



Resourcing under tensions: How frontline employees create resources to balance paradoxical tensions

Journal:	<i>Organization Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	OS-18-0092.R4
Manuscript Type:	Article
Keywords:	resourcing, frontline employees, paradoxes, tensions, practice theory, interactions, Ethnography < Research Design and Data Collection
Abstract:	Managing resources and tensions at the frontline is crucial for organizational success. To advance our understanding of how frontline employees turn assets into useful resources under tensions, we draw on research on resourcing and practices of responding to paradoxical tensions. Our ethnographic study of employees in a multinational retail-

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

	<p>fashion company finds three resourcing practices – situational reframing, organizational preframing and institutional deframing – that enable frontline employees to balance tensions. We contribute to both the resourcing perspective and to research on individuals’ responses to paradoxical tensions, first, by identifying the varying scopes of meaning (situational, organizational or institutional) that employees infuse potential resources with; second, by extending the notion of framing to understand how resourcing is accomplished interactively in tension-laden situations; and third, by explaining how employees’ construction of tensions is related to their dynamic moves between resourcing practices.</p>



1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

Resourcing under tensions:

How frontline employees create resources to balance paradoxical tensions

Anna Schneider¹, Bernadette Bullinger², Julia Brandl¹

¹University of Innsbruck, Austria

²IE Business School, IE University, Madrid, Spain

Corresponding author:

Anna Schneider, University of Innsbruck, Universitätsstrasse 15, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria;

anna.schneider@uibk.ac.at, +43 (0) 512 507-71453

Abstract

Managing resources and tensions at the frontline is crucial for organizational success. To advance our understanding of how frontline employees turn assets into useful resources under tensions, we draw on research on resourcing and practices of responding to paradoxical tensions. Our ethnographic study of employees in a multinational retail-fashion company finds three resourcing practices – *situational reframing*, *organizational preframing* and *institutional deframing* – that enable frontline employees to balance tensions. We contribute to both the resourcing perspective and to research on individuals' responses to paradoxical tensions, first, by identifying the varying scopes of meaning (situational, organizational or institutional) that employees infuse potential resources with; second, by extending the notion of framing to understand how resourcing is accomplished interactively in tension-laden situations; and third, by explaining how employees' construction of tensions is related to their dynamic moves between resourcing practices.

Keywords

resourcing, frontline employees, paradoxes, tensions, practice theory, interactions, ethnography

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 This study explores resourcing under tensions – how individuals turn assets such as
10 technologies, material artefacts and knowledge into useful resources to balance contradictory
11 organizational demands. Resourcing under tensions is particularly evident in our study of
12 frontline work, where customers expect high-quality service (i.e. customer-orientation) and
13 the company demands that employees follow guidelines, standards and efficient organizing
14 to keep costs low. Building on insights into how individuals respond to tensions, we explore
15 frontline employees’ resourcing practices as they draw on assets and infuse them with
16 meaning to accomplish their objectives in tension-laden situations (Feldman, 2004; Feldman
17 & Worline, 2012).
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29

30 As a theoretical perspective, resourcing provides insights into situated practices, such
31 as how less-powerful organizational actors manage to convince top management (Howard-
32 Grenville, 2007), how they handle cost pressures during strategic change (Wiedner, Barrett,
33 & Oborn, 2017) or how in strained situations they strategically use ‘framing’ as a political
34 resourcing mechanism to convince others (Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence, 2018). These
35 studies show how individuals can interactively accomplish resourcing despite limitations
36 (Deken, Berends, Gemser & Lauche, 2018; Howard-Grenville, 2007) and implicitly suggest
37 that resources and resourcing are not independent from tensions. Experiencing tensions might
38 even be heightened when resources are scarce (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, &
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Lewis, 2018) but the challenge and urgency tensions bring with them might also encourage
10 improvisation and creativity in the use of resources (Smith & Lewis, 2011). However,
11 previous research has not explicitly focussed on how tensions relate to employees' resourcing
12 practices. To address this limited understanding, we draw on research that provides us with
13 insights into how individuals – in everyday practices – can balance paradoxical tensions.
14
15
16
17
18
19
20

21 Literature on paradoxical tensions argues that contradictory yet equally important
22 organizational demands (Lewis, 2000) require employees to reconcile conflicting roles and
23 complex goals, which for them creates tensions, such as 'frustration, blockage, uncertainty,
24 and even paralysis' (Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016, p. 68) (Denis, Langley, &
25 Rouleau, 2007; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013). Paradoxical tensions are reflected
26 in individuals' micro-practices in everyday situations (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), and
27 researchers exploring individuals' practices under tensions, meaning what people *do* in
28 tension-laden situations, have revealed that micro-practices such as humour, irony, rhetorical
29 strategies and metaphors lead to different individual experiences of and responses to tensions
30 (Bednarek, Paroutis, & Sillince, 2017; Gylfe, Franck, & Vaara, 2019; Lê & Bednarek, 2017;
31 Sheep, Fairhurst, & Khazanchi, 2017). The practice perspective on paradoxical tensions
32 urges researchers to study individuals' practices when they respond to tensions, and when
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 combined with the resourcing perspective, provides a valuable lens for addressing our limited
10 understanding of how frontline employees create resources under tensions.
11
12
13

14 To answer the question of how frontline employees use resourcing to balance
15 tensions, we study customer interactions. Customer interactions at the frontline is a setting
16 of strategic relevance (Balogun, Best, & Lê, 2015; Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee,
17 2015) that underscores the importance of managing resources and tensions. We employed
18 ethnographic methods – observations of customer interactions, interviews with sales
19 assistants and documents – over four months in our study of frontline employees in a large
20 multinational retail-fashion company. This setting is ripe with tensions, as customers expect
21 customer-orientation but often have unpleasant experiences, such as long waiting times or
22 additional fees for extra services. We find that employees use three resourcing practices: (1)
23 *situational reframing*, in which frontline employees *restore* customer-orientation after
24 unpleasant experiences; (2) *organizational preframing*, in which they anticipate tensions and
25 *previsionally* alter organizational procedures and meaning to maintain customer-orientation;
26 and (3) *institutional deframing*, in which employees draw on powerful institutionalized
27 beliefs to *de-emphasize* customer-orientation to justify the existing and potentially
28 conflicting organizational procedures.
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 We contribute to both research on resourcing and on responses to tensions. First, our
10 findings highlight that when facing tensions, individuals find innovative ways of resourcing
11 by infusing a potential resource with meaning from different scopes (situational,
12 organizational or institutional). These findings underscore the importance of studying
13 resourcing under tension, and extend prior work on how resources are created by linking
14 assents to meaning (Feldman & Worline, 2012). In addition to systematizing what previous
15 research has illustrated as situational and organizational meanings, we also theorize
16 resourcing as drawing on institutionalized meanings. We thereby show how frontline
17 employees draw on various scopes of meaning in order to address performing and/or
18 organizing tensions. Second, we build on studies that have identified the role of frames for
19 resourcing (Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence, 2018) and extend the notion of framing to
20 understand how meaning is interactively constructed in tension-laden situations. Specifically,
21 we introduce reframing, preframing and deframing to account for varying degrees of
22 ‘political resourcing’ depending on how employees construct the tension in the situation.
23 Third, we add to research on individuals’ responses to tensions (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013;
24 Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Tuckerman, 2018) by showing that frontline employees construct
25 tensions as either a performing or organizing paradox (i.e. either as being confronted with
26 different role expectations or as tension resulting from the competing interests of customers
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 and the company), which allows us to illustrate and explain how they dynamically move
10
11 between resourcing practices.
12
13

14 15 16 17 **Theoretical framework** 18

19 *Resourcing: Creating resources from assets by infusing them with meaning* 20

21
22 Compared to other research perspectives that consider resources as physical, human
23 or organizational assets that are valuable because of some innate qualities (compare e.g.
24 Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000; Miron-Spektoret al., 2018), the resourcing perspective, by
25 contrast, illustrates how individuals make assets useful. It sees these assets as *potential*
26 resources that only reach their full potential –become *resources in use* – when ‘organizational
27 members take up and use assets as they pursue activities in line with what they wish to make
28 happen in the world’ (Feldman & Worline, 2012, p. 630). This definition of resources shifts
29 the focus, from understanding them as static assets to examining how practitioners enact them
30 in dynamic and context-dependent practices, ‘[b]ecause resources are created and recreated
31 through action’ (Feldman, 2004, p. 307). *Resources in use* are valuable and a source of
32 authority in social interactions when individuals successfully connect assets with shared
33 meaning to accomplish their objectives. Illustrating this notion of resourcing, Feldman and
34 Worline (2012) describe the historical example of breadcrumbs during World War II:
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 because meat was scarce, people turned breadcrumbs into a resource by using them to prepare
10 meatballs, which allowed them to conserve resources and prepare a tasty family dinner. On
11 their own, breadcrumbs have no inherent use or meaning, since they can be used in many
12 ways to achieve different objectives. To the family adapting a meatball recipe to save money,
13 though, breadcrumbs are a meaningful and valuable resource.
14
15
16
17
18
19
20

21 Organizational actors accomplish objectives such as organizational change or
22 strategizing work through resourcing – linking assets to situational and organizational
23 meanings. Sonenshein (2014) found that producing creative outcomes on the sales floor does
24 not depend on the quantity of resources available to employees, as many studies on creativity
25 assume, but is instead the result of frontline employees’ own resourcing on the sales floor. In
26 her study of issue sellers – lower-level organizational actors who aim to draw managers’
27 attention to certain issues – Howard-Grenville (2007) demonstrates that assets such as
28 relationships, expertise and knowledge only become resources when managers believe those
29 assets to be meaningful. Wiedner et al. (2017) show that for organizational change to happen,
30 the allocation of resources is less important than connecting them to meanings and values,
31 both of which also influence power relationships and ultimately enable or constrain change.
32 According to Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence (2018), when the objective of resourcing is
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 aimed at convincing others, individuals might use resources for framing – that is, for
10 politically constructing meaning for their interaction partners.
11
12

13
14 Research on resourcing provides insights on situated practices; how less-powerful
15 organizational actors, constrained by organizational procedures (Sonenshein, 2014) and
16 situational pressures (Quinn & Worline, 2008), can interactively accomplish resourcing
17 despite these limitations (Deken et al., 2018; Howard-Grenville, 2007). These studies
18 implicitly suggest that resources and resourcing are not independent from tensions: a
19 perceived scarcity of resources might heighten the experience of tensions (Miron-Spektor, et
20 al. 2018). The challenge and urgency that tensions bring with them might also lead to greater
21 creativity in resourcing practices (Sonenshein, 2014). How tensions relate to employees’
22 resourcing practices, though, has not been the explicit focus of previous research. Next, we
23 review research on how individuals, in their everyday practices, can respond to paradoxical
24 tensions.
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40 *Individuals constructing and responding to tensions*

41
42 Paradoxes in organizations – defined as ‘contradictory yet interrelated elements that
43 exist simultaneously and persist over time’ (Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 382) – often present
44 themselves as contradictory demands that have to be fulfilled simultaneously, such as
45 organizational efficiency and customer-orientation. Research has provided insights into
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 responses to contradictory demands (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Schad, Lewis, & Smith,
10 2019; Smith & Tracey, 2016), yet many studies have focussed on organizational attempts to
11 balance tensions rather than on how individual employees might experience and respond to
12 them (Smith & Tracey, 2016). When studying individuals in organizations, however, we need
13 to consider the ‘interplay’ of organizational and individual responses, with ‘organizations
14 creat[ing] the conditions for staff to manage their own...tensions’ (Gümüşay, Smets, &
15 Morris, 2019, p. 5).

16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26 The practice perspective on paradoxical tensions shows that ‘tensions are actually
27 constructed in the micro-interactions through which people perform their contradictory tasks
28 and roles’ (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017, p. 434). Seeing tensions as socially constructed (Child,
29 2019; Tuckermann, 2018) implies that ‘paradoxes [surface] from relational dynamics
30 through dialogue, social interactions, and practices’ (Smith & Tracey, 2016, p. 458), and
31 therefore requires researchers to focus on individuals’ situated practices. Jarzabkowski et al.
32 (2013) showed that paradoxes might be constructed relationally across the macro (i.e.
33 organizational structure), meso (i.e. group identity) and the micro (i.e. an individual’s goals
34 and roles) levels. Inherent contradictions between organizational divisions and the resulting
35 structural tensions can be described as an *organizing paradox*. It might spill over to the
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 micro-level, where it results in a *performing paradox* when individuals face tensions
10 stemming from contradictory role and performance expectations.
11
12
13

14 Studies drawing on the practice perspective provide insights into various practices
15 that individuals use to balance paradoxical tensions; for instance, irony (Gylfe et al., 2019),
16 rhetorical practices that lead to moments of transcendence, in which both poles of the paradox
17 can be seen as complementary and necessary (Bednarek et al., 2017); or humour, involved in
18 individuals' interrelated constructions of and responses to tensions as they share and co-
19 construct their frustrations with organizational demands (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017). The
20 practice perspective on paradoxical tensions urges researchers to study individuals' practices
21 when responding to tensions and, in combination with resourcing, therefore provides a
22 valuable lens to overcome our limited understanding of how frontline employees construct
23 and balance tensions by creating resources from the various objects and assets that everyday
24 work situations usually contain.
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40 *Studying frontline employees' everyday practices*

41

42 For studying resourcing under tensions, we suggest – in line with recent calls (Barley,
43 2008; Smets et al., 2017) – that frontline work is a rich research setting to study individuals'
44 everyday practices and to advance theory on resourcing and responses to tensions. While
45 much organizational research has focussed on powerful decision-makers such as senior-level
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 managers and elite professionals, successful organizations require lower-level employees to
10 carry out organizational strategies (Balogun et al., 2015; Vaara & Whittington, 2012).
11
12 Literature on resourcing resonates with calls to study frontline work as situated everyday
13 practices: it requires researchers to explore how individuals bring ‘things’ into use in their
14 micro-practices (Feldman, 2004; Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2001). Studying the mundane,
15
16 interactive work of employees who have direct customer contact is therefore necessary for
17
18 understanding how they make use of their local work settings and potential resources (Darr
19
20 & Pinch, 2013).
21
22
23
24
25
26
27

28 While competing demands are pervasive throughout organizations, frontline work is
29 especially prone to tensions because employees are expected to implement organizational
30 strategies (Balogun et al. 2015; Lüscher, Lewis, & Ingram, 2006; Rouleau, 2005) while
31 simultaneously dealing with customers and clients. The ‘often contradictory demands placed
32 on frontline workers’ (Bolton & Houlihan, 2010, p. 380) mainly stem from the customers
33 expecting high-quality service (i.e. customer-orientation) and the company imposing
34 guidelines, standards and efficient organizing to keep costs low.
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44

45 Studying resourcing needs to consider that ‘everyday actions are consequential in
46 producing the structural contours of social life’ (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011, p. 1241), since
47 organizational and institutional embeddedness gives actors’ practices meaning in concrete
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 situations (Seidl & Whittington, 2014; Smets, 2017). Focussing on frontline work requires
10 researchers to account for individuals' everyday problems and tensions and for their
11 embeddedness in the situational, organizational and institutional contexts (Wilhelm,
12 Bullinger & Chromik, 2019) that provide them with potential resources for addressing these
13 problems and tensions. Frontline work requires action yet constrains actors' room for
14 manoeuvre, and is therefore the ideal setting to study such a pervasive and organizationally
15 relevant phenomenon as resourcing under tensions.
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27

28 **Methods**

29 *Research setting*

30
31 We studied customer interactions at xFashion (pseudonym), a retail fashion chain that is a
32 typical example of a 'customer-oriented bureaucracy' (Korczynski, 2002, p. 64) facing two
33 competing imperatives: improve efficiency by cutting costs and deliver high-quality service
34 and customer-orientation, the latter reflecting the widespread belief that 'the customer is
35 king' (Korczynski & Ott, 2004). Together, these two demands are 'the key tension of
36 contemporary service work' (Korczynski, 2002, p. 64) and the key task of managers and
37 frontline employees is to 'fashion a fragile social order' (Korczynski, 2002, p. 64) between
38 the two. For example, labour on xFashion's sales floor is divided into several departments
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 and into sales-assistant, cashier and alteration-tailor positions that together provide services
10 and manage customer relationships.
11
12
13

14 In everyday interactions on the sales floor at xFashion, frontline employees encounter
15 the following organizational conditions from which they construct tensions (Gümüşay, et al.,
16 2019): (1) *tight work scheduling vs. customer attention*, (2) *consulting vs. selling*, (3) *the*
17 *complicated merchandise-return procedure*, (4) *the alteration service as additional cost* and
18 *(5) case-by-case decisions in merchandise-complaints* (see also Table 1). These
19 organizational conditions for tensions, play out differently: in (1), the daily ‘turnover-to-
20 number-of-scheduled-employees’ ratio is tightly calculated, and sales assistants have to carry
21 out visual-merchandising, tidy up and handle merchandise returns and complaints. As a result
22 attention to customers is often being marginalized. In (2), sales assistants are expected to
23 provide style advice *and* sell. Commission stickers placed on each item they sell track
24 whether assistants meet daily sales targets even though some customers are uncomfortable
25 with this practice. For customers, the (3) merchandise-return procedure is also complicated
26 (‘a bureaucratic labyrinth’ [Int.]). Customers must first proceed to the department where they
27 originally purchased their item and then go to the central cashier to receive either
28 reimbursement or new merchandise. xFashion’s on-site alterations (4) cost extra, often
29 resulting in discussions with customers, since local competitors offer free alterations. For
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 merchandise complaints (e.g. pilling of a cashmere cardigan, rubbed-through spots in jeans
10 fabric, etc.) (5), frontline employees have some discretion in how to handle them (e.g.
11 accepting returns or giving a discount), which requires employees to make case-by-case
12 decisions and often results in arguments with unsatisfied customers.
13
14
15
16
17

18 *Field work*

19
20
21 We conducted an ethnographic study (Watson, 2011) and collected data on, from and
22 around the sales floor using observations, interviews and complementary documents. Access
23 was facilitated by the first author, who had extensive previous work experience at xFashion
24 as a sales assistant, department manager and store manager¹. This author, the principal
25 investigator (PI), was the only one collecting data at one xFashion store, at which the PI had
26 never worked before (to avoid influence from prior workplace hierarchies and relationships).
27 From the outset of field work, the other two authors were involved in continuous discussions
28 of the project. The on-site store manager helped obtain clearance from the local works council
29 and to identify and introduce the PI to potential research participants. This resulted in in-
30 depth access to 12 frontline employees (6 sales assistants, 3 alteration tailors, 3 cashiers)
31 working on the sales floor.
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48

49 ¹ The PI negotiated full field access immediately after having quit as a store manager at xFashion and starting
50 a PhD program. Data collection began approximately one year later.
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 *Observations.* To study ‘how things work’ (Watson, 2011, p. 202) on the sales floor, the PI
10 immersed her/himself in one store over a period of four months (February 2013 to May 2013)
11 for three to four days a week, from three to six hours a day. Familiarity with the setting from
12 previous work experience helped to quickly establish trusting relationships with research
13 participants, enabling the ‘close-observational or participative research that is central to
14 ethnographic endeavours’ (Watson, 2011). Each day the PI followed one or two frontline
15 employees during their shifts, observing different employees on different days.
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

26 During customer interactions, the PI was behaving like a regular customer (e.g.
27 looking at the merchandise, pretending to try something on)² and taking field notes on
28 primary (e.g. interaction length, number of participants involved, main content and course of
29 interaction) and secondary observations (e.g. atmosphere, description of feelings displayed)
30 as well as contextual data (e.g. objects, spatial arrangements). The PI engaged in extended
31 memo writing either immediately after each observed interaction or towards the end of each
32 shift, while preparing for the interviews. When no customers were around, the PI helped with
33 visual merchandising, participated in department meetings, sat with employees at the cashier
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44

45 ² Trying to behave like a regular customer allowed the PI to get as spatially close as possible to the interaction
46 (2 to 3 m distance), while also remaining as inconspicuous as possible to the customer. Key observations were
47 recorded immediately (in bullet points) during the interaction on the sales floor, which the customers usually
48 did not take note of. More extended field notes were recorded directly after each interaction, while the PI was
49 (mostly) sitting on one of the sofas in each department. A similar set-up was employed in an ethnographic study
50 of customer interactions in gyms (see George, 2008).
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 desk or in their atelier and went to lunch with them. At the end of each day, the observation
10 memos were then expanded into a comprehensive memo with additional observations and
11 dialogue reflection, which were transformed into electronic documents.
12
13
14

15
16 *Interviews.* To complement the numerous observations and sales-floor conversations, the PI
17 conducted an additional 39 in-depth interviews. Familiarity with the setting and continued
18 observation made it easier to spot interactions involving potential tensions and/or to capture
19 different, outstanding or deviating use of potential resources. Interviews with frontline
20 employees were then sampled based on those interactions the PI presumed involved tensions.
21 These interviews (on average 30 minutes) encouraged employees to reflect on their activities
22 during specific interactions and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were
23 conducted in German and the authors translated all quotes presented in the paper. Combining
24 observations with interviewing is a frequently used method in ethnographic studies of
25 frontline service work (see for example, Balogun et al., 2015; Rouleau, 2005).
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40 *Complementary documents.* The PI also collected written material from xFashion – training
41 documents, internal communication memos, meeting minutes and customer e-mail
42 complaints – which helped to better understand frontline employees’ activities and to
43 triangulate observations and interviews with contextual accounts of the company’s prevalent
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 organizing principles. For data analysis, transcriptions, field notes, memos and other written
10 material were uploaded to and coded in NVivo 12 software.
11
12

13 14 *Data analysis* 15

16
17 To illustrate the setting in rich detail, the PI wrote separate case stories of each
18 observed customer-interaction episode and, together with the interview and other
19 ethnographic material, developed thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of an ‘everyday workday’
20 of a sales assistant, a cashier and an alteration tailor. Applying Hendry and Seidls’ (2003; see
21 also Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017) notions of initiation, conduct and termination to separate
22 customer interactions, each description captured the (potential) resources employed in each
23 episode, the individuals’ activities and emotions displayed as well as the interactions between
24 frontline employee(s) and customer(s). To check for plausibility (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek,
25 & Lê, 2014), all authors discussed the thick descriptions and used them, together with the
26 observations, interviews and documents, to analyse data and illustrate our findings in the
27 form of a composite narrative made up of 10 representative vignettes exemplifying everyday
28 work on the xFashion sales floor.
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43

44 When analysing the data, we engaged in ‘insider/outsider’ coding (Gioia, Corley, &
45 Hamilton, 2013) until we achieved team consistency in our interpretations. More precisely,
46 one author, who had not been in the field, coded the data independently from the PI. Any
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 discrepancies were then discussed collectively to update and refine the coding. In parallel
10 and together with the third author, we engaged in a reflective process of iterating between
11 multiple theoretical concepts, literature and refined coding (explained below), which helped
12 the PI avoid the risk of ‘going native’ (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 19) and to counter potential
13 biases and assumptions in the interpretations that could potentially result from adopting an
14 informant’s view. We analysed the data in five steps:
15
16
17
18
19
20
21

22
23 First, we identified all episodes in which tensions were ‘visible’ (Tuckermann, 2018).
24 We coded either for a) a customer expressing dissatisfaction about the way things were done
25 or how the interaction proceeded; and/or b) frontline employees describing during the
26 interview a tension resulting from how she or he was supposed to act versus how the customer
27 would have liked her or him to act. This step eliminated 13 of the 39 episodes which had
28 neither of the two criteria. Of the remaining 26 interaction episodes (see Table 1 for
29 overview), we clustered typical and recurring problems and cross-coded them against the
30 characteristics of the customer-oriented bureaucracy (Korczynski, 2002; Korczynski & Ott,
31 2004). Doing so showed that we had identified five business-model specific conditions for
32 tensions, which relate to xFashion’s way of organizing itself as a customer-oriented
33 bureaucracy (see ‘Research setting’ above).
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Insert Table 1 about here
10
11 -----
12

13 Second, we looked for *how* frontline employees themselves constructed tensions
14 during interactions. We used the following definition to code for tension constructions:
15
16 ‘[T]ensions...are actually constructed in the micro-interactions through which people
17 perform their contradictory tasks and roles’ (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017, p. 434; see also Smith
18 & Lewis, 2011). We saw that frontline employees constructed tensions as a paradox of
19 performing when they considered themselves as accountable for the issues customers raised
20 during the interaction. For example, when putting the commission stickers on the
21 merchandise tag, employees struggled to reconcile their *role as a seller* with their *role as*
22 *consultant*, fearing that acting as a seller would appear illegitimate to customers. When the
23 tension was between xFashion and customers, employees constructed tensions as a paradox
24 of organizing, since xFashion – rather than the frontline employees themselves – was the
25 source for the issues raised during the interaction. For example, merchandise-return
26 customers often proceeded directly to the central cashier instead of first going to the sales
27 department, which often left the customer frustrated. A cashier constructed this tension as
28 follows:
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

48 It is unfortunate [that] so many [customers] don’t know how it works here... We often
49 have this situation and then they’re stressed or annoyed. As a customer I wouldn’t be
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 happy about that [either], making me talk to three different people for a return...it
10 appears a bit disorganized and incompetent if I get sent around all the time... This is
11 really unpleasant for customers and not the kind of service they expect from xFashion.
12
13

14 We then cross-coded the two paradox constructions with the five organizational conditions
15 for tensions. Except for one case, we saw that frontline employees constructed *tight work*
16 *scheduling vs. customer attention* and *consulting vs. selling* as tensions related to the paradox
17 of performing, while for the most part they constructed the *complicated merchandise-return*
18 *procedure*, the *alteration service as additional cost* and the *merchandise complaints* as
19 tensions related to the paradox of organizing (and in few cases also in relation to the paradox
20 of performing).
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29

30
31 Third, we coded the activities performed in each episode and noticed that they seemed
32 to be directed at pursuing different *objectives* (see also Table 3) along two dimensions. One
33 dimension was customer-orientation, in which customers were either assured that they were
34 ‘king’ or in which this notion was challenged; the other dimension was pre-defined
35 organizational processes, which were either maintained or changed during interaction. We
36 then analysed the activity-objective relationship across all episodes and kept seeing the same
37 patterns across job positions, employees and the typical organizational conditions for
38 tensions. For example, employees engaging in activities like ‘distracting the customer from
39 unpleasant experiences’ and ‘promising that things will be better in the future’ were trying
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 to show both customer-orientation and follow the pre-defined organizational processes. We
10 used ‘framing’ to refer to activities of interactively constructing meaning with customers
11 (Kannan-Narasimhan & Lawrence, 2018) and classified activities into one of three sets of
12 *activity objectives*. Activities aimed at *restoring* customer-orientation were clustered into the
13 broader thematic category (Gioia et al., 2013) *reframing*. Activities like ‘seeking the cheapest
14 alternative’ and ‘doing others’ tasks’ were clustered as *preframing*, where employees
15 *previsionally* altered organizational procedures and meaning to maintain customer-
16 orientation. Activities like ‘explaining the merchandise complaint/return procedure’ were
17 clustered as *deframing*, as they *de-emphasized* customer-orientation and justified existing
18 organizational procedures.
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30

31
32 Fourth, we closely examined the ‘resources in use’ (Feldman & Worline, 2012)
33 during each episode (e.g. company rules or technical devices involved) and their connection
34 to the three activity sets identified above. We looked for ‘manipulating’ and ‘recombining’
35 (Sonenshein, 2014), both of which involve creative acts of infusing assets and objects with
36 new or different meaning. We identified resources created by drawing on assets with
37 meanings from the *situation* (e.g. flowers, apologies), from the broader *organizational*
38 context (e.g. commission stickers, co-workers, or sales procedures) and from the broader
39 *institutional* setting (e.g. professionalism, entrepreneurship). Studying the activity
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 objectives-resources in use connections across episodes, we noticed that in each specific
10 activity set employees created specific resources (see Table 3), hence they engaged in
11 different resourcing practices. Accordingly, we labelled them *situational reframing*,
12 *organizational preframing* and *institutional deframing*. We illustrate these three resourcing
13 practices in our Findings section.
14
15
16
17
18
19

20 Fifth, we iteratively compared these resourcing practices with how frontline
21 employees constructed tensions (step two) and uncovered distinct interrelation patterns:
22 when frontline employees constructed the tension as a paradox of performing, they either
23 engaged in *situational reframing* or in *organizational preframing*, yet when they constructed
24 the tension as a paradox of organizing, they primarily engaged in *institutional deframing*.
25
26
27
28
29
30
31

32 In line with previous studies and suggestions (Smets et.al, 2015; Berends & Deken,
33 2019), we build on our thick description of each episode and present a ‘composite narrative’,
34 crafted to ‘make the author’s field experience...accessible to the reader’ (Jarzabkowski et al.
35 2014, p. 12). Drawn from multiple episodes and merged into a single workday of three
36 frontline employees at xFashion – the sales assistant ‘Monica’, the alteration tailor ‘Maria’
37 and the cashier ‘Linda’ – this composite narrative presents the full breadth and depth of our
38 data within a single story. It describes employees in various customer interactions, illustrating
39 how they construct tensions and which resourcing practices they engage in to balance them.
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

Findings

This section presents a composite narrative of an everyday workday illustrating the resourcing practices frontline employees use to balance tensions: (1) *situational reframing*, (2) *organizational preframing* and (3) *institutional deframing* (see Tables 2 and 3). In *situational reframing*, employees seek to *re-establish* customer-orientation while concurrently maintaining the (inconvenient) organizational processes that potentially lead to tensions. In this practice, they rhetorically and/or symbolically distract the customer from an unpleasant experience through drawing on resources infused with meaning from the situation. In *organizational preframing*, frontline employees seek to *pre-establish* customer-orientation by proactively attempting to avoid unpleasant customer experiences. In this practice, they draw on resources infused with meaning from the broader organizational context to alter potentially inconvenient organizational procedures. In *institutional deframing* frontline employees seek to maintain the potentially inconvenient organizational processes while questioning and de-emphasizing customer-orientation. This practice explains and justifies predefined organizational procedures to convince customers to comply and draws on resources infused with meaning from the broader institutional setting. Table 2 connects

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 each interaction episode from the composite narrative (in italics) to the resourcing practice
10 employed.
11

12
13 -----
14
15 Insert Table 2 about here
16
17 -----
18
19

20 Table 3 links the three resourcing practices illustrated in the composite narrative with the
21 broader corpus of our data and gives examples of resources created, activities performed and
22 objectives pursued in each practice.
23
24
25

26
27 -----
28
29 Insert Table 3 about here
30
31 -----
32
33

34 *Balancing tensions in interactive service work at xFashion*

35
36
37 Together with her colleagues, sales assistant Monica starts her day at 9 a.m. in the women's
38 casual-wear department. First, she takes care of an urgent customer complaint about the...
39
40

41
42
43 ...real mess in the women's department, something I would only expect at the cheap
44 retail chains but not in your store. In the future, I will consider not shopping at your
45 store. You are about to lose a loyal and frequent customer. (Obs., *customer e-mail*
46 *complaint*)
47

48
49 Monica sighs:
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Even if the customer is not right in front of me, this feels like a punch in the gut. I
10 hate these moments, because we really try to give our best all the time. I was really
11 down, and I always take such things personally. If you try your best to satisfy the
12 customers and do all the required tasks and then don't succeed, then you feel the
13 pressure.
14

15
16 In her reply she apologizes and offers the customer a €10 voucher towards her next purchase,
17 which she sends together with flowers to the address provided in the e-mail. The customer
18 curtly replies that the department 'is always like that' (Obs.) and sending a voucher certainly
19 'won't change my impression' (Obs.). Nevertheless, she credits xFashion for taking the
20 complaint seriously, which is 'beyond what I expected' (Obs.).
21
22
23
24
25
26
27

28 Around noon, the store becomes crowded requiring Monica to *attend to several*
29 *customers at the same time* and carry out different tasks: returning merchandise without a
30 price tag, checking the stock room for another size and helping an elderly woman looking
31 for some formal trousers. Monica travels among all three customers; however, the elderly
32 woman seems annoyed (Obs.), trying on different trousers by herself and going back-and-
33 forth to the sales floor to fetch other sizes. Finally, the customer makes her choice – without
34 Monica's help – and heads towards the checkout counter. At that moment, Monica reappears
35 to 'complete' (Obs.) the customer interaction by putting her commission sticker on the
36 trousers while charmingly asking if she 'could do anything else?' The customer cannot hide
37 her frustration any longer and cuts Monica short:
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Is it only you in the department today? I'm a regular customer and normally I'm used
10 to getting more service and consultation. I could get a pair of trousers like these
11 somewhere else, maybe at a cheaper price, but I come here because you're known for
12 being, and claim to be, a service-oriented retailer.
13

14
15 Monica apologizes and adds:
16

17 Yes, at the moment I'm alone, because it's lunchtime. And my colleagues are hungry
18 as well (smiling). We all have to eat sometime.
19
20

21 Despite Monica's reasonable excuse, staff from other departments usually help with
22 coverage during lunchtime. In the interview, Monica reflects on why she felt the need to
23 justify the situation:
24
25
26
27

28
29 It was quite crowded, yet I feel that customers expect more from xFashion, more
30 premium service and more staff. And I didn't want to say that there are always too few
31 people. They [the customers] shouldn't get this feeling. And usually we have more
32 staff. So my aim was that she [the customer] would feel good and would see that, even
33 though there were few staff, I did my best.
34
35
36

37 In the afternoon, a couple approaches Monica with a pair of jeans that look 'dirty, worn out
38 and old' (Obs.), *complain about the bad quality* and want to be fully reimbursed. They claim
39 they bought them one year ago and the jeans are xFashion's house brand, which cannot be
40 purchased anywhere else. They don't have a receipt but claim that the purchase might be
41 linked to their customer loyalty card, since they 'are frequent and really good customers'.
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 They hand Monica three different loyalty cards, which she checks in the back office. She
10
11 can't find this item, nor any other purchases, and explains back on the sales floor:
12
13

14 Since we have neither the receipt nor any record on the customer loyalty cards, I can't
15 reimburse you. I am sorry. If it had been last week and we could remember you,
16 maybe it would be different, but in this case it's just too long ago. We just have to be
17 fair here with respect to other customers.
18
19

20
21 The customers are 'disappointed' (Obs.) and insist that they 'bought [the jeans] here at this
22 store'. Monica gets 'nervous' (Obs.) and feels that she has to do something about the situation
23 to 'make them happy again' (Int.) and offers them a parking voucher for the 'inconvenience
24 of coming here'. The customers' faces become a bit friendlier (Obs.), they accept the voucher
25 and leave. In the interview Monica recalls that 'this complaint was unfair; they destroyed the
26 merchandise by themselves', which makes these situations difficult because 'you can't
27 exactly tell them that'. Monica's response sought to 'elegantly escape this situation' by
28 claiming a need for proof of purchase 'even though I knew that this was our merchandise'.
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38

39 She explains:
40
41

42 Of course, the easiest way would be to take everything back. But people should not
43 get the feeling that they can take advantage of us. However, it was important to me
44 that they [the customers] realized that we take their complaint seriously. So with the
45 parking voucher in the end, I think that it came across quite well that we are service-
46 oriented, they shouldn't be disappointed by our service. And they didn't expect that,
47 so I could make them happy again.
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Later, while reorganizing T-shirts on a table, she observes a couple queuing at the cashier to
10 return a premium-brand scarf. Linda (the cashier) explains that they have to go upstairs to
11 find a sales assistant and then return to the cashier downstairs. Annoyed by this ‘silly way of
12 organizing a store tour’ (Obs.), Monica joins them and offers to *take care of the merchandise*
13 *return* by herself, even if sales assistants from the ground floor ‘shouldn’t do so’ (Obs.).
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
Monica is concerned about...

...appear[ing] incompetent and disorganized. This is how xFashion organizes merchandise returns, but if I were the customer, I would perceive this as super uncomfortable. I’d really get annoyed ... And what is more, this is a chance for me to sell something, which our supervisors are also very keen on. I just had a training session on this the other day.

The training session the week before was on handling merchandise complaints: ‘Merchandise exchange is one of our services and a chance to acquire and retain customers!’ (Training document). She manages to sell a different scarf from her department, and just as she is about to stick her *commission sticker* on the merchandise tag, she *hands them over to her customers* saying ‘These are the insignia of our success. Please put them on if you are satisfied with my service’, which the customers happily (Obs.) did. Asked why she handed over the stickers, Monica answers:

Simply because many customers become suspicious when we put the stickers on. Some even feel uncomfortable and we [have] also had complaints about this. Other

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 stores don't do this, and after you have spent a lot of time consulting [with customers]
10 it is weird to signal that we get commission. Some colleagues just put their sticker on
11 any merchandise customers buy, even without consulting them. I don't want [to do]
12 this, that's why I often hand my stickers over to customers. But clearly, at the end of
13 the day, what counts is how much you sold.
14
15

16 Before leaving at 3 p.m., Monica consults a woman who is not entirely convinced of the loose
17 fit of a pair of pants around the thighs, yet Monica claims that this is 'latest fashion and the
18 new style'(Obs.). The customer holds the seam together in front of the mirror and says, 'I
19 feel [like] it has to be tighter here'. Monica *calls over Maria*, the tailor, and asks if she would
20 recommend altering the fit of the pants. Maria replies:
21
22
23
24
25
26

27
28 No, I wouldn't do that. Of course we can change it, but if you want my advice, then
29 leave it as it is. Otherwise it'll lose its shape. It looks really good like this now.
30
31

32 The customer 'seems relieved' (Obs.) by Maria's confirmation of Monica's advice and
33 eventually buys the pants. In the interview, Monica explains why she called Maria over for
34 support:
35
36
37
38
39

40 *Monica*: I knew that the customer was not sure about the fit, but I also got the feeling
41 that she did not really trust my recommendation. And when I get that feeling, I think
42 it is always better to offer the customer a third opinion, an expert, like Maria the tailor.
43 It was simply a way to take away her insecurity about the fit.

44 *PI*: How do you feel when customers don't trust your recommendations?

45 *Monica*: I am totally okay with this. It's just that I know I have to do something about
46 it. Some customers just need a second and a third opinion.
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Over in the women's outdoor department, Maria finds herself in the middle of a heated debate
10 about whether the sleeves of a down coat are too long. The customer is reluctant ('Can't I
11 just roll the sleeves up?') to shorten them because an alteration would cost €27.95, and asks
12
13
14
15
16 'Can we do something about the price? As a favour? I am a frequent customer and have a
17 loyalty card'. Maria refuses, carefully explaining the alteration process, and adds, 'You
18 know, these are *fixed prices*. We're all professionally trained tailors, and work like a proper
19 company within the store'. Still hesitant, Maria suggests the customer to buy the coat without
20 an alteration and bring it back whenever needed. The customer refuses ('I don't want to come
21 in again') and accepts ('Well, if it is necessary, then let's do the alteration'). Afterwards in
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30 the interview Maria reflects on the situation:

31
32 *Maria*: I felt that I had to justify, even *sell* the price of the alteration.

33 *PI*: Why?

34 *Maria*: Well, some customers feel they can negotiate the price. So that's why they
35 should know that's it not me making up some prices, but xFashion; I am just
36 responsible for the high-quality execution of alterations and that's what I tried to get
37 across. And I think it worked pretty well.
38
39

40
41 Later, Maria calls a customer who has been waiting 10 days for a suit from another store,
42 after a previous alteration had destroyed it. Since then, Maria *has been taking care of all*
43 *steps*, such as ordering the suit from another store, informing the logistics department to call
44 her as soon as the merchandise arrives and calling the customer to book an alteration. Maria
45
46
47
48
49
50 explains:

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Last time I talked to him, he was really upset, and I understand: the alteration was not
10 right. I now want to fix it personally so that we can win him back after so many things
11 went wrong.
12

13 The customer agrees to come to the store immediately, requiring Maria to extend her shift.
14
15 He seems quite happy and says, ‘You really made an effort to make it all right again. Thank
16 you very much. I didn’t expect that’. Maria accompanies the customer downstairs to Linda
17
18 at the cashier desk, informs her that the alteration is free and says goodbye.
19
20
21

22
23 There is a long queue at the cashier because Linda is the only one left and the store is
24 about to close. While processing a payment for one customer, she calmly *explains* to another
25
26 that *to return merchandise...*
27
28

29
30 ...remember to always go first to the merchandise department. In your case this is the
31 second floor. This is how it works here, and I want to ensure that you have the best
32 shopping experience possible.
33
34

35 For Linda, she explains the complicated merchandise-return procedure upfront because:
36

37 There are often customers who are not so familiar with shopping at xFashion, and
38 who don’t know how it works with the merchandise returns. And then they wait in
39 the queue here, just to learn that they have to go to the merchandise department first.
40 This often causes problems, because other stores do merchandise returns at the cashier
41 desk.
42
43
44

45 Linda processes a couple more payments until an ‘*irate customer*, seemingly in a hurry’
46
47 (Obs.) complains that he has now been waiting for ten minutes just to learn that he has ‘to go
48 upstairs for the merchandise return?!’. Linda apologizes, calmly asks him to go upstairs, get
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 the merchandise-return form and come back; ‘in the meantime, I will prepare some parking
10 vouchers for you so that you can park for free [today] and [on your] next [visit]’. The
11 customer grudgingly (Obs.) accepts these as an apology. Linda later explains:
12
13
14

15
16
17 You must never tell our boss – promise – but we use these parking tickets for all sorts
18 of little problems at the cashier desk. Also, sales assistants use them whenever there
19 is a little problem, although we shouldn’t do so. But it is a good way to make
20 customers happy again if something has made them angry.
21
22
23

24
25 *Resourcing at the frontline: Activities, (material) assets and meanings in resourcing*
26
27 *practices and employees’ movement among them*
28
29

30 Examples of activities and assets involved in *situational reframing* are Monica apologizing
31 for the messy store appearance and sending a voucher and flowers; assuring a customer that
32 new merchandise will arrive shortly (without knowing for sure if it really will) by clicking
33 and pretending to check the merchandise software; and Linda making up for the long wait
34 time at the cashier by handing out parking vouchers. Frontline employees turn these assets
35 into resources by infusing them with meaning from the situation. For example, checking the
36 merchandise software and fibbing about new merchandise arrival becomes meaningful –
37 becomes a resource – since it conveys to customers that Monica and Linda are really
38 dedicated to fulfilling the customer’s specific demand. *Situational reframing* enables
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 frontline employees to restore or maintain the notion of customer-orientation despite
10 customers' unpleasant experiences with inconvenient organizational procedures.
11
12

13
14 Examples of activities and assets involved in *organizational preframing* are Monica
15 calling Maria over to reassure the customer about the specific fit of pants; letting customers
16 decide whether her service warrants commission stickers or not; and altering the
17 merchandise-return procedure by referring to a specific training session she attended.
18 Frontline employees turn these assets (e.g. commission stickers, co-workers or pre-defined
19 sales processes) into resources by infusing them with meaning from the broader
20 organizational context. For example, handing over commission stickers to customers
21 becomes meaningful – becomes a resource – because it alters organizational processes and
22 offers a workaround that avoids unpleasant customer experiences. *Organizational*
23 *preframing* enables frontline employees to maintain the impression of customer-orientation
24 by proactively altering potentially inconvenient organizational procedures.
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40 Examples of activities and assets involved in *institutional deframing* are Linda
41 proactively explaining the merchandise-return process to 'ensure the best shopping
42 experience'; Monica rejecting a merchandise return by referring to a rule requiring proof of
43 purchase and justifying her action as one based on the fairness principle; and Maria justifying
44 merchandise-alteration prices by describing herself as a 'professionally trained tailor' while
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 wearing a metric tape and a needle cushion to support the description and by referring to her
10 department as a ‘company within the company’ and pointing to the alteration service menu.
11
12 Frontline employees turn these assets (e.g. metric tape, the needle cushion and the alteration
13 service menu) into resources by infusing them with meaning from the broader institutional
14 setting. Institutional *deframing* enables frontline employees to maintain potentially
15 inconvenient organizational processes and to de-emphasize the notion of customer-
16 orientation.
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24

25 The composite narrative also highlights how different resourcing practices are
26 flawlessly intertwined in and between service interactions on the sales floor and how frontline
27 employees skilfully move from one resourcing practice to the other. Table 2 illustrates how
28 resourcing at the frontline uses one or more of the three practices and how those practices
29 connect to employees’ constructing tensions. For example, when frontline employees
30 construct tensions as a paradox of performing (i.e. as a tension between tasks and roles), they
31 are most likely to engage in *situational reframing* or *organizational preframing*. In contrast,
32 when they construct tensions as a paradox of organizing (i.e. as a tension between the
33 customer and xFashion), frontline employees engage in *institutional deframing*, sometimes
34 combined with *situational reframing* (see Episode 7 in Table 2). For example, when Monica
35 refuses a merchandise return, she enacts both, by referring to the fairness of a bureaucratic
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 procedure (*institutional deframing*) and offering a parking voucher (*situational reframing*).
10
11 While specific resourcing practices allow employees to balance tensions in interactions,
12
13 moving between practices allows them to balance tensions in the stream of interactions.
14
15

16 17 18 **Discussion**

19
20 Our study explores how frontline employees create resources to balance tensions in
21
22 their customer interactions, thereby advancing our understanding of resourcing in tension-
23
24 laden situations and extending research on individuals' responses to paradoxical tensions.
25
26 We find that frontline employees engage in three different resourcing practices – *situational*
27
28 *reframing, organizational preframing and institutional deframing* – each of which has
29
30 different implications for how resources are created and how tensions are balanced.
31
32 Compared to previous studies on resourcing, our explicit focus on resourcing under tensions
33
34 allows us to show innovative ways of resourcing. We illustrate how employees infuse a
35
36 variety of meanings (from the situational, organizational or institutional context) to create
37
38 resources and use framing to a greater or lesser extend strategically. Our findings offer
39
40 contributions to both research on resourcing and on responses to tensions, which we outline
41
42 below.
43
44
45
46
47
48

49 *Resourcing under tensions at the frontline*
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 First, our findings illustrate that to balance tensions in interactions, frontline employees find
10 creative ways of infusing assets with meaning by drawing on the situational, organizational
11 and institutional setting. Frontline workers construct a tension as relating either to the
12 performance or to the organization paradox, and create resources drawing on different scopes
13 of meaning (situational, organizational or institutional). Hence, resourcing under tensions
14 requires employees to be innovative, not only in the assets that they turn into *resources in*
15 *use*, but also in the meanings they infuse resources with to help them to achieve their
16 objectives (Feldman & Worline, 2012). Several studies on resourcing have detailed how
17 crucial the concrete situation is for resourcing, because it enables actors to infuse new or
18 altered meaning to the situation and helps them create resources (Deken et al., 2018; Howard-
19 Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin, & Mao, 2011). Our findings add to these insights by
20 showing how frontline employees take potential resources and link them to *situational*
21 meaning in order to address performing tensions. Gifts and apologies can be used in a range
22 of different situations, yet in our study these resources are situational, since their meaning in
23 these situations is to restore customers' belief that they are 'king' – which has been threatened
24 by a previous unpleasant experience. *Situational reframing*, consequently, merely distracts
25 from the underlying contradictions inherent to many modern businesses – simultaneously
26 pursuing customer-orientation and cost efficiency. This practice allows frontline employees
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 to balance tensions and thereby carry out an organization's strategy at the frontline (Balogun
10 et al., 2015).
11
12
13

14 We also find resourcing that draws on meanings from the *organizational* context to
15 balance tensions that employees have constructed as a paradox of performing. We build on
16 previous findings that have highlighted the importance of tapping into organizational
17 meaning – especially the interests and norms held by important stakeholder groups in the
18 organization – to allow less-powerful actors to successfully pursue their objectives (Howard-
19 Grenville, 2007). Complementing Sonenshein's (2014) finding that organizational
20 conditions and management's permission and guidance enables frontline employees' creative
21 resourcing, we find frontline employees proactively reassigning new – and more customer-
22 oriented – meaning to organizational procedures in order to balance tensions.
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34

35 Drawing on the idea of practice-driven institutionalism – that situated practices are
36 nevertheless institutionally embedded (Smets et al., 2017) – we are able to theorize how
37 tensions might also require frontline employees to create resources by linking assets to
38 meanings from the *institutional* setting. Feldman and Worline's (2012) example of families
39 resourcing breadcrumbs to prepare less-costly meatballs was a practice linked to the
40 institutionalized meaning of supporting the war effort by using less of the valuable
41 commodity meat, yet empirical studies on resourcing have so far not established an explicit
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 link to institutionalized meaning – beliefs shared in organizational fields or societies. Our
10 findings illustrate that when frontline employees construct a tension as a paradox of
11 organizing, they infuse potential resources with institutionalized meaning, such as the
12 principle of fairness or professionalism, to challenge the frame of customer-orientation
13 during interaction. Our study illustrates that frontline employees use resourcing to negotiate
14 their relationship with customers, connecting *institutional deframing* to descriptions of
15 institutional work as ‘changing normative associations’ in order to create new institutions
16 (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) that use institutionalized beliefs to ‘[deny] the validity of
17 institutional myths’ and question their legitimacy (Townley, 1997, p. 262).
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29

30 A second contribution, by studying resourcing under tensions, is extending the notion
31 of framing in resourcing studies. Building on the insight that resources and tensions are not
32 independent from one another (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), we find that the challenge and
33 urgency of balancing tensions interactively leads to innovative ways of resourcing, as it
34 brings out different ways of framing meaning in interactions. Frames are ‘construct[s] such
35 as binary oppositions, conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles, and habits’ (Quinn &
36 Worline, 2008, p. 505) that allow actors to communicate specific aspects of reality to
37 influence individuals’ perceptions (Purdy, Ansari, & Gray, 2017). While Kannan-
38 Narasimhan and Lawrence (2018, p. 724) highlight the strategic aspect of framing as giving
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 sense to others and describe framing as a one-sided ‘political resourcing mechanism’, we
10 find that when facing tensions, frontline employees not only engage in political resourcing
11 and sense-giving, but also use framing to make sense of the situation for themselves. In the
12 context of resourcing research, this finding is innovative and resonates with the interactionist
13 perspective on framing, which recognizes that ‘frames are generated in a bottom-up process
14 during an interaction to make sense of what is going on during it’ (Purdy et al., 2017, p. 2).
15 To account for the different ways that frontline employees use framing as a response to
16 tensions, we introduce *reframing*, *preframing* and *deframing*.
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27

28 *Reframing* creates resources to restore a frame previously damaged by the tension,
29 and aims to ‘turn around’ a specific situation. It resembles the strategic framing of sense-
30 giving described by Kannan-Narasimhan and Lawrence (2018). *Preframing*, by comparison,
31 also involves aspects of sensemaking, and therefore enables frontline employees to anticipate
32 that a prescribed organizational procedures will likely lead to tensions and to proactively
33 create resources to alter these procedures or their meanings, which are then presented to
34 customers as a special service. *Deframing* challenges a dominant principle – in our case,
35 customer-orientation – by drawing on an institutionalized meaning (e.g. professionalism, the
36 principle of fairness, etc.) that is equally or even more dominant than customer-orientation.
37 Frontline employees in this practice essentially ‘test’, question or justify the underlying
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 values of the interaction (Dansou & Langley, 2012), strategically aiming to devalue the
10 other's frame.
11
12

13
14 *Constructing and responding to tensions through resourcing*
15

16
17 We add to the practice perspective on tensions (Bednarek et al., 2017; Sheep et al., 2017), as
18 we focus on the 'technologies or material artifacts [that] constrain and enable practices and,
19 hence, become part of the construction of and response to tensions' (Lê & Bednarek, 2017,
20 p. 505) and identify resourcing practices under tensions. Adding to research that considers
21 tensions as socially constructed in individuals' everyday practices and interactions
22 (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Sheep et al., 2017), we find that frontline employees in service
23 interactions construct tensions as relating to paradoxes of either performing or of organizing:
24 they either consider tensions as playing out in different and conflicting role expectations of
25 sales assistants (performing tensions), or they think of tensions as 'system contradictions'
26 (Lüscher et al., 2006) between the customers' and the company's interests (organizing
27 tension). Our findings suggest that individuals have the capability to reflect and act on
28 tensions that result from the company's contradictory objectives of cost-efficiency and high
29 levels of customer-orientation without transforming these contradictions into their own
30 performing tensions. By showing that employees can construct tensions on the micro-level
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 either as a performing or organizing paradox, we extend Jarzabkowski et al.'s (2013) findings
10 on individuals' tension construction and how paradoxes coevolve.
11
12

13
14 By illustrating how employees' construction of tensions and their resourcing practices
15 as a response are interrelated, we also complement research on responses to tensions (Child,
16 2019; Bednarek et al., 2017; Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017; Sheep et al., 2017; Tuckermann,
17 2018). With the help of resources that have situational meaning, *situational reframing* allows
18 frontline employees to interactively downplay the tension between contradictory demands by
19 'minimizing the interaction between the two' (similar to the 'splitting' response)
20 (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013, p. 256). In our case, this means separating the demands of a
21 concrete situation in which rhetoric and gifts are used to symbolize customer-orientation
22 from the organizational procedures that remain unchanged in the service of organizational
23 efficiency. *Situational reframing* is therefore a local arrangement to prevent escalation, but
24 because it does not tackle the underlying contradiction, it only brings temporary relief by
25 postponing the problem. In contrast, *organizational preframing* involves 'adjusting' the
26 'work practices...in order to support both sides of the paradox' (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013,
27 p. 261) and therefore actively engages with the contradictory demands and interactively
28 establishes a compromise with the help of resources that have organizational meaning. It
29 adjusts organizational procedures towards customer-orientation. While *situational reframing*
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 is a defensive practice employed to balance paradoxical tensions, *organizational preframing*
10 is more active and potentially ‘virtuous’ for organizations (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Smith
11 & Lewis, 2011). Frontline employees engage in these two resourcing practices when
12 & Lewis, 2011). Frontline employees engage in these two resourcing practices when
13 constructing tensions related to the paradox of performing, whereas when constructing
14 constructing tensions related to the paradox of performing, whereas when constructing
15 tensions related to the paradox of organizing, they engage in *institutional deframing*. This
16 latter practice, with the help of institutional resources, makes it possible to interactively
17 ‘supress’ (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013) one side – in this case the assumed interests of the
18 customer – and give priority to another –here, the organization. Within each single situation,
19 as a way of defensively engaging with contradictory demands, this practice only provides
20 temporary relief and has a potentially ‘vicious’ (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Smith & Lewis,
21 2011) effect for organizations over time if institutionalized beliefs about the customer
22 relationship are not changed on a larger scale. Analysing how responses to paradox coevolve
23 over time, Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) describe how defensive responses – such as splitting
24 and suppressing – may induce the active response of adjusting, which in turn may induce
25 additional defensive responses. While these authors describe this process by examining the
26 organization’s different embedding responses, we illustrate that the agentic ‘both/and’
27 construction of performing and organizing paradoxes also explains employees’ use of
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 different resourcing practices, which shows how resourcing is an integral part of tension-
10 response practices.
11
12

13
14 While different resourcing practices enable frontline employees to balance tensions
15 during a single interaction, employees also balance tensions in and across interactions by
16 agentically constructing tensions and dynamically iterating among all three resourcing
17 practices. We therefore argue that successful companies depend on frontline employees being
18 able to flexibly construct tensions and to dynamically employ different resourcing strategies
19 in order to achieve an overall balance (i.e. in the stream of interactions; see Smets et al.,
20 2015) of cost-efficiency through bureaucratic procedures and a high level of customer
21 service.
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31

32 33 34 35 36 **Conclusion**

37
38 Our study shows how frontline employees, typically less-powerful actors directly engaging
39 with customers and clients, can skilfully balance tensions in service interactions by creating
40 resources. By identifying three distinct resourcing practices – *situational reframing*,
41 *organizational preframing* and *institutional deframing* – we add to the research on resourcing
42 an understanding of the varying scope of meaning (situational, organizational or institutional)
43 that employees draw on to bring (material) assets into use when they interactively balance
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 tensions. We also extend the notion of framing in resourcing, as we outline how framing – in
10 our case, giving meaning to convince customers – can vary as the frame either reinforces the
11 interaction partners’ belief in customer-orientation or destabilizes this principle, while at the
12 same time frontline employees change or maintain prescribed organizational procedures. We
13 also discuss how resourcing practices vary depending on whether employees construct
14 tensions as performing (e.g. role conflict) or organizing tensions (e.g. opposing goals of
15 organizing).

16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26 While all frontline employees experience tensions vividly because of daily
27 interactions with customers and clients, there are differences in frontline work in terms of
28 autonomy, time pressure and possibilities for resourcing. Future research should address how
29 tensions are differently constructed and how resourcing in frontline work differs under
30 varying degrees of ‘authority’ that employees can draw on (Feldman, 2004).

31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 **Acknowledgements**

42
43
44 We would like to express our gratitude to the three anonymous reviewers, Senior Editor
45 David Arellano-Gault, and Editor in Chief Daniel Hjorth for their valuable support,
46 encouraging comments and guidance. Special thanks to Angela Aristidou, Luca Giustiniano,
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Martin Messner and Lukas Goretzki for their continuous feedback. We also like to thank
10 participants of research seminars at University of Innsbruck, and University of Salzburg, and
11 participants of the OMT paper session “To Be and Not To Be: Advancing Paradox Research”
12 at the 78th AOM 2018 in Chicago, the 9th International Process Symposium 2017 in Kos, the
13 32nd EGOS Colloquium 2016 in Naples, and the 12th Workshop on New Institutionalism in
14 Organization Theory 2015 in Lucerne, for their inputs on earlier drafts of the paper.
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

References

- Balogun, J., Best, K., & Lê, J. (2015). Selling the object of strategy: How frontline workers realize strategy through their daily work. *Organization Studies*, *36*, 1285–1313.
- Barley, S. R. (2008). Coalface institutionalism. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (pp. 491–518). London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Bednarek, R., Paroutis, S., & Sillince, J. A. A. (2017). Transcendence through rhetorical practices: Responding to paradox in the science sector. *Organization Studies*, *38*, 77–101.
- Berends, H., & Deken, F. (2019). Composing qualitative process research. *Strategic Organization*, 1-13 (online first).
- Bolton, S. C., & Houlihan, M. (2010). Bermuda revisited? Management power and powerlessness in the worker-manager-customer triangle. *Work and Occupations*, *37*, 378–403.
- Child, C. (2019). Whence paradox? Framing away the potential challenges of doing well by doing good in social enterprise organizations. *Organization Studies*.
- Dansou, K., & Langley, A. (2012). Institutional work and the notion of test. *M@n@gement*, *15*, 503–527.
- Darr, A., & Pinch, T. (2013). Performing sales: Material scripts and the social organization of obligation. *Organization Studies*, *34*, 1601–1621.
- Deken, F., Berends, H., Gemser, G., & Lauche, K. (2018). Strategizing and the initiation of interorganizational collaboration through prospective resourcing. *Academy of Management Journal*, *61*, 1920–1950.
- Denis, J.-L., Langley, A., & Rouleau, L. (2007). Strategizing in pluralistic contexts: Rethinking theoretical frames. *Human Relations*, *60*, 179–215.
- Eisenhardt, K. M., & Martin, J. A. (2000). Dynamic capabilities: What are they? *Strategic Management Journal*, *21*, 1105–1121.

- 1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Feldman, M. S. (2004). Resources in emerging structures and processes of change.
10 *Organization Science*, 15, 295–309.
- 11
12 Feldman, M. S., & Orlikowski, W. J. (2011). Theorizing practice and practicing theory.
13 *Organization Science*, 22, 1240–1253.
- 14
15 Feldman, M. S., & Worline, M. C. (2012). Resources, resourcing, and ampliative cycles in
16 organizations. In G.M. Spreiter & K.S. Cameron (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of*
17 *positive organizational scholarship*, 1–14. Oxford University Press.
- 18
19 Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of cultures*. London, UK: Hutchinson.
- 20
21 George, M. (2008). Interactions in expert service work: Demonstrating professionalism in
22 personal training. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 37, 108–131.
- 23
24 Gioia, D. A., Corley, K. G., & Hamilton, A. L. (2013). Seeking qualitative rigor in
25 inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research*
26 *Methods*, 16, 15–31.
- 27
28 Gümüşay, A. A., Smets, M., & Morris, T. (2019). ‘God at work’: Engaging central and
29 incompatible institutional logics through elastic hybridity. *Academy of Management*
30 *Journal*, (online first).
- 31
32 Gylfe, P., Franck, H., & Vaara, E. (2019). Living with paradox through irony.
33 *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*.
- 34
35 Hendry, J., & Seidl, D. (2003). The structure and significance of strategic episodes: Social
36 systems theory and the routine practices of strategic change. *Journal of Management*
37 *Studies*, 40, 175–196.
- 38
39 Howard-Grenville, J. A. (2007). Developing issue-selling effectiveness over time: Issue
40 selling as resourcing. *Organization Science*, 18, 560–577.
- 41
42 Howard-Grenville, J., Golden-Biddle, K., Irwin, J., & Mao, J. (2011). Liminality as cultural
43 process for cultural change. *Organization Science*, 22, 522–539.
- 44
45 Jarzabkowski, P. A., & Lê, J. K. (2017). We have to do this and that? You must be joking:
46 Constructing and responding to paradox through humor. *Organization Studies*, 38,
47 433–462.
- 48
49 Jarzabkowski, P., Bednarek, R., & Lê, J. K. (2014). Producing persuasive findings:
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

Demystifying ethnographic textwork in strategy and organization research. *Strategic Organization*, 12, 274–287.

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

Kannan-Narasimhan, R. (Priya), & Lawrence, B. S. (2018). How innovators reframe resources in the strategy-making process to gain innovation adoption. *Strategic Management Journal*, 39, 720–758.

Korczynski, M. (2002). *Human resource management in service work*. New York, NY: Palgrave.

Korczynski, M., & Ott, U. (2004). When production and consumption meet: Cultural contradictions and the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty. *Journal of Management Studies*, 41, 575–599.

Lawrence, T. B., & Suddaby, R. (2006). Institutions and institutional work. In S. R. Clegg, C. Hardy, T. B. Lawrence, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organization studies* (2nd ed., pp. 215–254). London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.

Lê, J., & Bednarek, R. (2017). Paradox in everyday practice: Applying practice-theoretical principles to paradox. In W. K. Smith, M. W. Lewis, P. Jarzabkowski, & A. Langley (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of organizational paradox* (pp. 490–509). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, M. W. (2000). Exploring paradox: Toward a more comprehensive guide. *Academy of Management Review*, 25, 760–776.

Lüscher, L. S., Lewis, M., & Ingram, A. (2006). The social construction of organizational change paradoxes. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 19, 491–502.

Miron-Spektor, E., Ingram, A., Keller, J., Smith, W., & Lewis, M. (2018). Microfoundations of organizational paradox: The problem is how we think about the problem. *Academy of Management Journal*, 61, 26–45.

Purdy, J., Ansari, S., & Gray, B. (2017). Are logics enough? Framing as an alternative tool for understanding institutional meaning making. *Journal of Management Inquiry*.

Putnam, L. L., Fairhurst, G. T., & Banghart, S. (2016). Contradictions, dialectics and

- 1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 paradoxes in organizations: A constitutive approach. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 10, 65–171.
- 10
11
12 Quinn, R. W., & Worline, M. C. (2008). Enabling courageous collective action:
13 Conversations from United Airlines flight 93. *Organization Science*, 19, 497–516.
14
- 15 Reckwitz, A. (2002). Toward a theory of social practices: A development in culturalist
16 theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5, 243–263.
17
- 18 Rouleau, L. (2005). Micro-practices of strategic sensemaking and sensegiving: How middle
19 managers interpret and sell change every day. *Journal of Management Studies*, 42,
20 1413–1441.
21
- 22 Schad, J., Lewis, M. W., & Smith, W. K. (2019). Quo vadis, paradox? Centripetal and
23 centrifugal forces in theory development. *Strategic Organization*, 17, 107–119.
24
- 25 Schatzki, T. R. (2001). Practice mind-ed orders. In T. R. Schatzki, K. Knorr-Cetina, & E.
26 von Savigny (Eds.), *The practice turn in contemporary theory* (pp. 50–63). London,
27 UK: Routledge.
28
- 29 Seidl, D., & Whittington, R. (2014). Enlarging the strategy-as-practice research agenda:
30 Towards taller and flatter ontologies. *Organization Studies*, 35, 1407–1421.
31
- 32 Sheep, M. L., Fairhurst, G. T., & Khazanchi, S. (2017). Knots in the discourse of
33 innovation: Investigating multiple tensions in a reacquired spin-off. *Organization
34 Studies*, 38, 463–488.
35
- 36 Smets, M., Aristidou, A., & Whittington, R. (2017). Towards a practice-driven
37 institutionalism. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, T. B. Lawrence, & R. E. Meyer (Eds.),
38 *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism* (2nd ed., pp. 365–391). London,
39 UK: Sage Publications Ltd.
40
- 41 Smets, M., Jarzabkowski, P., Burke, G., & Spee, P. (2015). Reinsurance trading in Lloyd's
42 of London: Balancing conflicting-yet-complementary logics in practice. *Academy of
43 Management Journal*, 58, 932–970.
44
- 45 Smith, W. K., & Lewis, M. W. (2011). Toward a theory of paradox: A dynamic equilibrium
46 model of organizing. *The Academy of Management Review*, 36, 381–403.
47
- 48 Smith, W. K., & Tracey, P. (2016). Institutional complexity and paradox theory:
49 Complementarities of competing demands. *Strategic Organization*, 14, 455-466.
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

- 1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Sonenshein, S. (2014). How organizations foster the creative use of resources. *Academy of*
10 *Management Journal*, 57, 814–848.
11
12 Townley, B. (1997). The institutional logic of performance appraisal. *Organization Studies*,
13 18, 261–285.
14
15 Tuckermann, H. (2018). Visibilizing and invisibilizing paradox: A process study of
16 interactions in a hospital executive board. *Organization Studies*.
17
18 Vaara, E., & Whittington, R. (2012). Strategy-as-practice: Taking social practices seriously.
19 *The Academy of Management Annals*, 6, 285–336.
20
21 Van Maanen, J. (2011). Ethnography as work: Some rules of engagement. *Journal of*
22 *Management Studies*, 48, 218–234.
23
24 Watson, T. J. (2011). Ethnography, reality and truth: The vital need for studies of ‘how
25 things work’ in organizations and management. *Journal of Management Studies*, 48,
26 202–217.
27
28 Wiedner, R., Barrett, M., & Oborn, E. (2017). The emergence of change in unexpected
29 places: Resourcing across organizational practices in strategic change. *Academy of*
30 *Management Journal*, 60, 823–854.
31
32 Wilhelm, H., Bullinger, B., & Chromik, J. (2019). White Coats at the Coalface: The
33 Standardizing Work of Professionals at the Frontline. *Organization Studies*, (online
34 first).
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

Author biographies

Anna Schneider is an assistant professor of human resource management and employment relations at the University of Innsbruck. In her scholarly work she draws on Paradox, Practice and Convention theory. In the context of employment, her current research interests include how service workers and organizations handle contradictory requirements and the role that intermediaries play.

Bernadette Bullinger is an assistant professor of human resources and organizational behavior at IE University in Madrid. She received her doctoral degree from the University of Mannheim. Her current research explores legitimacy and valuation in the context of employment and careers as well as visual and multimodal methods of studying institutions and organizations.

Julia Brandl is a full professor of Human Resource Management & Employment Relations at the University of Innsbruck, Austria. Julia's research interests center around the multiple and competing rationalities associated with managing employment issues, how individuals coordinate under conditions of uncertainty and the unintended consequences of actions. Her current research projects examine how organizations handle salary transparency and equal opportunity requirements in Austria. Julia mainly works with New Institutional Approaches, Paradox and Convention Theory.

Table 1. Data overview: Episodes including tensions, organizational conditions for tensions and tensions constructed at xFashion

Episode	Type of frontline employee	Organizational conditions for tensions	Form of tension construction	Resourcing practice
2 – Date of pickup	Alteration tailor	Alteration service as additional cost	Performing	Organizational preframing
3 – Replacing zipper	Alteration tailor	Alteration service as additional cost	Performing	Organizational preframing
4 – Broken zipper	Alteration tailor	Case-by-case decisions in merchandise-complaint procedures	Organizing & Performing	Institutional deframing and situational reframing
7 – Elegant trousers	Sales assistant	Tight work scheduling vs. customer attention	Performing & Organizing	Situational reframing and institutional deframing
9 – Bride’s mother	Sales assistant	Tight work scheduling vs. customer attention	Performing	Situational reframing
10 – Coats on sale	Sales assistant	Consulting vs. selling	Performing	Organizational preframing
11 – Friend of the store	Sales assistant	Tight work scheduling vs. customer attention	Performing	Organizational preframing
12 – Commission sticker I	Sales assistant	Consulting vs. selling	Performing	Institutional deframing
13 – Shortening sleeves	Alteration tailor	Alteration service as additional cost	Organizing	Institutional deframing
14 – Destroyed suit I	Alteration tailor	Case-by-case decisions in merchandise-complaint procedures	Performing	Organizational preframing
16 – Customer and two consultants	Sales assistant	Tight work scheduling vs. customer attention	Performing	Situational reframing
17 – Selling an alteration?!	Alteration tailor/Sales assistant	Alteration service as additional cost	Performing	Organizational preframing
21 - Selling a customer loyalty card	Cashier	Case-by-case decisions in merchandise-complaint procedures	Organizing	Institutional deframing
22 – Selling socks	Cashier	Tight work scheduling vs. customer attention	Performing	Organizational preframing
24 – Parking voucher for irate customers	Cashier	Complicated merchandise-return procedure	Performing	Situational reframing
25 – Explaining merchandise return procedure	Cashier	Complicated merchandise-return procedure	Organizing	Institutional deframing
28 – Destroyed suit II	Alteration tailor	Case-by-case decisions in merchandise-complaint procedures	Performing	Organizational preframing
29 – Worn-out jeans	Sales assistant	Case-by-case decisions in merchandise-complaint procedures	Organizing & Performing	Institutional deframing and situational reframing
31 – Customer leaves without a word	Sales assistant	Tight work scheduling vs. customer attention	Performing	-
32 – Do the pants fit?	Sales assistant/Alteration tailor	Consulting vs. selling	Performing	Organizational preframing
33 – Merchandise return	Sales assistant	Tight work scheduling vs. customer attention	Performing	Situational reframing
34 – Merchandise return at cashier desk	Cashier/Sales assistant	Complicated merchandise-return procedure	Performing	Organizational preframing
36 – Shirt’s fabric	Sales assistant	Consulting vs. selling	Performing	Situational reframing

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

37 – Selling is most important	Store manager	Tight work scheduling vs. customer attention	Performing	Situational reframing
38 – Untidy store	Sales assistant	Tight work scheduling vs. customer attention	Performing	Situational reframing
39 – What a nice T-shirt!	Cashier	Consulting vs. selling	Performing	Organizational preframing

Table 2. Balancing tensions in a composite workday of xFashion frontline employees

Episode	Constructing tensions as		Resourcing practice		
	Performing	Organizing	Situational reframing	Organizational reframing	Institutional deframing
38 – <i>Customer e-mail complaint</i>	Monica describes how badly she feels when she is not able to satisfy the customer and complete her other required tasks; she views it as a personal defeat		Monica seeks to appease the customer by providing an excuse, sending a voucher and flowers		
7 – <i>Attending to several customers at the same time</i>	Monica wants the customer to see that she is doing her best, despite of too-few staff	Monica feels that the customers expect high-quality service from xFashion, but that xFashion’s work scheduling does not allow for sufficient staff to fulfil that expectation	Monica acknowledges the tight work-scheduling procedures, but explains it away by referencing a basic human need: ‘My colleagues are hungry as well. We all have to eat sometime’ (smiling)		Monica acknowledges the tight work-scheduling procedures, but explains it away by referencing a basic human need: ‘My colleagues are hungry as well. We all have to eat sometime’ (smiling)
29 – <i>Complaint about the bad quality</i>	Monica wants the customer to experience a high quality of service despite the negative outcome of the merchandise complaint	Monica does not want the company to be cheated by its customers, although it would be easier to just take the merchandise back	Monica seeks to appease the customer again by offering parking vouchers		Monica refers to the organizational rule that there has to be a proof of purchase for a refund; she justifies it with reference to fairness and respect to other customers
34 – <i>Taking care of merchandise return</i>	Monica sees xFashion’s predefined merchandise-return procedure from the customer’s perspective			Monica changes the way the merchandise return should proceed to satisfy the customer and supports decision by referencing the company’s sales argument	
34a – <i>Handing over commission sticker to customers</i>	Monica feels that the commission sticker destroys the image of her high-quality consulting			Monica changes how commission stickers are used, by handing them over to the customers and letting them decide if she should get the commission	

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

Table 2. (continued)

Episode	Construction of tension as		Resourcing practice		
	Performing	Organizing	Situational reframing	Organizational reframing	Institutional deframing
32 – <i>Calling over Maria</i>	Monica realizes that the customer does not fully trust her and seeks ways to restore faith in her recommendation			Monica calls Maria over to confirm her recommendation of the pants’ fit, even though there was no alteration required	
13 – <i>Fixed prices for alterations</i>		Maria claims that it’s not her making the price, but xFashion			Maria justifies the fixed prices by referring to herself and her team as professionally trained tailors and as entrepreneurs; she refers to the service menu posted on the changing rooms while wearing a metric tape around her neck
28 – <i>Taking care of all steps</i>	Maria feels that it is part of her task to win back the customer after the alteration went wrong			Maria changes the in-store organizational procedures, as she takes care of all the required steps herself, thereby executing sales-assistant tasks, prolonging her shift and waiving the alteration fee	
25 – <i>Explaining how to return merchandise</i>		For Linda the merchandise-return procedure is complicated, which is why customers often have a problem with how it is organized at xFashion			Linda explains the complicated merchandise-return during the payment transaction to make the customer aware of the procedure; she refers to ensuring ‘the best shopping experience possible’
24 – <i>Irate customer waiting for ten minutes</i>	While sustaining the organizational principle, Linda thinks she also has to lessen the inconvenience		Linda apologizes and hands out parking vouchers to ‘make the customer happy again’		

Table 3. Representative data illustrating the resources created, the activities performed and the objective pursued during interaction

Situational Reframing			
Resources created by linking assets to meaning in the customer interaction	Activities performed in resourcing practices	Representative data	Objective pursued during interaction
<p>1. <i>In-situ</i> Created by drawing on assets and meanings from the situation (<i>available in-situ</i>) – e.g. discounts, flowers, vouchers, parking tickets, special treatments, excuses, promises</p>	<p>Illustrating product expertise (Episode 36)</p> <p>Promising more-suitable merchandise in future (Episode 9)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monica consults with a customer in the dress-shirts department; has difficulties finding the right shape, size and fabric. She becomes ‘nervous’ (Obs.) as she thinks that ‘there might be other customers more willing to buy’ (Int.). The customer also gets impatient (Obs.) and asks ‘Do you even know your assortment? I’d like to have a 100% cotton shirt!’ • Monica smiles. ‘Yes, of course’, points to all 100% cotton shirts and to prove her knowledge, she pulls out the washing instructions from all the shirts (Obs.) • This ‘eases the customer’s visible impatience’ (Obs.) as he apparently starts trusting her expertise; it takes a couple more minutes until he agrees on a shirt and buys it • A customer approaches Monica asking her to help find an outfit she can wear to her daughter’s wedding; in this moment, Monica already has two other customers to deal with • Together with the customer, she very briefly runs through the assortment and as she realizes that the customer requires more time for consultation (which she does not have right now) she says: ‘You know, we receive merchandise every day; if you don’t find anything you like today, you could come back in a couple of days, then maybe you will find some merchandise that matches your taste.’ • Monica takes a look at the computer on the sales floor and opens the merchandise software, ‘clicking around a bit’ (Obs.), and promises new merchandise by pretending to know which kinds of merchandise will arrive (Obs.); however, sales assistants are not usually informed about merchandise shipments. 	<p>In <i>situational reframing</i>, to balance tensions, frontline employees aim to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • re-please the customer by taking his/her side; • make the situation sound/look as if the customer is ‘king’ and hence to maintain the sense of customer-orientation; • and at the same time stick to the organizational procedure as predefined by the company <p><i>Situational reframing</i> is a practice of both skilfully maintaining the sense of customer-orientation and at the same time fulfilling the organization’s need for efficiency</p>

Table 3. (continued)

Institutional deframing			
Resources created by linking assets to meaning in the customer interaction	Activities performed in resourcing practices	Representative data	Objective pursued during interaction
<p>3. <i>Institutional</i> Created when actors draw on assets and meanings from the <i>broader institutional setting</i> – e.g. metric tape and tailor’s profession, the alteration service menu and the tailor as an entrepreneur; missing proof of purchase and fairness</p>	<p>Explaining the merchandise-complaint procedure (Episode 21)</p> <p>Explaining the merchandise-return procedure (Episode 25)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linda advertises the customer loyalty card at the cashier desk: ‘You know, if there is a merchandise complaint, this is always a tricky situation. We have to have the proof of purchase, and often, between us, it helps to show that you are a regular customer. So, take the loyalty card, and neither of us will have any trouble at all, because we really value our frequent customers.’ • Linda reveals the difficulties of a merchandise-complaint situation and offers the customer loyalty card as a solution by referring to how important good customers are to xFashion. • During the payment transaction, Linda complements and supports the customer’s purchase decision: ‘What a nice dress. I am sure the colour will suit you well. However, if for any reason you want to bring it back, make sure you go to the women’s formal department first. This is just to ensure that you follow our rules and don’t wait here in the queue, which might spoil the pleasure of shopping with us.’ 	<p>In <i>institutional deframing</i>, to balance tensions frontline employees aim to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take the organization’s side • explain and justify the organizational rules and procedures, thereby persuading the customer to accept how things work at xFashion • stick to the predefined organizational rules and procedures during interaction <p><i>Institutional deframing</i> is a practice of maintaining organizational processes by skilfully challenging the sense of customer-orientation without disillusioning the customer</p>