How Do Firms Manage Ethically-Contested Organizational Paradoxes? Insights from two Historical Case Studies of Modern Slavery

Abstract

Management researchers, particularly those focused on socially important issues such as worker exploitation, are increasingly interested in what this study terms *ethically-contested organizational paradoxes*. Such paradoxes occur when there is an incongruity between the ethical dimensions of a firm's action in one area, geographical or functional, and another. To understand how firms manage ethically-contested organizational paradoxes, this study conducts historical research on two twentieth century firms, Cadburys and Rowntree, who were lauded by contemporaries for their enlightened treatment of domestic workforces whilst simultaneously being engaged in labour practices overseas that were controversial and exploitative. This study examines how two multigenerational family firms managed the paradox inherent in the significant difference in how they treated their workers at home and abroad. This study identifies three types of strategies that firm leaders used to manage the existence of ethically-contested organizational paradoxes: *disinforming*, *subordinating*, and *self-doubting*.

Keywords: Organizational Paradox; Worker Exploitation; Family Business; Justification Work; Business Ethics

Introduction

Management theorists continue to debate the nature of organizational paradoxes (Lewis, 2000; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Berti & Simpson, 2021a). While many organizational paradoxes are unconnected to ongoing moral, ethical, and socio-political debates, a community of researchers have focused on the types of organizational paradoxes that stakeholders see as having a moral or ethical dimension (Greenwood & Freeman, 2018; Francis & Keegan, 2020). The present study terms such paradoxes as *ethically-contested organizational paradoxes.*

Understanding the strategies that family firm leaders use to manage organizational paradoxes to themselves, and their stakeholders, provides scope to confront this type of managerial behaviour. Researchers have hitherto devoted little attention to understanding how firms manage ethically-contested organizational paradoxes. To remedy this gap, this study develops two historical case studies based on archival research (Lipartito, 2013; Tennent & Gillett, 2023). The paper compares two British family firms, Cadburys and Rowntree, that used forms of labour overseas that were, even by the standard of the day, controversially exploitative. The primary goal in gathering this historical data presented below was to advance theory through a case study (Eisenhardt, 1989). However, this study also demonstrates what Maclean, Harvey, and Clegg (2016) call "dual integrity". In this context, dual integrity means that a research output would be respected by organization studies scholars as methodological and theoretically rigorous and would be seen by business historians as a solid piece of historical research. Both firms were, simultaneously, praised for being progressive employers that treated their British workers extremely well (Child, 1964; Rowlinson, 1988; Fincham, 2019; Burton & Sinnicks, 2021; Maclean at al., 2022; Suddaby et al., 2023). The firms' benevolent treatment of workers in Britain was interdependent on its exploitation of workers in the tropics, for the low prices the firm paid for tropical commodities such as cocoa gave the firms the financial resources that they bestowed on workers in Britain in the form of high wages and amenities. In effect, workers in the tropics were cross-subsidizing the incomes of the workforce in the UK. This study demonstrates how this arrangement persisted for several decades.

The inconsistency between the firms' treatment of their overseas and domestic workers has the three main elements of paradox according to Smith and Lewis's (2011) definition: contradiction, interdependence, and persistence. The contradiction element is seen in the following patterns: firms in the case studies were generous and progressive in their treatment of one class of workers but were highly exploitative towards another. The contradiction was persistent rather than fleeting, as it spanned decades. Finally, the two elements were interdependent: without the flow of low-cost raw materials produced by unfree workers in the tropics, the Quaker-run firms in this study would not have been able to generate the economic rents that allowed them to treat their domestic workforces generously. Based on the research, three main strategies were identified that firms used to manage their organizations' paradoxical behaviour: *disinforming*, *subordinating,* and *self-doubting*.

Literature Review

Organizational Paradox: Conceptual and Theoretical Considerations

Research on organizational paradoxes began in the late 1980s (Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Poole &Van de Ven, 1989). As the literature has developed, scholars have repeatedly called for greater definitional clarity. Lewis (2000, p.761) observed that there was a multiplicity of definitions of paradox, with some researchers defining paradox as "contradictions embedded within a statement (e.g., Murnighan & Conlon, 1991)" while others defined them as "contradiction embedded in organizational practices" (e.g., Eisenhardt & Westcott, 1988). Organizational paradoxes can also be defined as "persistent contradictions between interdependent elements" (Schad et al., 2016, p. 10) which may "seem logical in isolation, but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously" (Lewis, 2000, p. 760). This study relies on the definition offered by Smith and Lewis (2011) who reviewed 360 papers in organization studies about paradoxes and found that authors frequently used different definitions of paradox. Based on their review, Smith and Lewis (2011, p.382) proposed that paradoxes refer to "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time".

The definition offered by Smith and Lewis (2011) has become increasingly influential in the literature. As Smith and Lewis (2022, p. 531) note, while definitions still vary to some degree, authors' definitions increasingly converge around three constitutive elements: contradiction, interdependence, and persistence with paradoxes involving "dualistic forces that are both in opposition to one another yet are also reinforcing and synergistic, such that one element defines the boundaries of the other." Smith and Lewis (2011) suggest that paradoxes can emerge when organisational leaders must decide what they are going to do to fulfil stakeholder expectations, how they are going to do it, who is going to do it, and in what time horizon. Paradoxical tensions emerge in organizations when the elements in opposition are deeply inter-connected and reinforce one another (Berti & Simpson, 2021a) often creating a vicious cycle (Ungureanu et al., 2019).

It is important to distinguish between mere problems and full-blown paradoxes. Paradoxes are not just difficult to solve because of resource constraints as they are inherent to organizations and deriving from irreducible complexity linked to organizing dynamics and plurality of logics. Paradoxes can persist over time and often remain latent until contextual conditions (such as plurality, scarcity, and change) make them resurface (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Plurality deals with several stakeholders expressing contradictory perspectives about what to do about a particular practice, such as employee welfare (e.g. living wages vs going beyond legalistic expectations). Changes in the way act to achieve the welfare of employees may trigger juxtaposing priorities over time. Scarcity of resources (e.g., financial, temporal, and human) can create tensions about how to support specific causes whilst safeguarding financial performance.

Dealing with paradoxes is challenging because owners/managers may make decisions that display contradictory responses to avoid discomfort (Hahn, et al., 2014). Persistent tensions may revolve around the (mis)alignment of objectives, perceptions, and expectations (Russo & Perrini, 2010). At its core, paradox theory presumes that tensions are integral to complex systems and that the decisions of organisational actors may depend on attending to contradictory yet interwoven demands simultaneously (Smith et al., 2017). Paradoxes place organisational actors in a position of deciding between opposite options that offer a strong potential for (un)expected, sometimes unpleasant, outcomes.

The definition offered by Smith and Lewis (2022) is consistent with the ontology of paradoxes, which holds that paradoxes may be both inherent and socially constructed (Smith et al., 2017), a view that has been eloquently defended by Hahn and Knight (2021). Smith et al., (2017, p 4-5) argue that tensions may be depicted as inherently enmeshed within a system, structures, and processes that would allow for informed responses to expected patterns. This view positions paradoxes as existing outside individual agency, where decisions towards improved outcomes depend on individual awareness, recognition, and management competency. Under such a view, researchers can observe, measure, and manipulate paradoxes separate from their responses. By contrast, Smith et al (2017, p. 5) explain how a social construction approach depicts paradoxes arising from individual and collective sensemaking, discourse and relational dynamics. Such views suggest that paradoxes therefore exist within our discourse, action, cognitions, and relationships, not independent of them and that individuals have greater control in creating, exacerbating or diminishing, at any point in time, seemingly absurd oppositions.

A subset of this vast literature on organizational paradoxes concerns those paradoxes that have an ethical, moral, or political dimension (Gond et al., 2017). This paper contributes to debates about this specific type of paradox, rather than theorizing about generic organizational paradox. This study coins the term, *ethically-contested organizational paradox* because the paradoxes examined within the two case studies have a distinct moral or ethical element that is challenged in both contemporary and modern societies. Existing literature demonstrates that such paradoxes are frequently connected to power imbalances in wider society and involve inconsistencies between what an organization says or does in one area and its behaviour and practices in another (Schminke et al., 2014; Berti & Simpson, 2011; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018, Li, 2021b). In a recent survey of the literature on this type of organizational paradox, Francis and Keegan (2020, p.595) observe that organizational paradoxes can produce “anxiety” and “discomfort” for individuals within organizations. This observation suggests that senior managers and others with power within organizations will, *ceteris paribus*, feel a desire to resolve organizational paradoxes, albeit one that is counterbalanced by other considerations, such as financial constraints. Keller, Wong, and Liou (2020) note that when organizations experience paradoxes, individuals within the organization can experience an unpleasant tension that they will work to alleviate. Similar observations are made in Pamphile’s (2022, p. 2019) study of the organizational paradoxes that confront corporate grant-makers with individuals experiencing “anxiety” due to organizational paradoxes connected to the tensions between social and commercial objectives.

Despite this research on how individuals respond to organizational paradoxes, precisely how managers deal with the psychological pressures associated with ethically-contested organizational paradoxes remains an under-explored topic (Gond et al., 2017). The scarcity of research on this topic would suggest, in part, that researchers have encountered difficulties in observing managers who face such pressures. Few managers who are currently wrestling with an ethically-contested organizational paradox would likely feel comfortable talking to researchers about that paradox due to considerations such as fear of litigation and reprisals, or reputational damage. It is only through the development of historical case studies, using archival documents, that these phenomena can be explored.

An important paper by Hahn and Knight (2021b, p.362) outlines a “quantum approach” to the ontology of organizational paradoxes. They persuasively argue that organizational paradoxes are both inherent (they objectively exist) and are “socially constructed”. Hahn and Knight’s claim that organizational paradoxes are, at least in part, socially constructed is congruent with the research on how culture influences individuals’ reactions to organizational paradoxes (Keller & Lewis, 2016; Chin et al., 2021; Berti & Simpson, 2021a; Li, 2021b). Berti and Simpson, (2021b) draw attention to “moral legitimization” and “domain maintenance” as “enabling conditions” that help to perpetuate pernicious organizational paradoxes, suggesting that more research on such enabling conditions is required. This study builds on the assertion of Hahn and Knight (2021a) that a deepened understanding of how paradoxes develop and persist in specific cultural and social contexts is needed. Likewise, the study concurs with Berti and Simpson (2021b) in acknowledging that a better understanding of how managers undertake the “moral legitimation” of organizational paradoxes is also needed. The existing literature does not yet give us a clear understanding of how firms manage organizational paradoxes.

Salience has emerged as an important concept in the field of paradox. In management literature, the concept of salience became widespread following the seminal publications of the work of Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997), which developed a highly influential stakeholder model. The term generally refers to the degree to which a particular issue capture attention and become prioritized by managers in their decision-making processes. Wood et al. (2021, p. 198) define salience as "the degree to which managers give priority to competing stakeholder claims". This definition aligns with broader conceptualizations, which emphasize the factors that elevate the importance of certain issues or stakeholders over others within organizational settings. For example, if an issue is salient in a firm, it would often be discussed frequently in board meetings, whereas a lack of salience would result in the issue not appearing in the minutes of boardroom discussions. The stakeholder salience model suggests that managers prioritize different stakeholders based on three attributes: power, legitimacy, and urgency. Stakeholders possessing these attributes are deemed more salient, meaning their concerns are more likely to be addressed by decision-makers.

Scholars have debated the nature of the causal mechanisms that convert latent salience into actual salience. Neville, Bell, and Whitwell (2011) argue that it is changes in external factors, such as slow but steady shifts in societal values, can drive the transition from latent to high salience. For instance, growing levels of public concern over environmental issues, a phenomenon that has been observed in recent generations, can make a previously latent salience issue more important to the firm. Other scholars, like Bundy et al. (2013), suggest that skilful communication by individual activists who are able to reframe issues via "strategic frames" can be the main factor that makes an issue salient to managers. The Bundy et al. (2013) approach thus sees individuals as having a great deal of agency to determine the outcomes, which is in keeping with the emphasis on the individual agency of bold commanders that characterized the early discussions of saliency in military contexts.

Within the literature on issue salience, we see evidence of tension between perspectives that suggest changes in the salience of particular issues are exogenously derived, that is driven by social forces external to the firm, such as the shifts in Chinese government policy discussed by Qian, Parker, and Zhu (2024) and those that are more attentive to developments within the firm. For instance, one strand of the literature suggests that an issue can become highly salient to family firm when a member of a new generation joins the management team and starts raising that issue in conversations with other owner-managers (Mitchell, et al., 2011; Signori & Fassin, 2023). Similarly, the argument that the religious orientation of firm can change how it prioritizes the interests of different stakeholders, which has been made by Fang, Randolph, Chrisman, and Barnett (2013) suggests that if there is a change in the religious cognition of the managers of a firm (e.g., the CEO converting to a new religion), there will be a change in the salience of the firm of different issues that is independent of variables in the broader social environment.

The present study links closely to a considerable wider-social scientific literature on unfree labour in supply chains (Bales, 2012; Pesterfield, 2021; Rioux et al., 2020). The management research on this topic includes both historical research (Cooke, 2003) and papers on modern slavery in today's global supply chains (Christ & Burritt, 2018; Geng, et al., 2022; Islam & Van Staden, 2022). A major strand of research on modern slavery features in accounting journals, and explores transparency in supply chains (e.g., Christ et al., 2023). Researchers in business schools have thus devoted attention to disclosure requirements and social auditing tools as mechanisms for ending modern slavery (Christ et al., 2019; Christ, et al., 2020; Benstead, et al., 2021; McLaren, et al., 2024).

The largely unexamined assumption that drives researchers who are interested in modern slavery to focus on supply chain transparency and auditing is the belief that if consumers and other actors in the Global North knew about the human rights abuses associated with the production of commodities, they would immediately cease purchasing all imported goods made with unfree labour. However, historical evidence from the nineteenth century sugar trade suggests that even when such actors know that the goods they are consuming are produced with unfree labour, they will nevertheless persist in buying them (Smith & Johns, 2020). The present study moved away from approaches that focus our attention solely on access to knowledge about supply chain and towards issues of values and moral beliefs.

Historiography of Companies in the Case Studies

British historians have published extensively on the histories of Cadbury and Rowntree, often doing so with the view to speaking to debates about the nature of British capitalism. The first official history of Cadburys (Williams, 1931), which was published by a poet and Liberal party activist, devoted several pages to the issue of whether the firm had knowingly produced slave-produced cocoa in the Edwardian period. The clear tendency of this work was to exonerate the firm of the charges its critics had made. Williams suggests that the allegations against Cadburys had a party-political motivation, as they were made by members of the Conservative Party who disliked the Cadburys because they were prominent members of the Liberal Party. Williams (1931, p,211) concludes his discussion of the topic by quoting a judge who observed in 1909 that the firm's discontinuation of purchases from plantations with unfree workers "had not benefited a single slave".

The history of Rowntree's from 1862 to 1869 by Fitzgerald (1995) remains an invaluable source. Fitzgerald's primary focus is the development of the firm's capabilities in marketing, although he certainly discusses its pioneering employee wellbeing initiatives and the founding family's commitment to social reform. Fitzgerald (1995, p. 217) observes that "Rowntree has formed with Cadbury and Unilever a pantheon of companies which have attracted attention through their commitment to industrial villages, good working conditions" and similar expressions of the "Nonconformist conscience." The controversy over how Rowntree and the other Quaker sweets manufacturers sourced their raw materials is mentioned only briefly in this book. Fitzgerald (1995, p.516) discusses Rowntree's purchase of estates in Jamaica and Trinidad and then mentions that "during the Edwardian period, British chocolate manufacturers became embroiled in a public controversy about the use of slave labour in Sao Tome and Principe." Fitzgerald then gives us a paragraph-length summary of the controversy and the court case, basing his account on the 1987 book by Dr Gillian Wagner.

Rowlinson and Hassard (1993) discuss the processes by which Cadburys acquired a reputation for being a benevolent employer and how this reputation became strongly associated with the Quakerism of the owning family. Their paper, which points out that some Quaker entrepreneurs of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were heavily involved in slave-trading or had reputations for being harsh employers, suggests that the firm's adoption of paternalistic employment policies around 1900 was inspired by developments in other non-Quaker firms and were not simply a function of some permanent feature of the Quaker belief system. Their paper documents how Cadburys curated the memory of its firm. Their paper, which focuses on the historical narratives produced by the firm in the aftermath of the General Strike, indicates that by that time Quakerism had come to be associated with progressive causes such as the more humane treatment of workers. The evolution of Quaker teachings about the duties of employers to their workers lies outside the scope of their paper.

Consumers perceptions of Quakerism are an important theme of Da Silva Lopes (2016), a study of the British chocolate industry from the 1860s to the 1960s that is designed to speak to contemporary debates about the social certification of goods, such as that provided by the Fairtrade product label. She notes that during this period, the British confectionary business was dominated by Quaker businesses: Cadbury, Rowntree, and their predecessor, Fry. She documents the efforts of these firms in the first half of the twentieth century to improve the conditions of the tropical workers who produced their raw materials. She also argues that as social certification system similar today's Fairtrade scheme did not then exist, the institutions of the Quaker denomination performed an analogous role, serving as an "indirect independent endorser" of the products of the Quaker-owned firms. Da Silva Lopes (2016, p.408) explores the controversy in her paper, where she notes that "Cadbury, criticized for taking too long to act, brought a libel action against the Standard, the newspaper that made such allegations—and won the case." The narrative in her paper suggests that Cadbury's shift from relying on Portuguese Africa to producers in British colonies on the African mainland was motivated by strong benevolent sentiments on the part of the owning family rather than instrumental considerations, such as the desire to avoid bad publicity. She documents that Cadburys worked with other cocoa-purchasing firms, Quaker and non-Quaker, on joint action to address their humanitarian concerns.

Robertson (2013) explores the relationship between colonialism and workers lives at Rowntree's York factory through the lens of gender theory in a monograph-length study based on a mixture of oral historical sources and primary sources created by Rowntree and Terry's, two Quaker-run chocolate producers in York. Robertson conducted oral historical research with British female factory workers in York and female cocoa harvesters in Nigeria. Her goal in narrating this history is to highlight one of the ironies of chocolate production, namely the contrast between how the paternalistic Quaker-owned companies treated their British workers and the darker side of chocolate production, which included its overseas supply chain.

The study of Cadbury by Smith, Child, and Rowlinson (1990) presents extensive material about the history of the firm in the twentieth century, basing their account on archival records and other primary sources kept at the University of Birmingham. Smith et al. discuss the emergence of the firm's approach to industrial relations, which was part of an overall approach to doing business they call 'Cadburyism'. These authors compare and contrast Cadburyism with Fordism, an approach that diffused from the United States into British companies in the period they studied. As the focus of Smith et al. is on work in Cadbury's Birmingham operations, they devote little attention to the provenance of the firm's cocoa.

Three scholars have published books that look at the aforementioned Edwardian cocoa controversy. Wagner (1987) provides a good understanding of the origins of the controversy and the moral dilemmas faced by members of the Cadbury, Fry, and Rowntree families, three Quaker business dynasties that dominated the chocolate trade in Britain. She discusses the 1909 Cadburys libel trial, a court case that revolved around the claim the Cadburys had knowingly imported slave-produced cocoa from São Tomé. Wagner depicts the libel trial as a sort of proxy battle between the Liberal and Conservative parties and discusses the political figures that were involved in the saga of Cadbury's cocoa, who included Lord Grey, the Foreign Secretary and Sir Edward Carson, the Irish Unionist. Wagner suggests that the attack on Cadbury for using slave-produced cocoa was motivated by the Cadbury family's prominent role in first opposing the Boer War and the subsequent use of indentured Chinese workers in the mines of the Transvaal, a practice Liberals in England had labelled "Chinese slavery" at the time of the 1906 British General Election.

Wagner's account, which was based on extensive primary source research, has supported subsequent research on the controversy. It also influenced the popular historical consciousness in Birmingham by making a new generation aware of the historical issue of Cadbury's reliance on São Tomé cocoa. Grant (2005) drew on Wagner's findings in his study of the "new slavery" that emerged in the late nineteenth century as Africa was increasingly integrated into global commodity markets. Grant is harshly critical of Cadbury's failure to stop purchases from São Tomé once they learned that slave labour was in use there. Grant's (2005, p.113) account of Cadburys has a strong normative element and argues that the firm ought to have immediately stopped all purchases from São Tomé even though doing so would have resulted in unemployment for at least "several hundred workers" in Birmingham.

Methodology

This study uses historical sources and archival materials to construct two cases that theorise about how firms manage ethically-contested organizational paradoxes. As the previous section should make clear, we were not the first scholars to use the archival materials we accessed. However, we were doing so with different research questions in mind. Other scholars have successfully used historical case study data to contribute to debates on organizational paradox theory (e.g., Pant & Ramachandran, 2017; da Silva & Neves, 2023). Historical research methods using documents created by managers have one important advantage over interviewed-based methods in trying to address this type of research question: because the moral issues discussed in the documents no longer matter to living individuals, companies are far more likely to grant academic researchers unfettered access to the data they need.

Several considerations informed the initial decision to study the overseas supply chains of these two firms. First, published research established (Smith & Johns, 2020) that the overseas supply chains of these firms had been contemporaneously controversial and that critics of these firms had used the term slavery. As a result, this topic would allow the theorization about how firms manage this type of organizational paradox. Second, the work of Suddaby et al., (2023) established that the pro-worker discourse of the managers of these firms went beyond rhetoric and had been accompanied by considerable expenditures on worker wellbeing. Researchers who have closely examined how the Quaker firms covered in this study treated their workers have concluded that their expenditure on worker well-being appears to have been greater than could have been justified on the grounds of the long-term interests of the shareholders (Tibbals, 2019; Burton et al., 2019; Surdam, 2021; Burton & Sinnicks, 2021). This raises an interesting empirical question: how did these firms respond to and manage the paradox of their firm displaying generosity towards their domestic workforces whilst simultaneously participating in the exploitation of workers overseas?

In the historical period under investigation, 1890 to 1920, Cadburys was located in Bournville, a suburb of Birmingham, while Rowntree's was headquartered in York. The correspondence and other documents generated by the head offices of these two firms have been carefully preserved in the company's purpose-built corporate archives. In late 2021 and early 2022, these materials were accessed, photographed, and catalogued. Subsequent visits took place in 2023 and 2024. Working collaboratively with the relevant archivists we identified the folders and boxes relevant to the research question.

The Cadburys material we consulted are now kept by the University of Birmingham's archive service and were viewed in the Cadbury Reading Room. The Rowntree archival materials were acquired by the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research in York, which is where we viewed them. Within the Cadbury papers, we reviewed the board meeting minutes from the period under investigation, a large collection of files related to the libel trial, letters exchanged with British diplomats and Joseph Burtt, correspondence between the headquarters and subordinates in Africa, along with other sources. Within the Rowntree papers, we examined included the correspondence between the firm and its West Indian Estates department.

In parallel with this archival research, we conducted a methodical search of historical newspaper databases was also conducted, using Nexis and Gale Historical Newspapers databases to see how contemporary newspapers covered the issue. Searches were also conducted in the databases of historical newspapers *Manchester Guardian*, the *Times*, and the *Economist*. Twenty-one relevant articles, mostly contemporary press coverage of the firm's treatment of the domestic and overseas workforces, were retrieved and analysed. In addition, databases of UK government documents (parliamentary papers) were searched for relevant articles. The documents we found in the parliamentary papers included printed copies of the extensive correspondence between the British and Portuguese governments. Another useful source was the in-house company magazines stored at the Rowntree archive, which provided key insights into the management, conditions, and function of the company-owned overseas plantations. As Heller and Rowlinson (2020) have noted, company magazines are an important, if under-utilized, source for business historical research.

In analysing these primary sources, source criticism and hermeneutics were employed. Source criticism requires the investigator to answer a series of questions about each document they encounter in an archive. Many of these questions relate to the motives of document creators. Research protocols advanced by Heller (2023, p.987) were followed. Heller identifies pathways for using source criticism to "identify, analyse and use bias in historical sources to write reliable historical narratives". Indeed, survival bias and dealing with the fragmentary nature of archival sources is a challenge faced by many business historians, but especially pronounced when dealing with company practices that are ethically contested and morally dubious. As Popp and Fellman (2020) have noted, corporate archives are curated by archivists whose primary duty is to protect the interests of their organization, not to preserve the documents that will allow future academic researchers to get to the truth. In approaching the sources, the research team were acutely aware of the limitations of the available collections and the possibility that corporate archivists may have eliminated particularly incriminating documents related to colonialism and the treatment of overseas workers.

Lipartito (2013, p.293) suggests that 'an important part of the historian's task is both mastering the institutional matrix in which documents are embedded and also finding ways of going around or exceeding any limitations that the matrix imposes'. The research team made judgements about how to identify and then analyse company business-historical materials which had survived, been retained, and made publicly available in the company archives. In some cases, this proved problematic, especially when encountering gaps in the records and clear omissions in the materials. For example, precisely how many indentured Indians worked for Rowntree at any given time is difficult to ascertain, as the annual reports on the West Indian estates do not include any numbers about the size and composition of the local workforce, which is itself a telling lack of detail. Similarly, the search of the surviving materials in the firm's archive does not contain any internal correspondence in which Rowntree directors debated how to reconcile their benevolent treatment of their English workers with the controversial practices in place on their overseas plantations. The main strategy for overcoming these issues was through triangulation. Multiple datasets and several different types and styles of sources were analysed to develop the case studies. This enabled the cross-verification of core details which enabled the production of the analytic narratives contained in the two case studies. Triangulating data across multiple sources enabled the researchers to survey the archive materials, including letters/business records and board minutes in conjunction (and comparison) with other *bona fide* business-historical materials and documentary evidence, such as company magazines, company biographies, personal biographies, and contemporary newspapers, to discern the accuracy of the narrative and to contextualise the actions of the firm leaders.

Hermeneutical analysis is based on the theory that “specific texts, or parts of texts, therefore need to be understood in relationships to contexts and vice versa” (Kipping et al. 2014, p. 320). Hermeneutical research methods require the researcher to gain deep knowledge of the social context in which the primary sources were created. Reading widely around the topic enabled the researchers to gain contextual knowledge of the political, business, and legal cultures of the period and the history of British multinational enterprise. We did so by drawing on works in business and corporate history such as Chandler (1990), Wilson (1995) and Jones (2002) as well as corporate histories and biographies of the firms’ senior managers (Gardiner, 1923; Fitzgerald, 1995; Fitzgerald, 2004).

In all historical research projects, quantitative or qualitative, a crucial task facing the researcher is to sub-divide the period covered by their study into distinct eras. The findings below are presented in the form of an analytic narrative, a mode of sharing findings that is now widely used in management research as well as in qualitative economic-historical research (Bucheli et al.,2010; Levi & Weingast, 2016; Gill et al., 2018). Examining this broad range of data and archival materials facilitated the production of two extended historical case studies (Buchnea, 2023), each with four sub-periods, and with each providing insights into the ethically-contested paradoxes encountered at Cadbury and Rowntree during this period.

Case Study One: Cadbury Bros Ltd and São Tomé Before 1909

Pre-Paradox Firm Development, 1831 to 1886

Cadburys (officially Cadbury Brothers Ltd after 1899) developed out of the cocoa manufactory established by the Quaker merchant John Cadbury (1801–1889) in Birmingham in 1831. Under the leadership of George Cadbury (1839–1922), the company grew from twenty employees to approximately 8,600 (Gardiner, 1923). By 1900, Cadburys had become the country's largest cocoa and chocolate manufacturer. In keeping with the Quaker traditions of its owning family, Cadburys diverted profits that would otherwise have been paid as dividends into measures designed to benefit workers and other non-shareholder stakeholders. For instance, it subsidized the construction of houses for workers near its Bournville factory complex as well as a host of sporting facilities and amenities for workers. In 1899, the firm, which had previously been a partnership, was incorporated (Cadbury Ltd., 1899).

In 1895, Cadbury directors attended a conference of Quakers in Manchester that outlined new teachings about economic justice (Kent, 1998; Barbour, 1998). One of the innovative teachings to emerge from this conference was the idea that an employer should pay attention not just to the treatment of his own workers but also those of his suppliers. Following this conference, Cadbury's directors also paid attention to the working conditions in the British companies that supplied them with raw materials. The firm's directors had long been "in the habit of making enquiry as to the labour conditions in the mines from which we bought our coal" and in 1906 the board mandated that all "contracts for machinery and sundries … state that the contract must be carried out by labour paid at proper trade rates" (Robins, 2012, p.600). The directors' sense of moral obligation to workers thus extended beyond the boundaries of the firm to include the employees of the legally separate companies that were their suppliers, although only provided those workers were in the British Isles.

The firm's Articles of Association expressly gave George Cadbury and the other directors, all of whom were close relatives, the right to spend shareholders' money on "charitable and benevolent objectives" (Cadbury Ltd., 1899). This provision was important because English company law had, since 1883, endorsed a hard version of shareholder primacy and that thus severely constrained the ability of managers to spend the stockholders' money on philanthropic ventures (Moore, 2018). The invitation to George Cadbury by the leaders of Britain's labour movement to address the annual meeting of the Trades Union Congress in 1905 testifies to the extent to which he had earned the reputation as a benevolent employer (Gardiner, 1923). Even the critics who charged George Cadbury for his use of slave labour cocoa conceded that "as a philanthropist and friend of humanity, Mr Cadbury's reputation stands as high as his renowned for his sale of cocoa" (*Standard*, 26 Sept 1908). Cadbury, who lived modestly despite his now vast wealth (Gardiner, 1923), donated to a variety of philanthropic and political causes including the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which had worked since 1839 to eliminate all forms and unfree labour from the world. Between 1903 and 1906, the *Daily News*, the newspaper controlled by the Cadbury family, assailed the British government for permitting the importation of Chinese contract labourers into the mines of South Africa, where they worked, it was claimed, in conditions of "modern slavery" (Gardiner, 1923; Rempel, 1975; Valdez, 2021).

Emergence of an Organizational Paradox, 1886 to 1901

Prior to 1886, Cadburys purchased its raw cocoa in London's spot markets and thus did not have direct contractual relationships with the overseas firms that produced cocoa. In that year, however, the firm began to develop a direct relationship with a small group of plantations on the Portuguese-ruled island of São Tomé. The firm's decision to rely on producers in a non-English-speaking jurisdiction requires some explanation because the firm could easily have sourced cocoa from within the boundaries of the British Empire. By opting to rely on São Tomé, the firm was incurring the disadvantages associated with a language barrier and the 1890 law that wanted to create subsidiaries in the Portuguese empire "to incorporate and establish their legal headquarters in Portuguese territory" (da Silva and Neves, 2002, p.1624). The most compelling explanation for the firm's decision to make itself dependent on a small group of plantations in São Tomé for a crucial raw material relates to the lower prices offered by these suppliers. Indeed, the surviving evidence suggests that by stimulating demand for cocoa, Cadburys purchases gave both the institution of slavery on the island and slave raiding in Angola a new lease on life (Burt, 1908; Harper's 1906). The firm's directors began to see evidence as early as 1901 that the cocoa they were purchasing from São Tomé was indeed the product of slave labour.

Slavery was abolished throughout the Portuguese colonial empire in 1869, however, the island's plantation owners in São Tomé deeply resented the decision of officials in Lisbon to end slavery and quickly found ways of continuing to import involuntary African labourers from the mainland (Nartly, 1987; Clarence-Smith, 1993; Kieslow, 2017; Tomich, 2017). After 1875, the solution devised by the planters was to import *serviçais* (or bonded workers) from Angola. These workers were ultimately obtained from tribal rulers in the interior, who received a fee for each captive supplied. Until 1907, virtually no *serviçais* workers returned to the mainland from the island (Cadbury, n.d.). In that year, the Portuguese government responded to growing pressure from the English cocoa manufacturers and Britain's Foreign Office with humanitarian reforms of this system designed to ensure that surviving workers were returned home at the end of their service term (Cadbury, 1910).

Soon after Britain abolished slavery in its empire in the 1830s, the British government began pressuring other countries, such as Portugal, to abolish slavery in their colonial empires (Bethell, 1965; Mason, 2009). When Portugal and Spain abolished slavery they left in place forms of coerced labour (Drescher, 2020). A major preoccupation of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, a charity supported by George Cadbury, was to ensure that labour systems akin to slavery did not re-appear in any of the territories then being transformed by European capital (Trentmann, 2019). Henry Woodd Nevinson, a campaigning journalist, coined the phrase "modern slavery" to refer to the unfree labour he observed in the Belgian

Congo, Angola and elsewhere in Africa. This term came into common currency after about 1906 (Nevinson, 1906).

Managerial Recognition of the Organizational Paradox: 1901 to 1908

In 1901, William Adlington Cadbury, a director and nephew of George Cadbury, reported that he heard rumours of the use of slave labour in São Tomé during a visit to Trinidad in the winter of 1900-1. This director, who was visiting the company's small cocoa plantation there, encountered an Englishman who, "by way of banter" (Cadbury Brothers, 1909), had reported that the Portuguese on São Tomé used enslaved Africans to produce cocoa for Cadbury. The informant said that he had learnt about the existence of slavery in São Tomé from a Royal Navy officer who visited the colony (Cadbury Brothers, 1909, p.2).

Cadburys were first confronted with hard documentary evidence of the existence of slavery on those plantations a few months later. On 30 April 1901, the firm's board directors discussed an advert for a São Tomé plantation that had been brought to their attention. The text of the advert indicated that the plantation's workforce would be included in the sale, along with the land, buildings, and movable assets. The wording suggested that the authors of this advert regarded the plantation's African workforce as property. This emergency board meeting, that was organised at short notice and out of the regular sequence of board meetings, has minutes that provide a note that explained that the cultivation of "African soil" is better done with "Negro hands" rather than with "European labourers" (Board Minutes, Cadbury, 30 April 1901). Unfortunately, these minutes do not elaborate on why the firm's directors believed that it was necessary to use unfree Africans rather than allow free Africans to do this work. The same minute noted that the plantation's workers are "fed principally on bananas…the clothing is very primitive and cost still less, and their treatment while ill is of slight importance" (Board Minutes, Cadburys, 17 Feb 1903). The minutes strongly suggest that the board of directors, which includes George Cadbury and several of his relatives, recognized that their use of unfree African labour was consistent with their prior statements about the social responsibilities of employers.

In early 1903, Matthew Stober, a Scottish missionary who had recently returned from two years in Portuguese-ruled Angola appeared at Cadburys headquarters and reported to the firm's directors that unfree African labourers were being taken from Angola to São Tomé. The members of the Cadbury family who spoke to this visitor politely thanked him for bringing this matter to their attention and then called a board meeting to discuss how to respond to the accumulating evidence that slave labour was being used in São Tomé (Board Minutes, Cadburys, 17 Feb 1903). The directors' response was not to stop purchasing cocoa from there immediately but to try to gain more information to allow for a decision to be taken at some later date.

In early May 1903, the directors of Cadburys met the representative of a competitor firm, J.S. Fry and Sons of Bristol, to discuss this issue. They agreed that their companies should work together to collect information with a view to pressuring the São Tomé planters to "improve the lot" of the African workers who produced cocoa for the British market (Board Minutes, Cadburys, 12 May 1903). The directors indicated that they did not want to act rashly in terminating their purchases from the island and would instead work with other cocoa-importing firms to investigate whether the accusations of slavery were true. They declared that if the rumours of slave labour were accurate, they would then give the São Tomé planters one final chance to improve their treatment of their workers. A younger member of the family, William Adlington Cadbury, was tasked with gathering information (Anonymous, 1958).

William travelled to Lisbon in 1903 to research the matter on behalf of the two companies. While the senior British diplomat in the country told him that the rumours that slavery existed in São Tomé were almost certainly true, the Portuguese Minister of Colonies and the lobbying group that represented the São Tomé planters denied this charge in their meetings with William (Board Minutes, Cadbury, 5 July 1904). The Portuguese also told William that any abuses of African workers were trivial and would, in any case, soon be remedied by the implementation of the royal decree of January 1903, which had aimed to improve working conditions for African labourers. Faced with conflicting accounts of what was happening in São Tomé, the Cadbury board decided that yet more investigation was required before any sort of decision about terminating purchases from São Tomé could be taken. In 1904, William Adlington Cadbury met Sir Henry Johnstone, a noted expert on Africa, to determine whether he believed the rumours of slavery were correct. Johnstone reported that he had visited the island in 1884 and found that labour conditions there were excellent, with no signs of any form of slavery being visible to him. However, as the meeting minutes observed "this date was of course before the Colony became an important cocoa-growing centre" (Board Minutes, Cadbury, 5 July 1904).

Conflicting reports and information forced Cadbury to employ a strategy of self-doubting evidenced by their unwillingness to make the decision to stop using São Tomé cocoa until they were certain that *de facto* slave labour was used there. As a result, the firm's directors hired Joseph Burtt, a fellow Quaker, to conduct further investigations. Burtt travelled to Portugal and then São Tomé, where he inspected the plantations, and finally to Angola, the source of the island's workforce. During his travels around the island of São Tomé, Burtt, who was graciously hosted by a variety of planters, appeared to be uncertain about whether the workforce should be categorized as living in a state of slavery (Burtt, 1905a, 1905b, 1905c, 1905d, 1905d). However, during his visit to the African mainland, Burtt concluded that the workers the Portuguese called *serviçais* were indeed essentially slaves (Burtt, 1906a, 1906b, 1906c). His damning report was shown to the Cadburys board and senior British government officials. At the request of the UK government, which wished to avoid offending the government of Portugal, an important ally, the report was not published but was instead hand-delivered to Portugal's colonial minister and the owners of the São Tomé estates (Burtt, 1908). The evidence base was now deemed indisputable and the strategy of self-doubting ceased.

In a meeting in Lisbon, Portugal's colonial minister, an individual who was viewed by some of his compatriots as having dangerously liberal views about the rights of African workers, promised William Adlington and Burtt that the conditions of the workers would be improved (Burtt, 1908). He also declared every *serviçais* worker who wished to leave the plantation would now be allowed to do so. Shortly after this meeting, however, Portugal's monarch and crown prince were assassinated, which led to the installation of a more conservative colonial minister. The inability of the government in Lisbon to end slavery in São Tomé then forced Cadbury's directors to act. At a board meeting in February 1908, the directors decided that no more than one-third of the cocoa purchased by Cadburys should originate from São Tomé (Cadbury Board of Directors, 1908). In 1907, Cadburys had begun the costly process of creating an alternative supply of cocoa by nurturing a cocoa production and distribution system in present-day Ghana, where peasant proprietors were paid a premium to induce them to begin producing this unfamiliar crop (Cadbury Brothers Ltd, No Date; Southall, 1975, pp.58-60). There were no further discussions of the São Tomé slavery issue by the firm's board of directors until the autumn of 1908, shortly after the British public was first informed of the firm's use of slave-produced cocoa by a sensational newspaper article.

Stakeholder Recognition and Managerial Resolution of the Organizational Paradox, 1908 to 1909

The British public had, by 1908, come to associate the Cadbury family and brand name with a wide range of progressive political causes. The Cadbury family were also famous for their strong support of the centre-left Liberal Party. On 26 September 1908, the *Standard* newspaper, which supported the centre-right Unionist party, published an article reporting that the firm controlled by the great humanitarian George Cadbury was, at long last, investigating the "conditions of slavery" that existed on the plantations that supplied his raw cocoa. The paper asked why the trips to investigate conditions on São Tomé had "been deferred so long" and suggested that Cadbury's philanthropic activities, which included laudable efforts to improve the lives of workers in Birmingham, were being cross-subsidized by slave labourers. The article further charged that Cadbury and his relatives were "callous and indifferent to the conditions under which those who contributed to the production of cocoa for their manufacture worked" (*Standard*, 1908).

The appearance of this article was a turning point. On 5 October 1908, the firm filed a libel claim against the *Standard* newspaper. The resulting trial took place in December 1909. In March 1909, Cadbury Brothers issued an announcement jointly with Fry's, another British chocolate maker, and Stollwerck, the German chocolatier, that they would cease purchasing cocoa produced in São Tomé with immediate effect (Cadbury Brothers Ltd., 1909, p.9). The company decided that it would henceforth rely on peasant producers in British colonies in Africa as the primary source of their cocoa (Cadbury Brothers Ltd, no date). To make this policy a reality, Cadbury accelerated the development of cocoa production on the Gold Coast by paying labourers above market rates for cocoa beans and supporting efforts to educate local farmers about how to grow and process this crop (Southall, 1975). In late September 1908, William Adlington Cadbury departed Birmingham for Africa, where he would supervise the creation of a new supply system to replace the São Tomé cocoa. The well-wishers who attended his farewell party in a café near the plant included many hourly-paid workers, which suggests that the firm's manufacturing workforce was made aware of the potential impact of this reputational crisis on their livelihoods (Fletcher's Café, 1908).

An example of disinforming was evidenced when the firm's directors arranged for all canvas sacks marked with 'São Tomé' to be discretely removed from the Bournville factory and destroyed (Cadbury Brothers, 1909). Indeed, Jeremy (1990, p.148) documents a further instance of disinforming when Cadbury, as director of the *Daily News*, instructed the editor to "withhold mention of the Sao Tome affair because they 'were afraid it might wreck the work we are trying do'". Meanwhile, preparation for the libel trial continued. During the trial, Cadburys lawyers argued the delays in ending purchases from São Tomé were because the firm had sought to use its purchasing power to bring about improved working conditions. The jury eventually ruled in favour of Cadburys but awarded them only token damages of a farthing (*Church Times,* 1909; *Advertiser*, 1909). Thereafter, the firm does not appear to have seriously considered resuming the use of São Tomé cocoa despite encouragement from Portugal's new republican government and even figures in the British diplomatic corps to do so (Hall-Hall, 1916).

This case has sown how during this eight-year period Cadburys managers lived with an uncomfortable organizational paradox. The main strategy that the firm's board of directors used to manage the continuing use of morally dubious raw materials was by claiming to be uncertain about whether the raw cocoa they used was produced with slave labour. This justification strategy is self-doubting as this approach requires managers to appear to be less confident of their ability to accurately perceive reality. Another strategy adopted was disinforming which involved hiding information which could provide evidence the firm in its continued use of slave produced cocoa or by instructing the *Daily News* to withhold information that could be damaging whilst the libel case was ongoing.

Case Study Two: Use of Indentured Labour on Rowntree's Caribbean Estates

Pre-Paradox Firm Development, 1862-1898

In 1862, the Quaker grocer Henry Rowntree purchased an existing cocoa works in York. Historians have described Henry's younger brother Joseph (1836-1925) as the driving force behind the firm's dramatic expansion after 1869 (Fitzgerald, 1995; Vernon, 2013). Under Joseph's leadership, the firm pioneered new methods of mass manufacturing, marketing, and distribution. In 1897, the firm was listed on the London Stock Exchange, but it remained under the close control of Joseph, his sons, and nephews (Fitzgerald, 1995). Throughout this period at the helm of the firm, Joseph Rowntree remained an important leader of the Quaker denomination and a supporter of progressive political and social causes similar to those supported by George Cadbury (Vernon, 2013).

Along with members of the Cadbury family, Joseph Rowntree attended the 1895 convention of Quakers in Manchester at which the denomination had endorsed the doctrine that businessmen had very strong moral obligations to ensure the wellbeing of workers and other stakeholders (Kent, 1998; Barbour, 1998). Rowntree launched numerous initiatives designed to improve conditions for their own staff. Repudiating the doctrine that the sole fiduciary duty of company directors was to their shareholders, which was then enshrined in UK company law (Moore, 2018). Joseph Rowntree declared that he saw his company as "a God-given trust" and that he was required to balance his responsibilities to his workers and the wider community with his duty to make profits for the shareholders (Fitzgerald, 1995, p.212).

The firm's diversion of profits into measures designed to benefit workers appears to have begun in 1891 when the company appointed a welfare officer tasked with ensuring the well-being of their factory women. Paid sick leave was introduced in 1902, as was free access to a company doctor. A company pension scheme was created in 1906, and the company subsidized employee sporting and musical societies (Fitzgerald, 1996). Spending on safety equipment in the factory was well above the legal minimum. The model village of New Earswick was constructed, which provided excellent working-class housing at below-market rates (Davies & Freeman, 2005). In 1904, Joseph Rowntree announced his intention to give away most of his net worth to three charitable trusts. The firm subsequently moved to democratize its internal governance via the creation of a works council in which the worker's elected representatives counterbalanced the authority of managers (Rowntree, 1928) .

Emergence of the Organizational Paradox, 1898 to 1902

Prior to the late 1890s, the company had been content to rely on London spot markets for its supplies of sugar and cocoa. The firm's decision to integrate backwards by purchasing a cocoa-producing plantation in the British West Indies was motivated by fears that the world's cocoa producers might soon form a cartel to increase prices. In 1898, John Wilhelm Rowntree persuaded his fellow directors to acquire cocoa plantations in Dominica, Trinidad, and Jamaica, three British colonies (Fitzgerald, 1996). The firm's West Indian properties turned out to be loss-making ventures. Even the best-performing estates succeeded in making small cash profits that barely covered the interest payments on the loans contracted to purchase them (Rowntree Ltd, 1916). In early 1917, following a visit to York by the head of the West Indian operations, the board of directors began considering the sale of the Vinery estate. It was decided that the company would try to offload this property "if a customer could be found…" (Rowntree Ltd, 1917). In a desperate effort to stem the losses from West Indian properties, the company's local managers began growing limes and bananas for sale to the United Fruit Company of the United States (Rowntree, 1917). In short, the poor financial condition of the West Indian plantations meant that these subsidiaries would have limited resources to invest in employee wellbeing, even if the firm's managers had been inclined to make such expenditures.

After the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, the previously prosperous plantations of the British West Indies had stagnated as their owners had first struggled to secure sufficient labour to harvest crops and then, from the 1840s, ruinous competition in the British market from sugar produced in jurisdictions that had not yet abolished slavery such as Cuba and Brazil, where slavery was legal until the 1880s (Smith and Johns, 2019). After extensive lobbying by the owners of West Indian estates, the British government authorised a system of indentured servitude whereby workers in India would sign a contract that obliged them to work in the British West Indies for a term of seven years, for whichever planter purchased their contract (Saunders, 2018). To satisfy the concerns of abolitionists in Britain who feared that this system might degenerate into outright slavery, the treatment of the indentured workers was closely supervised by the Protector of Emigrant's team of inspectors (Connolly, 2018). Indian indentured workers were commonly referred to as "coolies", a term now deemed derogatory (Mahase, 2008; Sturman, 2014; Tomich, 2017).

Because it resembled slavery, the indentured labour system intermittently attracted negative attention in the British press until its abolition in 1917 (Sturman, 2014). Within the British West Indies, the system was resented by the descendants of the freed African slaves, who believed it depressed the prevailing scale of wages. Indentured servitude was also opposed by trade unionists in Britain. Plantation owners naturally favoured the perpetuation of the system (Mangru, 1986). From 1900, Indian nationalists, who were then demanding self-government within the British Empire for India, called for the abolition of the indentured labour system (Vahed, 2019). When the West Indian Royal Commission investigated the economy of the British West Indies in 1897, it heard conflicting views about whether the Indian indentured labour system should be continued (HM Government, 1897). In 1902, the use of indentured labour in the British West Indies was debated in parliament (Chamberlain, 1902). In 1910, there was yet another official investigation of the workings of the Indian indentured system in the West Indies: the Sanderson Commission did not recommend the end of this controversial system but did propose both further study and remedial measures designed to end any abuses of the Indian workers (Sanderson, 1910).

Indian indentured workers appear to have been an important source of labour for cocoa producers in the British West Indies after 1890, as planters struggled to cope with surging demand for chocolate in Britain (Euwema, 1993). A change in the regulations governing the welfare of Indian indentured labourers that went into effect in 1887, which reduced the costs of employing such labour, also meant that the West Indian cocoa producers "were in a better position to employ Indians" (Perry, 1969, p.77). Given that many other cocoa producers in the region employed Indian indentured labour, it is thus not surprising that Rowntree also employed Indian workers on its West Indian estates. Scattered references in the firm's magazine show that Indian indentured workers worked alongside free Black workers. The firm was certainly not ashamed to employ indentured workers.

In May 1902 the company produced *Cocoa Works Magazine* reported that "about forty of the labourers are East Indian immigrants or coolies, who live on the estate in single-room barracks" on the Dover Estate. They worked alongside "negroes, some living in their own cottages" (Cocoa Works Magazine, 1902). This article suggested to the English readership that is it entirely natural that the firm housed its employees in the Caribbean differently according to whether they were free Black or indentured Indian workers. The company magazine also reported that the firm employed local managers with the specialised skills needed to manage bonded Indian workers. For instance, readers were informed that the manager of the company's Vinery estate, an Antiguan white named Hamilton Macdonald, had been hired because he had previously "gained valuable experience in the management of East Indian coolies" doing so whilst working on a sugar plantation in Barbados (Cocoa Works Magazine, 1906).

Managerial Recognition and Justification of the Organizational Paradox, 1902 to 1921

As noted above, Rowntree had, by the time it had acquired the West Indian properties in 1898, developed a reputation in Britain for being a progressive company that made extensive investments in the well-being of its workers. Moreover, Rowntree directors had, in their capacity as private citizens, campaigned for a variety of social causes that were aimed at improving the conditions of various disadvantaged groups in the British Isles, such as industrial workers in England and the Irish peasantry. The decision of the managers of the firm to then use Indian indentured labour in the West Indian properties at a time when the use of bonded labour was increasingly controversial in Britain therefore requires explanation. How did the firms attempt to manage their paradoxical actions in practising an expensive form of welfare capitalism in York while using a contemporaneously controversial labour system on their overseas plantations?

How the firm depicted the tropical plantations in its company magazine provides important insights into how they justified the disparity in the treatment of its British and West Indian workforces. This magazine was produced under the close control of the firm's senior managers and can be regarded as giving the firm's official stance on all controversial issues. The magazine began publishing articles about the workers on Rowntree's overseas plantation in 1902, at a time when concern in Britain over the treatment of West Indian workers had been heightened by an official investigation of the indentured labour system (HM Government, 1897). Based on the reading of the relevant articles in this magazine, this study illustrates that the firm justified this paradoxical disparity in two main ways, which we call disinforming, and subordinating.

Disinforming involves misrepresenting the facts on the ground so that an obvious organizational paradox, such as inconsistencies in how a firm treats its workers in different parts of the world, does not become apparent. In its internal communications, the company stressed that it provided social benefits to its Black and South Asian workers analogous to those given to employees in York. For instance, in an article that described the firm's Blenheim Estate in Dominica, the workers were described as a "happy set of folk, depending largely on the cultivation of their own plots of ground, and forming a finer type" than the negroes "to be found in the coast towns." The same article reported how the estate manager, one C.S. Kitching had even gone so far as to organize a "moonlight dance" for the workpeople at which refreshments had been served (Cocoa Works Magazine, 1906). The magazine also printed a photograph of Black children, some nude, playing cricket on one of the firm's West Indian plantations, observing that the cocoa works in York also supported a cricket team (Cocoa Works Magazine, 1910)

The term subordinating means that the firms responded to an organizational paradox by referring to some higher moral principle, making the moral questions raised by the paradox seem like they are of subordinate importance. In discussing the treatment of workers in the West Indies, the firm referred to the need to help reduce the drain these colonies were imposing on the British taxpayer. The company magazine claimed that before its recent investments in cocoa production, the islands' economies had been stagnant and Black people were emigrating. The implication was that by using Indian bonded workers to produce a crucial commodity, the firm was helping to stimulate local trade, meaning that the descendants of slaves would not need to emigrate. One article claimed that "like unhappy Ireland, Dominica has been under every form of government without any great success having been achieved." The economy had long stagnated, prompting an extensive emigration to Venezuela and "the gold mines of Cayenne…A once flourishing coffee industry has disappeared" as has the sugar cane industry. However, in the last ten years a few young Englishmen with capital and energy have helped to build up a new trade in cocoa and lime juice, the population has increased, and the island is paying its way" (Cocoa Works Magazine, July 1902). The author was here referring to the outflow of workers to economic opportunities in French Guiana. Here the magazine was alluding to the then-common idea that Britain's West Indian colonies were a net drain on the British taxpayer since local tax receipts did not cover government expenditures. The clear implication was that since making the colonies financially self-sufficient was of crucial importance, any controversial labour practices associated with cocoa production should be accepted.

Discussion

We now discuss the implications of our findings for business historians who are increasingly interested in how this subject matter is connected to historical debates about slavery and global supply chains. As we noted above, the management literature on modern slavery in supply chains is informed by the assumption that if only consumers, managers, and other actors in the Global North knew about the unfree labour was involved in the production of commodities they consume, they would immediately cease purchasing all imported goods made with unfree labour. This assumption implies that eliminating modern slavery will simply involve providing consumers and other actors with more information rather than changing anyone's values. We also noted that Smith and Johns (2022) challenged this assumption: these authors showed that even when consumers know that the goods they are consuming are produced with unfree labour, they will nevertheless persist in buying such goods if it is expedient to do so. The findings of this paper largely corroborate these claims in that the managers in the first of our case studies, Cadburys, persisted in relying on unfree labour even after they had been presented with abundant evidence that their cocoa purchases were rewarding slave owners. The broader lesson for management academics and other interesting in finding solutions to the problem of modern slavery in supply chains is that supply chain transparency by itself will be insufficient to eliminate modern slavery and the difficult task of changing values must be addressed.

The literature observed that while researchers are increasingly interested in ethically-contested organizational paradoxes, the current literature has not yet provided an understanding of how firms manage the existence of such paradoxes to themselves and to others. Researchers have also observed that organizational paradoxes are culturally constructed (Hahn and Knight, 2021a) whilst Berti and Simpson (2021b, p.411) called for more research to improve our understanding of how managers undertake the "moral legitimation" of organizational paradoxes. Through our study of how managers at Cadbury and Rowntree, we have identified three main strategies that the firms use to manage the paradoxical behaviour of their organizations. They are *disinforming*, *subordinating, and self-doubting*.

Disinforming involves misrepresenting reality so that an obvious organizational paradox, does not become apparent in the public domain and to internal and external stakeholders. Subordinating means that the firm manage the organizational paradox by referring to some higher goal that is used to justify a given course of action that is regarded as ethically dubious. Self-doubting means that managers delay costly decisions by trivialising the matter, even when the facts are ethically salient. In self-doubting, a manager adopts a pose of excessive epistemic humility that allows them to avoid or delay taking costly action. Self-doubting and disinforming were the main strategies used by the managers of Cadburys in the first case study, while the strategies of disinforming, and subordinating were used by the managers of Rowntree.

The cases demonstrate how managers confronted with an ethically significant organizational paradox, such as a significant difference in its treatment of two classes of workers, are presented with three available strategies for managing and responding to the persistence of the paradox. They can use any number of these strategies and combine them in different proportions. Which of these strategies will be used by managers in each context depends, in part, on the firm's circumstances. When the companies in the two case studies are compared, differences are evident in which of the three strategies managers predominantly used. One major difference between the firms is that in the case of Cadbury, the firm's most important stakeholders, such as British consumers, came to recognize that there was a morally significant organizational paradox: particularly after hostile newspapers accused this benevolent firm of relying on goods produced with slave labour, the firm made heavy use of the self-doubting strategy. In the case of Rowntree, there is no surviving evidence that the firm's customers and other key stakeholders became aware of the equivalent paradox that affected this company, which treated its British workers well while simultaneously using indentured labour and other contemporaneously controversial practices in their tropical plantations.

The difference in the approach of the firms and whether they used the self-doubting strategy (Cadbury used it extensively whilst Rowntree did not) can be accounted for by the greater informational asymmetries present in Cadburys overseas supply chain relative to that of Rowntree's. The tropical plantations that supplied Rowntree were wholly owned subsidiaries in English-speaking British colonies. In contrast, the slave-labouring using plantations on which Cadbury relied were contract producers located in a country whose language was unknown the Cadbury's managers. These managers had more scope to credibly plead ignorance than if the plantations had been within the boundaries of the firm and the language barrier had been absent.

There are parallels between the justification strategies used by the historical managers we have studied (disinforming, subordinating, and self-doubting) and more recent behaviour by managers that have been discussed by researchers. For instance, two historians of science, have explored how managers in the tobacco and hydrocarbon industries have used "hired gun" scientific experts, including statisticians, to try to call into doubt the increasingly clear evidence that their products were harmful (Oreskes and Conway, 2010). The managers did so with the intention of buying their industries time and delaying the costly actions needed to remediate the harms being done. There is a striking parallel between the actions of the tobacco and oil industries and the Cadburys managers who conducted extensive and lengthy fact-finding missions that were ostensibly about confirming whether the Portuguese planters were really using slave labour. This study demonstrates how managers persisted with these investigations long after there was indisputable evidence confirming the rumours of slave labour. this may have been because managers were trying to delay costly actions, in their case, the creation of whole new cocoa supply chain on the Gold Coast.

Comparing the Rowntree and Cadbury cases illustrates that while the ideological commitments and religious orientations of the owning families of the two firms were very similar and contributed to the development of a latent paradox, it only became a salient paradoxical tension in the case of Cadburys due to a range of factors that included the firm’s political orientation and the specific nature of its relationship with overseas commodities producers. The broader lesson that paradox researchers can draw from our research is that whether a latent paradox becomes salient is depends on a range of socio-cultural factors such as the values prevalent in their social environment and the political and religious beliefs that influence cognition in a given organizational culture (in this case the cultures of two Quaker family firms).

There are two core strands of literature which this study engages. One strand includes papers that imply that changes in the salience of issues are driven by exogenous factors. Another strand in the literature focused on dynamics within firms, such as changes in the cognition of top management team managers, in thinking about how issues become more salient to firms. The findings of the two case studies suggest that while both exogenous and endogenous factors play a role in changing the salience to firms of social issues, endogenous factors were probably at least as important as the exogenous ones.

As this study demonstrates, increasing attention was paid in Britian in the first decade of the twentieth century to the issue of slave-labour and slave-like labour practices in tropical countries. Scandals over the brutal exploitation of workers in the Belgian Congo and the Transvaal put the issue on the front pages of newspapers. Henry Woodd Nevinson, the journalist who coined and popularized the term “modern slavery” in 1905, helped to strategically reframe the issue that increased its potential salience to firms. Thus, when *the Standard* broke the story in 1908 that Cadbury’s was relying on cocoa produced by *de facto* slaves, the issue of working conditions in Sao Tome became highly salient to the firm. This issue would have been highly salient for the managers of any chocolate company operating in the social context of Britain in 1908 regardless of the characteristics of the individuals who were the top managers. For any British company of this era, being accused of involvement in slavery would have represented a crisis.

However, the personal characteristics of the individuals who were in charge of Cadbury’s contributed to the issue becoming salient to this firm. The family that controlled this firm had, thanks to their religious beliefs, a very strong commitment to ensuring the welfare of workers. Indeed, members of the Cadburys family, along with members of the Rowntree family, had led the movement in 1895 to commit the Quaker denomination to a set of teachings that held that the owners of firms had a religious duty to maximize worker wellbeing. This endogenous set of forces helped to make the issue modern slavery salient to the firm even before the public revelations of 1908. As early as 1903, members of the board had extended discussions about this issue, which appear to have caused them considerable personal pain. The broader lesson management academics can take from this case study is that they should increase the degree to which they regard endogenous or firm-specific phenomena as important in determining whether an issue of latent salience will become important to a firm.

The issue of how overseas workers were treated remained a latent issue in the case of Rowntrees. In our view, this difference between the two companies is largely a function of contingency or luck rather than any fundamental difference between the two firms: intelligence of the deplorable treatment of cocoa harvesters in Sao Tome happened to reach a newspaper that was hostile to the Cadbury family. If the details of working conditions on the West Indian estates of the Rowntree family had reached similarly hostile journalists, it could have been weaponized in the same way. In this way, Rowntree was simply luckier than Cadburys.

Contingency goes largely unacknowledged in the literature on how latent issues become more salient to firms. Historians and philosophers of historical causation have long debated the roles of luck, serendipity, and chance in determining historical outcomes (Merton, 1957; Carr, 1961; Braudel, 1980; Hawthorn, 1993; Bunzl, 2004; Talbot, 2009; Maar, 2014). The findings presented in this paper suggests that an appreciation of the importance of historical contingency need to be integrated into the models we use to understand stakeholder salience.

Conclusion

The historical case studies developed in this paper enhance the understanding of how firms manage or rationalise the type of organizational paradoxes that have a strong ethical or moral dimension. Future historical research could contribute to debates in management about the "normalization" of organizational wrongdoing, a separate area of management theory (Earle, Spicer, and Peter, 2010; Palmer, 2013) that Nix and Decker (2023) have argued could be tackled using historical data and methods. This study has identified the various strategies that the managers in the case studies used along with boundary conditions. Future research should identify other strategies that are used by managers who seek to justify similar organizational paradoxes. Given that organizational paradoxes can be connected to such socially important issues as supply chain ethics, the treatment of workers, and different conceptualizations of the fiduciary duties of managers, additional research on this topic should be a priority.

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