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Deepening the conversation about the role of emotions and affective processes as barriers and enablers of decision making under uncertainty: Commentary on Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett (2021)

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The publication of Mark Fenton-O'Creevy and David Tuckett's "Selecting futures: The role of conviction, narratives, ambivalence, and constructive doubt" is a welcome development that stands to advance theoretical and practical understanding of the affective and emotional barriers and enablers of decision making under uncertainty. In particular, it theorizes the potential of "conviction narratives" as a cognitive-affective device for enabling individuals and collectives to embrace alternative futures that break from the past, rather than, as so often happens in foresight work, perpetuating an emotional and cognitive commitment to one or more variations of the past and present.

Even when there is an abundance of evidence that strategic persistence is highly dysfunctional, all-too-often decision makers are reluctant to countenance fresh courses of action, of the sort ultimately required to address proportionately the radical uncertainties prevailing. Instead, at best, they are paralyzed by threat-rigidities (Staw et al., 1981), or worse, they escalate commitment to courses of action borne of emotional and cognitive fixations that bind them irrationally to a future fundamentally rooted in past and present choices (Ku, 2008; Staw, 1976; Staw & Ross, 1987; Wong et al., 2006, 2008). Conviction narratives, as theorized by Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett (2021), are a refreshing addition to the growing kitbag of tools and techniques that are presently being developed with a view to enabling organizational decision makers to manage more skilfully the attendant individual and collective

cognitive-affective dynamics that inevitably arise when confronting high stakes, consequential choices, amid high levels of uncertainty (see also Healey & Hodgkinson, 2008, 2017; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008; Hodgkinson & Wright, 2002; Hodgkinson et al., 2015; Huff et al., 2016).

2 | CONTEXTUALIZING THE CONTRIBUTION OF CONVICTION NARRATIVE THEORY

From an organizational perspective, it is instructive to weigh Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett's (2021) conceptual contribution in the context of Teece's (2007) well-known dynamic capabilities framework. According to Teece (2007), dynamic capabilities are the mechanisms (skills, processes, procedures, organizational structures, decision rules, and disciplines) that enable learning and innovation at the organizational level by first "sensing" (and shaping) opportunities and threats, "seizing" those opportunities (and mitigating the threats), and then "transforming/reconfiguring" the organization in light of what has been learned via sensing and seizing. Futures and foresight science and practice, as elaborated by Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett, we suggest, lie at the heart of this fundamental threefold endeavor.

Sensing entails searching and exploring markets and technologies both local to and distal from the organization. The principal psychological challenge pertaining to this capability is one of

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cognitive adaption; that is, ensuring the development and updating of individual and collective mental models so that they remain fit for purpose, there by enabling decision makers to maintain strategic situational awareness. Seizing, in contrast, necessitates making high quality, interdependent investment decisions such as those involved in selecting product architectures and business models. The primary psychological challenge pertaining to this capability is one of ensuring efficacious decision processes that support choices appropriate to the shifting contingencies at hand, rather than clinging to solutions that worked in the past, or rushing ahead in new directions without due regard to the potential downsides of the alternative courses of action thus adopted. The third capability, reconfiguring, entails continuous transformation of the enterprise in response to market and technological changes, such that it retains evolutionary fitness. The primary psychological challenge pertaining to this capability is one of identity management—how to manage the attendant personal, social, and organizational identity dynamics that inevitably arise when attempting to pursue new ideas and activities in the workplace.

3 | WHY WE NEED TO DEEPEN THE CONVERSATION ABOUT THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS AND AFFECTIVE PROCESSES

In keeping with much of strategic management theory in general, including much of the theory underpinning futures and foresight practices such as scenario planning (cf. van der Heijden, 1996, 2005; van der Heijden et al., 2002), Teece (2007) predicated the psychological microfoundations of his dynamic capabilities framework on a cold cognition model of the strategic decision maker. As we have remarked elsewhere, based on an extensive review of advances in the cognitive and affective sciences:

“...the biases and inertial forces that undermine sensing, seizing, and transforming capabilities have emotional roots as well as cognitive ones. Building on this fundamental insight, we maintain that although the tools and processes commonly touted for engineering cognitively effortful reasoning and judgment are undoubtedly a *necessary* component of dynamic capabilities, in practice they are rarely a *sufficient* psychological mechanism for ensuring the long-term adaptability of the enterprise” (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011, pp. 1502–1503).

Indeed, as demonstrated by Hodgkinson and Wright (2002), in some circumstances, conventional approaches for augmenting strategic cognition, scenario planning included, can exacerbate the very problems they seek to alleviate (see also Healey & Hodgkinson, 2008). In an attempt to remedy this fundamental limitation, like Fenton-O’Creevy and Tuckett’s (2021) analysis of conviction narratives, our own publications (e.g., Healey & Hodgkinson, 2008, 2014, 2017; Healey, Hodgkinson, et al., 2015; Healey, Vuori, et al., 2015; Hodgkinson, 2022; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008, 2011, 2014, 2018) seek to offer a more complete picture of the psychological challenges associated with attempts to move organizations and wider institutions beyond status quo thoughts and actions (see also

Huy & Zott, 2019; Kets de Vries, 1980; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Vuori & Huy, 2016, 2018, 2020). We have argued that the key to building such a picture lies in “illuminating the ways the individuals and groups who manage these entities are governed by thoughts *and* feelings: always boundedly rational, but manifestly driven by emotion” (Hodgkinson & Healey, 2011, p. 1512).

We agree with Fenton-O’Creevy and Tuckett (2021, p. 11) that conviction narrative theory “adds significant insights to this body of work, through its systematic account of the role of emotion in the processes by which narratives are formed, elaborated, and motivate action.” The vital next step, of course, is to subject their theorizing to rigorous empirical scrutiny, not least because their analysis skims over the fact that, while serving as important devices for sensemaking, self-regulation, and action orientation, the stories that we tell ourselves can also be sources of bias and misbelief. In the absence of a systematic program of work examining how to balance the promise and pitfalls of using narratives to improve organizational decision making, people designing interventions based on this approach should proceed with caution.

4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

In our view, the ultimate aim of futures and foresight science is (or should be) to inform the design of interventions—in other words, tools, practices, and activities—to assist stakeholders at all levels of the enterprise, who are seeking variously to overcome inertia and a host of related psychological dysfunctions, with a view to fostering innovation and related outcomes (Healey & Hodgkinson, 2008; Healey, Hodgkinson, et al., 2015; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008). However, as highlighted by Fenton-O’Creevy and Tuckett (2021), the science underpinning the practice of supporting the emotional work involved in tolerating ambivalence and not knowing, while still being willing to act, is at an embryonic stage of development. We are hopeful that the publication of their paper will stimulate the much-needed fresh wave of empirical work required to validate their highly promising conceptual contribution. In closing, we can do little better than agree with Fenton-O’Creevy and Tuckett that the events of the recent global financial crisis, the continuing threats of climate change, and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, among the many radical uncertainties currently confronting the worlds of policy and strategy-making, demonstrate powerfully why this “design science” agenda (Healey, Hodgkinson, et al., 2015; Hodgkinson & Healey, 2008; Simon, 1969) is such an urgent priority for the advancement of research and practice.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study

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