Dialectics in a global software team: Negotiating tensions across time, space, and culture

Jennifer Gibbs

Human Relations 2009: 62; 905
DOI: 10.1177/0018726709104547

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://hum.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/62/6/905

Published by:

SAGE
http://www.sagepublications.com

On behalf of:

The Tavistock Institute

Additional services and information for Human Relations can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://hum.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://hum.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations http://hum.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/62/6/905
Dialectics in a global software team: Negotiating tensions across time, space, and culture

Jennifer Gibbs

ABSTRACT

This study examines dialectical tensions in global virtual teams, and the ways in which tensions are negotiated through communicative practices of team members. Drawing on ethnographic data from a global software team, the analysis revealed three main tensions in global team interaction: autonomy–connectedness, inclusion–exclusion, and empowerment–disempowerment. These tensions were composed of layers of subdialectics, which were either productive or detrimental depending on how they were managed. Team members engaged in selection, transcendence, and withdrawal strategies to negotiate these dialectics. Managers were more likely to treat tensions productively as complementary dialectics which enabled them to transcend oppositions, whereas lower-level foreign assignees were less able to cope with tensions, experiencing them as simple contradictions or paradoxes which constrained and disempowered them. This research contributes a tension-centered model of global team interaction that challenges dominant assumptions of clarity and consensus characterizing the virtual teams literature and has implications for global organizing more broadly.

KEYWORDS

dialectics • ethnography • global virtual teams • organizational communication • organizational tension
The workplace is becoming increasingly global. Many companies are responding to the pressures of global competition by establishing virtual teams – work teams that are to varying degrees geographically dispersed, electronically dependent, culturally diverse, and made up of dynamic structural arrangements (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006) – to accomplish work around the clock by merging resources and expertise from around the globe (Kirkman et al., 2002). Virtual teams transcend traditional organizational boundaries – geographical, temporal, and relational (Martins et al., 2004) – as they bring together members across locations, time zones, and cultures. Although virtual teams may function within the same country or different buildings within the same city (Majchrzak et al., 2000), many are internationally dispersed and their strategy and work itself are global in scope (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000).

Global teams face greater complexity than traditional teams in terms of task, context, people, time, and technology (Gluesing & Gibson, 2004). Team members encounter unique communication challenges that traditional teams have not had to contend with, as they coordinate tasks and processes across boundaries of time, space, and multiple layers of cultural complexity (Carmel, 1999). Global teams are thus fraught with contradictions: how to create synergy among members spread around the globe, how to achieve cohesion amidst cultural rifts and competing allegiances, and how to form consistent policies across units embedded in diverse organizational structures. Tretheway and Ashcraft (2004) write, ‘As organizational environments become more complex and turbulent, and as diverse institutional forms merge and emerge, organizations and their members are pulled or are purposefully moving in different, often competing directions’ (p. 81). Composed of members from far-flung locations and crossing multiple contexts, global teams exemplify an organizational form involving such opposing forces.

A growing body of literature focuses on articulating contradictions and tensions in various organizational settings (Howard & Geist, 1995; Jian, 2007; Pepper & Larson, 2006; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Seo et al., 2004; Tracy, 2004; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). However, to date theory on global and virtual teaming has primarily ignored such tensions or attempted to suppress them through prescriptive accounts of successful teams as characterized by clarity and consensus. Much of this literature emphasizes unifying virtual or distributed teams by reconciling differences and maximizing shared understanding, integration, and cohesion (e.g. Armstrong & Cole, 2002; Hinds & Weisband, 2003; Kiesler & Cummings, 2002; Kirkman et al., 2002; Knoll & Jarvenpaa, 1998). While a degree of shared understanding and cohesion is undoubtedly beneficial in coordinating virtual
teams, it may not be an unqualified good. Such a focus obscures certain important elements of global team interaction, namely dualities and tensions, which are likely to play a critical role.

Instead of trying to smooth over contradictions and disjunctures, this study examines and articulates inevitable tensions inherent in global team interaction, as well as team members’ communicative responses to such tensions that make them productive or destructive. I employ a framework of organizational tensions (Putnam, 1986; Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004) to understand the dynamics that both integrate and fragment global teams. The findings are based on an 18-month ethnography of a global software organization spanning locations in North America, Europe, Asia, and South America. The contribution of this study is twofold. First, it contributes a tension-centered model that challenges dominant assumptions about global and virtual teams by drawing attention to the critical role of tensions in global organizing. Second, it complements existing research on virtual teams – much of which is derived from anecdotal case studies, survey methods, and artificial settings such as classroom exercises (Gibbs et al., 2008) – by using qualitative field methods to tease out the dynamic tensions at play in global team interaction and articulate the discursive practices through which team members negotiate such tensions. The next two sections explore the important role tensions play in global organizing and pose two research questions. I then discuss the research setting and methods, followed by the study’s findings and implications.

Organizational contradictions and tensions

While organizations have traditionally been viewed as sites of stability, consensus, and rationality, organizational researchers are increasingly recognizing the importance of dualities and tensions as normal, ubiquitous features of organizations (Pepper & Larson, 2006; Seo et al., 2004; Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004). Ambiguity is regarded as a central feature of organizing (Eisenberg, 1984; Weick, 1979), and tensions and contradictions viewed as inevitable, even beneficial to organizations (Putnam, 1986; Tracy, 2004; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). A tension-based approach recognizes organizations as conflicted sites of activity and takes as its starting point the ‘dilemmatic’ nature of organizing arising from the paradoxes, contradictions, and ironies which naturally exist in organizations (Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004). Rather than regarding such tensions as mere anomalies or ruptures in the social fabric which must be eliminated or resolved, a tensional approach situates tensions as normal, routine features of organizational life and looks
for ways in which they can be productive for organizations as they find ways to ‘hold together necessary incompatibles’ (Tretheway & Ashcraft, 2004: 84).

While earlier research regarded contradiction as detrimental by weakening organizational productivity (Wendt, 1998) and leading to employee burnout and stress (Katz & Kahn, 1966), more recent work has recognized that it is not the existence of contradictions or dualities per se that is productive or destructive, but the way they are managed (Tracy, 2004). Dialectical tensions have been distinguished from simple contradictions (involving an either–or choice between two opposing alternatives) and paradoxes (dilemmas that demand impossible choices between non-existent or mutually exclusive options, e.g. ‘be spontaneous’) as they allow for the merging of opposites by embracing both poles as ‘both–and’ options (Putnam & Boys, 2006). Simple contradictions and pragmatic paradoxes have been theorized to produce negative responses as they ‘bankrupt choice’, especially when paradoxes become ‘double binds’ which paralyze action and limit responses to paranoia, lack of complex thinking, and withdrawal (Tracy, 2004). Complementary dialectics, on the other hand, are thought to engender positive outcomes as they involve creative thinking that generates new options and transforms and transcends the given opposition (Putnam & Boys, 2006; Tracy, 2004).

Studies taking a tensional perspective focus on the discursive practices employed by members as they ‘discuss and puzzle’ over contradictions (Howard & Geist, 1995) and negotiate contested meanings to enact change. As Seo et al. (2004) point out, dualities are bi-polar opposites that often work against each other; rather than being simple alternatives between mutually exclusive options, the choice to focus on one pole elicits tension and makes it difficult to enact both ends of the continuum at once. Tracy’s (2004) qualitative study of employees at two correctional facilities elucidated three different ways of handling organizational tensions. When tensions were managed as simple contradictions, they led to responses such as selection of one pole, vacillation (switching from one pole to the other based on time, target, or topic), or source splitting (dividing oppositions among several people, e.g. playing ‘good cop–bad cop’), which were all negative as they resulted in withdrawal and burnout. Treating tensions as pragmatic paradoxes or double binds also led to detrimental outcomes of withdrawal, literalism, and paranoia. When contradictions were regarded as complementary dialectics, however, they produced positive responses such as walking an empathetic line, balancing priorities, and creative performances. Positive responses involved simultaneous attention to various norms such that members were able to transform or transcend polar oppositions in creative new ways.

Seo et al. (2004) categorize the literature on contradictions into four types of responses: selection (ignoring one pole and selecting the other),
separation (recognizing both poles but separating them and oscillating back and forth between independent alternatives, similar to vacillation), integration (combining both poles through a forced merger or neutralization – neither of which allows for both poles to be fully realized), and transcendence (transcending or transforming dichotomies by creating new terms, through reframing or synthesis). They critique each response as not fully recognizing or valuing both sides of the duality and propose connection as a more complex way of coping with dualities (treating them as mutually reinforcing in order to embrace both poles). Overall, the literature reviewed suggests a number of ways to manage tensions: through selection, separation/vacillation, withdrawal, integration, transcendence, and connection. Examining dualities and their responses provides a useful framework for examining global team interaction, which is rife with tensions.

The role of tensions in global teams

By definition, global teams are characterized (though in varying degrees) by certain ‘decoupling characteristics’ (Gibbs, 2006; Gibson & Gibbs, 2006) – geographical dispersion, electronic dependence, cultural diversity, and dynamic structure – which act as centrifugal forces that pull teams apart through breakdown of coordination, loss of communication ‘richness’, cultural misunderstandings, and loss of ‘teamness’ (Carmel, 1999). Research on global software teams has identified opposing centripetal forces that bind teams together, such as a good telecommunications infrastructure, team building efforts, appropriate managerial techniques, and use of collaborative technology (Carmel, 1999) as well as identification with the team or other targets, cultural liaisons, and documentation of knowledge and processes to preserve them despite member turnover (Gibbs, 2006). These frameworks illustrate the tensions characterizing global teams, though they are not theorized as such.

Global teams are a microcosm of the tensions between global integration and local differentiation that characterize globalization more broadly (Giddens, 2003; Stohl, 2005), and as such comprise an ideal site for studying how these tensions at the macro level are negotiated through social interaction at the micro individual or team level. On the one hand, achieving a global task requires collaboration across cultural and geographical boundaries and thus a certain degree of cohesiveness, integration, and synergy. On the other hand, excessive cohesion and standardization of team norms and processes may curtail the strategic benefits of cultural diversity and local responsiveness and stifle innovation. Standardization of practices and policies may also be difficult as different sites are embedded in different
physical, cultural, and organizational contexts (Gluesing & Gibson, 2004) and thus may face challenges in sharing contextually ‘situated’ knowledge (Sole & Edmondson, 2002). As Bartlett and Ghoshal (1989) propose, operating transnationally requires a combination of global centralization and scale as well as sensitivity to local conditions and differences. Global teams thus involve a tension between the need for some cohesion and interdependence, on one hand, and flexibility to allow for diverse perspectives and autonomy at local sites, on the other (Earley & Gibson, 2002).

Although teams and organizations in general face similar tensions between independence and interdependence (Donnellon, 1996; Putnam, 1986), these general tensions are exacerbated in global teams. Earley and Gibson (2002) propose that multinational teams are characterized by equilibrium or balance between opposing forces of integration and differentiation, as members operate as both individuals and team members, and teams operate independently as well as within a larger social structure. In their model, general forces motivate and regulate social processes such that if a team becomes too integrated into a larger business unit (for example), it may react by engaging in practices to emphasize its uniqueness. They outline a number of catalysts in work structure and social structure, defined as stimuli, that act as an impetus for changes within team development. Each change helps establish a new equilibrium between the factors in tension with one another (Earley & Gibson, 2002). Although they outline potential dialectics such as role ambiguity versus hierarchy, isolation versus incorporation, and fractionation (or fragmentation) versus integration that may be salient in global teams, their discussion is rather limited to static description of each pole that does not get at the dialectical tensions between them or the ways in which they are discursively enacted. In addition, their prescriptions for reconciling such dialectics (for example, advocating leadership and facilitation to provide role clarity and eliminate ambiguity in reporting structure or maintaining relative consistency in the core group of team members to overcome feelings of isolation) seem to favor poles representing clarity, stability, and integration (as is common in much of the literature). As such, their framework is not truly dialectical and the dynamic nature of such tensions – as well as how they are managed by global team members – requires further articulation.

Examining global teams from a dialectical perspective helps explain and articulate the internal dualities that exist in light of their greater contextual complexity (Gluesing & Gibson, 2004) and provides insight into communicative tactics for managing such tensions. The notion of global teams as managed and perpetuated through dialectical tensions incorporates assumptions that differ significantly from traditional models of co-located
teams and groups, which continue to inform research on global and virtual teams (Gibbs et al., 2008). Rather than assuming innate benefits of team cohesiveness, shared understanding, and open communication, a tensional approach provides an alternative lens for studying global teams that captures and explains the tensions that constitute them and ways such tensions are negotiated. This study thus addresses the following three research questions: 

What dialectical tensions emerge in global team interaction? How do team members manage and negotiate these tensions? How do responses to these dialectics constrain or enable global team interaction?

Method

Research setting

Global teams are particularly prevalent in the software industry in light of the outsourcing trend, as companies increasingly shift information technology (IT) work to Asia and other offshore centers to take advantage of lower labor costs overseas (Carmel & Tjia, 2005). The Duke University CIBER/Archstone Consulting study found that 73 percent of US Fortune 2000 companies considered offshoring an important component of their overall growth strategy (Overby, 2006) and according to a Nasscom/McKinsey report, the worldwide offshore market is predicted to reach $110 billion by 2010 and to directly employ 2.3 million people in India alone (Ribeiro, 2005). The global software outsourcing trend is driven by pressures to reduce costs, offset the shortage of IT professionals in the United States and other industrialized countries, and achieve shorter development cycles and greater innovation (Carmel & Agarwal, 2002; West & Bogumil, 2000). Global software teams are a key mechanism for outsourcing development work.

This study is based on an 18-month ethnography of a global software team in a large digital imaging corporation, which will be referred to as PrintTech.¹ The team of focus, GlobTemp, was part of an offshore outsourcing organization that provided human resource assistance to software development teams within PrintTech by outsourcing work to software centers in Brazil, China, India, Ireland, Singapore, and the UK. This outsourcing frequently required software developers from these centers to spend time overseas as foreign ‘assignees’ in US-based project teams on short-term assignments lasting from six months to two years. Functioning as a temp agency within PrintTech, GlobTemp played a largely coordinating role of interfacing between the customer development teams and its software centers to identify developers with needed skills for a given project and bringing them to work in the customer teams, which were internal to
PrintTech. Its work involved both 1) assignee logistics, in terms of housing, car, insurance, visa, and legal issues pertaining to the assignees, and 2) customer support, such as arranging interviews with assignees and helping ensure smooth working relationships between customers and assignees. Although GlobTemp consisted of about 400 members in total, including the US headquarters (HQ) and software center staff, I examined primarily the interaction among the US HQ team, foreign assignees, and customer teams.

Data collection

In order to capture the wide range of perspectives and experiences of individuals from different cultural groups, qualitative data were collected through a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Through this approach, the researcher searches for relevant and meaningful categories that best explain the data and integrate them into a theoretical framework flexible enough to allow for new emergent concepts to fit the scheme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I conducted ethnographic participant observation from June 2000 to November 2001, collecting data through in-depth interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and analysis of documents and email. I focus here primarily on interview and observational data.

Interviews

Interviews were a useful method for examining the tensions experienced by GlobTemp’s team members and gaining insight into the communicative practices through which they negotiated such tensions. Interviews have been effectively employed in prior research taking a tension-centered approach (e.g. Jian, 2007; Pepper & Larson, 2006; Tracy, 2004), as they allow for examination of participants’ discourse, various interpretations of events and practices, and ways in which meanings may be contested. In this study, interviews were semi-structured to ensure a degree of consistency in questions asked yet allow for important but unanticipated issues to emerge (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

In-depth interviews were conducted on both the US East and West Coasts with a total of 50 managers, assignees, and customers involved in outsourcing activities for GlobTemp. This breaks down into eight US-based managers and administrative assistants, 22 assignees, and 20 customer team members (see Table 1 for profile of interview participants). Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes each. Nearly all interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded, and all tapes and notes were transcribed verbatim, resulting in over 1000 typed pages of double-spaced interview
data. Relevant questions from the interview protocol included degree and scope of team communication, roles and responsibilities, how work was structured and distributed, perceived challenges and benefits of global teams, and the impact of cultural differences on team functioning (interview protocol is available from the author). In the course of questioning, the prevalent role of tensions in team interaction became apparent, and subsequent interviews devoted greater attention to such issues.

**Participant observation**

Ethnographic observation also helped provide greater context and understanding of the interview data. I spent time in GlobTemp’s East and West Coast locations in the dual role of researcher/intern. As a participant

---

**Table 1** Profile of interview participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GlobTemp</th>
<th>50</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignee</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigerian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysian</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puerto Rican</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnamese</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Permanent location</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
observer, I had a company badge, email account and access to the company Intranet, memos and organizational announcements as well as internal team communication. Another valuable source of data was the frequent informal conversations that arose in people’s offices, in the hallway, and at lunch. I collected additional contextual data from notes from team meetings and conference calls and other company documents, as well as a 56-page double-spaced field log of observations and reflections from my experience within the organization (see Gibbs, 2002, for more detail).

Data analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant comparison method outlined by Glaser and Strauss (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Interview transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti content analysis software. In the first analytical step, line-by-line coding was performed to identify emergent topical codes such as ‘(unclear) roles and responsibilities’, ‘predictability (lack) and uncertainty’, and ‘team integration’. In the second iteration of coding, codes indicating broader tensions were highlighted and given extra attention in analysis. For example, the ‘(unclear) roles and responsibilities’ code was found to highlight irresolvable tensions in roles and reporting structure. Through building these codes and examining the excerpts they contained, various subdialectics were identified (such as unpredictable versus predictable and detached versus involved). In a third step, subdialectics were grouped together in families based on the larger tensions they revealed: for instance, the two subdialectics mentioned above were grouped into a larger tension called autonomy versus connectedness. This approach revealed the layering of sets of dialectics within larger categories, which provided the basis for the emergent theoretical model. Finally, excerpts for each tension were analyzed to identify how various team members responded to each set of tensions. After multiple iterations of these four coding steps, the larger thematic structure emerged, which will be discussed in the following section (a table with sample codes and quotes is available on request from the author).

Findings

Analysis of the data revealed that GlobTemp was fraught with contradictions due to the complex nature of global organizing, and that team members responded to tensions in a variety of patterned ways. These tensions will now be discussed and unpacked as they played out in the communicative practices of GlobTemp managers, customers, and assignees.
Autonomy versus connectedness

A key tension facing GlobTemp’s managers, in particular, involved enabling individual autonomy while preserving team connectedness. This tension manifested itself through GlobTemp’s rather amorphous team processes, roles and responsibilities. In particular, the team faced contradictions in its dual reporting structure and paradoxical roles such as the ‘internal customer’ (see Figure 1 for a diagram of GlobTemp’s reporting structure). Members struggled between subdialectics of unpredictable versus predictable and detached versus involved. Certain members (particularly managers) worked to preserve unpredictability and detachment in their roles and relationships, while others (particularly assignees) pushed for predictability and involvement.

Unpredictable versus predictable subdialectic

Managers of GlobTemp’s US-based HQ team and foreign assignees negotiated between embracing unpredictability versus predictability. GlobTemp’s managers described it as a ‘very fluid work environment’ and the founding managers (Jim, Paul, and Martin) – who until recently had been working together collocated for 10 years since GlobTemp’s inception as a small start-up – preferred to operate in an ad hoc, flexible manner and were resistant to defining and documenting their team processes. They described themselves as ‘mavericks’ who had built GlobTemp from the ground up and were proud of being unique, ad hoc, and entrepreneurial – especially within the rigid

Figure 1  GlobTemp reporting structure
bureaucratic PrintTech corporate culture. As Paul, a customer interface manager and founder, explained:

We are not an organization that lends itself well to process . . . the things I do are not predictable . . . Most organizations are pretty much standard processes . . . here’s our objective and here’s what we do, we develop software and here’s a spec and a schedule . . . I come in and whatever I might plan to do that day is probably not going to happen.

Whereas managers appealed to the lack of predictability as desirable and necessary to allow them to respond to ever-changing customer needs, assignees expressed frustration with the lack of planning and preparation, which resulted in their needs going unmet. Assignees faced a high level of uncertainty surrounding their assignments, both in terms of lack of preparation (they were typically given about 10 days’ notice to finish up projects in their home countries and prepare for their international assignments) and assignment length (as assignments were routinely extended). Kia, an assignee from the UK, complained that GlobTemp should have better defined her work requirements with the customer before sending her on assignment: ‘What they tell you and what you do are two different things . . . I know the world changes every day, nothing is defined, things change, projects change . . . I don’t expect a perfect world but at least to have defined this is what you’re going to do, then send people out.’ Though she acknowledged the unpredictable nature of work, she and other assignees emphasized the need for some predictability in work expectations (some were only told what computer language they would be working in), which was frustrating and led a number of them to early exits.

One way in which the GlobTemp managers and assignees negotiated the choice point between unpredictability and predictability was through selection of one pole by appealing to corporate values such as ‘customer first’. According to Paul, ‘GlobTemp is very amorphous. It adapts to the needs of the customer. And, again, it’s – customer or project – that’s what drives us.’ This comment reflects selection of the unpredictable pole by justifying the need for an ad hoc work structure that allowed for greater responsiveness to customer needs. Maintaining unpredictability and flexibility in their work processes allowed GlobTemp managers a great deal of autonomy, as they were able to operate independently for much of their daily work.

Kia also appealed to the corporate ‘customer first’ value – taking a different interpretation of it and using it to select the opposing pole of standardization – to justify why assignees were important and should be given attention, too:
I think it’s company first, employees later. Or customer first – we are customers, too. You know, you lose your customer how do you get the projects? How do you get people to work on projects? When people fail to deliver on what they should do, it lets employees down.

In this way, she reinterprets the ‘customer first’ value to apply to assignees as well by defining herself as a customer (as assignees were employed in customer teams and hence, customers too). Kia reinterprets this value to justify her need for predictability, in the form of clear expectations. This tension existed due to different interpretations of cultural values. Treating this tension as a simple contradiction and selecting opposite poles was unproductive for the team as each group ignored the needs of the other. It was constraining for assignees in particular, as the dominant unpredictability in the team’s processes hindered their career planning and advancement.

**Detached versus involved subdialectic**

A second subdialectical tension between detachment and involvement was evident due to the HQ team’s lack of resources and ambiguous dual reporting structure. Virtual team members are more likely to experience role ambiguity and role conflict in general, as they hold multiple roles within and across different units (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). In the case of GlobTemp, the team operated under a matrix structure, in which center managers reported to two bosses – the GlobTemp team leader (Jim) as well as a manager in their home country. Given the limited staff in the HQ management team (six managers and two administrative assistants) which serviced customers and assignees on both coasts and lack of a formal human resources person, it was necessary to preserve some overlap in roles and responsibilities; this required HQ team members to navigate tensions between detachment and involvement in their work relationships. Tensions also arose due to the ambiguous reporting structure in which assignees reported to HQ, home center, and customer managers. GlobTemp management and staff dealt with these tensions through two transcendence strategies: *walking the line between detachment and involvement* and *role rotation*. Assignees, on the other hand, engaged in *withdrawal* tactics which left them paralyzed.

Whereas GlobTemp managers preferred to retain ambiguity in roles and responsibilities to preserve their autonomy, they also had to deal with contradictory pressures from assignees, who pulled them toward the opposite pole of connectedness through desires for clear shared expectations about assignments, benefits, and reporting structure. To bridge these conflicting needs, managers found ways of balancing competing priorities by *walking*
the line between detachment and involvement (similar to Tracy’s, 2004, strategy of ‘walking the empathetic line’). They worked to build ambiguity into the reporting structure through their discourse, by simultaneously encouraging assignees to come to them with problems while distancing themselves through claims that they did not have time to maintain close involvement with them. This tension is reflected in Paul’s statement:

I will always help an assignee if I can, but I’m very careful about making sure they understand that I’m not here to be their pseudo manager . . . I tell you, people always gravitate to the light . . . it’s like if they think there’s somebody nearby who cares about them or will pass on to their manager that they’re doing a good job, or they can ask for help, my phone will never stop ringing. But I just can’t do it, you know.

Paul’s comments reveal ambivalence and an awareness of the need to simultaneously involve himself with assignees to make sure their needs were met yet maintain distance from them in order to protect his time and limited resources. Paul alternates between both poles within the same statement by saying he will ‘always help an assignee’ if he can (showing involvement), but he is not there to be assignees’ ‘pseudo manager’ (maintaining detachment). He treats this tension as a complementary dialectic and engages in a tactic to simultaneously attend to both poles. This response is productive for him as it enables him to attend to assignee’s needs through involvement with them, while also maintaining enough detachment to prevent his own burnout.

Preserving ambiguity and overlap in reporting structure – rather than imposing clear, rigid roles – was essential for the managers in allowing for flexibility and responsiveness to assignees’ needs, which ranged from housing and benefits issues to work assignment concerns and could not all be handled by the same person. Dispersing responsibility for interfacing with assignees among managers and administrative staff on both coasts helped alleviate any one member from carrying the burden as well as ensuring that at any given time, someone was available to help out. Thus managers and administrative staff engaged in informal role rotation to help fulfill assignee needs. As Diane, one of the administrative staff on the East Coast explained, ‘If they can’t get a hold of the West Coast then they ask me, so I get involved doing a lot of stuff that I probably shouldn’t get involved in, but everybody does everything in GlobTemp so . . . we just pitch in and help and get it done one way or the other and forward it to whoever.’ Diane’s statement that ‘everybody does everything in GlobTemp’ illustrates the benefits of fluid, overlapping roles in providing greater responsiveness to assignee needs. GlobTemp managers and staff developed techniques that enabled them to transcend the
dichotomy and balance the detachment needed to protect their limited resources with the involvement needed to attend to assignee concerns.

While GlobTemp managers and staff were generally comfortable with the inherent role ambiguity and used it strategically (Eisenberg, 1984) to enable their activity through the transcendence strategies discussed above, this tension was constraining for assignees. While on assignment, they faced a complex reporting structure, and the inherent ambiguity in the ‘internal customer’ model on which GlobTemp was based caused them considerable confusion. Reporting to a manager who was also their customer created conflicting expectations of the relationship they should have with this person. This created role strain as assignees expected guidance and support from their temporary managers in their work assignments, but felt uncomfortable asking questions, raising concerns, or giving negative news to their customer, whom they were expected to serve and please (as per the organization’s culture). As a result, assignees were often confused about whether to address concerns to the GlobTemp HQ managers or to their center managers back home. GlobTemp’s official policy was that home center managers were responsible for all assignee issues as their permanent employers, and they tried not to undermine that line of authority. In reality, though, assignees needed a local point of contact as well, as geographic and time zone differences and lack of situated knowledge (Sole & Edmondson, 2002) made it difficult for center managers half-way across the world to understand and resolve all issues (such as work-related problems, housing emergencies, or problems with rental cars that needed addressing immediately) that arose out of their sight and frame of reference. Julia, a UK assignee, expressed uncertainty over who to talk to about such issues:

We don’t know whether to ask over here or ask our center, we are in the middle. And then sometimes they just send us back . . . we don’t get anything . . . we should talk to our center in the UK, because they are our customers over here. And we cannot really talk about certain things to our customer. But there is a time difference, and it is not so easy . . . they are in a different environment, they cannot really understand what’s going on here.

Julia’s quote illustrates how the ambiguity in reporting structure affected the assignees: their confusion about who to go to often resulted in their needs going unmet. Her comments reveal that the dual reporting structure created a paradox or double bind for her, as she could not talk to her customer (who was not her manager and thus not responsible for her employee needs) or her manager back home, who was too far away to understand her needs. As
a result, she engaged in withdrawal tactics by not voicing her concerns, which was a common response among assignees. The tension in reporting structure trapped assignees in a no-win situation that promoted inaction by closing off their lines of communication. There was an ironic disconnect between the ‘everyone does everything’ discourse of GlobTemp managers and staff and the ‘we don’t get anything’ discourse of the assignees. Despite the HQ team’s attempt to build flexibility and ambiguity into the reporting structure to better attend to assignee needs, assignees often experienced this ambiguity as paralyzing. This suggests that productive responses embraced the ambiguity in the team’s complex environment, whereas unproductive responses constrained it.

Inclusion versus exclusion

A second key tension emerging from the data was one of inclusion versus exclusion, deriving from the team’s dynamic structure. This tension was most evident in the ways GlobTemp customers negotiated work relationships with the assignees who were temporarily employed in their teams. Customers faced a dilemma in viewing assignees as temporary contractors versus integrating them into the team. On the one hand, some customers saw the value of integrating assignees into their team by giving them more responsibility and utilizing their expertise in facilitating collaboration and achieving better performance. On the other hand, there were costs to integrating assignees into the team, since they would eventually have to leave. There was thus an ongoing tension between including and excluding assignees, stemming from dilemmas over their status as permanent versus temporary and insider versus outsider.

Permanent versus temporary subdialectic

Customers faced tensions in their relationships with assignees due to competing pressures to integrate them into the team while simultaneously keeping them at a distance, due to their non-permanent status. Gossett (2002) found that managers of contingent workers engaged in strategic practices to limit their identification, in order to exclude such members from decision-making and relieve the organization from responsibility for their general welfare. Similarly, customers limited their investment in assignees, viewing them as ‘disposable’ contract workers who were distinguished from their ‘permanent’ co-workers. The assignees’ role was complicated, though, because they were also permanent employees of PrintTech who were distinguished from outside contractors.
Further, although assignees were regarded as temporary workers, their assignments were frequently extended, such that they became increasingly permanent. While most assignments were meant to last six months or so, they were routinely extended to several years due to customer reluctance to let go of good workers. As assignees were asked to stay on longer, they became more integral members of the onshore team. GlobTemp managers explained this as a resistance to distributing work, pegging customers as ‘afraid of the dark’. Mark, one of the customers managing a distributed team, further explained the customer’s perspective:

So we are in this strange non-sustainable situation right now where we’ve got all these people. The intent was to send work back with them, but we’ve never identified exactly what is the kind of definable, reasonably self-contained piece of work we can send back . . . In the meantime, we’ve kept hiring these people, bringing them here, and they’ve become a more and more integral part of the team. At one time they were the kind of people that did ‘finishing touch’ work . . . now it’s people we can’t afford to lose.

Mark’s quote reveals a common dilemma faced by customers: on the one hand, they preferred working with assignees onshore since it was easier to manage them face-to-face than remotely and it alleviated the need to distribute their work. On the other hand, extending their assignments undermined the offshore business model in the long run as it defeated the cost savings of outsourcing and assignees could not be hired permanently. Over time, assignees became more integral team members and it became increasingly difficult for customers to let them go. Mark treats this dilemma as a simple contradiction in which he engages in selection of the inclusion pole while ignoring the exclusion pole. Through ignoring one pole of the tension and continuing to integrate assignees into his team, he creates a ‘non-sustainable’ situation with negative consequences that constrain the actions of both customers and assignees: customers suffered knowledge losses when assignees eventually had to return, and assignees felt trapped in a state of limbo as their assignments kept being extended.

**Insider versus outsider subdialectic**

Dual meanings of the term ‘contractor’ were a related source of tension. Assignees were contracted by GlobTemp through their centers to work for the customers. They were, however, still PrintTech employees rather than outside contractors, although they were employed in other countries. This
distinction became important in terms of how assignees were viewed by the customer. Customers had to distinguish between company employees and contractors in their teams, because legally they were not allowed to give benefits such as training to contractors. Customers often misunderstood their relationship to assignees and treated them as outside contractors who were not included in training courses or sometimes even team meetings. Assignees played a contradictory role as both company employees (insiders) but not company employees (outsiders), as PrintTech subsidiaries were joint ventures with local companies and different legal entities. As such, it was up to the customers’ discretion whether or not to include assignees in training or other benefits, and they often chose not to do so because they did not consider short-term investment in temporary employees worthwhile.

Customers dealt with this second subdialectic in a variety of ways, depending on their interpretation of the assignees’ role. A common response was treatment of the tension as a simple contradiction and selection of the exclusion pole. Many customers regarded assignees as outside contractors and tended to simply exclude them from team meetings and other material and symbolic resources such as training, based on their understanding of contractors as explicitly prohibited from attending certain meetings and other benefits under PrintTech policy. Evelyn, an assignee from Singapore, gave the following report:

Even though we are contract we want to be viewed as part of the team, but apparently we are not . . . Last week the big boss was here . . . they were having dinner or lunch . . . all the permanent staff were invited. We were never invited to join in, even for regular meetings.

Being excluded was frustrating for Evelyn, both because it made her feel unappreciated and because she did not know what was expected from her. Although customers often found it expedient to simply exclude assignees or treat them as outsiders, ignoring their needs for inclusion negatively impacted assignee morale and performance. Ignoring the inclusion pole constrained the actions of assignees, who missed out on important information sharing and social benefits of being included in team meetings, by impeding their ability and motivation to perform their work. This also had the unintended consequence of constraining the team’s overall performance as assignees could not contribute as effectively to the team.

A more productive tactic customers used to manage this tension was transcendence through arm’s length involvement. This involved accepting assignees as insiders while holding them at arm’s length, similar to the managers’ strategy of walking the line between detachment and involvement.
Simon, a customer managing a team distributed between the US and Singapore, addressed the assignees’ level of integration in his team:

People ask for them in meetings, like they were in the cubicle next door to you. You know, a resident. Initially they were ‘them’ and now it doesn’t really seem to be the case anymore. I think they’re more considered local people. But there is this constant awareness of when are the Singapore team members going to . . . go back?

Despite an initial ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality, this quote reveals a degree of reliance on the Singaporeans as fellow team members that developed throughout their assignments; given their physical location onshore, they came to be accepted as ‘residents’ or ‘locals’ in a way their counterparts back in Singapore were not. At the same time, their status as temporary team members or outsiders led the permanent team members to maintain a level of distance from them. Thus customers and local team members simultaneously included and excluded assignees from the team by assigning them dual status as both ‘one of us’ and ‘one of them’ which was enabling in allowing for simultaneous attention to multiple norms: assignees were given benefits of inclusion, while customer team members were protected from becoming too invested in employees who were going to leave at some point. This strategy involved embracing the ambiguity of the tension and using it productively to attend to both poles at once.

Some customer managers also found creative ways of getting around organizational constraints to include temporary employees, transcending them through discursive reframing. In addition to being a GlobTemp manager, Edward also supervised his own team which included several student interns and GlobTemp assignees. He employed a creative discursive strategy by renaming his meetings from ‘communication meetings’ to ‘status meetings’ in order to include all of his employees, both contract and permanent:

We can’t have our contracts [in the meeting]. You know, interns, anybody that’s not a permanent party . . . So we don’t call them ‘communication’ meetings, we call them ‘status’ meetings, we’ll say ‘I’m statusing it’. Because if we’re going to have a group that works together, I want all the people there.

In Edward’s case, discourse worked to include rather than exclude certain employees, as he found a creative way to bypass organizational policy constraints by renaming his meetings to allow for non-permanent members to be included. This tactic exemplifies a performance that transcends the
poles of the inclusion–exclusion tension to make it productive for the team. By employing a conceptual redefinition (Seo et al., 2004), Edward transcends the opposition and channels the tension between the poles into a solution that enables him to work within company policy while also allowing non-permanent members to be included in teamwork.

Empowerment versus disempowerment

The third key dialectic was one of empowerment versus disempowerment, related to power dynamics within the team. It consisted of the subdialectics of equitable/inequitable and privileged/marginalized.

Equitable versus inequitable subdialectic

Customers faced an irresolvable tension in how to treat assignees fairly, since assignees compared themselves with both fellow employees back home (for example, in India) and with American colleagues in their temporary teams. Since assignees were employed and paid by their local centers, GlobTemp managers discouraged customers from giving them bonuses that would make their local pay scale meaningless. As Martin said, ‘one American-sized reward can nullify the value and effectiveness of all the awards available in India . . . We have in the past scaled some of them back and said, we’d rather you didn’t give them this size award. Even though the other Americans got that.’ However, the assignees compared themselves to their American colleagues and felt treated unfairly if they did not receive awards and benefits commensurate with these colleagues. This created a paradoxical double-bind for GlobTemp managers and customers in which being equitable meant also being inequitable: by encouraging customers to scale back awards to make them more equitable with assignees’ home country pay scale, they were also encouraging awards that were inequitable with US employees’ pay and benefits. The longer assignees stayed on-site while receiving pay and benefits commensurate with their home center, the more they felt exploited, treated unfairly, and stigmatized as temporary workers.

Assignees also tended to compare their benefits and living conditions with those of assignees from other centers and grumbled about differential treatment. For example, the Singaporean assignees had to share apartments, whereas assignees from some of the other centers did not. These policy differences led to complaints about unfair treatment, as evidenced in comments from Evelyn from Singapore: ‘GlobTemp treats people differently . . . They say they are all the same, but there is no black and white policy saying they
are all fairly treated . . . When you come here you tend to compare.’ Although GlobTemp attempted to standardize its assignee benefits policy, it was impossible to do so completely due to different labor costs (for example, UK assignees were more ‘expensive’ than Indian assignees) and different housing agreements negotiated by each center (for example, studio versus one-bedroom apartments). This lack of standardized policy led to perceptions of inequity, and GlobTemp managers could never quite pin down what was fair.

Privileged versus marginalized subdialectic

Finally, tensions between privilege and marginalization also played out in the meanings constructed around foreign assignments. GlobTemp managers framed assignments through the discourse of privilege as providing valuable career growth for assignees, since they enabled them to work in the US, improve their English proficiency, perform cutting edge work and receive financial benefits such as daily per diems and paid trips home, on top of their regular salaries. Rather ironically, these same work conditions were, however, regarded as marginalizing by assignees themselves. Although Jim, the team leader, stated GlobTemp’s formal vision as follows: ‘I want our organization to be acknowledged as a great place to build a career’, this vision was contradicted by the lack of career development and training available, which was a big source of contention with assignees. Alice, a Singaporean assignee, shared a common sentiment:

You always feel like you are just a contract staff; you are not part of the company. There won’t be any career development for you, and you always ask yourself, what will happen to me in two years’ time? . . . A lot of people left for this reason.

Assignees faced a paradox as they needed training for their career development and often for their current projects as well but were usually denied it. Center managers refused to pay for higher-cost training for assignees stationed in the US, and customers did not consider it worthwhile to invest in training non-permanent employees. As a result, assignees often felt marginalized as temporary workers who were deprived of adequate support and guidance from their customer managers as well as tangible benefits related to career growth, such as formal performance appraisals. They could not plan career paths and often found themselves in a state of limbo in which their career advancement was put on hold (while meanwhile, others back in their home centers were promoted).
Further, customers felt pressured to marginalize assignees due to perceptions of local team members that assignees (who often outperformed local employees) posed a threat to their jobs. As Edward said while discussing outsourcing challenges:

A lot of the jobs, [customers] don’t want to give the cream of the crop jobs to these people. They want to save the good work for their own people because it’s good for career development and for planning. If their people see them outsourcing some of the better jobs, they’re in fear of their job. And that’s a real risk.

Concern for the welfare of their ‘own people’ was thus another reason why customers were less likely to treat assignees as full members of their project teams and why they were often given less desirable maintenance rather than development work. Customers often placed retaining and nurturing their own permanent employees over retaining temporary contractors (in whose careers they did not have as much of a stake). As a result, many assignees felt marginalized and treated like contractors or ‘cheap labor’ rather than legitimate members of their project teams.

Many of the tensions experienced within GlobTemp and its customer teams were negotiated productively by managers and customers, but were experienced negatively by assignees. Overall, assignees tended to value their work experience in the US but many felt disenfranchised due to the lack of voice afforded them and frustrated with the uncertainty they faced while on assignment. This led to their primary strategy of withdrawal, and ultimately exit from the organization. One of GlobTemp’s greatest challenges was assignee attrition in the form of early termination of assignments or assignees leaving the company altogether, primarily due to lack of career development – including lack of challenging work and training needed for career advancement. Mukesh from the India center complained that GlobTemp had no career plan for its employees. When probed further as to whether he had voiced this concern, he said:

Yeah, I have been trying to express my interests to GlobTemp, to assert myself, trying to express that I’d like to work as a database administrator a lot of times. But . . . I haven’t been able to get a good opportunity . . . If I am going to be a database administrator then I need to learn more things . . . If an organization doesn’t recognize that, then you tend to leave your motivation . . . and say, if I stick to this company I’m going to lose everything. So [I will] go to some company which is going to provide me with some challenges.
As Mukesh’s quote reveals, some assignees felt demotivated due to their marginalized position relative to their more ‘privileged’ permanent co-workers. As a result, they withdrew from the situation by exiting. They also felt disempowered from speaking up due to their precarious position as temporary contractors. This perceived lack of voice was evident in Sanjay’s comments in a focus group with the Indian assignees: ‘People just quit, you know, they don’t complain about it . . . We convey it to our center manager, we hear they will tell it to GlobTemp, but nothing happens (laugh).’ Frustrated with the ineffectiveness of the communication channels available to them, disgruntled assignees would often ‘just quit’ without talking with GlobTemp or their customers. In fact, this strategy resulted in many assignee complaints going unnoticed by GlobTemp or customers, who were often unaware there were issues until it was too late. This response was constraining for both assignees, who were denied career growth and voice, as well as for the team as a whole, given the high level of assignee attrition.

Summary

The findings identified several necessary and irresolvable tensions in global team interaction. Table 2 summarizes the key tensions and their nested sub-dialectics, as well as the main groups negotiating each tension and the response tactics employed. In response to the first research question, three major tensions were evident: tensions between autonomy versus connectedness, inclusion versus exclusion, and empowerment versus disempowerment. In response to the second research question, team members drew on various discursive strategies to negotiate these tensions, including selection, transcendence, and withdrawal. In response to the third research question, the selection and withdrawal responses generally proved to be unproductive as they pushed for clarity by embracing one dialectical pole or the other or rejecting both poles, thus constraining team members’ actions. Transcendence strategies, on the other hand, employed creative performances to attend to oppositional norms by embracing the ambiguity of the dialectics and incorporating both poles in a positive, enabling manner.

Discussion

The analysis offers a tension-centered model to articulate tensions arising in a global team spanning cultural, geographical, and organizational boundaries. The model has implications for theorizing about global teams and organizing more broadly. First, it re-theorizes global team interaction as an
on-going process of negotiating contested meanings in the form of tensions enacted from differing interpretations of work roles, values and processes due to the team’s embeddedness in multiple contexts. The three major tensions identified between autonomy and connectedness, inclusion and exclusion, and empowerment and disempowerment mirror the larger tensions between integration and differentiation inherent in globalization processes (Giddens, 2003; Stohl, 2005). The findings also unpack related subdialectics (or second order tensions) for each of the three primary dualities. As Seo et al. (2004) contend, dualities consist of multiple inter-related tensions, such that a given duality or tension is nested in larger systems of bi-polar relationships. The findings illustrate this nesting of tensions and their inter-relationships.

These particular tensions are not unfamiliar and have been identified (although not necessarily theorized as such) in other contexts. The autonomy versus connectedness tension has been found to characterize tensions in romantic relationships (Baxter, 1990) and has been well documented by

Table 2  Organizational tensions and communicative responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialectical tension</th>
<th>Subdialectics</th>
<th>Main stakeholders</th>
<th>Responses and examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy versus connectedness</td>
<td>Unpredictable versus predictable</td>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>Selection: appealing to corporate values to justify one pole or the other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detached versus involved</td>
<td>Assignees</td>
<td>Transcendence: 1) walking the line between detachment and involvement, 2) role rotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawal: paralysis and confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion versus exclusion</td>
<td>Permanent versus temporary</td>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>Selection: simple inclusion or exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insider versus outsider</td>
<td>Assignees</td>
<td>Transcendence: 1) arm’s length involvement, 2) discursive reframing: changing language used to bypass restrictive policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment versus disempowerment</td>
<td>Equitable versus inequitable</td>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>Withdrawal: lack of voice and exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Privileged versus marginalized</td>
<td>Customers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assignees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialectical tension</th>
<th>Subdialectics</th>
<th>Main stakeholders</th>
<th>Responses and examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy versus connectedness</td>
<td>Unpredictable versus predictable</td>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>Selection: appealing to corporate values to justify one pole or the other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Detached versus involved</td>
<td>Assignees</td>
<td>Transcendence: 1) walking the line between detachment and involvement, 2) role rotation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawal: paralysis and confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion versus exclusion</td>
<td>Permanent versus temporary</td>
<td>Customers</td>
<td>Selection: simple inclusion or exclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insider versus outsider</td>
<td>Assignees</td>
<td>Transcendence: 1) arm’s length involvement, 2) discursive reframing: changing language used to bypass restrictive policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment versus disempowerment</td>
<td>Equitable versus inequitable</td>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>Withdrawal: lack of voice and exit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Privileged versus marginalized</td>
<td>Customers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assignees</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

on-going process of negotiating contested meanings in the form of tensions enacted from differing interpretations of work roles, values and processes due to the team’s embeddedness in multiple contexts. The three major tensions identified between autonomy and connectedness, inclusion and exclusion, and empowerment and disempowerment mirror the larger tensions between integration and differentiation inherent in globalization processes (Giddens, 2003; Stohl, 2005). The findings also unpack related subdialectics (or second order tensions) for each of the three primary dualities. As Seo et al. (2004) contend, dualities consist of multiple inter-related tensions, such that a given duality or tension is nested in larger systems of bi-polar relationships. The findings illustrate this nesting of tensions and their inter-relationships.

These particular tensions are not unfamiliar and have been identified (although not necessarily theorized as such) in other contexts. The autonomy versus connectedness tension has been found to characterize tensions in romantic relationships (Baxter, 1990) and has been well documented by
previous organizational studies (e.g. Jameson, 2004; Putnam, 2003). This study confirms the prevalence of the autonomy–connectedness tension in global organizing, as well as unpacking subdialectics of unpredictable–predictable and detached–involved and responses specific to global team contexts such as role rotation. These tensions and responses likely extend to other geographically dispersed work settings as well.

The inclusion versus exclusion tension provides an extension to other research on virtual and temporary work arrangements. GlobTemp assignees faced similar treatment to the contingent workers in Gossett’s (2002) study, in which managers worked to keep temporary workers detached or excluded from their employing organizations. However, there was a difference in the experience of these two sets of temporary workers: rather than experiencing a clear-cut identity as temp workers, GlobTemp assignees faced a tension between being simultaneously permanent employees (of the company) and non-permanent employees (in their temporary project teams). As a result, they engaged in different strategies: whereas the contingent workers in Gossett’s study clearly selected the exclusion pole and suffered no adverse effects as they did not expect to form strong attachments to their temporary organizations, GlobTemp assignees expected to be treated as permanent (PrintTech) employees with meaningful career paths, and being kept at arm’s length through treatment as temporary contractors posed negative consequences for them. As organizational forms become increasingly complex, it is important to consider implications of work arrangements in which allegiances are not clear-cut and employees may face paradoxical roles as both permanent and temporary workers, and the conflicting expectations this may produce as such complex identities are negotiated. Further research should examine implications of such new forms for employee identification and commitment.

The third tension of empowerment versus disempowerment contributes insights into power dynamics in global teams, an area that has been understudied (Gibbs et al., 2008). Specifically, managers (both GlobTemp and customers) were more capable of transcending oppositions they faced, treating them as complementary dialectics and developing creative and productive strategies that enabled them to balance competing demands and broker relationships. This supports the notion that reframing tensions is more cognitively complex and challenging but is associated with higher satisfaction (Baxter, 1990). Lower-level assignees, on the other hand, were less able to cope with tensions and more apt to treat them as simple contradictions or paradoxes from which they retreated or withdrew, facing burnout and stress due to unclear expectations and role ambiguity (Katz & Kahn, 1966) and engaging in counterproductive strategies such as selection or
withdrawal, which left them paralyzed, disempowered, and alienated. This disempowerment may have stemmed from their temporary position as well as cultural factors: most came from high power distance cultures (Hofstede, 2001) in which deference to authority was expected and were thus unlikely to complain or speak up. As a result, they were deprived of material and symbolic benefits and their career growth was stifled. This systematic difference calls attention to the power dynamics involved in global work (and other types of work in general) and the need for managers to engage in meta-communication (Tracy, 2004), dialogue (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) and other reflexive practices (Barge, 2004) that give voice to employees and empower them to develop transformative strategies – especially virtual workers, who may be both structurally and culturally disadvantaged. Further research should explore power dynamics in more detail.

The responses employed – selection, transcendence, withdrawal – align with basic categories established in the literature for responding to organizational tensions (Putnam & Boys, 2006; Seo et al., 2004; Tracy, 2004) but contribute specific new ways they play out in global organizing. The predominant tactics used to manage dualities, selection and withdrawal, were unproductive as they provided limited options and constrained action by ignoring one or both sides of the dichotomy. More productive transcendence strategies involved embracing the inherent ambiguity and complexity of the team’s environment and using it to enable team members’ actions, rather than trying to impose a fixity on tensions. This implies that global team members need to embrace complexity and ambiguity in order to attend to both tensional poles. Failure to attend to the tensional nature of dualities often leads to unintended consequences (Seo et al., 2004) and perpetuates practices members want to change.

Although the primary tensions were largely met with both productive and unproductive responses, unpacking the subdialectics revealed that certain dichotomies were harder to overcome than others. Managers and customers were able to transcend tensions in reporting structure (detached/involved) and team membership (permanent/temporary, insider/outsider). Other dualities proved more problematic and more likely to be met with selection or withdrawal: those related to standardization of processes (unpredictable/predictable) and power dynamics (equitable/inequitable, privileged/marginalized), highlighting issues likely to be particularly challenging for global team members. Taken together, the analysis offers a systematic, theoretically grounded framework for understanding how layers of tensions play out in global teamwork through patterned responses. It helps advance theorizing on global teams by bringing together diverse theory on interpersonal relationships and virtual and temporary work and recasting it.
in tensional terms. Although these tensions are not exhaustive, they are likely to arise in other work settings involving geographical dispersion, temporary work arrangements, and cultural diversity.

More broadly, this model calls our attention to the critical role played by tensions in global organizing. The analysis illustrates that relationships in global teams are characterized by tensions involving simultaneous attempts to connect with colleagues and employees while keeping them at a distance, indicating that virtual work relationships may be more loosely coupled (Weick, 1976) and characterized by loose connections – which are increasingly characterizing our communities and social relationships in general (Wuthnow, 1998). Further, findings suggest it is not necessary to replicate conditions of traditional collocated teams by maximizing cohesion and shared understanding, as some literature suggests (Gibbs et al., 2008). The tension-centered model emerging from the data suggests that global teams may be characterized as much or more by features of unpredictability, impermanence, and disjuncture than by rational, predictable, and orderly practices. Rather than searching for clarity and consensus in organizing, this research illustrates the need to recognize ambiguity and uncertainty as playing an integral role in organizations (Eisenberg, 1984; Putnam, 1986; Weick, 1979). Given the rising prevalence of multicultural, mediated work environments in modern organizations, organizational theorists should attend to the impact of such features on communication.

This study has several limitations that warrant mention. The ethnography may be limited by a somewhat US-biased perspective, despite attempts to include a large number of foreign assignees as well as customers and managers from other cultures in the sample. Most of these individuals were, however, currently working in the US; I was only able to include perspectives of two of the center managers and a handful of customers from abroad. Second, the nature of GlobTemp as a global team may be called into question due its large size (about 400 members including headquarters staff, center managers and assignees). While research on global teams typically focuses on teams with a small number of members, GlobTemp was studied as a team simply because the founder considered it a team and the centers and their employees formed an integral part of GlobTemp’s global work and strategy. The research focus was narrowed to interaction among the onshore assignees, GlobTemp managers, and customers, as they were the ones primarily involved in global work. This focus may be unconventional, but it reflects the complex and fluid nature of many global organizational forms, and findings illustrate tensions involved in global organizing more broadly. Findings may be influenced by the nature of GlobTemp’s work, which involved more ambiguity and flexibility than other types of work such as
software development, with its precisely defined requirements, tight deadlines, and limited resources. Further, findings are likely to be conditioned by the population of study, as most team members were software engineers who were likely to prefer low-context media such as email, autonomous work styles, and a low degree of social interaction. Further research should examine tensions in other global work settings and among other sample groups. More longitudinal research is also needed to see how tensions evolve over time and determine long-term effects.

This research has focused on an ethnographic study of an offshore outsourcing team supplying software development skills to internal customers in a large high tech corporation. This study makes important contributions in furthering our understanding of the complexity of global team interaction. It points to the important role of tensions in managing complexity and ambiguity in processes of global organizing. The data provide a rich ethnographic account of ways dualities are manifested and negotiated through the communicative practices of team members, revealing that tensions may be negotiated differently by different organizational members and that global team managers in particular utilize such tensions productively. The findings suggest we continue to rethink our assumptions about global teams and teams in general in light of their increasing complexity.

**Acknowledgements**

The author would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of Nicole Ellison, Cristina Gibson, Rebecca Heino, Patricia Riley and the anonymous reviewers on earlier drafts of this article. Linda Putnam’s guidance and support was also invaluable in shepherding the manuscript through the review process. The data for this study were collected as part of the author’s dissertation, directed by Patricia Riley.

**Note**

1 Pseudonyms are used for all organizational entities and participants to ensure confidentiality.

**References**


---

**Jennifer Gibbs** (PhD, University of Southern California) is an Assistant Professor of Communication at Rutgers University. Her research interests include collaboration and management of multiple identities and tensions in global virtual teams and other virtual and multicultural work contexts, as well as online self-presentation and relationship formation. Her work has been published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Communication Research*, *Communication Yearbook*, and *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, among others.

[E-mail: jgibbs@rutgers.edu]