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A paradox theory lens on proactivity, individual ambidexterity, and creativity: An empirical look

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Summary

Paradox theory suggests that contradictory demands, like applying current work methods while exploring new ones, should be viewed as dualities with competing and complementary aspects. It advocates for employee ambidexterity, where employees must manage exploitation and exploration. We know little about how personal dispositions affect ambidexterity independently or when interacting with situational factors. Based on a time-lagged survey of 364 employee–supervisor pairs from 74 R&D teams, we found that proactive disposition was positively related to ambidexterity, enhancing creativity. Guided by trait activation theory, we found further that paradoxical supervision and job autonomy enhanced the relationship between proactive disposition and employee ambidexterity and the indirect effect of proactive disposition on creativity via ambidexterity. We discuss these findings' theoretical and practical implications, extending the literature on proactivity, ambidexterity, and paradox theory.

KEYWORDS
ambidexterity, creativity, job autonomy, paradoxical supervision, proactive personality, proactivity

1 | INTRODUCTION

Adaptability and agility are non-stop requirements of our ever-evolving business environment, aggravated by the challenges of dealing with seemingly contradictory demands on employees at every level (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016; Mu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Competing responsibilities include performing well in short and long runs and applying current work methods while searching for and experimenting with new ones. People often "deal" with such tensions by ignoring or missing essential cues or framing choices as binaries from which to choose one option over the other. Alternatively, to good effect, they can behave ambidextrously.

Paradox theory (Lewis & Smith, 2022) is relevant to any persistent dilemma. Paradox theory treats ongoing dilemmas and apparent tradeoffs as competing but also as dualities with complementary and integrative potential. Ideally, employees accept them as contradictions inherent to their work responsibilities, engage them actively, apply both/and thinking, and apply them creatively over time.

The need to engage in exploitation and exploration—to behave ambidextrously—comprises one of the most vital, profound, and

confounding dualities in management theory. The study of organizational ambidexterity (Levinthal & March, 1993; March, 1991; Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996) inspired research into individual-level ambidexterity, defined as the extent to which employees both explore new opportunities and exploit existing knowledge and skills in their work (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016; Mu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Exploration includes "searching for, discovering, creating, and experimenting with new opportunities," while exploitation includes "selecting, implementing, improving and refining existing certainties" (Mom et al., 2007, p. 910). Engaging in both exploration and exploitation enables employees to handle complex, often contrasting job requirements resulting from diverse customer and organizational needs or fast-changing technologies (Tempelaar & Rosenkranz, 2019). As a result of these accelerating needs, employee ambidexterity is crucial to individual creativity (Yang & Yang, 2020), team performance (Schnellbächer et al., 2019), and organizational success (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

Although research has demonstrated the helpful role of individual ambidexterity in employee and collective outcomes (Mu et al., 2022), two critical issues are inadequately addressed. First, we understand little about which organizational members are more or less likely to behave ambidextrously. To ensure adequate exploration and exploitation, organizations or teams have options to use structural separation (different people doing different activities) or cross-level integration (people at different levels emphasizing one or the other, Mu et al., 2022). However, individuals can and often need to be ambidextrous via their personal traits, competencies, and resources.

Studies of ambidexterity's personal predictors include an eclectic mix of intrinsic motivation (Kao & Chen, 2016), general self-efficacy (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016), role breadth self-efficacy (Mom et al., 2019), and the paradox mindset (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2018). These findings undoubtedly enrich our understanding, but these individual differences concern how people feel and think, which can be context-specific and fluctuate greatly based on daily experiences or feedback from others (e.g., Gerhart & Fang, 2015; Parker, 1998). Therefore, identifying stable yet flexible dispositional factors influencing ambidexterity can advance our theorizing, predictions, and influence (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016; Miron-Spektor et al., 2011; Mom et al., 2009). Further, it can help organizations and managers select employees who effectively pursue multiple, complementary, or competing goals.

We proposed that the disposition to behave proactively would relate positively to employee ambidexterity, the latter being largely a function of proactive behaviors. Proactivity shapes environments and oneself to create better futures than would occur without it (Bateman, 2017; Bateman & Crant, 1993; Crant, 2000). People behaving proactively are not reacting passively to their circumstances but actively searching for opportunities to change trajectories, initiate change-creating actions, and persist despite obstacles in their goal pursuits (Crant, 2000). The proactive disposition entails personal agency (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Chen et al., 2021) and predicts many volitional, self-chosen, change-inducing behaviors, including ambidexterity (Mu et al., 2022).

Also limited is our understanding of which and how personal dispositions and situational factors interact to affect ambidexterity. A fuller understanding of ambidexterity will not come until we more thoroughly study organizational and personal factors together (Raisch et al., 2009). Theories and research about proactive personality indicate that how it manifests in concrete behaviors is contingent on situational factors (Erdogan & Bauer, 2005; McCormick et al., 2019). While proactive individuals are inclined toward ambidexterity (Kiss et al., 2022), they may encounter obstacles or hesitate to display their tendencies (Crant et al., 2017). Therefore, another objective of this study is to acquire a better understanding of the conditions under which proactive employees are more or less likely to behave ambidextrously.

Drawing on trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021; Tett & Burnett, 2003), we examined two situational factors that can activate proactive disposition and manifest it behaviorally via ambidexterity. Trait activation theory describes how the expression of individual traits depends on social, task, and organizational cues that trigger or constrain trait-expressive behaviors. Employee traits are most likely to appear as work behaviors when situational cues indicate opportunities to display them and do not inhibit them. The first situational moderator concerned the balance of control and flexibility in work arrangements (hereafter, "paradoxical supervision"; Zhang et al., 2015).[1] One supervisory paradox is to fulfill organizations' structural requirements that stress order and control plus followers' desire for personal consideration and flexibility (Zhang et al., 2015). Paradoxical supervision clarifies work requirements but does not micromanage work. Employees can then experience role conflict, confusion, and uncertainties. Alternatively, they might perceive their supervisor's acceptance of or preference for a broad repertoire of behaviors. This can signal to employees an opportunity to display their behavioral inclinations (Tett et al., 2021; Tett & Burnett, 2003). When supervisors impose high standards at work but still tolerate mistakes, they can activate proactive employees' high openness to experience (Crant et al., 2017; Fuller & Marler, 2009) and adaptability (Jiang, 2017), thus allowing more freedom and possibilities including exploration and exploitation. In contrast, low paradoxical supervisors tend to be low on one set of activities or the other, creating constraints and fewer options and thus suppressing and thus ambidexterity.

To further understand the boundary conditions under which proactive disposition manifests in ambidexterity, we examined job autonomy as a core component of the task environment. Job autonomy refers to an individual's independence and discretion in scheduling their work and deciding what procedures to use in performing their tasks (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). High job autonomy gives employees contextual cues to express their personality traits; it allows more behavioral variability and individual expression than low

[1]According to Zhang et al.'s (2015) framework, paradoxical leadership consists of five dimensions: "Treating subordinates uniformly while allowing individualization;" "Combining self-centeredness with other-centeredness;" "Maintaining decision control while allowing autonomy;" "Enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility;" and "Maintaining both distance and closeness." In this study, we focused on only one dimension: the ability to enforce work requirements while allowing flexibility, so-called "paradoxical supervision."

autonomy (Spitzmuller et al., 2015; Tett et al., 2021; Tett & Burnett, 2003). As a result, under high job autonomy, proactive employees will take advantage by choosing exploration and exploitation as they wish.

In sum, our study contributes to understanding the relationships among ambidexterity, proactivity, situational factors, and creative outcomes in various ways. First, it adds to our knowledge about dispositional predictors of ambidexterity (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016; Mom et al., 2009). Second, by examining the moderating effects of paradoxical supervision and job autonomy, we shed light on the social and task environments that can actualize the potential benefits of proactive disposition. Third, we investigate a key behavioral mediator between proactive disposition and creativity, potentially helping organizations and managers foster ambidexterity and creativity. Figure 1 shows our theoretical model.

2 | THEORY AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

2.1 | Employee proactivity, ambidexterity, and creativity

The proactivity concept has undergone significant developments over the years. Initially highlighting an understudied facet of social cognitive learning theory (person influencing environment; Bateman & Crant, 1993), the dispositional perspective (proactive personality) dominated the literature. Blossoming interest identified and studied an array of specific proactive behaviors (taking charge, initiative, voice, information seeking, and more; see Parker & Bindl, 2017 for a thorough review). Most recently, proactive mindset emerged as a new label (Benson-Greenwald & Diekman, 2022; Deacon & Miles, 2023).

Crant et al. (2017) distinguished proactive personality as a trait or disposition from proactive behavior as an observable action. They summarized studies treating proactivity as a self-assessment of recent behaviors (a criterion, not a predictor variable only) and noted its malleability—a feature of trait activation theory. This qualifies proactivity as a free trait (Little, 2014): a disposition with measurable stability but one that the individual can display or override intentionally and strategically. Further, Bateman (2017) described proactivity as a unique class of behaviors with particular and uncommon attributes, including strong agency, pursuing constructive change, and forging futures intended to be better than what would occur without them. Periodic and ongoing opportunities can activate this free trait to manifest in commensurate behaviors.

We propose that proactive disposition positively predicts ambidexterity for several reasons. Given their propensity to challenge the status quo and make future-focused changes, proactive individuals are likely to identify problems and opportunities and act on them via exploration by bringing in new ideas and practices (Crant, 2000). Proactive employees seek information and learn new things to effect constructive changes as they search for, discover, and create new opportunities. Proactive individuals may also be good at exploiting existing competencies and assets to improve efficiency in completing their tasks (Crant, 1995; Kiss et al., 2022; March, 1991; Wang et al., 2017). That is, proactive employees—when opportunities appear—engage in exploration activities that might lead to radical change and distinguish them from other employees while also making smaller, incremental, changes.

Second, proactive people can embrace ambidexterity more effectively because of their high openness to experience (Crant et al., 2017; Fuller & Marler, 2009). Proactive individuals with high openness seek fresh and varied experiences and are comfortable with the unfamiliar (Fuller & Marler, 2009; Judge et al., 2002). As a result, they experiment with new and different approaches when considering problems and opportunities (de Vries et al., 2016; Major et al., 2006). On the other hand, less proactive individuals who are more involved in routines and standard operating procedures prefer familiar practices and ideas and could engage in exploration or exploitation, but probably with a strong inclination toward exploitation.

Furthermore, proactive employees are likely to be more adaptable (Jiang, 2017) and flexible in switching between exploration and

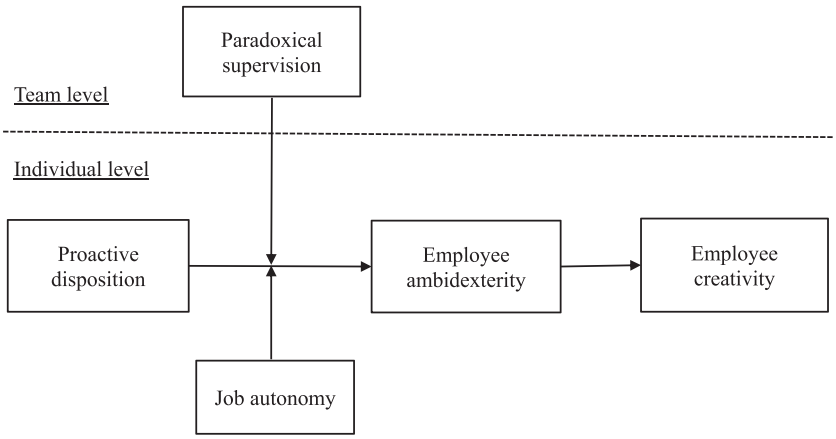

FIGURE 1 Hypothesized model linking proactive disposition and employee ambidexterity to employee creativity.

exploitation—activities that require distinct cognitive processes. Exploration demands imaginative, divergent thinking, while exploitation relies on concentrated, focused attention. While individuals often prefer one mode over the other, causing people to resist switching (Bidmon & Boe-Lillegraven, 2020), proactive individuals adapt by flexibly choosing their approaches as needed (Tolentino et al., 2014). Also, their results orientation and persistence mean (Bateman & Crant, 1993) they will exert the necessary effort to more comfortably and (often) effectively redirect their focus between exploring and exploiting. In contrast, employees with lower proactive disposition immerse themselves in familiar approaches and are less likely to switch, even as changing situations might require it. Taken together, we propose:

> **Hypothesis 1.** Proactive disposition is positively related to employee ambidexterity.

Employee ambidexterity relates positively to employee creativity (Yang & Yang, 2020). The management literature defines creativity as novel and useful ideas (Amabile & Pratt, 2016) and describes these two dimensions as paradoxical (Miron-Spektor & Erez, 2017; Mueller et al., 2012). Novelty requires a divergent process that breaks assumptions to generate new ideas, whereas usefulness arises from a convergent process that adheres to certain boundaries to provide practical solutions (Ulrich & Nielsen, 2020). People can address this paradox via ambidexterity.

Exploration and exploitation comport with novelty and usefulness, respectively. Exploitative activities such as pursuing efficiency can contribute to usefulness. Explorative activities such as identifying, creating, and attempting different solutions to work problems can stimulate employees to generate additional new ideas. Being ambidextrous means engaging in a greater variety of behaviors and opening new possibilities, thus making creativity more likely. Engaging in exploration and exploitation can promote creativity (Seo et al., 2015).

The preceding arguments and research suggest that employee ambidexterity mediates, at least partially, the relationship between proactive disposition and creativity. The proactive disposition can foster ambidexterity through efforts to change and exert control over work and work environments. In turn, enhanced ambidexterity facilitates creative idea generation. Therefore, we propose:

> **Hypothesis 2.** Employee ambidexterity partially mediates the relationship between proactive disposition and creativity.

2.2 | The moderating effects of situational cues

Here, we discuss contextual cues that can interact with the proactive disposition to influence ambidexterity. According to trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021; Tett & Burnett, 2003), individuals' traits manifest in commensurate work behaviors in response to relevant situational cues. If work situations prevent or discourage it, being ambidextrous can be difficult even for proactively inclined employees (Mu et al., 2022). In contrast, social and task environments with trait-relevant proactivity cues permit more freedom of expression, thus allowing this disposition to appear behaviorally. We considered paradoxical supervision and job autonomy to be trait-relevant cues that activate the expression of proactivity and thereby ambidexterity—or constrain it, when at low levels.

2.2.1 | The moderating role of paradoxical supervision

Paradoxical supervision is one dimension of paradoxical leader behaviors, or leader behaviors that appear contradictory but are interconnected, aiming to meet competing workplace demands over time (Zhang et al., 2015). Paradoxical supervision enables leaders to respond appropriately to the ubiquitous contradictory demands and challenges in organizations, like strictly enforcing work requirements to control followers' behaviors while granting followers flexibility. Among the five dimensions of paradoxical leadership, we chose to study this dimension because its emphasis on imposing work requirements while permitting flexibility is conceptually the closest to exploitation and exploration. It focuses on how supervisors manage employees' task-relevant behaviors (Zhang et al., 2015) and can provide social cues that activate proactive disposition to manifest in ambidexterity and creativity (Shao et al., 2019).

We propose that paradoxical supervision as a trait-relevant cue enhances the relationship between the proactive disposition and ambidexterity; we expect it to be stronger when paradoxical supervision is higher than lower. A high level conveys that supervisors expect their employees to comply with work regulations and standards as well as generate divergent insights and unique contributions. High paradoxical supervision signaling switching activities provides more opportunities for proactively disposed employees to express trait-consistent behaviors, switching between explorative and exploitative activities with their high openness, adaptability, and flexibility. Also, these trait-expressive behaviors are recognized and appreciated under the proactivity-consistent situational cues (i.e., high paradoxical supervision) and thus are positively evaluated by the supervisors who paradoxically manage tasks. Individuals with low proactive disposition might see the same signals and opportunities to behave ambidextrously but are less likely to engage in these trait-inconsistent behaviors.

On the other hand, when supervisors exhibit low paradoxical supervision, they provide cues about which behaviors are appropriate—for example, clearly signaling either exploitation (being a routine necessity) or exploration (being nonroutine). Such contexts may offer less opportunity for proactive individuals to switch between exploration and exploitation flexibly and can suppress it. As a result, the proactive disposition may not be highly expressed in

ambidexterity, and thus, even proactive employees might respond to their work requirements primarily with exploitation or exploration only. Thus,

> **Hypothesis 3.** Paradoxical supervision moderates the relationship between proactive disposition and ambidexterity such that this relationship is stronger when paradoxical supervision is higher rather than lower.

2.2.2 | The moderating role of job autonomy

Along with leader behaviors, job characteristics can play essential roles as situational cues that give individuals the freedom to pursue their work goals consonant with their sense of self (Tett & Burnett, 2003). People are motivated to express their traits when given the chance (Tett et al., 2013). Such discretionary cues allow employees to pursue goals that align with their personal dispositions. We propose that job autonomy as a discretionary trait-relevant cue (Tett et al., 2013) enhances the relationship between the proactive disposition and ambidexterity such that the relationship is stronger when job autonomy is higher than lower. Employees with high autonomy can behave as they are (Barrick & Mount, 1993; Cooper & Withey, 2009). High job autonomy provides more freedom to express personal traits such that people highly disposed toward proactivity will display their high openness, adaptability, and flexibility in ambidexterity more than those not so disposed. When job autonomy is low, employees are given limited discretion in scheduling their work, making job-relevant decisions, or selecting work methods (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). With limited freedom, even proactive employees may find it difficult to express their traits and, thereby, are less likely to behave ambidextrously. Hence,

> **Hypothesis 4.** Job autonomy moderates the relationship between proactive disposition and ambidexterity such that this relationship is stronger when job autonomy is higher rather than lower.

These moderating effects influence creativity through ambidexterity. Our hypotheses suggest a moderated mediation model, as shown in Figure 1. Hence,

> **Hypothesis 5a.** Paradoxical supervision moderates proactive disposition's indirect effect on employee creativity via ambidexterity such that the indirect effect is stronger when paradoxical supervision is higher rather than lower.

> **Hypothesis 5b.** Job autonomy moderates proactive disposition's indirect effect on employee creativity via ambidexterity such that the indirect effect is stronger when job autonomy is higher rather than lower.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Sample and procedure

Data were collected from full-time employees working in research and development (R&D) teams at two pharmaceutical companies and one IT service company in Eastern China. Typical tasks in the R&D units of the two pharmaceutical firms included biological screening, pharmacodynamics validation experiments, and audited instrument use records. Major tasks in the R&D unit of the IT service company were designing, testing, and maintaining software programs. As R&D functions are tasked with generating creative ideas and producing innovative outputs, creative behavior and outcomes are critical in their performance.

We collected data from multiple sources (team members and team leaders) to alleviate common method variance and at two points in time to enable causal analysis and inferences. A group of researchers handed out and collected paper surveys on-site during working hours. Team members completed a questionnaire assessing their proactive disposition, job autonomy, and their leader's paradoxical supervision at Time 1. Approximately one month later (Time 2), these members reported their exploration and exploitation behaviors, which we then used to compute ambidexterity. Also, at Time 2, team leaders evaluated subordinates' creativity within their team.

We identified and invited 92 teams from the three companies to participate in our survey. We matched each team member's survey with their team leader's survey for two time points and retained 364 team members in 74 teams for the final analysis. All the responded teams showed a high within-team response rate (above 75%, de Jong & Elfring, 2010). Team size ranged from 4 to 10 (average = 6.16). Among all team members, 32.0% were female, the mean age was 36.51 years (SD = 7.04), and the mean organizational tenure was 12.84 years (SD = 7.40). Most (72.5%) had an undergraduate or master's degree. Of the 74 team leaders, 80.6% were male, the mean age was 40.43 years (SD = 5.46), and their mean organizational tenure was 15.18 years (SD = 6.42).

3.2 | Measures

We assessed the key variables using the established scales from previous studies and written in Chinese. For the proactive trait and employee creativity, we used the existing Chinese translations, which had been published in peer-reviewed journals. For other variables, following Brislin's (1986) back-translation procedure, two bilingual researchers independently translated the measures from English to Chinese, and then a third researcher translated the Chinese items back to English. Any discrepancies (all because of different expressions or writing styles) were resolved through consensus. All items were assessed with seven-point Likert-type scales (1 = "*Strongly disagree*" and 7 = "*Strongly agree*") except for employee creativity (1 = "*Strongly disagree*" and 5 = "*Strongly agree*").

3.2.1 | Proactive disposition

Following Bindl et al. (2012) and Parker (1998), we assessed employees' proactive tendencies by adopting the six highest-loading items in the original proactive personality scale (Bateman & Crant, 1993). Items include "If I see something I don't like, I fix it.", "No matter what the odds, if I believe in something I will make it happen.", and "I am always looking for better ways to do things." (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$).

3.2.2 | Employee ambidexterity

Employees' ambidexterity scores were computed based on their exploration and exploitation activities as measured by scales adapted from Mom et al. (2009). We asked respondents how much they engaged in various work-related activities last month. Sample exploration items were "Searching for new possibilities with respect to products/services, processes, or markets," "Evaluating diverse options with respect to products/services, processes, or markets," and "Focusing on strong renewal of products/services or processes." Sample items measuring exploitation were "Activities which serve existing (internal) customers with existing services/products," "Activities primarily focused on achieving short-term goals," and "Activities which you can properly conduct by using your present knowledge." Seven items tap exploration (Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$) and seven tap exploitation (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$). Following the norm in previous studies (e.g., Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Lubatkin et al., 2006; Mom et al., 2009), we multiplied scores of the two dimensions of exploration and exploitation to create an ambidexterity index.

3.2.3 | Paradoxical supervision

We used a four-item scale to assess supervisors' paradoxical behaviors of enforcing work requirements while allowing flexibility (Zhang et al., 2015).[2]

Employees rated paradoxical supervision with four items: "My supervisor stresses conformity in task performance but allows for exceptions.", "My supervisor has high requirements but allows subordinates to make mistakes.", "My supervisor clarifies work requirements but does not micromanage work.", and "My supervisor is highly demanding regarding work performance but is not hypercritical." (Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$). This measure was then aggregated to the team level. The ICC(1) value of .13, ICC(2) value of .42, and mean $r_{wg}(j)$ value of .84 met acceptable levels to justify the aggregation of individual responses to the team level (Fleiss, 1986). We averaged to calculate a team-level index.

3.2.4 | Job autonomy

To measure employees' job autonomy, we adopted the Idaszak et al. (1988) scale that includes three dimensions: work scheduling autonomy, decision-making autonomy, and work methods autonomy. Sample items include "My job allows me to plan how I do my work.", "My job allows me to make a lot of decisions on my own.", and "My job allows me to decide on my own how to go about doing my work." A second-order confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with three first-order factors loading on a higher order factor yielded an adequate fit, $\chi^2(24) = 148.52$, comparative fit index (CFI) = .95, and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) = .05. Hence, following the previous studies (e.g., Kuvaas et al., 2016; Stiglbauer & Kovacs, 2018), we created a single job autonomy index by averaging all items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$).

3.2.5 | Employee creativity

We used the three-item scale from Oldham and Cummings (1996) to measure employee creativity. Supervisors rated the creativity of each employee on their teams. The three items are "This employee's work is creative.", "This employee's work is original and practical.", and "This employee's work is adaptive and practical." (Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$).

3.2.6 | Control variables

To partial out individual differences that may influence ambidexterity and creativity, we controlled for employees' age (in years), sex (0 = male, 1 = female), and education level (1 = high school, 2 = undergraduate, and 3 = master's degrees and above). We also included two tenure variables measured in years: organizational tenure and tenure with the leader. We included two firm dummies to account for any confounding firm-level effects.

3.3 | Analytic procedure

Given the nested structure of these data, we conducted multilevel analyses with Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2012). We modeled paradoxical supervision at the team level and all other variables at the individual level. When testing the cross-level moderating effect (H3), we group-mean centered proactive disposition and grand-mean centered paradoxical supervision (Enders & Tofighi, 2007; Hofmann & Gavin, 1998). We drew the simple slope figures for a significant moderating effect at ±1 SD from the mean of the moderator (Aiken & West, 1991). We used the Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications produced asymmetric confidence intervals (CIs) for the

[2]We conducted a scale validation study to explore the correlation between the four items measuring paradoxical supervision and the other items in Zhang et al. (2015). We collected data from 380 employees using Prolific (189 men, average age = 37.63 years, and average organizational tenure = 6.11 years). The correlation between paradoxical supervision (i.e., the one dimension we used) and the full scale (22 items) is very high ($r = .86$, $p < .01$). The correlation between paradoxical supervision and the other 18 items (i.e., excluding the four items we used) is also very high ($r = .79$, $p < .01$).

mediating effects of employee ambidexterity on the relationship between proactive disposition and creativity and the moderated indirect effects (Preacher et al., 2010; Preacher & Selig, 2012).

4 | RESULTS

Before testing the hypotheses, we conducted multi-level CFAs to assess the distinctiveness of the key variables (proactive disposition, job autonomy, exploration, exploitation, and employee creativity at the individual level; and paradoxical supervision at the team level). To adequately assess the model with an appropriate parameter-to-sample size ratio, we used three-item parcels for the measures with more than three items and used the three dimensions for job autonomy as parcels (Little et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2022). The six-factor model fits the data well, χ^2 (364, 80) = 240.85, CFI = .91, RMSEA = .07, and SRMR for Level 1 = .06, SRMR-level 2 = .00. It also fits the data better than a five-factor model that combines exploration and exploitation (χ^2 difference = 40.15, df = 4, $p < .001$, χ^2 [364, 84] = 281.00, CFI = .89, RMSEA = .08, SRMR-level 1 = .06, SRMR-level 2 = .00). These results confirmed the distinctiveness of the key measures.

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics of all study variables. All are sufficiently reliable (Cronbach's $\alpha > .70$). Employee ambidexterity was positively and significantly correlated with proactive disposition, paradoxical supervision, job autonomy, and employee creativity ($r = .40$, $p < .01$; $r = .32$, $p < .01$; $r = .24$, $p < .01$; $r = .18$, $p < .01$, respectively).

Hypothesis 1 proposed that proactive disposition would relate positively to ambidexterity. Table 2 (Model 3) shows that relationship after controlling for firm dummies and employee demographic characteristics ($\beta = 3.45$, $p < .01$). This result supported Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2 stated that employee ambidexterity would partially mediate the relationship between proactivity and creativity. The Monte Carlo simulation supported the hypothesis: for the path of proactive disposition—ambidexterity—creativity, the indirect effect = .03, 95% CI [.001, .074].

Hypothesis 3 posited that paradoxical supervision would moderate the relationship between proactive disposition and ambidexterity such that this relationship would be stronger when paradoxical supervision was higher rather than lower. As shown in Model 6 in Table 3, the interaction term of proactive disposition and paradoxical supervision was positive and significant ($\beta = 3.41$, $p < .01$). Tests of simple slope show that the relationship was significant when paradoxical supervision was high (+1SD simple slope = 4.80, $p < .01$), but not when paradoxical supervision was low (−1SD simple slope = 1.64, *n.s.*). Figure 2 portrays these simple slopes.

These results support Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4 proposed that job autonomy would moderate the relationship between proactive disposition and employee ambidexterity such that it would be stronger when job autonomy was higher rather than lower. Model 4 in Table 3 shows a positive and significant interaction effect ($\beta = 2.22$, $p < .01$). The relationship between proactive disposition and ambidexterity was significant when job autonomy was low (−1SD simple slope = 1.16, $p < .05$), but it was stronger when job autonomy was high (+1SD simple slope = 5.07, $p < .001$). The simple slope difference, portrayed in Figure 3, was significant (slope difference = 3.91, $p < .001$). These results support Hypothesis 4.

Although we hypothesized the moderating effects of paradoxical supervision and job autonomy separately, we supplemented the separate analyses with both hypothesized moderation effects in a single equation. The results, Model 7 in Table 3, are pretty similar to the separate tests, with both effects significant.

Hypothesis 5a and Hypothesis 5b proposed that paradoxical supervision and job autonomy would moderate the indirect effect of proactive disposition on creativity via ambidexterity. The Monte Carlo simulations (see Table 4) show that the indirect effect varied as a function of paradoxical supervision (conditional indirect effect = .04, 95% CI = [.009, .074]). The indirect effect was significant when paradoxical supervision was high (+1SD indirect effect = .05, 95% CI = [.014, .099]), but not when paradoxical supervision was low (−1SD indirect effect = .02, 95% CI = [−.001, .045]). The indirect effect moderated by job autonomy also was significant (conditional indirect effect = .02, 95% CI = [.004, .043]). It was significant when job autonomy was high (+1SD indirect effect = .05, 95% CI = [.010, .094]), but not when low (−1SD indirect effect = .01, 95% CI = [−.001, .031]). These results supported Hypothesis 5a and Hypothesis 5b.

4.1 | Supplementary analyses

We performed similar supplementary analyses without control variables. Results are highly similar to those reported above and support all hypotheses. Detailed results are available upon request. We also tested the hypotheses with an alternative computation for employee ambidexterity (ambidexterity = exploitation and exploration/2). The results replicate those of the multiplicative approach (ambidexterity = exploitation × exploration), except that the interaction effect between proactive disposition and paradoxical supervision is only marginally significant ($\beta = .13$, $p < .08$).

In addition, given that Tett et al. (2013) and Tett et al. (2021) posited that multiple contextual cues may jointly define the situations in which individuals have opportunities to express trait- relevant behavior, we tested whether paradoxical supervision and job autonomy jointly affect the relationship between proactive disposition and employee ambidexterity. When paradoxical supervision and job autonomy are both high, proactive disposition may have the highest positive relationship with ambidexterity. However, the result shows that the three-way interaction effect was not significant ($\beta = 1.86$, *n.s.*). It is plausible that a social trait activator (paradoxical supervision) and a task trait activator (job autonomy) are substitutes for each other in prompting proactivity trait expressions as ambidexterity. Future research is needed to better understand the optimal conditions for activating proactivity to foster ambidexterity with different

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables.

Variables		*Mean*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1.	Firm A	0.66	0.48	—													
2.	Firm B	0.23	0.42	−.76	—												
3.	Age	36.51	7.04	−.04	.12	—											
4.	Sex	0.32	0.47	.13	−.09	.06	—										
5.	Education	2.45	1.02	−.11	.15	−.01	−.07	—									
6.	Organizational tenure	12.84	7.40	−.03	.10	.88	.05	−.06	—								
7.	Tenure with leader	5.53	4.96	.07	.04	.39	.00	−.02	.54	—							
8.	Proactive disposition	5.22	0.80	.06	−.04	.00	−.08	−.05	.02	−.02	(.76)						
9.	Exploration	4.98	0.84	.05	.03	.01	−.03	.01	.01	−.02	.37	(.79)					
10.	Exploitation	5.25	0.82	.05	.04	.00	−.06	−.06	.01	−.02	.34	.66	(.85)				
11.	Employee ambidexterity	26.60	7.72	.06	.04	.01	−.05	−.03	.01	−.04	.40	.92	.88	—			
12.	Job autonomy	4.60	1.11	.01	.04	−.03	−.05	.01	−.05	−.23	.21	.23	.18	.24	(.92)		
13.	Paradoxical supervision	5.08	0.46	.01	.10	−.07	−.06	.15	−.10	−.12	.16	.28	.28	.32	.33	(.73)	
14.	Employee creativity	3.91	0.64	.13	.03	−.01	.04	−.07	.00	.92	.01	.14	.20	.18	.02	.07	(.75)

Note: $N = 364$. Reliabilities are in parentheses. For all correlations above $|.11|$, $p \leq .05$; and above$|.15|$, $p \leq .01$. Employees reported their proactive disposition, job autonomy, and their supervisor's paradoxical supervision at Time 1 and assessed their ambidexterity at Time 2. Supervisors assessed their subordinates' creativity at Time 2.

TABLE 2 The mediating effects of employee ambidexterity on the relationship between proactive disposition and employee creativity.

	Employee ambidexterity			Employee creativity			
Variables	**M1**	**M2**	**M3**	**M4**	**M5**	**M6**	**M7**
Intercept	23.98**	7.09	4.83	3.58**	3.46**	3.47**	3.18**
Firm A	3.48*	3.07*	2.34	.47**	.47**	.47**	.45**
Firm B	3.45	3.43*	2.12	.47**	.47**	.47**	.45**
Employee's age	−.01	−.04	−.05	.00	.00	.00	.00
Employee's sex	−.89	−.42	−.71	.09	.09	.09	.10
Employee's education	−.30	−.18	−.52	−.03	−.02	−.02	−.02
Employee's organizational tenure	.10	.10	.12	.00	.00	.00	.00
Tenure with the present leader	−.09	−.08	−.07	.00	.00	.00	.00
Proactive disposition		3.45**			.02	−.01	
Paradoxical supervision			5.28**				.08
Employee ambidexterity						.01*	.01*
Pseudo-R^2	.03	.18	.12	.06	.06	.07	.07

Note: $N = 364$ individuals, 74 teams.
For the Pseudo-R^2, M1 to M3 and M4 to M5 were compared with their null models, respectively.
*$p < .05$, and **$p < .01$.

TABLE 3 The effects of paradoxical supervision and job autonomy on the relationship between proactive disposition and employee ambidexterity.

	Employee ambidexterity						
Variables	**M1**	**M2**	**M3**	**M4**	**M5**	**M6**	**M7**
Intercept	23.98**	25.21**	23.65**	24.12**	26.57**	25.75**	25.75**
Firm A	3.48*	3.49*	3.37*	3.34*	2.31	2.29	2.16
Firm B	3.45	3.50	3.33	3.28	2.11	2.08	1.89
Employee's age	−.01	−.06	−.01	−.03	−.06	−.03	−.01
Employee's sex	−.89	−.59	−.58	−.22	−.41	−.40	−.10
Employee's education	−.30	−.18	−.12	−.26	−.35	−.37	−.43
Employee's organizational tenure	.10	.13	.08	.10	.12	.09	.08
Tenure with the present leader	−.09	−.09	−.05	−.04	−.06	−.06	−.02
Proactive disposition (PD)		2.96**	2.66**	3.11**	2.95**	3.22**	3.24**
Job autonomy			.97**	1.17**			1.10**
PD × job autonomy				2.22**			1.99**
Paradoxical supervision (PS)					5.24**	5.24**	5.29**
PD × PS						3.41**	2.55**
Pseudo-R^2	.02	.09	.10	.12	.18	.20	.21

Note: $N = 364$ individuals, 74 teams.
For the Pseudo-R^2, all models were compared with the null model.
*$p < .05$, and **$p < .01$.

combinations of situational factors (e.g., task, social, and organizational factors).

5 | DISCUSSION

The combined results validate the Figure 1 model proposing 1) ambidexterity as a behavioral mediator between the proactive disposition and supervisor ratings of employee creativity, 2) proactive disposition as a predictor of arguably the most far-reaching paradox (ambidexterity) in management literature and practice, and 3) trait activation theory predictions of person/situation interactions. The statistical support for each hypothesis adds to the validated nomological nets of every variable, including moderators (paradoxical supervision and job autonomy) operating as activators at high levels—potentially as stimuli, motivators, and facilitators. Below, we offer practical implications after first broadening the lens to consider theoretical

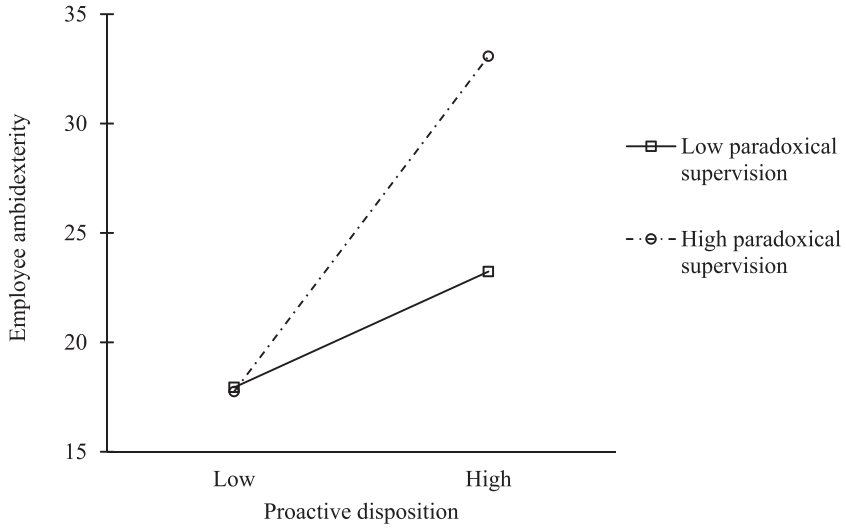

FIGURE 2 Simple slopes of the relationships between proactive disposition and employee ambidexterity at levels of paradoxical supervision.

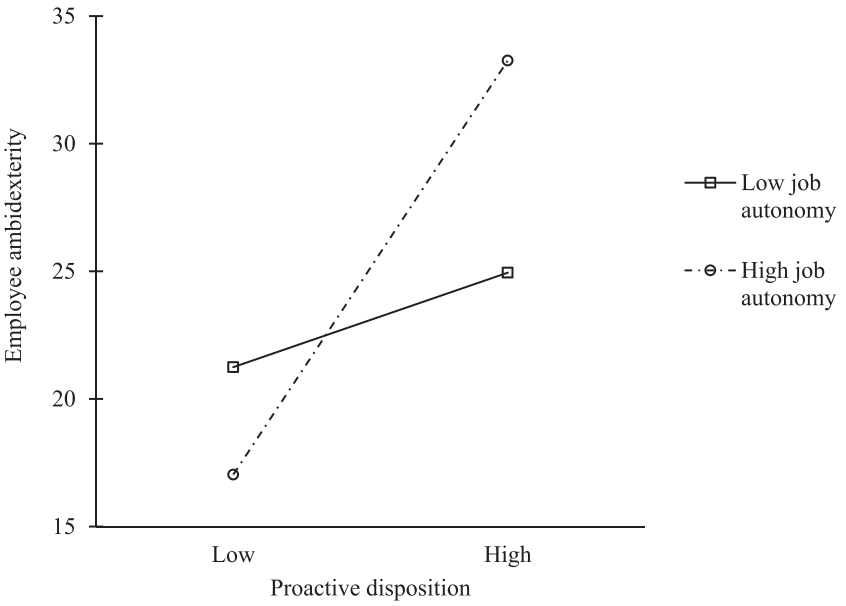

FIGURE 3 Simple slopes of the relationships between proactive disposition and employee ambidexterity at levels of job autonomy.

Moderator		Indirect effect	Monte Carlo 95% CI
□	PD → EA → EC	.03*	[.001, .074]
Job autonomy	High	.05*	[.010, .094]
	Low	.01	[−.001, .031]
	Difference	.04*	[.008, .075]
Paradoxical supervision	High	.05*	[.014, .099]
	Low	.02	[−.001, .045]
	Difference	.03*	[.008, .069]

TABLE 4 The indirect effects and moderated indirect effects on employee creativity.

Notes: PD = proactive disposition; EA = employee ambidexterity; EC = employee creativity; CI = confidence interval; High = +1SD; Low = −1SD.
*$p < .05$.

implications and ideas for future research, particularly regarding ambidexterity and proactivity.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

Beyond the significant relationships among specific variables, the broadest theoretical contributions concern the ambidexterity paradox and proactivity as a uniquely vital pairing of agentic thoughts and actions. Paradox theory uses dual, competing, tension-creating goals to describe and analyze interdependent concepts and processes (Lewis & Smith, 2022). Moreover, it pertains to real-world challenges ranging from organization design, diversity management, and transformational leadership to pandemics and climate change. The exploitation/exploration duality—the behavioral core of this study, manageable via ambidexterity and proactivity—is a challenging, ubiquitous paradox and a performance imperative. Its inherent, seemingly universal tensions and dilemmas include stability vs. change (Farjoun, 2010) and short-term vs. long-term time horizons.

Consistent with our first hypothesis, high proactives (Li et al., 2020) can better manage the tension between exploration and exploitation. Effectively managing paradoxes requires the action- and results-oriented dynamics of personal agency (Bandura, 2006). The thinking-and-doing duality of proactivity—a proactive mindset with commensurate, intentional behaviors enacted when attractive opportunities exist—strategically considers problems and opportunities, imagines possibilities, and changes trajectories to pursue alternative futures that might not otherwise arrive (Bateman, 2017).

Proactivity appears to form a unique class of behaviors that differ in concept and consequence from most behavior (Bateman, 2017). Supporting this idea, de Vries et al. (2016) made a theoretical case for adding proactivity to the HEXACO model and used the original 17-item measure (Bateman & Crant, 1993) to empirically validate its separate location in the model. The de Vries et al. team describes proactivity as an indicator of "active engagement" and calls it HEXACO's "missing link." We explain proactivity's distinction by being more self-directed, motivated by future considerations more than by past and present, and guided by deliberative information processing (Kahneman, 2011). These features generate desired trajectory changes and future consequences, in contrast to preserving status quos or continuing current paths. Much research remains to be done around proactivity, ambidexterity, our field's various engagement constructs (Macey & Schneider, 2008), and a wide array of potential predictors, mediators, moderators, and criteria.

Moreover, theoretical implications arise from the contexts that activate proactivity and enhance ambidexterity. Guided by trait activation theory (Tett et al., 2021), we found that proactivity was manifested in ambidexterity when paradoxical supervision or job autonomy was higher rather than lower. Trait activation theory shows potential for explaining and predicting proactivity's operation in different circumstances. Our findings contribute to a theoretical understanding of the circumstances under which proactivity leads to constructive rather than less-than-optimal coping processes and performance (Parker et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2010).

Our study also responds to Mu et al.'s (2022) call to enrich the conceptualization of individual ambidexterity by examining the interplay between personal characteristics and contextual factors. High proactives are drawn to exploring radical change opportunities—along with smaller, incremental changes akin to exploitative tweaks—when high-valence opportunities arise in the circumstances including our moderators' high levels. Low proactives in the same circumstances are likely to do less exploration for significant opportunities and problems, to be indifferent toward the actions required or what they could accomplish, or to hold repellant negative valences toward those processes or goals. Previous research adopting an interactionist perspective on employee ambidexterity found that paradoxical leadership can enhance the impact of leader vision (Zhang et al., 2022) and learning orientation (Kauppila & Tempelaar, 2016) on employee ambidexterity. Our results complement these studies by showing which dispositional and situational factors interactively affect employee ambidexterity. These can enrich nomological networks and management practices that leverage the nexus between proactivity and ambidexterity.

A final comment about our study and paradox theory (Lewis & Smith, 2022): Exploitation and exploration comprise the best-known paradox in the academic management literature. However, multiple paradoxes live throughout our Figure 1 model and hypotheses. Persistent tensions reside in creativity as a performance outcome (novelty and usefulness), proactivity (problem-solving and opportunity seeking, thinking and doing, actions and projects with differing time horizons, attempting change in the face of counteracting forces), and situational moderators (paradoxical supervision and autonomy vs. control). Our findings highlight the joint influence of context and personal agency toward managing the dual challenges of maintaining existing competencies and seeking innovative pathways.

5.2 | Practical implications

How to ambidextrously deploy exploitation and exploration is a challenging, prevalent paradox necessary for performing well over time (March, 1991). Implications for practice follow directly from our results, as do farther-reaching suggestions by extension. For supervisors and most others in leadership positions, paradoxical supervision and offering job autonomy can motivate and facilitate proactive employees' ambidexterity. Combining the predictive powers of proactivity, exploitation, and exploration could identify and strengthen our abilities to predict and influence coping processes and outcomes (Parker & Bindl, 2017). Managers can adapt their management approaches—for example, crafting work contexts (Benson-Greenwald & Diekman, 2022), multiple paradoxical leadership dimensions (Zhang et al., 2015), and engaging in customized conversations—according to employees' high, medium, or low proactivity inclinations.

Managers and organizations can benefit further by leveraging proactivity as a high-impact construct and assessment criterion for selection, training, and development. Justifying proactivity as a

selection criterion begins with the fact that its self-report measures predict a wide array of constructive behaviors, performance types, and well-being indicators (Parker & Bindl, 2017). Furthermore, meta-analysis (Spitzmuller et al., 2015) confirms that the proactive disposition accounts for unique variance in task performance, overall job performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors even after controlling for all Big Five personality traits (plus general mental ability regarding the first two criteria). Long considered the latitude and longitude for mapping personality constructs (Ozer & Reise, 1994), the Big Five collectively account for less than 50% of the variance in the proactive disposition. So far, to our knowledge, the proactivity measures show little or no adverse gender or racial subgroup differences, indicating their potential usefulness in selection decisions (Spitzmuller et al., 2015).

Proactivity's cognitive, behavioral, and performance advantages, often accompanied by risks, indicate its potential usefulness to employees and employers through training and development. Proactivity programs in South Africa (Friedrich et al., 2006), Germany (Raab, 2007), and Uganda (Glaub et al., 2014) initiated and strengthened proactive behaviors by helping employees develop self-chosen goals, collect information, develop and implement plans, and collect and process feedback. Subsequently and impressively, Strauss and Parker (2018) applied Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and developed a field intervention with two proactivity workshops having similar components but differing objectives.

We believe that proactivity, manifested in ambidexterity, paradoxical thinking, and other thoughts and actions, could be shaped into productive elements of team and even organizational cultures (Wang & Rafiq, 2014). Moreover, it is perpetually timely and crucial, especially in the VUCA environment (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity). Paradoxes are ubiquitous and complex, and agility, adaptability, and ambidexterity have never been more essential (Cunha et al., 2020). Virtually no dilemmas are isolated binary choices, solvable with dichotomous thinking (Mieda et al., 2021); instead, they must be embraced and managed well via multiple decisions and solutions.

5.3 | Limitations and future directions

This study has several limitations, so caution is required in interpreting the results. First, our research design does not permit strong causal inference. We used a time-lagged design, which is rare in the study of ambidexterity (Joseph et al., 2023), and the proposed relationships are theoretically reasonable. However, we cannot rule out alternative explanations for the findings. Causality could be bidirectional or driven by unmeasured variables; for example, creative employees may be naturally ambidextrous, and ambidextrous skills can facilitate and motivate proactivity. Social cognitive theory's triadic reciprocal causation among person, environment, and behavior (Bandura, 1986), a theoretical underpinning of the proactive personality concept (Bateman & Crant, 1993), indicates that related variable pairs can have reciprocal causal relationships. To learn more about causality, future studies with longitudinal designs can reveal not just causal dominance but also how different time lags might influence it (Lian et al., 2014).

Second, we measured creativity from the perspective of supervisors only. Although supervisor assessment is the method used most to measure employee creativity (Ng & Feldman, 2012), future research could use objective and other measures such as peer evaluation (e.g., Ng & Yam, 2019) and objective data (e.g., Liao et al., 2010).

Third, the sample came from a single country, so the cultural context might affect our findings and limit generalizability. Chinese people prefer usefulness to novelty (Leung & Morris, 2011; Liou & Lan, 2018), so supervisors might prioritize usefulness, and employees might engage in more exploitation than exploration. More broadly, Yin and Yang, striving to balance the two opposite forces existing everywhere, are deeply rooted in Chinese philosophy (Fang, 2012). Chinese tend to use such a mindset in dealing with various paradoxical situations (Faure & Fang, 2008).

The dynamic relationships among exploitation, exploration, and proactivity are open for future research. The exploitation/exploration relationship is a long-standing topic for debate, and Mu et al. (2022) offer a typology of four possibilities. Considering the potential effects of proactive disposition, we hypothesized a positive proactivity/ambidexterity relationship, believing that proactivity would relate to exploration more than exploitation. The primary logic was that proactive and explorative activities share common core characteristics that exploitation does not: intentional change and long-term emphasis, in contrast to exploitation's routine stability, reliability, and near-term focus. Nonetheless, exploitation is not devoid of change initiatives; the changes are more incremental than radical, as in exploration. Kiss et al. (2022) hypothesized that proactiveness, because of its strong action and results orientations, would positively predict exploitation and exploration activities, describing and measuring them as different types of innovation in contrast to most other research. Future research can explore how proactive employees perceive the relationship between exploration and exploitation and how they make judgments and choices in using their limited time and other resources.

When combined over time, those activity sets achieve predictability and control while renewing and cultivating change. However, controversy over how exploration and exploitation relate to one another remains, and fresh theorizing continues (Mu et al., 2022). Still unknown are other contingencies—ideally actionable by organizations, teams, and individual employees—that determine when and how exploitative and exploratory activities operate competitively or independently—or additively or synergistically toward generating broad, flexible, sustainable, and growing behavioral repertoires. Rather than pure competition between exploitation and exploration for scarce resources, individual differences, situational variables, and multiple paradoxes will likely determine a particular exploitation/exploration relationship. These are all directions worthy of future investigation.

Another potential research question concerns multilevel generalization theory and whether the relationships found here hold at different levels (Chen et al., 2005; Drazin et al., 1999). Our theories become broader and more parsimonious if the relationships among proactive mindset, ambidexterity, and creativity are homologous

across levels, including the organizational and team levels (Chen et al., 2005).

Future research can also examine whether the network placement of proactive employees in teams influences employee ambidexterity. For example, proactive employees who occupy central network positions may be better able to engage in exploration and exploitation activities, leading to greater ambidexterity in the team. Future research could also explore the optimal dispersion of the proactive disposition in a team to facilitate team ambidexterity and creativity (Zhang et al., 2021). Too many proactive employees in a team may cause tension among team members, inhibiting team exploration and exploitation.

5.4 | Conclusion

Fostering proactivity and ambidexterity at the individual level can effectively address workplace paradoxes. Dualities and tensions characterize all the concepts studied here, plus many more (Lewis & Smith, 2022). A single paradox and its tensions are likely to be interdependent with others, so we can learn much by examining multiple paradoxes simultaneously to fully grasp their psychological, behavioral, and performance outcomes, including facilitators and barriers. We also call for more research to overcome factors constraining and stimulating the expression of constructive free traits (Little, 2014) such as a proactive disposition. The big picture, also deserving deeper investigation, is the interrelations among human resource practices (Kim, 2019; Pak et al., 2023) and organizational cultures (Lee et al., 2019; Sun & Zhao, 2023) that develop and sustain proactivity and ambidexterity in individuals, teams, and organizations.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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