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Applied tensional analysis: Engaging practitioners and the constitutive shift

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Abstract

This article introduces applied tensional analysis as a methodological framework that integrates constitutive ontologies (that depict organizations as processes in constant states of emerging or becoming) with the applied need for practitioners to understand and navigate the everyday exigencies of their organizational experiences. Applied tensional analysis centers analysis on tensions as the key to understanding *organizational becoming* in contrast to approaches that assume organizations are stable entities and consequently focus on patterns, themes, or laws. The applied tensional analysis framework offers four analytical foci (context, tensions, enacted responses, and repertoires) organized into two loops (analytical and change) as guides for data collection and analysis. While the analytical loop orients scholars to the current and past configurations of an organization's emergence, the change loop emphasizes the multitude of available responses to a particular tension and the constitutive implications of those responses for organizational becoming.

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As a new methodological approach, applied tensional analysis suggests that organizational knowledge requires more than awareness of what an organization *is* and includes awareness of organizational potential and what an organization might *become*.

Keywords: Applied methodology, constructivism, paradox, tensions

Historically, organizational studies have followed methodological and epistemological traditions that ground *knowing* in the ability to identify patterns and consistencies (e.g. themes or laws) among organizational practices, texts, processes, or other interactions. Undergirding this approach is the ontological assumption that organizations exist, more or less, as stable entities. More recently, however, organizational studies have offered new assumptions that suggest organizations are constantly becoming, renewing, and emerging through constitutive processes of human interaction (Ashcraft et al., 2009; McPhee and Zaugg, 2000; Putnam and Nicotera, 2010; Segal, 2017; Stacey, 2001). Given this conflict between traditional ways of knowing and constitutive ontologies of becoming, two major questions emerge. First, how do we “know” an organization if we admit that the patterns and consistencies we traditionally rely upon as “knowledge” are subject to constant change? And second, how can we confidently share “knowledge” with organizational practitioners if each organizational situation is uniquely constructed and uniquely becoming? This article introduces applied tensional analysis (ATA) as a new methodological approach capable of addressing both questions. ATA focuses on organizational tensions as *both* a key feature that animates practitioners’ experience *and* a critical entry point for understanding the constitutive processes of organizations as constantly emerging and becoming. In doing so, ATA extends both constitutive and applied approaches by integrating a practical emphasis into constitutive theories of becoming and drawing out the constitutive implications of practically oriented applied scholarship.

ATA accomplishes this integration of practical and constitutive scholarly imperatives by offering a much-needed shift in methodological goals and analytical foci. ATA is grounded in the assumption that tensions are not necessarily problems to be resolved but facts of organizational life (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004; Tsoukas,

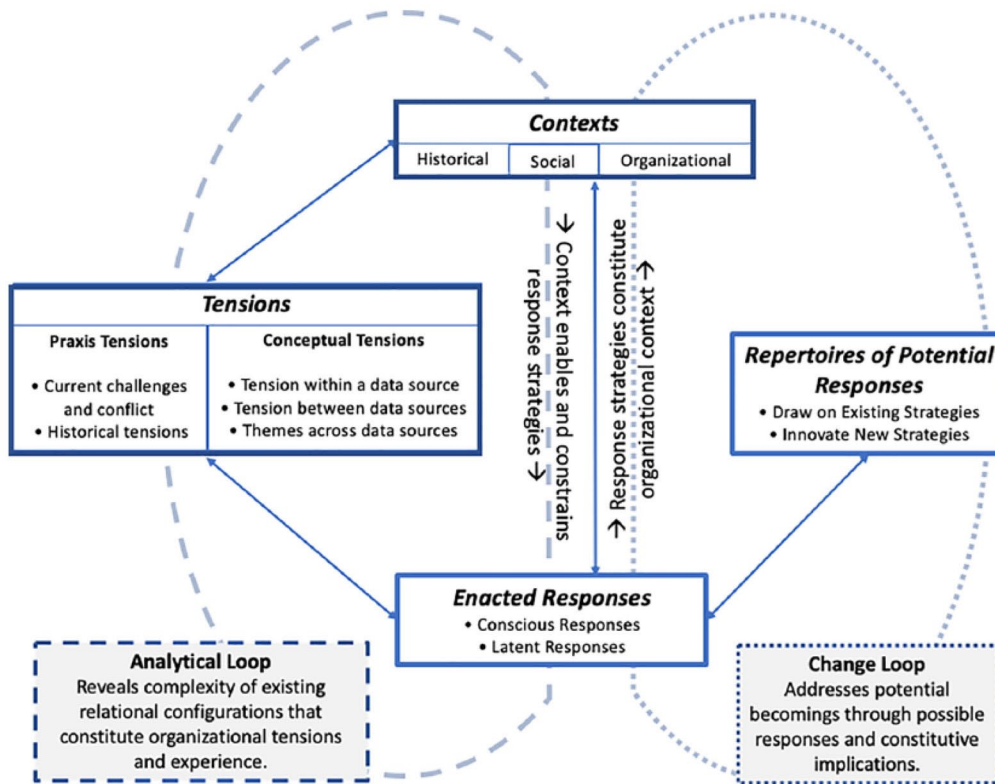


Figure 1. ATA's four analytical foci.

2017). More importantly, ATA treats tensions as moments of possibility and potentiality—moments where and when constitutive organizational practices are inconsistent or unstable, and thus open to change; moments where organizational actors impact constitutive processes (Greig et al., 2012; Stacey, 2001). ATA suggests that researchers approach tensions accordingly—as moments where the existence of the organization is fundamentally “at stake” in the strategies and tactics organizational actors use to navigate and respond to the most mundane of tensions (Deetz, 1992; Schoeneborn, 2011). To establish a methodology that fully integrates existing theoretical principles of constitutive ontology, tensional potential, and applied imperatives of practitioners, ATA offers four analytical foci (context, tensions, enacted responses, and repertoires) organized into two loops (analytical and change; see **Figure 1**). Thus, ATA provides a methodological framework that scholars can use to guide data collection and analysis in ways that honor both the complications that

constitutive ontologies introduce into organizational knowing *and* the applied need to assist practitioners as they navigate the exigencies of organizational life.

This article begins by establishing the theoretical foundations that ATA builds on through a review of constitutive ontology and an overview of the ways tensions have been valued and conceptualized in tension-centered literature. Building on this foundation, the next section introduces each ATA methodological focus and offers illustrative examples from a study of diversity consultants. This article concludes with a reflection on the position of an ATA researcher and how ATA might extend existing research. The study referenced throughout this article drew on interviews with 19 diversity consultants based in the United States. The interviews focused on the challenges they experienced in their work and their navigation of those challenges. This study played a significant role in the development of ATA. This article, however, is not intended as an empirical analysis of that data. Details of this study are published elsewhere (Mease, 2012, 2016), while the examples herein are intended as illustrative examples of the ATA methodological foci.

The constitutive shift and the problem of organizational knowing

In organizational studies, the linguistic turn of the 1980s focused on the role of language in organizing and establishing a place for interpretive research (Putnam and Pacanowsky, 1983). This “turn” radically altered how scholars go about “knowing” an organization. Methodological assumptions and available methods expanded to include qualitative approaches that address how organizations are variously interpreted and experienced through language. However, the linguistic turn also set the direction for what can be termed the “constitutive shift.” This shift extends assumptions of the linguistic turn toward an ontological understanding of organizations as fundamentally *constituted* through language and everyday interaction. While the constitutive shift is evidenced in a large body of work that casts organizations as a constant balance of stability and change (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), as process based (Segal, 2017), and as symptomatic of chaos

(Stacey, 2001), it is most explicitly taken up in Communicative Constitution of Organization (CCO) scholarship (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Putnam and Nicotera, 2010), most recently in literature describing relational ontologies (Kuhn et al., 2017).

ATA draws on two assumptions from these approaches: first, *everyday, taken-for-granted mundane organizational behaviors and interactions not only make the organization happen, they are also precariously open to disruption*. All of these approaches attend to everyday communication, such as coordinating activities (McPhee and Zaugg, 2000), decision making (Schoeneborn, 2011), or walking to work (Cooren et al., 2013) among many other activities. Organizations happen because (among other things) people decide to show up to meetings, and tasks are completed as people are directed or compelled to do them. Yet, these constitutive processes are always vulnerable; people may not show up, important tools might break, and tasks may not be completed. As processes are disrupted, changed, or improved, the organization *becomes* something new (Kuhn et al., 2017).

This first assumption hinges on a second and more subtle assumption: *organizational entities come to exist through their relationships to other entities, not because they are inherently meaningful unto themselves. Accordingly, organizations should be analyzed as configurations of relations*. In other words, the existence and meanings of a removed budget item, a closed door, a conflict between two managers, a mission statement, or a water-cooler conversation are derived from their places in the larger organization, which is itself a configuration of constituted texts, conversations, power structures, resources, and other discursive and material organizational entities (Tsoukas, 2017). CCO scholars (Kuhn et al. 2017) have summarized the nuance and variety of theoretical work that has contributed to this position by drawing on scholars of performativity, sociomateriality, Actor-Network Theory, and Affect Theory. They identify five significant ontological premises of relationality upon which ATA is grounded: (a) the “ontological reversal” which suggests that relations produce “things” rather than vice versa; (b) an enacted, flat ontology, that eschews structural transcendence, essentialized stability, or fundamental coherence; (c) sociomateriality, which assumes that elements of our real world are simultaneously socially and materially constituted, evoking both language and materiality in the

(in)stability of our lived world; (d) Action¹ as collaboratively accomplished by living and non-living entities; and (e) causality as mutually imposed, rather than a linear notion of simple cause and effect.

While a more nuanced discussion of this grounding is beyond the scope of this article, it is worth noting that the significance of organizational configurations is intuitively understood by many teachers and practitioners. As they move from class to class, meeting to meeting, or organization to organization, strategies that were effective in one context can be ineffective (or even disastrous) when replicated in a different context. The key to successfully engaging in one organizational context does not necessarily unlock access to or ensure success in another. Why? Because the intervention “becomes” something new in each context as it draws on and acts on (i.e. relates to or articulates) the particulars of each unique organizational configuration (Kuhn et al., 2017; Stacey, 2001). Understanding the constitutive significance of relational configurations requires that we extend beyond early systems thinking (where parts of a whole mutually impose on one another) to an understanding that a task, document, person, or organization *becomes* something different as configurations (and consequently organizations) change through everyday interactions. Thus, each organization, by virtue of its unique configuration, is a unique singularity that is constantly emerging and changing—a process referred to here as *organizational becoming*.

Thus, the constitutive shift presents a dilemma to scholars invested in systematically knowing organizations as “becomings,” and in helping practitioners know and navigate their organizational contexts. A majority of research that embraces organizational becoming emphasizes that organizational stability is not a natural state, and consequently offers methods for investigating how the stability and durability of organizations is achieved and maintained (Leonardi, 2013; Nicolini, 2009). While emphasizing durability is critical to understanding organizational constitution, what remains underdeveloped in organizational literature is a methodological approach that specifically embraces the emergent aspect of organization. In other words,

1. It is critical to note a divergence in language here from Kuhn, Ashcraft, and Cooren who use the term “agency” to describe this collaborative action. The divergence is intentional and significant, but not necessarily important to the argument in this article.

while acknowledging becoming, much work on organizational becoming is still focused on “knowing” the durable and persistent character of organizations, without rethinking what it means to “know” the constantly becoming aspect of organization. To help us address this challenge, as well as the challenge of bringing an applied aspect to constitutive ontologies (Leonardi, 2013), I turn to literature on knowledge.

Knowing organizational becoming

If elements of organizations are constantly emergent and changing, and contingent upon the configuration of a particular organization at a particular moment, how can scholars claim to offer “knowledge” to practitioners that is relevant across time and place? In their own observation that organizational acts do not have universal implications in all organizations, Örtenblad et al. (2012) offer some guidance on this question (although their work attributed differences in outcomes to organizational context rather than to ontological constitution). Still, their call for methods that (a) “transform the theory we teach from tablets of prescriptive truth to glocal mirrors for self-reflection and for group reflexivity” (p. 152), (b) challenge the authority of traditional forms of scholarly knowledge, and (c) privilege practitioners’ reflection on their own experiences, remains relevant to scholars who attribute the lack of universal implications to a relational ontology and the constitutive shift rather than context.

In addition, Stacey (2001) suggests that understanding organizations as *becoming* rather than as stable entities requires a focus on everyday human interactions. He demonstrates how moments of interaction are the location of an organization’s constant emergence yet continuous existence— moments where the consistencies of the organization’s past constrain the possibility of its future. Stacey also argues that organizational knowledge exists only as it is enacted in these interactions, and he explains how this has significant implications for organizational learning and sharing of knowledge. Policies, documents, and databases are thus not stores of knowledge in themselves; they are tools or resources for creating knowledge in moments of human interaction. In other words, scholarship and stored knowledge offer little more than guides at any given moment in an organization’s

process of becoming. Stacey's position resonates with Marsick et al. (2017), who suggest that a bifurcation of formal and informal knowledge is misguided. They indicate that one actually completes the other, as "formally" learned knowledge is not complete until enacted in informal settings, and informal learning is shaped by the construction of formally established knowledge and learning.

Both studies demonstrate that knowledge is enacted at a particular moment and challenge the authority of traditional forms of knowledge that focus on durable aspects of organization. This aligns with emerging conceptions of knowledge as practice, rather than an object that is owned, transferred, and distributed (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000). However, ATA does not treat practice and knowledge as equivalent. Instead, ATA embraces the notion of "communicative knowledge" as "a distinct form of knowing, accomplished and 'housed' in interaction, but that is also about interaction, about how to interact persuasively and effectively within the frame of one's practice" (Rennstam and Ashcraft, 2014: 10). Thus, in addition to moving away from prescriptive truths and toward practitioner reflection (Örtenblad et al., 2012), ATA focuses on moments of interaction as the key to "knowing" organizations while simultaneously calling attention to the organizational configurations that constitute those moments.

In addition to these challenges that constitutive ontologies present to traditional methodology, Tsoukas (2017) points out a more practical concern: traditional forms of theory that overemphasize consistency fail to account for (and often ignore) time constraints and ethical dilemmas that are commonplace in organizational experiences. Ultimately, the concerns of Marsick et al. (2017), Örtenblad et al. (2012), and Tsoukas (2017) echo the implications of ontological becoming: that scholars cannot offer practitioners a coherent list of best practices that apply universally across organizations. Thus, scholars interested in management learning are left in a bind: while the prospect of offering best practices is compromised, the stakes of management learning are elevated. There are more than practical skills at stake in teaching, learning, and scholarship; the very constitution of organizations is also at stake in the ways practitioners learn to navigate their everyday organizational contexts.

Foucault (2007) offers guidance on developing an imperative for scholarship that embraces this bind presented by constitutive

ontologies of becoming. He suggests that scholars should point practitioners toward key considerations as practitioners choose their own strategies and tactics. He states,

If you want to struggle, here are some key points, here are some lines of force, here are some constrictions and blockages. In other words, I would like these imperatives to be no more than tactical pointers. Of course, it's up to me, and those who are working in the same direction, to know on what fields of real forces we need to get our bearings in order to make a tactically effective analysis. (p. 3)

As Foucault suggests, a scholar should offer practitioners key points to consider and assist in the analysis of existing forces. It is up to those navigating their organization to “get [their] bearings” and choose their own tactics or course of action, accordingly.

Thus, constitutive ontologies challenge traditional approaches to organizational knowledge and challenge the concept of “best practices” (Segal, 2017; Stacey, 2001; Tsoukas, 2017). But existing constitutive scholarship guides us to meet this challenge through approaches that examine the particular moments in which knowledge is enacted and organizations emerge (Marsick et al., 2017; Stacey, 2001), provide critically informed guides for action (Foucault, 2007; Stacey, 2001), create spaces for self-reflexivity (Örtenblad et al., 2012), and account for the ways time constraints and ethics influence organizational action (Tsoukas, 2017). ATA brings all of these principles into a single coherent process of investigation. And where does ATA begin? It begins by considering the moments in which tactical choices must be made—where we can catch organizations in a moment of becoming. It begins with tension.

Understanding tensions

Putnam et al. (2016) use *tensions* as an umbrella term that refers to general conflict that results in “stress, anxiety, discomfort, or tightness in making choices, responding to, and moving forward in organizational situations” (p. 68). Likewise, this article uses tension as an

umbrella term while also using the term *organizational (in)stability* to describe the fundamentally tension-ridden character of organizational structures that are constantly emerging and becoming. Not surprisingly, the concepts and language used to describe tension are full of tension. For example, in their review of scholarship that addresses tension, Putnam et al. (2016) use the term *dualisms* while Smith and Lewis (2011) use the term *dilemma* to describe two forces that circumstantially create tension but are not necessarily interdependently defined by one another. Among interdependent tensional forces, Putnam et al. use *dualities* to describe tensional forces that are unified and are always integrated in a both/and situation, while they use *dialectics* to focus on the constant interplay of push-and-pull between opposites. Finally, they use *contradictions* and *paradox* to describe interdependent but mutually exclusive tensional forces, where paradox is unique for its recursive and seemingly irrational mutual implication. Attending to the ways tensions are constructed and conceptualized can influence organizational outcomes. This idea is a central premise of paradox theory, which suggests that organizational outcomes can be enhanced by reframing and transcending seemingly contradictory organizational tensions, so as to integrate them in organizational life (Papachroni et al., 2015; Sheep et al., 2017).

The value placed on tensions

In addition to the variance in the structure of tensions, scholarship also demonstrates fluctuations in the way tensions are valued. As Smith and Lewis (2011) point out, early organizational theories of the 20th century stigmatized tensions. Because organizations were thought to be relatively stable phenomena, tensions were conceived as problematic interruptions to the ordered stability that was the hallmark of organization. Consequently, practical and academic work focused on preventing or resolving tensions, and on discerning the best practices that helped avoid tension.

The constitutive shift, however, recasts tensions as an inevitable aspect of organization. Because organizations are collaborative, communicative constructions, they inevitably manifest the differences embedded in the multitude of voices that contribute to their constitution. For example, Dempsey et al. (2011) focus on the tensions that emerge

in transnational feminist networks that bring together people of various nationalities with varying levels of economic privilege, while Jay (2013) emphasizes how collaboration across government, business, and non-profit sectors brings competing organizational logics into tension with one another. While these examples use broad cultural and organizational constructs to highlight tensions, similar tensions emerge in small groups of people with diverse backgrounds and perspectives—an inescapable feature of organizing. Thus, ATA casts tension as an everyday inevitable aspect of organizing. In this sense, one might think of organizing as *a process of collaborative surfacing, making sense of, and developing strategies for navigating or resolving tensions in pursuit of shared action and meaning making*.

Even among approaches that destigmatize tension, there are differences in how tensions are treated. Some approaches carry the vestiges of traditional methods, accepting that tensions are inevitable but still casting them as problems to be solved. For example, Stohl and Cheney (2001) highlight the pragmatic paradoxes of participation and democratic organizing, demonstrating how efforts to increase participation for the sake of democratic organizing actually compromised democratic ideals. In such cases, tension is no longer stigmatized but it remains problematized. Some research, particularly research addressing organizational identity, has suggested that organizational actors can develop navigation strategies that neutralize threats posed by tensions. For example, both Tracy (2004) and Meisenbach (2008) found that alternating or switching identity frames helped to neutralize the negative effects of tensions that result from stigmatized organizational identities.

Meanwhile, an emerging body of scholarship has attempted to recast tension as not only inevitable but beneficial. According to this conception, tension not only triggers necessary processes of shared sense-making (Baxter, 2011), knowledge creation (Greig et al., 2012), and organizing (Schoeneborn, 2011), but it also creates moments of possibility in which organizational actors might embrace new possibilities, adjust to new circumstances, redress injustice in the organizational context, and serve as the impetus for organizational change (Jay, 2013; Leclercq Vandelannoitte, 2013). Similarly, Vince et al. (2018) cast tension as a productive means of surfacing power and emotional factors that influence management learning, as they found

that knowledge gained in a protected learning environment often encountered frustrating barriers when participants attempted to apply that knowledge in the political context of their own workplace. In fact, Kuhn and Schoeneborn (2015) suggest that understanding tensions as beneficial is one of the key pedagogical benefits of teaching constitutive approaches.

Tensional methodology

Methodologically, ATA embraces tensions as inevitable parts of organization that are potentially beneficial. Tensions might emerge as problematic when considered in context, but they are not inherently problematic in all organizational contexts. ATA does not advocate for a particular navigational strategy, as is often the case with paradox studies (Papachroni et al., 2015; Sheep et al., 2017). Instead, ATA returns to the Foucauldian imperative (quoted previously) to cast tensions as moments in which organizational actors must choose a response, and to position scholars as assisting in “getting our bearings” (Foucault, 2007: 3)—not only on the organization as it is currently configured but also on what it might become given the possible response options. Because tensions are conceptualized and valued in various ways across organizational scholarship and practice, existing research provides interpretive guides that can help scholars and practitioners get their bearings on both tensions and available responses as they analyze their own tensional moments and contexts.

In addition, ATA also responds to tension-based literature that calls for more attention to issues of methodology. Smith and Lewis (2011) call for “methodological strategies that can investigate tensions, enable contextual richness, and consider more cyclical dynamics” (p. 397). In addition, Ashcraft and Trethewey (2004) offer four recommendations for tension-centered methods: an examination of history, an emphasis on metacommunication as a strategy for negotiating organizational irrationality, examination of micro-practice, and an emphasis on social identity. The ATA methodology introduced here integrates these calls with methodological calls outlined by scholars who focus on organizational knowledge: to examine the particular moments in which knowledge is enacted and organizations emerge (Marsick et al., 2017; Stacey, 2001), to provide critically informed guides

for action (Foucault, 2007; Stacey, 2001), to create spaces for self-reflexivity (Örtenblad et al., 2012), and to account for the ways time constraints and ethics influence organizational action (Tsoukas, 2017).

The analytical loop

In order to integrate the diverse methodological calls highlighted in the existing literature, ATA offers four methodological foci: tensions, context, enacted strategies, and repertoires of potential responses. Figure 1 also highlights how these foci form two loops: the analytical loop, focused on developing a contextually informed understanding of tensions and human experience, and the change loop, focused on organizational potential by highlighting possible responses to tension with attention to constitutive implications. Tension, context, and enacted responses are all foci in the analytical loop, which integrates calls for a methodology that “can investigate tensions ... [and] enable contextual richness” (Smith and Lewis, 2011), examine history, emphasize social identity (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004), account for the ways time constraints and ethics influence organizational action (Tsoukas, 2017), and examine the particular moments in which knowledge is enacted and organizations emerge (Marsick et al., 2017; Stacey, 2001).

Tensions

Identifying tensions is a key element of ATA because tensions mark moments in which organizational actors make choices that ultimately have constitutive implications for the organization (Schoeneborn, 2011). ATA identifies two manifestations of tension: praxis tensions which are those identified by and experienced by practitioners as tensions and conceptual tensions which are those identified through scholarly data analysis.

Praxis tensions are explicitly acknowledged by practitioners in everyday organizational interactions. Analyzing praxis tensions requires researchers to empathize with organizational actors and to identify tensions as they are experienced from that subject position. Organizational protests or strikes, controversial organizational actions highlighted in popular media, or straightforward interview

questions, such as “What are some of the common challenges you face in your job?” offer indications of praxis-based tensions. Thus, a multitude of methods—ethnographic, interviews, participant observation, surveys, or textual analysis—might be used to identify the tensions practitioners experience. For example, Cooren et al. (2013) offer a specifically constitutive approach to identifying tensions through the identification of competing figures that speak through members of Doctors Without Borders, making competing ideals present in organizational decisions.

Scholars should note that, as organizational actors gain skills to successfully navigate tensions, the tensions might not be explicitly experienced as such (Deetz, 1992). Thus, researchers might attempt to uncover historically experienced but currently latent tensions. In interviews, asking “What are some of the lessons you have learned about doing this work?” may uncover tensions experienced in the past. Organizational texts may also highlight past tensions. For example, policies may have been designed to stem a historical tension, or shifting budget resources might indicate competing interests in an organization.

Whereas praxis tensions are experienced by organizational actors as tensions, *conceptual tensions* may not be immediately expressed by participants or be evident in texts. Instead, they surface through data analysis and may occur within, between, or across data sources (e.g. surveys, interviews, texts, and locations). For example, in the diversity consultant study that informed ATA (Mease, 2016), many participants defined success in terms of large-scale organizational change. However, when asked to speak about a specific successful experience, the same consultants often responded with a story that focused on individual impact. Thus, a contradiction emerged within a single data source. Tensions may also occur between data sources. For example, some diversity consultants identified more strongly with social-justice outcomes while others cast organizational performance as their primary obligation. This example also points to the fact that some tensions emerged as *themes* across the interviews. Accordingly, a tension emerged across the interviews between defining diversity narrowly (reflecting socially disadvantaged groups and aligning the definition with a social-justice approach) and defining diversity broadly (reflecting any difference

that impacts business outcomes—for example, personality, tenure, etc.—and aligning with a business consultant perspective). Whether a tension occurs within a single data source, between data sources, or across data sources, conceptual tensions may not be saliently experienced by organizational members as tension. Rather, they can be described as a manifestation of Ashcraft and Trethewey's (2004) "organized irrationality."

While praxis and conceptual tensions resemble Smith and Lewis's (2011) salient and latent tensions, the relationship between praxis and conceptual tensions goes beyond a degree of recognition. Parsing out relationships between praxis and conceptual tensions, or what Sheep et al. (2017) call "tensional knots," is an important aspect of ATA. Conceptual tensions might link a series of praxis tensions, offering a common thread between them. For example, while many diversity consultants espoused social-justice ideals, they often shifted to using business language creating a conceptual tension in the interviews (Mease, 2012). However, this shift in language was linked to praxis tensions of gaining contracts, approaching leadership with major diversity problems, or gaining buy-in from resistant workshop participants. Similarly, the conceptual tension between broad and narrow definitions of diversity were linked to praxis tensions, where broad definitions were used to gain access to organizations and to reduce resistance from those who were not part of traditionally disadvantaged groups. Organizational data, such as climate surveys or turnover rates, were leveraged to shift focus back to a narrow definition based on historically disadvantaged groups. Parsing out these "knots" helps to gain a better understanding of "the fields of real forces" as Foucault (2007) suggests is imperative to research. Existing theories can inform this analysis of praxis and conceptual tensions and their relationships to one another. For example, Putnam et al.'s (2016) constructs of tension might prove useful to understanding the assumptions that create tensions in a particular context and Smith and Lewis's (2011) categorical matrix may help identify organizational tensions based on learning, organizing, performing, and belonging. Ultimately, the goal of analyzing tensions and "tensional knots" (Sheep et al., 2017) is to begin to understand the existing organizational configuration, with specific attention to its most vulnerable relationships that are most immediately subject to organizational becoming.

Context

As scholars analyze praxis and conceptual tensions, they must take three dimensions of context into consideration: organizational, social, and historical. *Organizational context* refers to the unique configuration of organizational relations that constitute a particular organization (Kuhn et al., 2017). In other words, the unique configuration of existing organizational bodies, spaces, practices, knowledges, structures, and artifacts that constitute the organization also provide the “organizational context” for the moments of interaction in which tensions are experienced, in which response strategies are enacted, and in which organizations are (re)constituted. Moreover, analyzing organizational context offers a way to account for time constraints and ethical dilemmas that often influence tension and potential responses, and yet are often ignored in research that offers best practices (Tsoukas, 2017). ATA of *social context* examines how broad social contexts shape tensions. For example, economic downturns and financial upswings, identity constructs (as called for by Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004), and global politics not only evoke tension but also constrain and enable the strategies used to navigate a tension. The analysis of *historical context* resonates with Foucauldian (Foucault, 1990, 1995) genealogical methods that trace “the history of the present” and corresponds with Ashcraft and Trethewey’s (2004) suggestion that tension-based methods should account for histories. More specifically, ATA researchers ought to trace the history of tensions to better understand how they emerged as *tensions*.

For example, in regard to the tension between social justice and business motivations for diversity consultants, historical context of diversity work shows that diversity consultants emerged in the 1970s to help organizations respond to federal non-discrimination laws—a clear legacy of the civil rights movement (Dobbin, 2009). Legal enforcement of these laws all but disappeared during the Reagan administration. Diversity consultants then turned to new economic-based arguments to justify their work—repositioning themselves as management consultants rather than bearers of the social-justice legacy. Moreover, contemporary social contexts allow consultants to merge this tension, as failures to live up to expectations of the Civil Rights legacy were cast as a public relations (and consequently financial)

issue if not addressed through diversity training. However, organizational context matters too, as consultants navigated this tension differently when working with non-profits or educational organizations that did not have the financial imperatives of a typical business (Mease, 2012).

According to relational ontologies, context is not just something that surrounds tensions but also part of the configuration of relations that constitute organizations, tensions, and participant experiences (Kuhn et al., 2017). Thus, one purpose of contextual analysis is to open possibilities for rethinking the arrangement of opposing or conflicting forces. From a constitutive point of concern, integrating the organizational, historical, and social contexts into ATA offers nuanced understandings of how tensions emerge, while also giving insight into the latent potential for tension and context to be reconfigured. From a practical point of concern, considering context offers an understanding of the forces that constrain and enable organizational actors' choices of responses to tensions. Thus, analyzing context offers insight into both the capacity of organizational actors and an account of the contextual configurations that help to constitute the organizations.

Enacted responses

The third part of the analytical loop in ATA analyzes the response strategies organizational actors (in collaboration with material objects and texts) use to address the tensions they experience (Schoeneborn, 2011). This analytical focus turns attention from broad social, historical, and organizational conditions to the specific and concrete "micro-practices" (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004) and particular moments (Marsick et al., 2017; Stacey, 2001) that organizational actors enact on a daily basis. Some (but not all) of these strategies are self-evident, with actors being conscious of their uses. Thus, while some strategies are easily identified through direct questioning ("What strategies have you developed for facing that challenge?"), others require closer analysis and observation to discern strategies that have been normalized or have grown into the "practical consciousness" (Giddens, 1986) of practitioners to the point that they are not even recognized as a response to a tension. In the diversity consultant study (Mease, 2012),

consultants developed several strategies to navigate resistance from participants in training: developing a humorous style, developing conceptual appeals (e.g. redefining diversity to be more inclusive), developing contextual appeals that addressed organizational tasks and demands, and asking the person to leave the workshop or training if necessary.

Again, scholars can turn to existing literature to find tools for developing analyses of response strategies. Recent work has brought attention to the distinction between strategies that attempt to resolve tension and strategies that offer ways of navigating and living with tension (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Jay (2013) categorizes responses to tensions as strategic and managerial, while Putnam et al. (2016) suggest that response strategies generally fall into “either-or,” “both-and,” or “more-than” responses and offer specific examples of strategies within these categories. These existing theories may help to assess the possibilities and limitations of a given response.

Finally, the analytical loop of ATA requires that scholars examine enacted responses in relation to context, with special attention to how context constrains and enables people’s enacted responses when facing tensions. For example, one consultant suggested that it was easier to do thorough work in an organizational context guided by social missions (Mease, 2012). Social missions enabled unique enacted response strategies from consultants that were not available in for-profit organizations because moral accountability (rather than financial accountability) was already primary in the organizational culture. Scholars might also focus on more evident constraints of everyday practices. An analysis of policies that constrain choices and resource availability might demonstrate these possibilities and constraints. For example, many consultants addressed how their lofty goals, standards, and strategies were quickly tempered due to limited resources and restricted access to organizations (Mease, 2016). Therefore, a variety of methods can be used to address how the context both constrains and enables organizational participants’ enacted responses to tensions. Understanding these contextual constraints is critical to fully grasping practitioner experiences of tension, or the ways that particular ideas and objects “speak through” others (Cooren et al., 2013).

The change loop

The analytical loop of ATA examines context, tensions, and enacted responses in order to create an understanding of how existing tensions came to be and how practitioners respond to those tensions. It helps scholars and practitioners to understand how the existing organizational configuration emerged, and to identify the tensions among that configuration. More importantly, it identifies those tensions as potentially generating organizational becoming. While enacted responses have the potential to shape this becoming, the analytical loop also attends to the contextual relations that enable and constrain enacted responses and the potential for becoming. Taken by itself, the analytical loop offers an account of organizational configurations and a particular organizational moment of potential becoming. However, it lacks two things. From a practical point of view, it offers practitioners much in the way of description, but little in the way of normative guidance (i.e. an alternative to best practices). From an ontological point of view, it does little in the way of considering the constitutive implications and potentiality of enacted responses.

The change loop addresses these two lackings by focusing attention on the ethical and efficacious *possibilities* of the constitutive process by building repertoires of response strategies to organizational tensions. This loop integrates calls for methodologies that emphasize metacommunication (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004), provide critically informed guides for action (Foucault, 2007; Stacey, 2001), and create spaces for self-reflexivity (Örtenblad et al., 2012). However, context and enacted responses are part of both loops. Thus, I introduce the change loop by reconsidering the relationship between context and enacted responses as they are emphasized in the change loop before addressing the importance of repertoire building to ATA.

Reconsidering responses and context

As analysis shifts from the analytical to the change loop, the relationship between enacted responses and context becomes critical, not only because this pair of foci holds the two loops together, but because the relationship between the two specifically addresses the constitutive shift. In addition to analyzing the influence of context

on enacted responses in the analytical loop, ATA scholars should also analyze how response strategies (re)constitute and (re)configure the context, including the organization itself (Schoeneborn, 2011; Stacey, 2001). The analysis of enacted responses must expand beyond how effectively a response addresses a tension, to analyze how a response constitutes the organization through reconfiguration in both intended and unintended ways. For example, I have already identified a conceptual tension between broad and narrow definitions of diversity and identified that this tension emerged through consultants' attempts to respond to a variety of praxis tensions (access, resistance, etc., Mease, 2016). To illustrate the constitutive relationship between enacted responses and context, consider consultants' use of a broad definition of diversity as a response to the tension of garnering employee buy-in. A broad definition allows traditionally privileged people to see themselves as part of diversity and to feel like the effort is relevant to them. However, ATA requires that scholars extend beyond the practical question of how well this response garners buy-in. ATA also requires scholars to analyze the constitutive implications of using broad definitions to respond to this tension. Diversity initiatives constituted to address historically disadvantaged groups may manifest differently from those focused broadly on any difference that impacts an organization's bottom line (e.g. personality style and organizational tenure). Thus, the praxis tension of employee buy-in marks a moment that evokes response. The enacted response shapes the very constitution of what "counts" as diversity in the organizational context. In this way, tensions evoke responses that simultaneously address the tension (a question of efficacy) and constitute the organization (a question of ontology).

By addressing *both* efficacy and ontology, ATA again integrates practical and constitutive concerns and demonstrates how attempts to alter or change organizational constitution or practice can address *both* constitutive implications of enacted responses *and* the tensional exigencies that evoked those responses. An example of how this merger might reframe scholarly work applies to critical diversity scholarship that has critiqued consultants' monetization of diversity for the ways it constructs people as commodities (Lasch-Quinn, 2003). However, the consultants showed that the business case was essential to gaining contracts (Mease, 2012). Thus, while the critiques might be

ontologically valid, they are not necessarily realistic or efficacious for practitioners. ATA offers a way for scholars to help practitioners both address their praxis tensions and attend to constitutive implications. However, to accomplish this goal, scholars should engage in building critically informed repertoires.

Building repertoires

Given the unique configurations and complex tensions that characterize each organization and simultaneously open it to constant becoming, what is a scholar to do with the consequently compromised universal value of “best practices”? The ATA alternative is building repertoires of response strategies. Practically speaking, scholars build repertoires to assist organizational actors by offering multiple options for responding to a particular tension, as well as identifying the implications of each of those responses. Thus, *what it means* “to know” *an organization in a particular moment of interaction expands beyond awareness of what an organization is to include an awareness of what an organization might become*. This knowing requires both the awareness of (a) existing organizational configurations and relationships provided through the analytical loop and (b) potential configurations and relationships identified in the change loop.

Scholars can build repertoires by compiling a variety of responses learned from observing multiple organizations or interviewing multiple organizational actors regarding their experiences of a particular tension. This tactic is simply a matter of highlighting the strategies already used by research participants, regardless of how common or unique those strategies are. An analysis of policies or programs may also help offer possible response strategies. A second way to build repertoires involves researchers innovating strategies that may not be immediately apparent to participants. These strategies may emerge by making latent strategies more specific and intentional or by reframing the tension – perhaps as exemplified in paradox literature (Pachroni et al., 2015; Sheep et al., 2017), or by shifting between the tensional concepts Putnam et al. (2016) delineated. Finally, a merger of these two approaches might involve active engagement or focus groups that bring researchers and practitioners together to build response repertoires, fostering Örtenblad et al.’s (2012) suggestion of

self-reflection and group reflexivity. Thus, building and communicating repertoires often includes metacommunication as suggested by Ashcraft and Trethewey (2004).

Building and offering repertoires not only stands in contrast to more traditional scholarly approaches that offer singular best practices, but offering repertoires also deviates from traditional critical scholarship that depicts some strategies as more ethical than others. By offering repertoires, scholars preserve the role of practitioners as the most aware of their own organizational context, and consequently leaves the determination of most ethical or most efficacious responses to them.

This last point does not suggest that ATA researchers should offer a menu of response strategies without critical assessment thereof. ATA researchers should offer a critical analysis of the possibilities and risks that different strategies portend, while taking into consideration *both* exigent tensions (including the ways context constrains a response, as revealed in the analytical loop) *and* the constitutive implications of any given response strategy (as demonstrated in the change loop). This dual consideration is key to developing realistic repertoires of responses that are both capable of creating desired constitutive outcomes while also being useful in navigating everyday tensions. The case of broad and narrow definitions of diversity offers insight into the provision of repertoires that accounts for both constitutive and practical implications (Mease, 2016). Critical scholars such as Lasch-Quinn (2003) have critiqued the broad definition of diversity, suggesting that it overlooks histories of oppression and “waters down” diversity work, resulting in a failed attempt to address complicated histories of injustice. While this is certainly a constitutive risk of using a broad definition, an ATA analysis would extend such a critique by analyzing the broad definition as an enacted response to exigent tensions. As outlined above, one of the tensions that the broad definition responds to is resistance from workshop participants. Thus, rather than stopping at critiquing the broad definition for its constitutive implications (which attends only to the change loop), ATA researchers would acknowledge the constitutive risks while simultaneously offering a repertoire of response strategies for addressing resistance—some of which might mitigate the constitutive risk. In the case of diversity consultants, this repertoire included using humor

or demonstrating how improved diversity skills will enhance professional skills, job performance, and chances for promotion. Thus, ATA researchers should illustrate the practical and constitutive strengths and weaknesses of each response offered in a repertoire.

Two loops, together

By highlighting the purpose and potential methods involved with each of the four foci, I have shown how ATA can guide scholars and practitioners toward an understanding of organizations that are rife with (in)stability and are constantly becoming. Consequently, what it means to know an organization must expand from *awareness of what an organization is to include an awareness of what an organization might become based on the knowledge of existing configurations and relations (provided through the analytical loop) and the potential configurations and relations (offered in the change loop)*. From the analytical loop, ATA 1) provides an understanding of the socially, historically, and organizationally laden “tensional knots” (Sheep et al., 2017) that call organizational actors to act, 2) identifies responses to those tensions as constitutive moments of possibility and becoming, and 3) discerns the contextual influences on that moment of becoming. It ultimately highlights the constraints that condition individual action (maintaining the continuity of an organization) while simultaneously highlighting tensions as potential spaces of becoming. The change loop focuses on the potential paths of organizational becoming that may emerge from those tensions. It does this by 1) highlighting varied options through the development of a repertoire of possible responses, 2) identifying and critiquing possible organizational configurations that may result from those options and 3) emphasizing the role of human responses in changing organizational configurations. Although ATA focuses on a particular moment of response to a tension, it clearly articulates that response to both an organization’s past and future in an ever-evolving process of becoming. Both loops are grounded in a relational ontology of becoming (Kuhn et al., 2017) in which organizations are constituted through relational configurations—relationships that are teeming with potential and open to continual becoming. Yet, as a practically oriented analysis, ATA locates practitioners within that relational ontology of becoming and highlights how scholarship can serve those practitioners.

Reflections on the role of the ATA researcher

An ATA researcher acknowledges that his or her critiques and advice, no matter how artful or convincing, are not in an optimal position to affect the processes of organizational constitution and becoming. Repertoires intervene in organizational constitution only when they inform organizational members' actions. ATA researchers use the analytical loop to assist organizational members in reading organizational configurations and the change loop to assist in identifying possible actions. When combined, they offer insight into potential becoming, and assist practitioners in selecting the most *contextually and constitutively responsible response* to the tensions of organizational life.

Consequently, ATA places equal value on (a) the awareness provided by organizational members as intelligent actors who possess "practical consciousness" (Giddens, 1986) and affective sensibility (Kuhn et al., 2017) due to their embedded position in organizational contexts and (b) the awareness provided by researchers who bring expert skills and exposure to a wide variety of organizational contexts and histories. By virtue of ATA's guidance and individual expertise in specific theories and methods, scholars bring practitioners a complementary awareness of how and where to look for necessary information to inform responsible choices. Moreover, through exposure to a wide breath of organizations and scholarship, scholars can identify resonant situations and tensions that offer insight into the intended and unintended implications of particular responses that might not be immediately apparent to practitioners. While this expertise can, in part, be communicated through traditional academic articles, it can also be developed through the interview process, through member checks on initial data analysis, and through informal conversations.

A side note on methods

As a methodology, ATA offers a practical constitutive approach to research that should guide a researcher's choice of methods for data collection and analysis, but it does not prescribe a specific method. In each foci section above, I have offered potential methods that might

assist with data collection. While more elaboration on useful methods would provide a fruitful area for further research, I offer three assumptions when considering more specific data collection methods:

1. There is no preferred order or starting place in the four methodological foci.
2. Depending on scope, studies might emphasize a particular focus or set of foci while relegating other foci to context by drawing on existing research. Extended studies and manuscripts might address all four foci.
3. A wide variety of methods (including qualitative and quantitative) might be used to examine the particulars of any given focus.

Scholars might look into existing work on constitutive ontologies to discern potential methods of data collection. The data collected, however, should be analyzed with attention to both efficacy and constitution simultaneously, and with the goal of assisting practitioners in making contextually and constitutively responsible choices. Thus, regardless of data collection methods, ATA posits an orientation toward data that merges imperatives of efficacy and constitution. To illustrate this point, I draw on Vince et al.'s (2018) analysis of Critical Action Learning (CAL) by the way of focusing on paradox. While maintaining the basic approach to data collection methods, I aim to show how the ATA approach might shift the analytical approach to that data.

The ATA shift

Just as ATA uses tensions as an entry point for knowing, Vince and colleagues “use paradox as an explicit lens through which to reveal contextually specific tensions arising from action learning and then to utilize these in support of critical reflection” (p. 87). Ultimately, they suggest that CAL raised tensions and, when coupled with critical reflection, led to particularly productive learning. However, they highlight the problematic organizational context as simultaneously squelching learning and growth when individuals leave CAL spaces and go back to their everyday routines.

Using ATA to make sense of the CAL study reveals that its current form focuses primarily on identifying tensions as well as identifying and analyzing the potential of critical reflection as a response to those tensions. First, approaching Vince et al.'s (2018) data using ATA would encourage scholars to expand beyond critical reflection and to incorporate an analysis of multiple responses to the identified tensions, thus building a repertoire. The development of repertoires would be necessary in order to add actionable knowledge to the critical awareness that Vince et al. provide. Moreover, given the focus of ATA, researchers might facilitate or analyze reflections in a way that builds these repertoires.

Second, ATA could address the issue of organizational constraints by considering how the identified response strategies can effectively (re)constitute the organization. In other words, the repertoire of responses should not only offer strategies to navigate the tensions fostered by CAL participants' return to their everyday work (an efficacy focus) but should simultaneously consider how their response strategies (a) reconfigure the organization and potentially (re)constitute the organization to allow for more democratic or liberating possibilities or (b) reinforce existing power structures. Thus, while both ATA and Vince et al. use tensions as entry points for exploring organizational knowledge, shifting to an ATA approach requires a reconceptualization of those tensions as places where the *potential becoming* (in addition to the extant being) is brought into awareness by way of (potential) responses and their constitutive implications.

Another area of research that might benefit from ATA is the growing literature on coaching, because coaches "help coachees to think about the situations and problems and to come to their own solutions" (Shoukry and Cox, 2018: 415), which offers a natural fit with ATA. However, Shoukry and Cox point out that while coaching typically presumes a neutral stance, it often asserts the values of neoliberalism or of a particular cultural context. In order to address this point, they call for coaching to be considered a social process and for coaches to become "more critical and aware" (p. 424). ATA is a useful response to this call because it accounts for organizations as process through consideration of both past constraints and future possibilities, even as it focuses on the tensional exigencies of coachees' experiences. Moreover, ATA's integration of constitutive considerations into practical

concerns offers a framework for approaching the cultural and ideological values that may be (re)constituted by the choices that coaches make. More work should be done to assess the ways ATA and coaching literature can be mutually informed.

Conclusion

ATA does not stand on its own. It builds on the work of others who parse out more carefully the dynamics of constitutive ontology (Ashcraft et al., 2009; McPhee and Zaugg, 2000; Putnam and Nicotera, 2010; Segal, 2017; Stacey, 2001). The same is true for methods. Although the methods highlighted in each section illustrate the capacity for ATA to incorporate a variety of methods and constitutive theories is a strength, it relies on the scholar bringing their own methodological strengths to any ATA analysis. In addition, ATA is not intended to supplant traditional forms of scholarship that focus on consistencies, patterns, and the durable features of organizations. Given that organizations balance predictable and unpredictable elements, the broad field of research should continue to develop both types of research.

This article began with a tension: while organizational theory has embraced constitutive ontologies of becoming, less work has been done to lay out the practical implications of constitutive ontologies of becoming for normative theory intended to guide practitioners in their everyday navigation of workplace challenges (Leonardi, 2013). Undergirding this challenge is a persistent focus on the durable and stable aspects of organization, even as scholars admit the durable aspects of organization are accomplishments rather than a natural state of being. By investigating tensions as moments open to change and organizational becoming (Baxter, 2011; Greig et al., 2012; Schoeneborn, 2011), ATA offers a way to focus on the potentiality of organizational becoming. In doing so, it integrates calls to develop tension-based methodologies. The two-loop model considers “cyclical dynamics” (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 397), the emphasis on context accounts for contextual richness (Smith and Lewis, 2011), history, and social identity (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004), and the emphases on building repertoires and enacted responses integrate calls for a focus on metacommunication and examination of micro-practice (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004),

respectively. Thus, ATA contributes to the tension literature by offering an integrated framework for considering tensions. But more importantly, ATA demonstrates that addressing tensions fills a gap in becoming literature, because it offers a way to address the becoming of organizations through an analysis of potential via a repertoire of possible responses to tension.

In addition to filling this theoretical gap in the becoming literature, ATA's more important contribution is that it integrates a practical orientation into becoming literature and vice versa. Given that becoming ontologies compromise the notion that scholarship can offer "knowledge" through one-size-fits-all recommendations or best practices (Segal, 2017; Stacey, 2001; Tsoukas, 2017), ATA repositions the researcher as collaborating with practitioners in specific moments in which knowledge is enacted and organizations emerge (Marsick et al., 2017; Stacey, 2001). Because the analytical loop accounts for the unique configuration of each organization, it allows scholars to account for the subtle issues of time constraints and ethics (Tsoukas, 2017). Perhaps most importantly, the ATA methodology merges practical questions of efficacy with concerns regarding organizational becoming, creating an explicitly practical approach to organizational becoming. ATA accounts for the fact that individuals are compelled to satisfy multiple demands in their work live (calls for efficacy) in actions that simultaneously constitute organizations as becomings.



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