms. Multiparadigm research extends this thinking by encouraging ‘reflexivity 3.’ Researchers travel across paradigms to appreciate different languages and methodologies (Holland, 1999). At this level, research appears as a continuous process of self-discovery, and reflexivity arises out of experimentation with new research practices. Lastly, ‘reflexivity 4’ relates to metaparadigm theory building. This level of reflexivity is not bound by paradigmatic constraints (Holland, 1999). Rather, it transcends personal and political concerns, as researchers explore intricate differences in identity between researchers, the subjects of research and the audiences for the text (Herts, 1997).

Multiparadigm inquiry fosters intense reflexivity (i.e. levels 2, 3 and 4), helping researchers examine their work and selves at new depths. This is not to say that reflexivity is the ultimate goal, as it may, if taken to its extreme, encourage the formation of ‘navel-gazing’ scholarly communities – excessively introspective and egotistical. Given such precautions, however, one of the greatest values of multiparadigm inquiry is the potential for personal learning, even enlightenment. From our own, first-hand experiences as well as the writings of other multiparadigm researchers, we believe that the exploration of alternative worldviews opens powerful doors of perception. Researchers often note that multiparadigm inquiry forever altered their perspective, impacting their future research even when attempting to return to more single-paradigm concerns (e.g. Lewis & Grimes, 1999; Martin, 1992).
As Reed (1997: 22) noted: ‘A retreat back into a golden age of philosophical innocence and/or empirical pragmatism is unlikely to be an attractive or viable option when the “genie” of ontological and epistemological reflection has been let out of the bottle and there is no chance of forcing or coaxing it back in.’

**Challenges of multiparadigm inquiry**

A successful multi-paradigm perspective, in short, must explain how different theoretical approaches might be related, but must do so (a) while preserving genuine multiplicity (e.g. the relatedness does not involve the reduction of one approach to another) and (b) without uncritically embracing the disunifying ‘paradigms’ paradigm (i.e. the increasingly entrenched view of organizational inquiry which – by appealing to the incommensurability thesis – purports unalterably to divide the field into mutually exclusive, contradictory metatheoretical camps).

(Weaver & Gioia, 1994: 566)

Multiparadigm inquiry raises considerable philosophical, cognitive, and cultural challenges. Advocates, for instance, face *philosophical challenges* as they must weigh the claims for and against paradigm incommensurability. Some commentators depict paradigms as competing intellectual lenses (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Jackson & Carter, 1991). Accordingly, there can be no linguistic or analytical bridges between them, as each takes recourse to particular ontological, epistemological or ideological presumptions. In contrast, multiparadigm researchers question incommensurability (e.g. Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Morgan, 1997), seeking to contrast paradigm perspectives. Following Parker’s (1995) stones analogy, rather than apply extreme relativism, refuting the existence of stones, multiparadigm inquiry explores ways of describing their feel, appearance and uses depending upon one’s point of view. Taking an obvious creative leap, organizational phenomena may exhibit varied qualities of ‘solidity’ to varied actors, depending upon their roles, political interests, cultural backgrounds, etc. Hence, multiparadigm researchers may argue the undesirability of choosing one view over another, but do not negate the possibility of juxtaposing such views. Distinguishing disparate lenses may prove inspiring, extending researchers’ peripheral vision dramatically, yet never completely.

Multiparadigm inquiry also provokes considerable *cognitive challenges* as researchers strive to learn not only the language of different paradigms, but also their social and political practices. According to Brocklesby (1997),
researchers must form propositional (i.e. methodological) and common sense (i.e. intuitive) knowledges of each paradigm. Yet researchers’ socialization within their home paradigm – and the understandings and comfort it provides – make it difficult to acknowledge other ways of viewing the world. Researchers must leave behind (temporarily) their old paradigm to engage an alternative. Such empirical engagement can be a painful exercise. As Lincoln explained, ‘fooling around with a new paradigm is an intensely personal process, evolving from not only intellectual but also personal, social, and possibly political transformation’ (1990: 67). Such challenges help explain why many multiparadigm exemplars stem from doctoral experiences, prior to researchers’ entrenchment in a single paradigm (e.g. Graham-Hill, 1996; Hassard, 1985; Kelemen, 1995; Lewis, 1996). Yet, regardless of academic tenure, exploring multiple paradigms offers a potentially frame-breaking experience. Once researchers become immersed in different cultures, their mindsets are forever changed. They may attempt to ‘return home,’ applying their once favored conventions, but their participation alters for they can no longer pretend that their paradigm is complete (Brocklesby, 1997).

Cultural challenges arise as multiparadigm inquiry threatens the traditional conventions of varied research communities. According to McCloskey (1994), researchers gain acclaim, legitimacy and visibility for their work by following a specific set of established procedures. Yet, if research conventions dictate what counts as quality or knowledge, our research itself plays a significant role in perpetuating or questioning these conventions. Multiparadigm inquiry may encourage research choices to become more conscious and informed. By developing cross-paradigm sensitivity, researchers may engage in provocative and enlightening work that extends their peripheral vision and awakens their self-reflective capabilities. Theory that considers, even accommodates, divergent perspectives, may contribute intricate understandings – understandings that mute objectivity/subjectivity debates and offer insights for more diverse organizational actors. Although multiparadigm inquiry is yet to be regarded as legitimate by the entire field, it has found resonance with a growing cadre of researchers, who are prepared to put to trial their academic credibility in order to explore pluralism and paradox inherent within organizations and organizational studies.

Concluding note

By tapping modern and postmodern insights, multiparadigm inquiry adheres to Kilduff and Mehra’s conviction that ‘the practice of research should never
be a timid adventure’ (1997: 476). Yet, simultaneously, multiparadigm exemplars question modern claims of incommensurability and the extremes of postmodern relativism. Researchers value multiple paradigm lenses, while recognizing their blinders. Such divergent lenses may enable insights into varied facets of organizations, potentially enhancing understandings of how dramatic transformations are intensifying ambiguity, complexity and conflict. Multiparadigm strategies may guide explorations of pluralism and paradox, fostering development of more relevant and comprehensive theory. For the challenges of contemporary academia necessarily reflect those of organizational life:

The same paradoxical demands are made of researchers of complex social and cultural processes. They cannot simply adopt existing, standardized approaches. The whimsicality of reality can only be grasped with a multi-perspective approach that combines various methods of data collection, multi-level analysis and the in-built view of paradoxes in the research plan. This calls for creativity, for serendipity-proness, for not being afraid to walk on thin ice, for an attitude of fundamental scepticism about fixed models and solutions and for a critical reflection on one’s own actions.

(Koot et al., 1996: 211)

References


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