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## A source of novelty and/or absurdity: the paradoxes of management

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**Abstract:** This paper explores paradox, a way of seeing organisations that emphasises interdependence, opposition and persistence, as both a source of novelty and absurdity. Paradoxes are processes with a dual potential for organisational harm or good, depending on the way they are framed and tackled. We explore this dual side of paradox and discuss some of its implications for the management of organisations.

**Keywords:** paradoxes; organisations; novelty; absurdity.

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## 1 Introduction

“Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

– Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

It is increasingly accepted that organisations are characterised by tensions and contradictions (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Such tensions are not, therefore, some indication of a temporary dysfunctional state that must be ‘solved’. Rather, organisations and the actors within them need to work with and through contradictions as a normal condition. In other words, it is increasingly understood that organisations are inherently *paradoxical* (Clegg et al., 2002; Schad et al., 2016).

Paradoxes are oppositional states that are mutually defining and persist over time (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Cunha and Clegg, 2018). Classic examples relevant to organisational life include the contradictory but entwined dynamic of stability and change (Farjoun, 2010) or the interplay of exploration and exploitation (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; March, 1991). These tensions involve the impossibility of choice: organisations cannot afford to choose one pole or the other. They need both. For instance, change without stability is impeditive of improvement; but improvement without substantive change will stall the organisation. Paradox therefore entails the need to do one thing well and its opposite. March and Weil (2009) colourfully expressed this when they noted that good leaders are part poets part plumbers. The difficulty is that good poets tend not to appreciate plumbing whereas plumbers tend to discount the managerial value of poetry.

Paradox, in this perspective, is a managerial process that matters (Quinn and Cameron, 1988). Some organisations, such as Toyota, offer a good example of how contradictions can be used to leverage organisational competitiveness (Takeuchi et al., 2008). For instance, Toyota’s Tayloristic approach (with all its inherent rigidity) is a *source* of change, not an impediment to it. In another context, that of manufacturing firms, service innovation becomes intertwined and overlaps with the exploratory and exploitative R&D activities. Product innovation mainly occurs through R&D activities and precedes product launch. By contrast, service innovation tends to be intertwined with other steps in the value chain in which services are simultaneously produced and delivered. Thus, product-service innovation generates natural tensions that resonate with the organisational ambidexterity debate in terms of the integrative mechanisms that enable firms to coordinate explorative and exploitative efforts (Bustinza et al., 2019).<sup>1</sup> Because of this, researchers have scrutinised paradoxes as a source of competitive advantage (Heracleous and Wirtz, 2014; Smith and Tushman, 2005). And a consequent body of organisational literature has now built-up understanding of how organisations can harness paradoxes, responding to them in a way that leads to innovation (Garud et al., 2011; Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017), creativity (Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Miron-Spektor and Erez, 2017; Rothenberg, 1979), and transcendence (Bednarek et al., 2017). The creative potential inherent in paradox, that ability to search for synergies and transcend either/or constraints, is a large part of the power of paradox.

Less attention has been paid to the ‘wild side’ of paradox. Paradox cannot necessarily be tamed or controlled (Cunha and Putnam, 2019). Attention should also, therefore, be paid to the relationship between paradox and organisational absurdity. Namely, paradox is not only a potential source of discovery and novelty. Paradox can also be the gateway to the absurd (Lewis, 2000). This is because the creative potential of paradox bumps-up

against *impossibility*, as represented in the Lewis Carroll quotation our commentary opened with. What appears to be enabling on one level is experienced as impossible at another. What prompts creativity in one moment can be experienced as an unsolvable impossible demand too far in another moment (Lê and Bednarek, 2017).

In the next section, we explore these two possibilities. This article explains why paradox can be a source of novelty and organisational competitiveness if treated as both-and source of dynamic balance, but also how attempts to balance create the absurd.

## 2 Paradox as source of novelty

Paradox has been portrayed as an important source of organisational novelty: the positive power of paradox has been emphasised. This is because paradox transforms an either-or type of approach to problems to a both-and view of organisations and organising (Smith et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011), where integration of opposites is no less relevant than separation (Cunha et al., 2019). When facing paradoxes, organisations need to develop paradoxical mindsets, i.e., ways of thinking that appreciate tension as a force for organisational renewal rather than dilemmas to solve (Miron-Spektor et al., 2017). In a dilemma, a choice is due (Putnam et al., 2016; Smith and Lewis, 2011) but paradoxes are not dilemmas. They impose the need for both-and type of balancing rather than a choice of one pole. For example, choosing between stability and change is an impossibility, because both are needed, and one implies the other (Farjoun, 2010).

How can then paradox constitute a source of novelty? As the research above suggests, there are multiple means. We explore three broad possibilities, we consider particularly relevant within the current organisational climate and in extending current paradox research: holism, inside-outside connections and micro-macro articulations. These possibilities need to be taken into account to turn paradox into a source of advantage. We explain their meaning next.

First, a paradox mindset imposes a *holistic* approach to problems. In a paradox, managers cannot focus on one side of a problem, as there is always another side to it. By imposing a holistic mindset, a paradox approach counters the tendency towards the development of organisational architectures of simplicity (Miller, 1993). These architectures result from a progressive tunnelling vision that leads organisations to emphasise the competences that they already possess. Because deepening competences can produce rapid results, following the path of simplicity can be tempting; it is also dangerous as Miller (1992) explored with the image of the Icarus paradox. As Miller (1992) explains, this is the dynamic whereby businesses fail abruptly due to the very elements that led to their initial success. Paradoxical thinking, therefore, forces organisations to complicate themselves (Weick, 1979), countering the development of simplicity. As Lüscher and Lewis (2008) outlined, strategic questioning via paradox is a means to question simplistic solutions.

Second, paradox, especially in the age of agile (Denning, 2018), means that organisations need to carefully attend to inside-outside connections. For instance, thinking agile means understanding how to use technology to benefit the customer. This implies a dual move: the capacity to become technology-savvy (an internal capability) combined with the need to stay close to the customer. This dual competence is inherently paradoxical: being simultaneously inwardly and outwardly facing and driven. But the

logic of agile when technology-focused risks to stimulate the creation of organisations increasingly detached from their environments that in parallel lose touch with their customers. The discipline of customer intimacy (Treacy and Wiersema, 1993), when practiced competently, can equip the organisation with a naive capacity to see the world, i.e., the capacity to see the world with a pristine form of awareness (Chia, forthcoming). This pristine capacity to approach to reality without organisational preconception and prejudice can be critical to avoid the traps of solutions past. Another example is how large-scale societal grand challenges will only be able to be addressed through multiple stakeholders, often with contradictory objectives, working together. Such issues demand yet further understanding of how novel solutions arise from a capacity to look inward (to draw from internal objectives, capabilities and resources), while making a connection outward to the contradictory objectives of others to bring those internal capabilities to bear on a problem – a process which is itself paradoxical (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019).

Finally, a paradoxical view collapses the separation of micro and macro. Paradoxes are invitations to see the big in the small and the small in the big. For example: when a local solution becomes a problem, what does the solution-alias-problem reveal about vicious circles, macro-organisational dysfunctional patterns that persist? Macro-paradoxes have micro-expressions (Lê and Bednarek, 2017). As Chia (forthcoming) observed, the need to zoom in and to zoom out (Nicolini, 2013; Jarzabkowski et al., 2015) defines the capacity of an organisation to avoid trapping itself in the details of micromanagement, as well as in the distance of macro-leadership. Paradox is both abstract and concrete and imposes the need to analyse the large and the small, the micro and the macro.

In summary, from the angle of paradox, established organisational dichotomies are habits to unlearn. This invites managers to assume that, as Leonard-Barton (1992) remarked, core competences can become core rigidities. Paradox, in other words, is an invitation to stay alert and to avoid tested but mindless approaches to work (Krug, 2000) that tend to reinforce the status quo and simplistic architectures of organisation.

### **3 Paradox and the absurd**

Because of the recent attraction for paradox as a ‘both-and’ form of leadership that dissolves old dualisms, the productive side of the process has been well-considered. The other side of paradox – perhaps for dramatic effect what we might call the ‘dark-side’ – has been less considered (Cunha and Putnam, 2019). A way into understanding this is provided by authors studying in fields such as logics and philosophy (Quine, 1966). That is, that paradox has an absurd and illogical side. The absurdity of paradox and the double binds it produces are well known (Tracy, 2004). The absurdity of paradox comes from the fact that some attempts to articulate oppositions can result in nonsensical outcomes. Classical example consists in commanding people for creativity (‘Be creative!’) or in statements such as ‘this statement is false’. This of course is a double bind that reveals the potential for paradox management to derail and become a source of organisational confusion and messiness, producing organisational equivalents of Wonderlands (McCabe, 2016). Indeed, inherent in many statements of complex problems defined by paradox lies not only contradiction (to be solved) but also absurdity. For instance, if we consider global efforts to address the insurance protection gap, this involves tensions

between public and private objectives of the stakeholders involved (Jarzabkowski et al., 2019). However, it also entails an openly acknowledged absurdity: *insuring the uninsurable*. If it was insurable, it would be. If it was uninsurable efforts to address, it would be fruitless. It is therefore neither and both.

Let us consider an example. Reflecting on the fieldwork one of the authors conducted of science organisations straddling the demand for immediate impact (commercial or public good) with long-term science excellence this absurdity becomes clear. For instance, one can think of a government-owned research company that was expected to make profit but be at the forefront of science excellence areas for the country. This could be described in hugely positive ways at the top level of the organisation: they make money off world-class science. The demand for profit sees them being focused on the needs of the country and being ultra-efficient in everything they do. The demand for excellence sees them making that money by developing cutting edge techniques and employing and attracting top scientists. However, the absurdity of this was felt at the lower levels of the organisations. Where, there were comments by scientists that they existed in departments that need to make money, “but my science does not make money it eats it.” Or, dynamics where routine science made the firm’s profit through delivering to clients. Yet, scientists talked about magically having to spin out ‘cutting-edge’ research from that routine work; routine work that took up all their time (exploitation) was largely in direct tension with new discoveries yet did not do away with the demand for science excellence (exploration). Thus, even as the paradox that this public-private hybrid of a science organisation existed in spurred novelty (creative solutions were always evident) the absurdities and indeed chaos of the paradoxical demands were never done away with. The people inside the organisation often felt that they were operating on the very edge of what was possible. That came at a cost to those involved even as a transcendence narrative was so logically sold by some in leadership positions.

How then can paradox lead towards the absurd? We explore three possibilities. First, taking part for the whole. Organisations can focus on some partial indicators and take them as representative of the whole or project past successes as sources of future success. This will permit a focus on what is good at the cost of what is discounting what is bad and psychologically uncomfortable and dissonant – for example assuming that impact is good. Thus, what can manifest as innovative solutions [or transcendence rhetoric (Bednarek et al. (2017))] on one level can be experienced as absurd – or impossible – at another level. We see this in the above example of the science organisation. The lesson? Organisations, and especially organisational leaders, must recognise this duality of paradox in order not to oversell the positive potential of paradox at the expense of those left at the coalface of the absurdity of it.

Second, what can manifest as a creative solution in the context of intractable contradictions one moment can fall apart or lead to chaos and doubt in another. For instance, as the paradox resurfaces in unexpected ways and as novelty is questioned or pushed back against. Paradox is unstable, a mix of synergy and trade-off (Li, 2016). This combination contains the tendency for processes to change without notice. Paradoxes persist (Smith and Lewis, 2011) but they do not necessarily persist in the same way, instead expressing twists and turns (Abdallah et al., 2011), with a moment of transcendence, for example, often simply an interlude to another expression of tension (Bednarek et al., 2017) or absurdity. A process that seems balanced may suddenly reveal a surprising *volte face*, turning success into failure.

If the capacity to see holistically represents a process to productively use paradox, taking some part for the whole risks to turn paradox into a trigger of surprising processes, even a portal to the absurd. For example, the excess of control may produce chaos, but chaos can lead to control (Gelfand, 2018). The lesson? Organisations and organisational actors must be flexible enough, and emotionally resilient enough, to navigate the fact that, when it comes to paradox, what can be a source of novel creativity in one moment can be a force of chaos and absurdity the next. This means constantly coming up with new pathways through tension and contradiction: navigating paradox is an active ongoing effortful accomplishment (Lê and Bednarek, 2017).

Third, paradoxes, in practice, are rarely singular (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013). In particular, paradox is an invitation to absurd when wrapped in circular processes. Paradoxes are complex, embedded and nested (Knight and Harvey, 2015). As Poole and Van de Ven (1989, p.576) observed “the resolution of one paradox may inadvertently create another.” In other words, paradoxes coexist and co-evolve with other paradoxes. Sheep et al. (2017, p.482) explore ‘tension knots’ as existing tensions give way to new ones; such knots can be “wildly unbalanced pushes and pulls within and between tensions.” The way paradoxes interact is far from established but it is known that paradoxes contribute to the creation of patterns that gain circular qualities. Organisational circles refer to patterns of repetitive, self-amplifying, persistent sets of events sustained by positive feedback (Tsoukas and Cunha, 2017). Circles are impervious to interruption and attempts to change them often end-up reinforcing them even further, surprising the reformers and neutralising the reforms. Thus, even as the novel creative potential of one paradox is reached, this very act results in a new paradox or expression of chaos. In this sense, with these tension knots and circular process, absurdity – or the impossibility – of the situation arises from the fact that it can often be unclear WHAT tension one is even dealing with, being impacted by or harnessing the novelty of. Knowing more about the constitution and the unfolding of circles will help to clarify the potential absurdity of paradox.

Of course, there are ways through absurdity. Lüscher and Lewis (2008, p.229) outline that (yet more) paradoxical thinking – or novel solutions – itself is the solution to absurdity:

“The seeming absurdity and rising frustration of such an unsolvable conflict sparked a search for both/and options. Moving to a higher level of abstraction, managers would seek a link between the contradictory elements.”

Further, the literature has shown how humour often accompanies paradox as a reaction to impossibility and inappropriateness. Forming a micro-means of moving forward despite the absurdity of the situation as a means of diffusing tension, while allowing them to juxtapose incongruous issues (Hatch, 1997; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017; Martin, 2004). Indeed, this is summed up in the title of Jarzabkowski and Lê’s (2017) article: ‘We have to do this and that? You must be joking. Constructing and responding to paradox through humor’. Yet, the exploration of the absurd has only just begun. Indeed, in contrast to the notion of the absurd being the thing that paradoxical thinking transcends, it may be that through working with (rather than ignoring or vanquishing) the absurdity of paradox, we get closer to understanding the full power and complexity of it (Cunha and Putnam, 2019).

### *3.1 Avenues for future research*

The previous discussion opens avenues for future research that have already started to be explored in a number of theoretical streams including corporate social responsibility (González-González et al., 2019), knowledge management (Vendrell-Herrero et al., 2019) and leadership (Schad and Smith, 2019), among others. One stream of research refers to the relation between the two sides of paradox as sources of novelty or invitation to the absurd. A theme that seems particularly promising refers to how attempts at balancing become absurd and how the absurd gets normalised. Decisions can produce unexpected outcomes and these, sometimes become normal despite their dysfunctional side. The case of the Kafkaesque organisation is an obvious example: organisations sometimes produce such a labyrinth of rules that they grow their catch-22 situations (Ashforth, 1991; Clegg et al., 2016). The organisation will become absurd, but absurdity will be normal. People may see the flaws and imperfections of the system but will learn to live with them (Rosenhan, 1973). The absurdity of paradox is not transcended nor openly acknowledged, creating intriguing organisations.

We would also like to mention the possibility to explore the ideas raised in this paper in two specific contexts. First, as one of our reviewers pointed out, there is ample space to explore the absurd in the context of crisis management. Regarding the Chernobyl disaster, s/he observed,

“In the Soviet system, all individuals believed that hard work (including studying and working) dignified, and that the government would guide and protect them. It was also believed that the USSR was never wrong, that it was the country with the most privileged minds in the world, the perfect homeland, the smartest, the most prepared. You can see the paradox here between being highly educated (freedom of thought) but living in a command economy (not freedom of choice).”

In other words, organisations sometimes create absurd mindsets rather than paradoxical mindsets (Miron-Spektor et al., 2017) that impede people from taking decisive action when it is most needed. This also suggests another possibility: how dealing with paradox may imply the need for improvisation to allow people to try new things as they go along, in an active effort to make sense of incomprehensible situations. Second, as mentioned above, there are also opportunities to explore the ideas inherent in this paper in the context of new forms of work and organisation. Exploring how the logic of products becomes one of services through servitisation opens interesting research agendas. Organisations will need, for example, to explore how this transition helps them to achieve more-than approaches to innovation through the entwining of exploration and exploitation, a possibility that has not been tackled sufficiently in the literature (Putnam et al., 2016).

At a more sociological level, paradox theory can inform the study of how identity politics and identity organising can be tackled with a paradox mindset. Identity politics can be dangerous as they are polarising. Polarisation makes reality simpler, able to be expressed via a slogan on a hat or a bus for instance, but also less nuanced. The role of paradoxical mindsets as an antidote against polar dualisms can help to find common ground and a language of collaboration (Jay and Grant, 2017) at organisational and societal levels. This space between organisational and political science perspectives may thus offer rich settings to study paradox as a possibility to deal with complex societal challenges.

## 4 Conclusions

Paradox has recently been touted as an important source of competitive advantage (Smith and Lewis, 2011). It can create a space for novelty and discovery through its emphasis on both-and perspective of organisations. We discussed how organisations can capitalise from a paradox perspective but also exposed the rough edge of paradox, which creates absurd possibilities. As in Carroll's world of Alice, paradox can indicate that sometimes there is something wrong without us necessarily knowing what it is. This ambiguity is source of both the magic and frustration of paradox and the reason why paradox is resistant to prescription.

Having provided a foundation for better acknowledgement of the absurd, the remaining question is how might organisations harness its power – paradoxically.

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## **Notes**

- 1 We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for this example.