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The elusiveness of strategic HR partnering:
Using paradox theory to understand tensions
surrounding the HR business partnering role

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Abstract
Human resource business partnering is an established mechanism for the advancement of strategic HR. While much research has reported on relationships between partners (HRBPs) and line managers, relationships between partners and other aspects of the HR function are less well understood, as is the interplay between HRBP-LMP and HRBP-HR relationships. Through the use of paradox theory and case study methodology centred on a large public sector health care authority, we found these two sets of relationships to be operating paradoxically within an operational frame of reference, thereby constraining the establishment of strategic partnering.

KEYWORDS
business partner, HR business partners, HR function, HR professional, line manager, paradox theory, qualitative data

1 | INTRODUCTION

For decades, the HR function, and the roles within it, have experienced tensions. For example, Drucker (1961: 269–270) described the ‘personnel’ function as a “hodge-podge”, comprising a “collection of incidental techniques without much internal cohesion”. Out of these tensions has emerged what Keegan et al. (2018, p. 1112) describe
as "perhaps the most popular model" of HR which sees the function divided into three areas: administrative/routine aspects in the form of a Shared Service Centre (SSC); Centres of Excellence for expertise and policy (CoEs); and a strategic business partnering unit (Human Resource Business Partners – HRBPs; see also Marchington, 2015; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Hird et al., 2010; Ulrich, 1997, 1998). The rationale for this division is to facilitate strategic intimacy towards Line Manager Partners (LMPs) (through the HRBP unit), quality innovation in terms of policy making (CoEs), and administrative and operational excellence (SSCs) (Keegan et al., 2018).

Despite the commonality of this approach numerous tensions between the various HR actors and roles persist (see, for example, Gubbins & Garavan, 2016; Pritchard, 2010; Roche & Teague, 2012; Sheehan et al., 2014). As summarized by Keegan et al. (2019: 79–80), HR practitioners remain confronted with "myriad tensions embedded in the structured antagonism that pervades the employment relationship…, in the clash between operational and strategic activities…, and in the people-centred versus business-centred interests served by HR practitioners and the policies and practices they develop." In short, the function contains "different – and at times contradictory – elements" (Keegan et al., 2018, p. 1112), and while the function, and its practitioner roles, have morphed over the decades, tensions remain.

In this paper we employ paradox theory to develop a fuller understanding of specific tensions surrounding the HRBP role, their impact on role manifestation, and whether the resulting manifestation allows partners to fulfil the strategic role envisaged (Marchington, 2015; Ulrich, 1997, 1998; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Ulrich et al., 2012). Whilst research has examined HRBP-LMP relationships and tensions (Lemmergaard, 2009; McCracken et al., 2017; Pritchard, 2010), relationship dynamics between HRBPs and their colleagues in the HR function (HR-HRBP relationships) are less well understood. Further, paradox theory allows us to move beyond the dyadic examination of the two relationships central to the partner’s role (HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP) to explore the dynamic interplay of the two ('the relationship between relationships') as tensions "emerge and evolve, dissolve or reproduce themselves in the context of ongoing social interaction" (Langley & Sloan, 2011, p. 262).

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | The HRBP context

The role of the HRBP is to partner with LMPs to enable the achievement of strategic goals (McCracken et al., 2017). Research into various HRBP models (see, for example, Stríteský & Quigley, 2014), and the core competencies underpinning the role (Caldwell, 2008; Ward, 2008) is well established and several authors have examined the HRBP-LMP interface and identified tensions around the administrative/transactional versus strategic focus of HRBPs (Chiu & Selmer, 2011; Wright, 2008). These include LMP demands for operational (rather than strategic) support arising from the relative remoteness of SSCs and CoEs (Keegan et al., 2018), issues around LMP competence in assuming operational HR responsibilities, and role conflict on the part of LMPs around ‘line’ versus ‘HR’ responsibilities (McConville, 2006; Renwick, 2003). McCracken et al. (2017) argue that failure to address such demands can threaten HRBP–LMP relationship development, which is therefore predicated on providing some operational, as well as strategic, support. However, the impact this has on other relationships surrounding the HRBP role – HR-HRBP and HR-LMP – is less clear.

Strategic partnering also requires that HRBPs work effectively with the other elements of the HR function. However, this HR-HRBP interface is less well researched, and empirical evidence on how the three differentiated HR functions (CoEs, SSCs and HRBPs) operate/should operate in practice is thus less clear (Farndale & Paauwe, 2009; Keegan et al., 2018; Van Dam et al., 2013), with the model's theoretical basis itself being questioned by some researchers (Caldwell, 2008). Myriad tensions have been identified, including role conflict and role ambiguity and struggles between strategic and operational focus, change versus continuity, intervention versus non-intervention, and people versus process (see Keegan et al., 2018). Gubbins and Garavan (2016, p. 241) reported that HR
professionals face "inherent functional and relationship tensions" between the various roles which they are required to adopt (see also Roche & Teague, 2012). Lemmergaard (2009, p. 187), too, has argued that "tensions are created between the expected, perceived, and enacted (HR) roles simply because of inherent paradoxes. Role conflict arises due to opposing interests between roles". Referring specifically to the partnering role, Pritchard (2010, p. 185) noted tensions in the HR department whereby HRBPs were "seen to 'both have their cake and eat it' in respect to notions of being free to be strategic but retaining a say in transactional issues". Clearly then, the potential for tensions and conflict between differentiated HR functions and roles is well established in the literature.

These two sets of relationships (HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP) constitute the immediate operating environment faced by partners, with each presenting competing pressures, pushes and pulls on the partnering role. While acknowledging that other pressures and tensions (for example in the form of HR – employee relationships, increasing HR complexity as it moves beyond the HR department and line management, and more widely HR’s ongoing quest for legitimacy and status; see Brandl et al., 2017; Keegan et al., 2012), may also impact role manifestation, the purpose of this paper is to develop understanding of the primary role played by these two key relationships. We propose that any response to tensions within either dyadic (HR-HRBP or HRBP-LMP) will have implications for the other. In other words, that the two sets of relationships are interdependent, and that potential exists for contradiction and tension to emerge between the two. Interdependence, together with the potential for contradiction and tension, represent the central elements of a paradoxical relationship (Smith & Lewis, 2011), so we turn to paradox theory to better understand the interplay of partnering relationships.

2.2 | Paradox theory

Previous research has introduced the language of paradox theory in its attempts to explain tensions within the HR function (see for example, Charlwood et al., 2022; Rodrigues et al., 2020). Keegan et al. (2018, 2019) have argued that paradox theory can offer a valuable lens through which to explore tensions within HR, and in particular the role of the HR practitioner. Therefore, consistent with Cunha and Putman’s (2019: 100) contention that "(r)ather than treating paradox as a problem or a tool, we believe that scholars should examine how organizational actors respond in paradoxical situations", we introduce paradox theory - the nature of paradox, its (differing) forms, tensions which may render a situation paradoxical, and the conditions – contextual and individual – which animate tensions and paradox.

2.3 | Paradox tensions

At the heart of paradox theory lie tensions arising from contradiction between organisational elements. In "one of the most well developed and cited frameworks for exploring tensions" (Aust et al., 2015, p. 199), Smith and Lewis (2011) identify four tension categories which may lead to the emergence of paradox: organising, performing, belonging and learning tensions.

Organising tensions arise from the issue of how work is to be completed and by whom (processes), reflect organisational complexity and structural design alternatives, and originate from “competing designs and processes to achieve a desired outcome” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 384). Performing tensions at the macro level reflect stakeholder plurality and are rooted in “multiple and competing goals as stakeholders seek divergent organisational success” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 383). These reflect tensions around what is to be done rather than how it should be done, or who should do it. At the individual/micro level Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) argue that performing tensions can emerge as inevitable ‘spillover’ from organising decisions which present individuals with conflicting demands.

Within the HR context previous research has identified few examples of performing tensions at the macro level (for example, little disagreement around either the operational or strategic goals of HR); however, at the individual level, HR professionals face performance tensions in the form of divergent expectations from different stakeholders.
Cohen (2015) has also noted performance tensions arising from stakeholder perceptions of HR professionals, whereby senior management apply strategic performance criteria to HR professionals while much of the organisation may view HR staff as administrative employees responsible for smooth day-to-day people management. Examples of organising tensions abound - including role confusion, ambiguity and conflict, tensions around who has (or should have) responsibility for both operational and strategic HR responsibilities, and in the HRBP context which HR tasks should be delegated, and which retained (Gerpott, 2015; Keegan et al., 2018; Leemergaard, 2009; McCracken et al., 2017; Pohler & Willness, 2014; Roche & Teague, 2012). Spillover from organizing tensions has been found to energetise performing tensions on the part of LMPs, including: goal conflict in terms of prioritising the line division at the expense of wider organisational considerations; prioritising immediate line responsibilities at the expense of strategic responsibilities; and reluctance to accept HR responsibilities due to concerns around workload, competence, and performance metrics in place (Brandl et al., 2009; Hailey et al., 2005; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003).

Thirdly, belonging tensions arise as organizational members – both as individuals and groups – seek to achieve and assert both individuality and homogeneity (see, for example, Kreiner et al., 2006; Smith & Berg, 1987), fulfil opposing yet co-existing roles, and attempt to manage and reconcile competing values and identities (Badaracco, 1998; Gubbins & Garavan, 2016; Huy, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). The introduction of HR partnering has fundamental belonging implications for both HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships, rendering belonging tensions a likely outcome. Marchington et al. (2011) argue that boundaries within the HR context have become increasingly blurred in recent years, increasing the potential for belonging tensions, while in 2003 Caldwell warned of the emergence of a potential division within HR itself, with some HR professionals tasked with strategic responsibilities emerging as an elite, while others tasked with entry-level and administrative responsibilities are afforded low status.

Finally, learning tensions emerge as systems change and develop, reflecting tensions between past, present, and future practices (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Such tensions are exacerbated by the nature and pace of change (Weick & Quinn, 1999). The introduction of HR partnering, and the accompanying redefinition of roles and responsibilities creates learning needs for all parties involved in the partnering model – HR, HRBPs and LMPs (Caldwell, 2008; McCracken et al., 2017; Ward, 2008).

This leads us to our first research question:

RQ1: to what extent does the introduction of HR partnering lead to the development of organising, performing, belonging and learning tensions between HR, HRBPs and LMPs?

Paradoxical tensions can be further broken down into inherent, and socially constructed tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Inherent tensions - “contradictory yet interrelated elements embedded in organizing processes that persist because of organizational complexity and adaptation” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 389) - arise out of the process of organizing itself, in the form of dualities embedded in structures, processes and systems. While existing in every organisation, such tensions often remain latent until animated by contextual factors, whereupon organisational members transform these ‘latent’ tensions into ‘salient’ tensions through a process of paradoxical cognition (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Once salient, these tensions then drive response behaviours on the part of organizational members which – depending on their nature – can result in the emergence of “vicious” or “virtuous” development cycles (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 391).

Three contextual factors appear to be particularly relevant to the process whereby latent tensions become salient - plurality, change, and scarcity (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Plurality relates to the existence of multiple views, opinions and inconsistencies which bring opposing elements to the fore (Cohen & March 1974). Organisational change drives a need for new ‘sense-making’ (Mantere et al., 2012) as members “grapple with conflicting short- and long-term needs... and with competing yet co-existing roles and emotions” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 390). Finally, resource scarcity creates the potential for allocation decisions to exacerbate tensions between opposing, yet inter-related,
The introduction of the HRBP model represents a significant organisational change, involves multiple stakeholders, and aims to secure more efficient use of resources; as such it encompasses all of Smith and Lewis’s (2011) drivers of salient tensions (see also Gerpott, 2015). As Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 390) argue: “taken together, plurality, change and scarcity challenge our bounded rationality and stress systems. As a result, individuals are more prone to break apart inter-woven elements into either/or decisions, practices and understanding, blurring their inter-relatedness”. This leads to our second research question:

RQ2: to what extent does the introduction of HR partnering render latent tensions salient?

2.4 | Paradox manifestations

Smith and Lewis’s (2011) seminal paper identifies paradoxes, dilemmas, and dialectics as potential outcomes of tensions. Schad et al. (2016, p. 13; 7) define paradox as “persistent contradiction between interdependent elements” which “while seemingly distinct and oppositional... actually inform and define one another”. Similarly, Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 382) refer to “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time”, noting that these elements can appear logical when examined in isolation, but irrational when considered together (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 382).

These “contradictory yet interrelated” elements can be described as dualities, which while oppositional to each other are also synergistic in nature within the bounds of a larger system (Cameron & Quinn, 1988). This separates dualities through the development of internal structural boundaries which highlight distinctions and emphasize difference at the expense of synergy, encouraging ‘either/or’ thinking in relation to the two elements. Simultaneously, the wider system boundary also plays an integrating role which highlights synergies between the two. However, the broader system boundary by “bind[ing] and juxtapose[ing] opposing elements [also] amplifies their paradoxical nature, creating a dynamic relationship between dualities and ensuring their persistence over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 386). For example, it may appear logical for the HRBP to maintain effective, embedded, close relationships with both LMPs and HR colleagues when considered independently; however, this can appear irrational when juxtaposed and one relationship may develop at the expense of the other. So, while the clear boundaries that differentiate HRBPs’ relationships with LMPs and their HR colleagues may encourage either/or thinking (e.g., either transactional or strategic), the external system boundary should encourage synergies. Effective partnering requires that both relationships HR–HRBP and HRBP–LMP work effectively.

Smith and Lewis (2011) differentiate paradox from two related outcomes - dilemmas and dialectics - both of which have the potential to develop into paradoxes through persistence over time. Dilemmas represent tensions between mutually exclusive alternatives, where each offers both advantages and disadvantages (Smith & Lewis, 2011), and are resolved through choice. However, the choice may prove “temporary... over time the contradictions resurface, suggesting their interrelatedness and persistence” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 387), more accurately rendering the dilemma a paradox. For example, the choice of an operationally (rather than strategically) focused partnering model may not prove final, and the dilemma of choice persist or re-emerge.

Dialectics examines the ongoing process of resolving tensions through integration (i.e. rejects the exclusivity associated with dilemmas). Thus, the elements constituting the duality are inter-related and connected in a push – pull relationship (Bledow et al., 2009) with movement in one having a corresponding effect on the other. Dialectics therefore emphasizes the dynamic interplay of opposing poles (the ‘thesis’ and ‘antithesis’; Carlo et al., 2012) which sees “tensions emerge and evolve, dissolve or reproduce themselves in the context of ongoing social interaction within and among social systems” (Langley & Sloan, 2011, p. 262). Integration, or synthesis, attempts to merge the elements constituting the duality into a combined element, thus stressing similarities. However, this neglects important differences and can lead to the integration being short-lived, as a new antithesis emerges in response to the integration (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Clegg (2002, p. 29) proposed that paradoxes and dialectics become synonymous when “a thesis does not exist despite its antithesis, but because of it. Each pole of the dialectic needs the other to sustain its presence”. A dialectics perspective on the partnering role positions HR–HRBP and HRBP–LMP relationships on a continuum, with increasingly close HR–HRBP or HRBP–LMP relationships being at the expense of the other, thereby
reflecting Smith and Lewis’ (2011) concept of a vicious cycle whereby tensions are mitigated simply by prioritising/choosing either one or the other contradictory elements. In such a scenario the HRBP will continually struggle to maintain balance with both LMPs and HR. This leads us to our third research question:

RQ3: to what extent do tensions between HR–HRBP and HRBP–LMP relationships manifest as salient paradoxes, dilemmas or dialectics?

3 | METHODOLOGY

Given the complexity of the HRBP relationships we adopted a single case study methodology which enabled us to develop an in-depth, holistic understanding of the plurality of these relationships and social processes (Gummesson, 2000; Orum, et al., 1991; Yin, 2009), within a real-life context. Inherent to the research questions was the need to understand the “flesh and bones of everyday life” for HRBPs (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003, p. 62). Throughout we adopted a qualitative/interpretative approach (Frost, 2009) to enable participant voice to emerge (Colahan et al., 2012), while at the same time understanding and interpreting the tensions associated with the HRBP role. Underlining our interpretive/constructivist epistemological position we attempted to understand the multiple realities and experiences of our participants by adopting a non-judgemental, open and neutral position to ensure that participants related their experiences of how HR issues were managed (Merriam, 2015). We felt that this was important when studying organisational paradoxes which, as can be appreciated from the above literature review, are fraught with tensions, nuance, and ambiguities.

3.1 | Empirical setting: The trust

The empirical setting was a public health and social care trust (the ‘Trust’) located in the United Kingdom which had undergone significant change in HR structure (taking around 3 years to plan and deliver), including the introduction of the strategic HRBP role designed to “push and follow a strategic people management and development agenda” (Director of Human Resources). Prior to these changes the Trust had previously implemented an operationally (rather than strategically) focussed HR partnering model, discontinued a number of years before the introduction of the model we discuss in this paper.

The main motivation and driver of these changes was to ensure that HR played a central role in the Trust which, similar to many healthcare organisations, over the previous 5 years had experienced (and was continuing to experience), complex people management issues, particularly linked to staff resourcing and retention, effective deployment of staff, employee relations and organisational development issues. The Trust provided an appropriate arena for research into paradoxical tensions surrounding the HRBP role given the scale, extent and difference within line functions, and also the extent of the HR function. Employing over 10,000 staff, the Trust provides health and community services to around 500,000 people. The HR division employs approximately 100 professional staff across five directorates (including, for example, Employee Relations, and Terms, Conditions and Resourcing). Specialist expertise is housed in the original directorates in the form of Centres of Excellence (CoEs), while a Shared Services Centre (SSC) is provided by an IT supported help desk. Three senior manager level internal appointments were made to the position of HRBP to perform the strategic partnering role.

3.2 | Data collection

Mindful of the research questions, and to ensure full participation by all relevant stakeholders, when negotiating access to the Trust we requested a copy of the organisation chart and detailed information about the HRBP and other HR roles (including job descriptions and an internal report on the requirements of the HRBP role). Using these documents, in order to ensure depth of analysis, semi structured interviews were utilised as the primary data collection method at Director and Assistant Director level in both HR and Operational Divisions, and also with HRBPs. Additionally, the Trust’s
BENNETT et al.

CEO and Deputy CEO were also interviewed. To develop as full an understanding as possible of the various tensions surrounding the HRBP role, we also conducted a series of focus groups with managers from Operational (Line) Divisions (see Table 1) who work closely with HRBPs. The rationale for the use of focus groups with these managers was twofold. Firstly, this allowed us to ensure maximum participation and secondly, given the busy healthcare setting, arranging focus groups to follow on from weekly management team meetings allowed us to avoid over-burdening or over-imposing, and limit disruption. The focus group setting also afforded a suitable environment for LMPs to comment on shared issues and tensions related to HR matters. All interviews and focus groups were of approximately 45 min to 1 hour duration.

The interviews and focus groups followed a broadly similar format designed to explore: (i) perceptions of the purpose and scope of the HRBP role; (ii) relationships between HRBPs and both HR and LMPs; (iii) perceptions around the value of the HRBP role; and to (iv) identify threats to the role and scope for its future development. The specific questions used in each of the interviews and focus groups emerged from the literature review and are available on request, but as an example, a key question linked to understanding the HRBP role in action was: Do you feel that managers and others accept this HRBP role and understand what it is designed to achieve (prompt: not the policing role that HR was felt to play in the past)?

Participants were encouraged to relate their experiences of the HRBP role within their own terms of reference, and to take the dialogue in any appropriate direction, which enabled us to explore, interpret and reflect upon their responses. For example, in relation to the above question, a series of follow up questions were used to capture examples where HRBPs undertook more tactical roles or diverged from their strategic rationale. Understandings gained from earlier interviews or focus groups were used to probe later participants, thus using a process of interpretation and reflection throughout to better understand tensions. This enabled us to maintain fidelity in the data collection process “by taking into account the interpretations and experiences of informants in formulating explanations” what Pratt et al. (2022, p. 221) calls “benevolence”.

### 3.3 Analysis and interpretation

The interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim (yielding over 500 pages of transcript). Given our interpretative approach we iterated back and forth to the literature and Trust documentation (job descriptions and organisation chart), were reflexive in both our individual thinking and through team member
discussions and made use of peer feedback on manuscript versions (see Figure 1 for a summary of the data analysis progression, similar to that of Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013). This enabled us to ensure that interpretations were trustworthy and reflective of the participants' voice which further supported benevolence of the process (Pratt et al., 2022).

We began by open coding, common in interpretative research. Interview transcripts from each HRBP and their associated LMPs were divided across three of the authors. The remaining interview transcripts, together with the focus group transcripts, were independently analysed by all four authors. To build the initial coding structure, the authors read and re-read each transcript, through drawing on concrete data (Locke et al., 2022; see Figure 1). Subsequently these initial codes were refined and finalised through using whiteboard facilitation techniques to reach consensus between authors.

Next we began to conceptualise and interpret these initial codes. We did not begin with a clear set of “analytical moves”, instead letting the data speak to us and using the literature and our experience as researchers enable us to better understand tensions surrounding the HRBP role, and decide on each move in the data analysis process (Pratt et al., 2022). For example, a clear theme that emerged during this process was pressure from LMPs for HRBPs to perform an operational role due to learning and organising tensions within the Trust. Initial codes linked to ‘tensions’ were used as umbrella terms and other nuances linked to organising and performing fell out of the data as we analysed it. For example, the word ‘conduit’ or ‘post-box’ emerged in several transcripts and in the analysis process we linked these terms to organising tensions.

This process occurred through numerous sessions over more than a year, with multiple iterations as we conceptualised and re-conceptualised using interpretive diagrams as our way of identifying patterns from the data (Locke et al., 2022), a process reflected in Figure 1. The initial conceptualisation of the paradoxical tensions and their impact on role manifestation was presented at an international conference, with feedback from this facilitating a further period of reflection on HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships, making full use of the data to confirm our interpretations. This resulted in a second conference submission which was helpful in enabling us to further tie down the paradoxical nature of relationships. Throughout the process we continually reflected and iterated our interpretation of the data, always ensuring that benevolence to the participants was maintained (Pratt et al., 2022).

4 | FINDINGS

Driven by plurality, change and resource scarcity (Smith & Lewis, 2011) the findings reveal the introduction of partnering to have rendered salient a complex set of paradoxical tensions (Research Questions 1 and 2). Learning tensions have undermined both expectations and enactment of the partnering role. Alongside this, new responsibilities and conflicting views on their purpose and usefulness, have created issues around role allocation, purpose, clarity and
expectations, reflecting organising, performing and belonging tensions. The outcome of these is the emergence of an operationally-focussed dialectical paradox between HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships (Research Question 3).

4.1 | Learning tensions

Learning tensions have been energised in two ways. Firstly, ‘unlearning’ tensions whereby expectations engendered by both past and ‘current’ (pre-partnering) practices have created different understandings of the HRBP role (on the part of HR and LMPs), and LMP expectations of operational HR support. The resulting tensions in both HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships are being exacerbated by strong, (pre)existing HR-LMP relationships (belonging tensions, discussed below), leading some LMPs and HR staff to ‘bypass’ HRBPs and deal directly with former contacts. Many LMPs have supported this as it fulfils their desire for ‘HR to do HR’ (organising tensions, discussed below).

Secondly, significant LMP learning tensions were found around the complexity of devolved HR responsibilities, and their competence/confidence to assume the devolved role. Concerns were expressed around HR training quality ("too classroom based"; “sketchy”), and difficulties in maintaining competence in respect of complex, but infrequent, HR issues: “if it is a situation you don’t deal with very often the training isn’t very beneficial", “[we] don’t actually have enough experience [in HR issues] to maintain a developed competence", and “[we have to] start from scratch” each time an issue arises - “you are never actually building yourself up to be confident and competent”. Devolved HR responsibilities were described as too dispersed and “scattered across a number of [LMPs]”. Numerous situations were noted where LMPs “haven’t moved [an issue] forwards because I don’t know who is taking it forward with me...”.

These concerns are recognised at senior level within HR, leading one Assistant Director to comment “we haven’t actually given [LMPs] any [HR] management skills... we are expecting people to [take on an operational HR] role without actually supporting them in that... that is something we are trying to address at the minute...”. Similarly, an HR senior manager argued that, despite training, “we have a lot of LMPs who don’t know the basics of HR...".

4.2 | Organising and performing tensions

These relate to issues around what is to be done (performing) and how and by whom work is to be completed (organising).

4.2.1 | Performing tensions

These arise from stakeholder plurality, and pressure for competing goals (Smith & Lewis, 2011). While we found little or no disagreement between parties around the overall (macro) goals in terms of HRM within the Trust, performing tensions were observed within the LMP role. Priorities here centred around line responsibilities and objectives, with the devolved HR role being seen as “an additional workload that has been transferred to [LMPs]”.

4.2.2 | Organising tensions

These reflect structural design alternatives, and significant tensions were observed across all three parties – HR, HRBPs and LMPs. While on the surface the senior HR team had a strong strategic vision for the HRBP role – that partners would act as a “conduit” and “key temperature taker” (HR Director), support LMPs in developing strategic HR capacity, and “help [LMPs] strategically to think outside the box...” (HR Assistant Director) – this vision was not widely shared, with one HRBP asserting that “at a high level [within HR] there is a misunderstanding at times of what we do”. HR Assistant Directors expressed concerns as to whether “everybody understands their roles”, including HRBPs - “I don’t think the business partners understand the role... I don’t think any of us understand the role...”. Ultimately, the consensus at senior HR level was that “we didn’t have a strong enough handle on it at the beginning”, and that a critical success factor is to “define the role and be very sure of the [desired] outputs... I’m not sure that we were entirely clear”. While HRBPs had clear understanding of the role’s intended strategic positioning, they described the four-page (official)
job description as "very broad", and "a little bit of everything..." a view with which we concurred after reviewing the documentation. This led to partners defining their role through enactment.

Discussions with HR senior managers also revealed much confusion around partnering. Typical views included: "we haven't really got to grips with it"; "it hasn't really established itself to the right degree"; "we are still kind of working through [role allocations]"; and that "nobody is really sure what the relationship [HR – HRBP – LMP] is or should be... there is confusion all around". This has led senior HR managers to overtly question the partnering role: "what are the HRBPs doing?... What is their role out in the organization... I'm not seeing their involvement out there – I'm not saying they are doing nothing, but maybe we don't see what is going on...". Such comments not only evidence confusion, but also an element of antipathy on the part of some towards the role (see also 'learning tensions', above, and 'belonging tensions', below).

The general consensus among senior HR managers was that the HRBP role remains "a grey area", with it being difficult to see "what the outcomes [of partnering] are in the organisation". One thing on which HR managers were clear was that LMPs "shouldn't be going to the HRBPs for advice on [operational] HR issues, they should be coming to us!". Ultimately, one HR senior manager categorised the role as being somewhat redundant: "I see the business partners come to me quite a lot for specialist experience... [previously] it would be the [LMPs]; but then the [LMP] comes to me too... I don't know what is going on out there".

Role confusion was also apparent on the part of LMPs (high-level health care staff with major functional responsibilities). Although provided with supporting information about the partnering model, HRBPs contended that "[LMPs] don't understand the role...", and that continual efforts are required "to make it clear that you are really only there as a [strategic] support...". Such views were confirmed in discussions with LMP senior managers, with typical comments including that "[the role] just kind of evolved...", and that "I don't think [role clarification] is set out anywhere".

Consequentially, HRBPs reported having to spend considerable time clarifying roles and responsibilities to LMPs. While recognising the need for operational involvement by partners during early stages (to "get a few things over the line" and build trust and relationships), HR Assistant Directors expressed concerns that LMP lack of understanding is "dragging [HRBPs] down" into an operational HR role. LMPs were described as "clinging to our current business partners", and as having adopted a conservative, 'rules-based' approach to HRM based on "risk avoidance" as a result of "not having the comfort of having someone who really understands the [HR] issues".

The overwhelming demand from LMPs was for "more HR input into the processes that we are currently dealing with"; "[we] have ownership of the problem... [we] might have more understanding of wider perspectives [provided by the HRBP]... but [we] don't necessarily always have the right skills in the right people to manage it". Thus, a LMP demand that "HR do HR" and preoccupation with operational HR issues were identified as a significant organising tension.

On a more positive note, LMP Directors and Assistant Directors were more cognisant of the strategic nature of partnering than senior management level colleagues. Thus, Directors and Assistant Directors opined partnering to have added "a HR dimension and voice around our management", creating "much improved communications and relationships" (between operations and HR), and providing "big picture, transformational input" to meetings. 'Strategic' benefits identified by LMP senior managers, on the other hand, reflected a view of the partner as a conduit to HR, rather than as a driver and implementer of strategy. Benefits were couched in terms such as the value of having a divisional advocate within HR, and their value as: a source of information on the wider Trust; "a communication link [to HR]"; "fresh eyes"; and as a "sounding board", "signpost" and "point of expertise".

In summary, the introduction of partnering has generated much organisational confusion around roles and responsibilities, an outcome of which has been the role "evolve[ing] as [operating] divisions have wanted [it] to..." (HR Assistant Director).

4.3 | Belonging tensions

Unsurprisingly, given the salient learning, performing and organising tensions, belonging tensions were also to the fore within each relationship as parties sought to either protect or enhance their position.
4.3.1 | HR-HRBP tensions

HRBPs perceived a belief on the part of HR that “we [HRBPs] are here to take their work, and do their jobs, and step on their toes”, while noting that at other times “they push [work] back at us”. Partners perceived HR senior managers as being “very precious about their areas” and feeling “disempowered”, and contended “there is a bit of jealousy about the role, because [it] is very front facing, it’s very prominent, we are out and about in the divisions...”.

For their part, HR senior managers contended partners need to: “realise where the limitations of their role [lie] and recognize that there is the specialist [HR] team”; ensure that “the core team [HR] is seen as being the person who comes in and fixes the problem for the [LMP]”; and that HRBPs “desire to be at one with their [operations] division” is side-lining and obscuring the input of HR professionals. Others spoke of a sense of “losing face... because the HRBPs are there in [our] place”; that HRBPs are afforded greater professional status, and HR-LMP relationships should be reemphasised to clarify that HR managers “still have a role in the organisation with [LMP] managers”; and that LMPs “shouldn’t be going to the HRBPs for advice... they should be coming to us!”. The views of these managers are perhaps best summarised in the contention of one that “HRBPs come back to [HR] and get the specialist information, and then they go and they give it to the [LMP], and the [LMP] manager thinks they [HRBPs] are great... [while] the person who provides the information is there going ‘That was me!’...”.

In consequence, HRBPs reported at times feeling they are no longer an integral part of HR, being treated as ‘outsiders’ within the function. One contended “we are not considered by our own team in HR as HR senior managers”, while another spoke of being subject to greater “scrutiny” than the HR specialisms. Partners voiced a sense of “sitting in the middle of things”, and “not [being] properly integrated into HR”, with their “biggest challenge” being “the role of the HRBP within our own HR function”, and the need for HRBPs and HR to “work better as a team”. This is despite making significant efforts to remain an integral part of HR, efforts not seen as being reciprocated. Thus, one spoke of going:

to the assistant directors [HR] proactively, to try and keep them involved in what I am doing.... But will the other HR managers necessarily come and do the same with us? I don't think so... they could be working on an issue in [one of my] operating divisions and [I] will not know anything about it... We are more mindful of keeping them in the loop than they are of trying to keep us in the loop.

Another spoke of often being “at pains to emphasise [to LMPs] that there were still the HR specialist areas, they still have their functions... I will help you if I can, but they are the specialist areas, they have their roles, and if it belongs to them I will pass it to them”.

Thus, relationship dissolution and communication breakdown have come to characterise HR-HRBP relations. HR Director/Assistant Directors acknowledge these outcomes, with one describing how HR staff feel “slighted” by the HRBPs’ line facing role, and adopting a typical attitude towards HRBPs of “you are just giving me all this and you are taking the glory...”. This has led to ‘face-saving’, ‘by-passing’ and ‘turf protection’ behaviours by HR staff driven by (in the words of one HR Assistant Director) an attitude of “I'm just going to email this [LMP] directly because I want to show them that it's me that is the expert in this”. All in all, the nature of HRBP-HR relationships was summarised by one assistant director as being one of “confusion all around... [and] we are now starting to see some of the outputs of that confusion... relationships are breaking down a wee bit, maybe not exactly breaking down, but there are tensions”.

4.3.2 | HRBP-LMP tensions

In response to confusion and ambiguity, LMP lack of confidence and competence, and to establish relationships, build trust and gain understanding of LMP operations, partners identified an initial need to adopt a more operational HR focus before subsequently seeking to evolve the strategic role. Risks associated with this approach were acknowledged with one partner noting that “you have to have awareness... there are times when I would go out a bit [in terms of providing operational HR support]and then have to pull myself back in...”. However, despite this, there were indications of overly close HRBP – LMP relationships developing. One partner contended that “the people we need to please are
the [LMPs]”, while another referred to LMPs as “a great bunch of people; I suppose that’s what makes me want to stay with them...”. While recognising that partners are “trying to take a strategic view”, HR Director/Assistant Director level are aware of the danger of role distortion and HRBPs “getting dragged down into operational things”, and that “the hard bit for our HRBPs is to make sure they keep themselves at that [strategic] level, and that they don’t get sucked in, because they will, they will...”.

5 | DISCUSSION

The introduction of partnering has energised and made salient various paradoxical tensions between HR, HRBPs and LMPs (Research Questions One and Two), confirming many of the inherent tensions and conflicts previously identified (Gubbins & Garavan, 2016; Keegan et al., 2018; Pohler & Willness, 2014; Roche & Teague, 2012), and that – despite intentions otherwise - HRBPs are often seen as the first point of contact for all HR issues (Keegan et al., 2018). From the perspective of paradox theory, the two relationships of interest are operating as a duality, each is implicating the other in a dynamic fashion (Bledow et al., 2009; Carlo et al., 2012), and there is interdependence and contradiction between each (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Research Question Three).

5.1 | Research questions one and two

The empirical findings reveal the introduction of partnering to have created significant salient tensions in both HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships. Specifically, tensions within each are creating pressure for the adoption of an operational focus by HRBPs.

5.1.1 | HRBP-LMP relationships

LMP learning tensions (including expectations of operational support and lack of competence and confidence/inadequate training) have resulted in LMP demands for operational HR support. Alongside this, lack of role clarity and understanding and a strong preference for ‘HR to do HR’ (organising and performing tensions), together with partners’ initial need to adopt an operational focus (to establish trust and confidence – belonging needs – and build knowledge), have combined in pulling partners towards the adoption of an operational role (see Figure 2).

5.1.2 | HRBP-HR relationships

Learning tensions have fostered resentment of the partnering role and distorted expectations of the role on the part of HR staff previously involved in partnering. Organising tensions (lack of role clarity and understanding, and a belief that core HR staff should have responsibility for HR issues), are combining with learning tensions to fuel belonging tensions. In response, HR staff are adopting face-saving and turf protection behaviours, and engaging in efforts to ensure the continuance of existing, pre-established relationships with LMPs (by-passing). The outcome of this is the dissolution of HR-HRBP relationships.

Developments within each relationship thus reflect Smith and Lewis’ (2011: 390) contentions around the potential for plurality, change and scarcity to energise tensions and to “stress systems”. The findings present clear evidence of the three parties “breakin[ing] apart inter-woven elements into either/or decisions, practices and understandings”, and of “inter-relationships becoming blurred” across HR, HRBPs and LMPs (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 390).
Our third research question related to the relationship between HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships, and whether this is manifesting paradoxically. For conditions of paradox to exist three core constituents must be present – the elements constituting the paradox (in this case HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships) must function as opposing poles of a duality, there must be contradiction between poles, and the two poles must be interdependent (Smith & Lewis, 2011). As shown in Figure 2, below, these conditions were all met in terms of the manifestation of partnering within the Trust. Figure 2 summarises how the operationally focused HRBP role manifestation observed is being driven by salient tensions in both HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships.

The initial operational focus adopted by HRBPs (in response to HRBP-LMP tensions) is creating HR-HRBP tensions; the resulting dysfunctional HR-HRBP relationships in turn push partners towards an ever tighter operationally focused role with LMPs, reflecting the development of a 'vicious cycle' (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Conversely, a withdrawal from this operational focus on the part of HRBPs may help restore HR-HRBP relationships, but at the expense of HRBP-LMP relationship quality. Specifically, the two relationships are operating dialectically (Bledow et al., 2009; Smith & Lewis, 2011) and are connected in a push-pull relationship within an operationally focused frame of reference where movement in one has a corresponding effect on the other (Carlo et al., 2012).

This is further conceptualised in Figure 3 (below), which illustrates the dynamic interplay of HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships in the form of a 'see-saw'. Partnering within the Trust is currently manifesting towards position A in terms of HRBP-LMP relationships (embedded, operational focus); the corresponding negative implications for HR-HRBP relationships result in that relationship manifesting around position B (conflicted, remote, ineffective). Due to the dialectical nature of relationships, any efforts by HRBPs to re-establish effective relationships with HR (i.e. attempted movement in the direction B-D) will result in a decline in HRBP-LMP relationships – that is, an inverse movement in that relationship in the direction A-C.

No position within Figure 3 facilitates strategic level partnering, with the two extremes (AB and CD) illustrating primary threats to its achievement: where (i) the HRBP effectively becomes a 'personnel manager on secondment' (AB); or (ii) becomes simply a 'post box'/contact point for the LMP within HR (CD). From the perspective of dialectic theory, the operationally-focussed manifestation of partnering in the Trust represents the unchecked and unmanaged
evolution of a new thesis (‘operational partnering’) in response to paradoxical tensions. However, this thesis fails as an integrating mechanism (Smith & Lewis, 2011) in that it is not the intended outcome – strategic partnering, which immediately presents as an antithesis thereby rendering the dialectical outcome a paradox (Clegg, 2002; Smith & Lewis, 2011). So, in answer to Research Question Three, the various tensions within each individual relationship and between the two principal relationships (HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP) have resulted in the development of a paradox within an operational frame of reference. Further, efforts to resolve this paradox will prove futile as neither pole (AB nor CD; Figure 3) facilitates strategic partnering. Thus, management should instead focus on the prevention of its development.

5.3 | Implications and recommendations for practice

HR business partnering can be viewed as an attempt to resolve tensions within the HR function through spatial separation of responsibilities and prioritisation of strategy (Boglind et al., 2011; Gerpott, 2015; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Its introduction to the Trust, however, has had a somewhat opposite effect, energising and making salient latent tensions which have now crystallised as a dialectical paradox within an operational – rather than strategic – frame of reference. While some of the tensions which have driven this outcome may be inevitable, we argue that the outcome itself is not, and a number of measures may be appropriate to prevent its emergence. These all involve ensuring that from inception the HRBP role is clearly established at the strategic level, with the clear aim of decoupling partners from operational HR responsibilities. Three related ‘tension management’ interventions are proposed, with the over-riding aims of: (i) developing a full understanding and preparedness on the part of all parties (HR, HRBPs and LMPs) as to the intended strategic nature of the HRBP role; (ii) ensuring that difficulties associated with the devolution of HR responsibilities (see, for example, McGovern et al., 1997; Whittaker & Marchington, 2003) to LMPs are overcome; and (iii) managing developing relationships in such a way that operational tensions do not come to dominate.

**Preparation and clarification.** A comprehensive preparation stage should include the development of a shared partnering climate (addressing learning and performing tensions) and expectation management (learning tensions), develop shared understanding between all three parties as to the nature of the role (organising tensions), and foster shared ownership of the partnering model and its objectives (performing tensions).

**Development of clear role specifications and provision of full training.** Following the preparation stage, future roles and relationships should be clearly set out to reinforce understanding and acceptance that the HRBP role will operate at the strategic level (addressing organising and performing tensions). All necessary training and support should be put in place and completed prior to introduction (learning tensions). This should include the development of clear contact points for LMPs in terms of both HRBP and HR responsibilities, full upskilling of LMPs in devolved HR responsibilities, and skills development in the areas of teamwork and interpersonal skills for all three parties (to address belonging...
tensions). The aim here is to prevent HRBPs from becoming "dragged down" into operational support, and central to this is the development of LMP competence (learning tensions).

**Relationship management.** The first two interventions should alleviate pressures for partners to perform an operational role, thus removing the source of HR-HRBP relationship dissolution and limiting the potential development of a 'vicious cycle' of relationships (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Post introduction significant efforts should be made to ensure that both relationships (HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP) develop synergistically, and that neither develops in the unilateral or uncontrolled manner which resulted in the dialectical outcomes observed in the Trust. The development path for both relationships should be closely integrated around a strong strategic HR focus.

The rationale underpinning these interventions is to prevent partnering from falling into an operational frame of reference through ensuring effective spatial separation as a means of paradox resolution. A further possibility in this regard might see the introduction – at least for an initial period – of a junior partner to support LMPs through the development of operational HR competence. Alternatives to spatial separation could involve decoupling the introduction of strategic partnering from devolution of operational HR responsibilities ('temporal separation'; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Introducing strategic partners before the devolution of operational HR responsibilities could provide a less confused environment for LMPs, allowing HRBP-LMP relationships to develop strategically. Alternatively, their introduction after devolution has been completed and become competently established could mitigate against LMPs drawing partners into operational issues.

5.4 | Directions for future research and contribution to theory

While the above recommendations may help prevent partnering from falling into the dialectical paradox observed, questions remain around their long-term effectiveness. Gerpott (2015) and Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) have argued that spatial separation (or splitting) avoids working through the contradictory pressures and tensions which cause paradox, and Ehnert (2009) that it fails to take account of HRM's multi-faceted nature. As such, contradictory tensions may re-emerge or biased HRM practices result, which may undermine the HR function in the longer term (Gerpott, 2015; Hird et al., 2010). Indeed, many of the HR contradictions and tensions identified in the literature were found to have carried over in the Trust into the partnering model introduced, with the dialectical paradox in a sense reflecting 'same tensions, different context'. Future research is therefore directed towards: (i) the extent to which the interventions suggested can resolve tensions longer term; (ii) the potential for tensions to re-emerge within the partnering model, and the form which these may take; and (iii) alternatives to spatial separation such as 'synthesis' (Calabretta et al., 2017; Poole & Van de Ven, 1989) which seek to accommodate differing poles by "encourag[ing] leaders... to work through competing demands simultaneously" (Lewis et al., 2014, p. 73).

This paper contributes to theory in a number of ways. Previous literature has identified various tensions around the differentiated HR function (Gubbins & Garavan, 2016; Keegan et al., 2018, 2019; Sheehan et al., 2014), and examined dyadic HRBP-LMP (McCracken et al., 2017; Keegan et al., 2018; Chiu & Selmer, 2011) and to a much lesser extent - HR-HRBP relationships. The use of paradox theory has enabled us to move beyond this dyadic analysis of partnering relationships to: (i) develop a fuller understanding tensions surrounding the partnering role; and (ii) develop understanding of how the two primary sets of relationships underpinning the role (HR-HRBP and HRBP-LMP relationships) implicate each other in shaping HRBP role manifestation. The outcome has been a fuller understanding of the role, the tensions faced, and the forces shaping role manifestation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No conflict of interest.
DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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