USE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE TO NAVIGATE PARADOXES WITHIN A NON-HIERARCHICAL ACTIVIST GROUP

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ABSTRACT

This reflective paper aims to contribute to the ongoing literature on the role of reflective practice in supporting change agents within organizational settings. It will explore how I, as a student within the master's program Human Systems Intervention, used reflective practice to navigate inherent group paradoxes as part of a wider organizational change effort within a rapidly evolving, non-hierarchical climate activist group. As a means of understanding this experience I will draw off of reflective practice literature and in particular the 'Vygotsky Space' framework and paradox theory drawing on the work of Smith and Berg's group paradoxes and Smith and Lewis's dynamic equilibrium model.

Keywords: Activism, Paradox, Non-Hierarchical, Vygotsky, Self-Reflection

INTRODUCTION

Non-hierarchical systems are described as organizations that do not have central or fixed-positional leadership functions (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). While these structures can give a sense of autonomy to their members in how they contribute to the organization, they can also lead to tensions as members deal with the paradoxes of being both autonomous and responsible to the outputs of a group. This can pose particular complications for process consultants working within these contexts, as they play a more active role in intervening in the evolving process dynamics of an organization, by forming a helping relationship with a client system (Schein, 1999). The practice of process consultation can be described as one that interplays 'reflection' alongside 'doing', in essence, it is by intervening in the system and reflecting upon these moments of intervention that new insights become points of inflection for consultants to bring change within the organizations they are seeking to help (Ellis et al., 2001). This is closely connected to Mezirow's (2000) concept of critical reflection, which he describes as an examination of values to achieve transformative learning in which we are made aware of the very frames of reference we have previously been subject to. By drawing on reflective practice, I argue, consultants can successfully intervene within these non-hierarchical organizations.

This paper will explore this argument through the lens of my own experiences working within a non-hierarchical activist organization as part of my work within the Graduate Program in Human Systems Intervention at Concordia University in Montreal. Consulting within this setting meant I was constantly interacting with an evolving set of organizational members as I was confronted with fluctuating norms and boundaries making continuity difficult. How can we stay present to what is happening, as the very structures around us shift and change, while still finding ways to help our client systems? By reflecting on these moments of transformative learning, we can not only make sense of our own experiences and tensions, but we can also use

them to become aware of the paradoxical conditions inherent within non-hierarchical organizations. That experience can then be reflected e to the organization to help it move forward.

In these next sections I establish theoretical connections between non-hierarchical organizations and paradoxes, drawing on the work of Smith & Lewis (2014) 'paradox theory' and Smith and Berg's (1987) theory of 'group paradoxes' and the sociocultural learning framework 'Vygotsky Space' (Gavelek & Raphael, 1996; Harré, 1984; Mcvee et al., 2005). Using these theories, I will then analyze my own experiences and moments of transformative learning by drawing on key quotes taken from my journal entries. Finally, I will speak to my learning and the possibilities this may have on future reflective practitioners working in similar organizational contexts.

Group Paradoxes and Non-hierarchical Activist Systems

Smith & Lewis (2014) define paradoxes as "*contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time*". This definition highlights that paradoxes are tensions that lives across at least two states, and that they persist across an organization or group's existence. As part of their paradox theory, Smith and Lewis (2014) describe a dynamic equilibrium model in which paradoxes represent latent tensions that become salient when rapidly changing external and internal environmental factors make the tensions these paradoxes create unavoidable.

Langfred's (2000) studies show how self-managed teams and organizations are particularly susceptible to the more salient effects of organizational and group paradoxes. Edmondson & Lee (2017) have defined non-hierarchical or self-managed organizations as "*systems that radically decentralized authority formally and systematically throughout the organization*" (p.39). These organizations aim to remove bureaucracy and, as a result, their hierarchical functions granting autonomy and authority exist at the individual and group level. Their 'radical' nature means that the traditional manager-subordinate relationship isn't found anywhere within the organization—the groups themselves are in charge of their management with a formalized governance structure, rules, and processes (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). The intention of non-hierarchical systems is empowerment – to enhance flexibility, adaptability, responsiveness, and creativity of all individuals to the surface. As there is no hierarchical position that holds authority over the group, then it is the group itself and the individuals within the group who come together to continuously agree on decisions. This creates a need to balance the individual member's autonomy and the needs of the group itself (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). It is these types of tensions that generate the conditions for paradoxes to emerge (Smith & Lewis, 2011).

Smith & Berg (1987) speak to paradoxes as an inherent element of group life as members struggle with being simultaneously an individual with beliefs, skills, and values, and a part of a group with a collective purpose. This contradictory dynamic between the whole and the part leads to a manifestation of splitting where members project these tensions onto someone or something else (colleagues, managers or leaders, other sub-groups, external actors or conditions or roles) and actively aligning themselves against another (K. K. Smith & Berg, 1987). An example can be found with the *'Occupy Movement'* which experienced rapid growth as individuals aligned to the collective purpose. Their non-hierarchical model prompted them to adopt a collective and consensus-based form of formal decision-making in which every member

had a say. However, this model also led to routine decisions taking a long time. A dynamic described as the tyranny of the structureless as they found themselves stuck in resolving the needs of the "*whole*" at the expense of the (Freeman, 2013). Smith & Berg (1987) further defined these tensions across three areas of group paradoxes of belonging, engaging, and speaking. The paradox of belonging (which includes the paradoxes of identity, involvement, individuality and boundaries) are characterized as the tensions between an individual membership and their inclusion into a group (Smith & Berg, 1987). Paradoxes of engaging (which include paradoxes of disclosure, trust, intimacy, and regression), refer to the willingness of an individual to be open and vulnerable to a group while simultaneously strengthening relationships with the whole (Smith & Berg, 1987). Finally, the paradox of speaking (which includes paradoxes of authority, dependency, creativity, and courage), refers to the individual's capacity to influence and be influenced by the group and the way members can empower the group as a whole (Smith & Berg, 1987).

According to the dynamic equilibrium model these tensions can lead to vicious cycles that continuously reinforce negative dynamics generating anxiety, defensiveness and inertia in the face of emerging contradictions within groups and organizations (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Smith & Berg (1987) define this as stuckness in which groups and their members may be holding on to their current patterns of thinking, preventing them from collectively addressing the reasons behind the paradox in order to resolve the tensions. A focus on individual autonomy happens at the expense of group cohesiveness. A focus on group autonomy often results in group-think, or the loss of individual discretion (Smith & Berg, 1987).

As a consequence, Langfred's (2007) studies show that self-managed teams can be more vulnerable to conflict, distrust and negative emotions towards each other (Langfred, 2007). Their self-managed nature can be particularly precarious as these feelings can lead them to then "re-structure" themselves in a bid to resolve the problem, without dealing with the underlying conflict at hand (Langfred, 2007).

As these paradoxes persist over time, the only way to address them is through their acceptance, via a strategy of working-through the paradoxes (Smith & Berg, 1987; Smith & Lewis, 2014). Smith & Lewis (2014) dynamic equilibrium model describes a virtuous cycle in which the paradox is 'accepted' in a bid to understand the relationship between the contradictions and underlying tensions. The group collectively aims to find a solution that can elevate it beyond the contradictions—a solution, in other words, that can bring short-term resolution and boost performance in an effort to generate success over the long term. Smith & Berg (1987) define this as a movement which is described as "*leaving old patterns, at least for a time, and exploring new psychological or emotional ground in the life of the group*".

The Use of Reflective Practice to Uncover Paradoxes

To analyze how reflective practice can support us in uncovering paradoxes within self-managed organizations as consultants I will draw on the framework called Vygotsky Space. This framework illustrates how reflective practice can be seen as an individual and collective as well as public and private activity, influencing not just the self but for others around us as well (Finlayson, 2015). In Finlayson's (2015) article tracking the evolution of reflection practice, he references Nilsen, Nordström, and Ellström's (2012) definition of reflection as the "*mechanism to translate experience into learning, by examining one's attitudes, beliefs and actions, to conclude to enable better choices or responses in the future*". This definition shows reflection as

an act of socio-cultural learning that generates an improved activity in a wider environment. This is articulated in the Vygotsky Space framework which illustrates a cycle of learning across four phases or '*transitions*' (Peck et al., 2009). In the first phase Appropriation, we move through a 'collective public space to a *'collective–private'* space by incorporating insights from our environment through observation and interactions. In transformation, we move from a 'collective–private' space to an 'individual–private' where we make sense of and adapt that knowledge to our context and needs. As we shift towards publication we go from an individual–private space to an individual–public space where that knowledge is then conceptualized into a form that can be shared with others. Finally, as we enter into conventionalization we go through the individual–public to the collective–public space where this knowledge becomes established to be taken in by others.

Gallucci (2008) uses Vygotsky Space to show how individual reflections can be used to create an impact on the organizational level, as observations from the consultant are shared, internalized, reinterpreted and then put into practice collectively within the client organization. Through reflective practice, consultants can gain a greater awareness of their participation within organizational dynamics, group paradoxes, and what Argyris calls defensive routines—routines, that is, that can block or slow down change within non-hierarchical organizations (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Defensive routines can be interrupted through reflection and by uncovering the diverse values, assumptions, beliefs and theories of action inherent within the individuals of a group of organizations, also known as *double-loop* learning (Lee & Edmondson, 2017). Thanks to the capacity of reflection to generate both individual and collective learning, consultants within a system without formal hierarchical leadership can still be influential. The consultants' own experiences can become a catalyst for moving beyond the paradoxical dynamics found in non-hierarchical activist organizations. In turn, this can build up an organization's capacity to recognize and name these dynamics later on.

Reflective Practice as a Way of Uncovering Paradoxes: A Case Study

The case study I will illustrate occurred as part of a master's research project that took place over 9 months from November 2019 to July 2020, within the Graduate Program of Human Systems Intervention at Concordia University in Montreal. Within this context, I was asked to partner with an organization to conduct a project using a process consultation approach aimed at understanding their organizational context and eventually designing an intervention aimed at improving its functioning. My client system was the 'coordination working group' within a local chapter of an international climate activist group with dozens of chapters around the world. The activist group used non-violent civil disobedience to influence political action on issues of climate change. The activist group was structured around a decentralized and non-hierarchical system of governance organized through autonomous working groups with specific mandates like outreach, communication, infrastructure and tactics. Each autonomous working group selected two members to be coordinators that oversee the internal and external functions of a group. These coordinators formed a working group called '*coordination*' who met and worked together to share information, preserving the group's *horizontality*. Given the fluctuating membership, the coordination group numbered 15 members within the organization that consisted of roughly 100 members. The project followed four phases of Block's (2011) consultation process. Firstly, through *environmental scanning and contracting,* I worked with the organization to define a scope through informal conversations with members and meeting drop-

ins. This allowed us to define a '*scope of work*' that would guide the project. In the next phase *of data gathering,* I conducted 8 individual *Appreciative Inquiry* interviews and 4 non-participant observations of internal meetings (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic coding to uncover underlying patterns in the group's way of working. In *feedback,* these themes were presented. across 3 virtual meetings, to 10 members of coordination working group members who had participated in the interviews or had been observed. The purpose of these meetings was to collectively find and define a new area of focus to work on. The last phase, *intervention*, aimed at addressing an organizational challenge identified from the feedback meetings. This phase brought together a smaller design team of 5 individuals who would recruit, design, and co-facilitate the intervention alongside me. The intervention itself involved 12 members of the organization in two three-hour virtual sessions that spanned two days in a series of individual and group processes. At the end of the project, a retrospective was conducted with the members of the group who were the most active in my project, to gather their impressions of the experience and possible outcomes.

To analyze my reflective experience I will use Vygotsky Space, Smith and Berg's (1987) group paradoxes, and Smith & Lewis's (2014) paradox theory. To better articulate these connections, I will focus my analysis on key *critical incidents* across various project phases that illustrate moments of reflective practice that illuminated a greater awareness in myself and eventually my client organization. My use of critical incidents is inspired by Gee & Barnard's (2020) article which explores how practitioners can use reflective practice as a way of exposing the paradoxical conditions, or the 'moments of paradox' in which we experience 'chaos, doubt and feelings of uncertainty. These moments were instances in which latent paradoxes had become salient for me as a consultant.

Inspired by the work of Shepard, who describes the role of journaling within the reflective practice, the main source of data I will draw on will be a series of 59 personal journal entries collected over the entirety of the project period. These entries were coded and analyzed to uncover the critical incidents cross-referencing them with four phases Vygotsky Space & Smith and Berg's group paradoxes.

CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Critical Incident 1 – Contracting: Searching for Stability within Uncertainty

"*I might have been too direct and forceful with this new scope and not taken the time to co-create it with them. To get ahead with the project sooner than late. Both from a fear of the organization changing faster than my capacity to the project and a fear of losing the project itself.*" – (A. Starnino, Journal Entry, November 22nd)

I was initially invited into the organization by my contact client to help the group understand their issues of growth, specifically how they could rapidly grow their membership. However, upon doing an *environmental scan* I became privy to various internal issues stemming from informal structures and difficulty in having productive communications. I became overwhelmed by the ambiguity of the project, and of the organization itself. To eliminate the anxiety I was experiencing, I proposed to my contact client that we forgo the initial scope and instead focus on a project looking to increase the cohesion and effectiveness of the coordination working group.

The shift in scope meant I had to present my proposal to members of the coordination group for approval. However, it was met with relative silence, making it hard to gauge a reaction

of how people truly felt. Right away, my proposal was put to a vote. I felt rushed.I was unsure whether to pause the process, to take more time to see if there were more questions or concerns. In the end, it got approved, but I still felt worried. After all, this was my proposal and not one that came from the organization itself.

Analysis: Looking back at this experience I could see how I was '*appropriating*' the wider dynamics and ambiguities of the system, as I was trying to find my place within the group. As I journaled, I recognized a pattern of wanting to move ahead and clarify my role to reduce my feelings of ambiguity. Drawing on Smith & Berg's (1987) paradoxes, I could see a clear connection to many of the paradoxes that fall under '*belonging*'. I was experiencing the tensions and discomfort of dealing with my identity as a non-member "*intruding*" into an organization that felt 'taboo' because of its nature as an activist group. Within the paradox belonging we also find the 'paradox of boundaries' that states that with no boundaries there can be no relationship (Smith & Berg, 1987). I felt lost in the amorphous nature of the group. Rushing to finalize a scope quickly and unilaterally for my client allowed me to set my '*boundaries*' and define my relationship. Coordination was an attractive focus as it felt like a resolution to address the 'whole' and 'parts' of the organization at the same time. As I moved towards a 'transformation phase' and made sense of my experiences, I realized how I fell prey to the paradox of individuality, in response to the anxieties of the group. While I could find multiple logical justifications for this shifted scope and focus, it was in reflection I recognized that I was pushing ahead because of my anxiety. Finding a scope meant a resolution to the internal stress I felt, but not of the paradox as a whole since the tensions I felt were unaddressed, and not expressed directly back into the organization.

Critical Incident 2 – Data Gathering: Dealing with Rigidity Within Fluidity

"What should I have said? I felt put in the spot and scared...I feel so rigid with my role. How can I forge this helping relationship in a fluid way" – (A. Starnino, Journal Entry, January 22nd)

Despite being an informal activist organization, their weekly meetings were highly structured, designed to be efficient, with only a few people speaking at a time which in turn allowed them to go through dozens of agenda items in only a few hours. This, however, also limited the time they had to discuss more complex issues facing the activist group as a whole, such as burnout, leading to quickly decided solutions. This structure was justified by the decision to push more informal discussions outside the meeting time by going out over beers or sticking after the meeting for informal chats. As I observed these meetings, the group would continually probe my boundaries as a neutral observer, with statements such as, "you're not part of us yet", when I would state my role as a master's student and not a member of the group. Times when I would be addressed directly, or my opinion would be sought unexpectedly I would freeze, unsure what to say, afraid to intervene, afraid to cross the boundaries I set out for myself with the client organization. My experience of observing meetings was contrasted in my one-on-one interviews, where I would hear their positive stories of success and generative metaphors for the future. I felt freer to express myself and to build off of what I was hearing.

"Maybe that's what's happening with the client system as well, it's a question of being too strict...put you in a "box" that doesn't allow you to see more broadly, to be fluid, open, less rigid"- (A. Starnino, Journal Entry, February 5th)

As the weeks went by, however, I began to observe a sense of boredom with my project

and the organization. As I journaled, I tried to understand why the rigidity I saw happening in the meetings was also happening with me. My inability to build a relationship with the group was due to the way I had structured *myself* towards them. Rather than confronting this pattern with the organization, I turned inwards, exploring theories and frameworks like the *Work that Reconnects,* developed by Macy & Brown (2014) and the work of Starhawk, who used the language of spirituality, magic, and group ritual as a way of understanding the internal group dynamics of activist social change groups. This became a way I could acknowledge my feelings of disconnection, without needing to address the group at the time.

Analysis: Throughout my data gathering, I could see the moments I 'appropriated' the rigid dynamics of the group. Again, here we can see the paradox of boundaries as the rigidity caused by the limits, I set for myself led to a lack of freedom and fluidity in my actions, creating an extra urgency to 'defend' by establishing and reinforcing my role as an external student-consultant. As I entered into transformation, I saw my limits were not only related to my role but also my inability to engage and open up to them about what I was feeling, which can be seen within Smith & Berg's (1987) paradoxes of engagement. The paradox of disclosure states the relationship between the group's capacity to be open requires an openness on the part of the individual (Smith & Berg, 1987). Disclosing more about me, my thoughts, and my opinions felt like a violation of my stance as a student-consultant. I felt it would jeopardize my status with them, creating unwanted influence. This tension was also visible with the group: to achieve efficiency they would overly structure their meetings forgoing open discussions. In the same way, the group split the task-based and relationship-building parts into two different moments. The way their highly efficient meetings were followed by informal gathering mirrored my own 'split'. I felt I could open up in my one-on-one interviews in which I felt freer to disclose and have an open conversation. However rather than opening up with the group about these tensions I stayed within the 'individual and private' zone of Vygotsky Space, turning inwards to explore theories on my own with the hope that I would be able to eventually introduce them in later phases of the project.

Critical Incident 3 – Feedback: Opening up By Focusing In

"*I felt like a bad facilitator, I felt people were disconnecting. I felt disappointed in myself. It just feels blurry, messy and fuzzy and I felt there was a lack of closure…* (A. Starnino, Journal Entry, March 29th)

Ahead of the feedback session, the data I collected revealed powerful themes in a form of key questions: "*How do I move the group forward?*" and "*How do we do it together?*" The underlying pattern showed the struggle of taking leadership in a group that was deeply against any form of centralization. The data motivated the small group to speak to a 'taboo' of talking about power. However, while the initial discussion had gone well, as we went on, I suddenly found myself lost, the conversation was shifting in multiple directions with time in the meeting running out. Without a resolution, we could only agree to meet again the following week to discuss a possible intervention. The meeting had provoked doubt about my capacities as a facilitator as I tried analyzing all the reasons why it didn't go as planned. I realized I got stuck right in the middle of their dynamic and had then run all around me and had no idea. Then pushing ahead, in different directions. Pushing me, making me jump back and forth. It moves too fast for me to track what is going on at the moment - (A. Starnino, Journal Entry, April 7th)

As I journaled and reflected on my experience, I recognized that the negative feelings I experienced were not just my own but were perhaps reflecting the wider patterns of the group itself. The lack of space for unexpressed negative emotions had created a situation where people were jumping to short-term solutions, which in term created a lack of shared alignment and more unexpressed negative emotions. I would reflect this information as a graphic depicting the dynamic. I felt the only way to impact it was to decide to 'join in' by proposing an intervention that aimed at creating a space where they could express these feelings and then speak to ways leadership could be supported in the group as a whole. In the next meeting, I presented the graphic I experienced and my intervention proposal. The presentation prompted a deeper discussion, with members able to discuss what they had been experiencing. The proposal was received positively and approved, with members stating how they felt happiness and deep gratitude to myself and everyone present.

Analysis: Between the first and second meetings, I was stuck in the 'appropriation' phase, engaging in a constant back and forth struggle between 'collective' and 'individual' dimensions, taking the failures of the first two meetings as a result of my inabilities as a consultant. Looking at my more negative self-reflection, I realized I continued to struggle with paradoxes of engagement (Smith & Berg, 1987). I grappled with feelings of incompetence as I stood as an outside facilitator attempting to hold the group together. It was in moving through the transformation phase that I arrived at a deeper understanding of what had been happening – it was by holding back my perceptions of what I had been feeling that I got pulled into the dynamics. A pattern that continuously replicated itself throughout my whole project. As I came to this insight I shifted toward 'publication', by visualizing the dynamic I created an opportunity for the group to moved towards what Lewis & Smith call *acceptance*. By putting forward an intervention proposal we shifted towards 'conceptualization as my proposal was then taken up by the group to be implemented. The group's focus on power and leadership aligns with Smith & Berg's (1987) paradoxes of 'speaking', more specifically that of *authority*. As the avoidance of speaking to the 'taboo' of power, in turn, created a feeling of being powerless within the group. What I had not noticed were the ways I had given up my power in hopes of helping the group. As I recognized and engaged in my authority with the intention of empowering the group, I was able to finally have an influence. By speaking up, naming the dynamic, and acknowledging the situation, we were able to accept and *work-through* these paradoxes finding movement and finally shifting towards and an agreed-upon intervention (Smith & Berg, 1987).

Next Steps – Intervention: Moving ahead by Speaking to the present

Over the next two months with the design team, I would continue to work through similar tensions, but this time I had a new awareness and a voice with which to speak. The intervention would create space for the powerful emotions that members of the activist group had been holding in, about their context and each other. It also allowed them to have an important conversation about the leadership roles the movement was missing. As the project came to close participants in the retrospective would speak with gratitude that the intervention had brought them closer together, giving them an appreciation for the new capacities they gained while working with challenging dynamics. There was an acknowledgement that there was much to be done on a practical level, and a preparedness to do that.

DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the literature and my own experiences I am left with three key learnings that aim to advance the discussion on these topics: reflective practice as a way to 'shift' paradoxes, leadership's role within paradox, and the role of 'self' in dealing with paradoxes.

Reflective Practice as Way to Shift Paradoxes

While Vygotsky Space and Smith & Lewis (2014) dynamic equilibrium model presents themselves as cyclical in nature, my experiences show that these cycles are anything but linear. I was often required to shift between appropriation and transformation as I became exposed to new dynamics and confronted with new paradoxes nested within the organization. In an article looking at paradoxes in a pedological context, Knight and Paroutis (2017) introduce the idea of *threshold concepts that* can generate a 'significant shift' in the understanding of a subject. It was only once I was faced with stuckness, that I was motivated to name the paradoxical tensions I and the group were experiencing. Once I shared openly, I was able to go from the individual dimensions back to the '*collective*.' Through conventionalization we were able to develop a shared understanding, generating movement through the intervention proposal.

Leadership's Role Within Paradox

Smith & Lewis (2014) speak to the role that leadership plays in supporting groups through the "*opposing*" forces of paradox. This brings an added tension: in non-hierarchical groups where there is no formal "leadership" who deals with the paradoxes? It should perhaps be no surprise that as my client system and I struggled with multiple intersecting paradoxes, the role of leadership and power and the paradox of authority eventually took centre stage. Smith and Berg (1987) say that the paradoxes of belonging, engagement and speaking are often experienced sequentially over the journey of a group. As I struggled with belonging and engagement throughout the project it was my encounter with the paradoxes of authority and my recognition of the need for leadership at the moment that I was prompted to act, finding movement in the other 'nested' paradoxes I was struggling with. These tensions place consultants in a difficult position as they aim to influence change within decentralized organizations. Smith & Berg (1987) speak to the paradox of dependency, recognizing that for an individual to create change within a group requires them to depend on others. By recognizing that my interdependency with the client organization was a vital part of the 'helping relationship' I was forming with my client, I was able to let go of my fear of joining in. Then drawing on the paradox of *creativity,* which states that the new requires the '*destruction*' of the old, I reconceptualized my very role as a process consultant, not as an external observer but as an embedded part of the very group I hoped to help, using my reflective practice as an anchor.

The Role of Self in Dealing with Paradoxes

The Vygotsky Space framework also describes three temporal states we enact as we learn within socio-cultural environments – *embodied self* – how we experience the world, *autobiographical self* – how we capture and make sense of that experience, and the *social self* – how we bring what we've learned out into the world (Finlayson, 2015). As I look back over my experiences throughout the project, I recognized how it was only when I moved beyond the

autobiographical self towards the social self that I broke away from the paradoxes the group and I had been experiencing. This brings a new perspective on the importance of the 'self' as a way of understanding and even reflecting the paradoxes that may trap an organization. Reflective practice allows us to use the *embodied self* and our own experiences as a possible entry point to learning more about the systems around us. Here the notion of 'reflective practice' itself unveils a paradox. The tension between individual reflection and collective practice means that no matter the circumstances reflective practitioners are inherently embedded into the paradoxes of the organizations we work with and within. It is here that reflective practice and frameworks that help support illuminate it, like Vygotsky Space, acts as a way to allow the 'self' to be vehicles of understanding, appreciating these paradoxes and their capacity to make us aware of our embodied experiences.

CONCLUSION

Andriopoulus and Gotsi's article on researching paradox, asked the question "*What is the role of the researcher in the study of paradoxes?*". As I look back on my experience, I now ask myself "*what is the role of the consultant in working with paradox*". One Smith & Berg paradox I have not yet mentioned is the paradox of *involvement,* that to 'detach' and truly gain perspective on our context, requires that we also be involved. As I navigated the confusion and uncertainty of my position as a consultant, I recognized how reflective practice supported me in discovering and eventually challenging the paradoxes that were facing me and the wider system around me. As I have shown in this article, there is a connection between the role reflective practice can play in supporting practitioners trying to work within the paradoxical conditions of self-managed organizations. I believe this high-level and preliminary investigation in this area illuminates a continuing need to look at the intersection between these areas within future studies. I recognize that the experiences described in this paper are limited both in data collection and its focus on a single organization. However, as more organizations experiment with self-managed forms of leadership and organizational structures, these paradoxes will only become more salient, creating a need for change agents within these organizations to have methods to work through them.

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