Ambidextrous leadership, paradox and contingency:

Evidence from Angola[1]

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Abstract

The study departs from two assumptions. First, it considers that organizations, their leaders and the HRM function are inherently paradoxical and that, in that sense, dealing with paradox is a necessary component of the leadership process which requires ambidexterity capabilities. Second, it explores whether the paradoxes of leadership may manifest differently in different contexts. We explore the emergence of paradox in the leadership of Angolan organizations. Angola is an economy transitioning from a centrally-planned to a market mode, and this makes it a rich site for understanding the specificities of ambidextrous paradoxical processes in an under-researched, "rest of the world", context. The findings of our inductive study led to the emergence of four interrelated paradoxes and highlight the importance of ambidextrous paradoxical work as a HRM contingency.

Keywords: leadership, ambidexterity, HRM in Angola, ambidextrous paradox work.

The idea of a "paradox turn" has not been articulated yet, but it is building momentum in the field of management and organization, in areas such as ambidexterity (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009), leadership (Fletcher, 2004; Ibarra, 2015; Warner, 2007), corporate sustainability (Hahn, Pinkse, Preuss, & Figge, 2014), the family firm (Ingram, Lewis, Sarton, & Gartner, 2014), organizational culture (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Takeuchi, Osono, & Shimizu, 2008), corporate strategy (Hundsnes & Meyer, 2006), and business education (Dobrow, Smith, & Posner, 2011). Recent research has revealed that paradoxes are pervasive forces in organizational and broad institutional processes at every level of analysis. *Institutions*, such as marriage, can be paradoxical, as they contain the potentially contrary demands of romantic involvement with the binding, non-romantic dimension of a legal contract (Nilsson, 2015). *Organizations* have been portrayed as paradoxical, as they necessarily imply opposing institutional logics, such as the logic of the family and the logic of the business in the case of family firms, the logic of commerce and the logic of education, the logic of service to the public and the logic of budgetary discipline, the logic of short term and the logic of long term (e.g., Pache & Santos, 2010; Schuman, Stutz & Ward, 2010). *Teams*, including top management teams (Amason, 1996), are paradoxical as they require a balance between collaboration and competition, dedication to the collective and a desire to stand out, and so forth (Doz and Hamel, 1998; Silva et al., 2014; Smith & Berg, 1987). *Individuals* have also been presented as struggling with paradoxical forces, namely because their protection of personal excellence leads them to become rigid (DeLong & DeLong, 2011), because they have motives for being both good citizens and star performers (Bergeron, 2007), and are confronted with conflicting identity pressures, such as those coming out of work and family demands (Kets de Vries, 2012). The "paradox turn", in summary, stresses that organizing is replete with opposite demands and tensions that somehow need to be reconciled and put to a productive use.

In this paper we explore the role of ambidextrous leadership paradox work as a way of managing existing tensions, with a focus on the management of people. In doing so, we attempt to respond to one important theoretical question: could there be a contingency theory of paradox? This constitutes a pertinent conceptual issue as previous work by Smith and Lewis (2011) persuasively argued that as environments become more global, dynamic and competitive, paradoxical thinking can constitute a fruitful alternative to more established contingency reasoning. We explore whether even paradoxes can have a contingency component, with different contexts eliciting the emergence of different types of paradoxes. In this sense, contingency and paradox theories would not exist in opposition but instead could be

synthesized through ambidextrous leadership paradox work. In so doing, we conduct our work at the interface of the theories of paradox and contingency, therefore contributing to a contingency-informed theory of paradox, an important conceptual endeavor.

In line with Zoogah (2008) we postulate that: (1) paradox may be a relevant organizational phenomenon *per se*, i.e. regardless of context, and that (2) the functional form it takes may express local and singular features (e.g. Zhang, Waldman, Han & Li, 2015). On the a-contextual side lies the assumption that organizations and their leadership are inherently paradoxical and fraught with opposite demands. This dimension does not depend on context, as every organization articulates paradoxical tensions and requires ambidexterity capabilities. Contextually, we aimed to study the specific manifestations of paradox in a transitioning African context, Angola. This need is substantiated for example in Kiggundu et al. (1983), who noted that the contingencies confronting leaders in Western settings, including institutional contingencies (Musacchio, Lazzarini & Aguilera, 2015) are not necessarily valid for developing countries and, as such, do not conceptually exhaust the range of paradoxical manifestations confronting leaders. Cultural, economic and institutional idiosyncrasies of developing countries may produce paradoxical demands and challenges not identified in other contexts. Leadership paradoxes in Africa may, according to previous literature, involve the need to develop short-term flexibility while preparing organizations for the long run (Bock, Opsahl, George, & Gann, 2012; Kamoche & Cunha, 2001; Sarala, Cooper, Junni, & Tarba, 2014), combine foreign management practice with local culture (Gomes, Sahadev, Glaister & Demirbag, 2014). Over the last decade, Africa in general and Angola in particular have been experiencing a remarkable economic growth. This has resulted in a substantial increase in the number of multinational firms (MNEs) entering this market. However, the fact that most African countries, including Angola, are still facing major development challenges (Kamoche et al., 2004), increases the potential for institutional contradictions (formal vs. informal) between the host and home-country logics.

In such context, foreign MNE subsidiaries will need to be able to take decisions considering management practices characteristic of their own home markets, as well as the institutions and business systems of the host country. Managing paradoxes that result from these differences can be difficult as managers from more developed countries, characterized by individualist and instrumentalist practices, will be confronted with a context dominated by hierarchical paternalistic practices (Horwitz, 2012; Horwitz and Smith, 1998; Newenham-Kahindi, 2013),

and a collectivistic and interdependent relational network of reciprocal obligations (Gomes et al., 2014; Horwitz, 2013; Horwitz and Smith, 1998; Kamoche et al., 2012). This trait of philosophical and cultural form of communal humanism, "Ubuntu", is not only evident in Angola, but also across most other Sub-Saharan countries, and influences the decision-making process across all areas of society, including in business organizations. Decisions that do not take sufficient account of the local context (Jackson, 2012; Kamoche et al., 2004), have been indicated as a main reason for creating conflict and frustration among internal and external stakeholders (Anakwe, 2002; Nwankwo, 2012). Our research question is: *how do Angolan ambidextrous leaders handle the paradoxes confronting them in their work, and what are the emic and the etic dimensions of their management of paradoxes?*

To answer this question, we organized the study in the following sections. First, we briefly lay the theoretical ground for the discussion, articulating leadership and paradox with a particular attention to the African context. Next, we presented the methods, and subsequently the findings and their implications. We have uncovered four paradoxes, some contextual, others a-contextual. These paradoxes led us to conclude that researchers need to consider not only the presence of paradox, as well as the way managers *work* with and around paradox. This practice is called ambidextrous paradox work. We observed that it is not enough to be aware of the presence of paradox but also to develop ambidexterity capabilities to be able to transform such awareness into some productive outcome in terms of articulating good HRM and cultural intelligence.

PARADOXES OF LEADERSHIP IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

Paradox has been identified as a central characteristic of contemporary organizations (Eisenhardt, 2000). It refers to "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p, 382). In the case of leadership, the defense of paradoxical demands as intrinsic to practice is now well established (see, e.g., Costanzo & Di Domenico [2015] and Kets de Vries [2014] for recent discussions). In this study, we explore the paradoxes involved in leadership processes in an African context.

This is a relevant endeavor as work on leadership paradoxes implicitly assumed the universality of paradox. In this paper we study the manifestation of leadership paradoxes in Angolan organizations in order to learn more about the universality and contingency of paradox. We do so with the conceptual support of three theoretical streams of literature: (1) paradox as intrinsic

to leadership and organizing; (2) paradox as resulting from institutional contradictions, such as those found in transitioning contexts; and (3) ambidextrous leadership as an activity that renders paradoxes salient due to the need to articulate opposing organizational interests. We consider the contributions of these three streams of literature next.

First, on the basis of previous research, paradoxes may be thought of as inherent to leadership and organization (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Organizations may contain the forces of paradox because opposing but mutually constituting demands have to be articulated, such as the need for both exploration and exploitation (Glaister, Ahmmad and Juni, 2015; Juni et al., 2013; Juni et al., 2015; Nemanich & Vera, 2009; Oriley and Tushman, 2004; Zhang et al., 2015), past and future performance incentives (Ahmmad et al., 2015), change and stability (Farjoun, 2010), control and autonomy (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997), innovation and routine (Feldman, 2000), positive and negative (Cameron, 2008). Leaders may have to lead these, as well as other contrasting demands, such as being authentic *and* not showing the true self (Goffee & Jones, 2005; Ibarra, 2015), sharing power *and* exercising authority (De Vries, Pathak, & Paquin, 2011), and empowering *and* controlling (Warner, 2007).

Second, Angola, our national research context, has cultural idiosyncrasies and is undergoing an important transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. This suggests that Angola could provide a rich site for the study of leadership as paradoxical process, because the transition from a centrally planned to a market economy implies a number of deep level changes that take time to stabilize. Transitions create instability which opens institutional contradictions between new logics and old ones (Seo & Creed, 2002). These logics operate over historically-constituted factors, such as weak states and ethnic identities (Michalopoulos & Papaioannou, 2015) that render inconsistencies even more prevalent. Those divides are not exclusive of Africa but have specificities that should not be ignored. In the case of Angola, the historical circumstances, including a colonial past and a recent post-independence civil war debilitated the state and countered the solidification of independent institutions, the rule of law, and effective educational systems.

Though Angola has been moving towards a market economy, it can neither be considered as a "liberal market economy" (LME) in which organizational strategies and decisions are mostly mediated by competitive markets, and more short-term performance oriented, nor as a "coordinated market economy" (CME) in which the decision-making process tends to be more relational and participative, and have more developmental longer-term multiple stakeholder

perspectives (for an extensive discussion about varieties of capitalism (VoC) see Hall and Soskice [2001]). Instead, like Mozambique (Dibben and William, 2012), Angola can be considered more as an ''informally dominated market economy'' (IDMEs) in which organizational decisions are more influenced by informal institutions, defined as ''socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels'' (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, p.727).

The emergence of the informal economy in this context can, to a great extent, been seen as a legacy of colonialism and subsequent processes of independence, economic and political restructuring, neo-liberalism, and privatization (Dibben & William, 2012; Lindell, 2009). The transitory nature of the Angolan market creates some paradoxes which exacerbate the difficulties and challenges presented to managers. Similarly to several other African countries, two different logics permeate the Angolan economy: one that is more capitalist based and export oriented, and another more diversified and domestic focused mostly comprised of smaller firms operating in the informal sector (Dibben & William, 2012; Frynas & Wood, 2006). This is probably a major contradiction in Angola, where recent investments have increased significantly the production capacity of the country in various diversified areas, including agriculture. Though the Angolan government is the legal owner of the lands of the country, it has been issuing more and more land rights for private agricultural exploitation. However, in many cases, new entrepreneurs are too focused on short-term profits and dividend distribution, instead of having longer-term business development approach. In addition to this, the potential capacity to supply domestic as well external export markets is not realized due to other factors such as lack of know-how and logistics and distribution issues.

Third, we articulate the African context with paradox via ambidextrous leadership. Previous research indicates that leaders must confront paradoxes to be effective (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; DeLong & DeLong, 2011; de Vries et al., 2011; Goffee & Jones, 2005; Ibarra, 2015) and to build sustainable organizations (Hahn et al., 2014; Lewis, Andriopoulos & Smith, 2014; Manz, Anand, Joshi, & Manz, 2008). We define ambidextrous leadership as the ability to switch flexibly between seemingly paradoxical leadership behaviors in order to reconcile conflicting interests and fostering organizational ambidexterity. Ambidextrous leaders are capable of putting in place supportive mechanisms necessary to reconcile tensions and conflicts resulting from contradictory logics and tradeoffs involved in decision-making processes (Burguess et al., 2015; Smith and Tushman, 2005; Stokes et al., 2015). For instance, they are required to resolve

conflicts and reconcile the paradox of simultaneously combining long-term experimental exploratory actions and short-term efficiency exploitative actions, whilst maintaining strategic coherence (Halevi et al., 2015; Jansen et al., 2008; O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004). Leaders face tradeoffs when pursuing exploration and exploitation concurrently because exploration requires "search, variation, and experimentation that result from decentralization, loose cultures, and less formalized processes" whilst exploitation requires "refinement, efficiency, and improvement that succeed by reducing variance and increasing control and formalization" (Jansen et al., 2008, pp. 983). As suggested by Rosing et al. (2011), ambidextrous leaders are capable of switching between more open leader behaviors that encourage autonomy, openness, tolerance, exploration and experimentation, and more closed leader behaviors by setting stricter guidelines and specific goals, and by closely monitoring progress and taking any necessary corrective action. The continuous switching between opening and closing leader behaviors can be unpredictable and complex, and depend to a great extent on the expertise and needs of other organizational members. While some employees may need more direct instructions and guidelines, others may be more productive and committed if they are given more autonomy to explore new solutions and different directions.

However, we do not know much about how paradoxes manifest in the case of African organizations, where some challenges are different from those of the West, as discussed above. Research established that culture operates as a boundary condition for the management of paradox in ambidexterity (Yoon & Chae, 2012; Xing et al., forthcoming), and for the types of behavioral expectations that people develop about leadership (House et al., 2002). This seems to be a relevant research endeavor given that the poor quality of leadership and management processes in many African contexts has been presented as an obstacle to economic development and to human progress (e.g., Bloom, Lemos, Sadun, Scur & Van Reenen, 2014; Kamoche, 1997; Zoogah, Peng & Woldu, 2015). But developing ambidextrous leaders cannot be done without considering the cultural boundary condition and its impact on the choices, including the paradoxical choices that confront their organizations and themselves. As such, ambidextrous leaders need to be sensitive to the context in which they operate and possess a varied behavioral repertoire, in order to be able flexibility adapt their behavior according to the situational contingencies they face (Hooijberg, 1996; Rosing et al., 2011). The above reasoning thus suggests that the research question is relevant for both conceptual and pragmatic reasons.

METHOD

Selection of the research setting and methodological approach

To explore both a-contextual (etic i.e., universal, meaning that organizing and leadership necessarily involve elements of paradox and contradiction no matter the context) and contextual (emic, i.e., specific forms of paradox emergence in a particular context, in this case a transitioning economy) dimensions of paradox in the leadership process, we adopted the following methodological approach. We used an inductive analysis, in order to explore the process without rigid preconceptions. Angola offered a suitable research setting, given the country's deep transitions, first from a colonial to an independent condition, in November 1975, and then from a centralized to a decentralizing economy (Sidaway & Simon, 1993). Because we were interested in extending/modifying theory (Lee et al., 1999), an inductive logic could serve the purpose of building knowledge about the Angolan context in a conceptually unconstrained way. We composed an insider-outsider research team, with researchers combining diverse levels of familiarity with the setting, including three Angolan nationals, a foreigner with regular contact with Angolan organizations, and one unacquainted with Angola. The goal of this approach was to reach diverse perspectives that could counter biases and prejudices and help to build a balanced interpretive theorizing. Data were collected through interviews with managers and a review of the literature dealing with Angolan history (Table 1). Another source of information (e.g., Kets de Vries, 2001) consisted in several forms of contact between members of the research team and Angolan people and organizations, as nationals and foreigners with diverse degrees of familiarity with the context. The above procedures allowed us to triangulate sources and to reduce the pitfalls and prejudices caused by both proximity and distance.

Table 1 about here

Sample and data collection

We considered participants in a leadership development program in a management school to collect and to critically discuss the data coming out of semi-structured interviews with experienced Angolan managers. Participants (31 male, 13 female) were asked to use four broad leadership questions as the script for the interviewing process: What are the major strengths of leadership practices in Angola? What are the major challenges confronting local leaders? What are the explanations for current strengths and weaknesses? How can leadership practices be improved? We kept our interview script deliberately open as we were following an inductive

approach, not influenced by our own preconceptions. We expected our informants to reflect about the *whats*, *hows* and *whys* of leadership paradoxes in Angola. Instead of directly asking about paradox we adopted an indirect way: to make inferences about paradox without forcing people to think about their practice as paradoxical. This indirect access strategy may be less efficient but will be more naturalistic, less intrusive and will not bias respondents towards paradox.

The interviews and the critical analysis of the professional managers participating in the leadership development program thus constitute the central empirical material for the present study. We secured permission to use the data from the participants, and meta-reflected upon the reflections of our informants in such a way that we build our interpretation upon previous interpretations, in an iterative process of collective sensemaking.

In total, 91 interviews and the reflections they elicited formed our primary data base. These managers were mainly male (n = 74), between 28 and 65 years old, operated in public and private organizations, both big and small, and presented different levels of seniority (from low level managers to CEOs). They worked in sectors such as banking, utilities, retail, mining, and services. Interviews were mainly conducted face-to-face in their respective work sites (with the exception of three interviews which, due to geographical distance, were conducted with electronic intermediation). The interviews lasted from 20 to 90 minutes.

Analytical strategy

We followed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to analyze our data inductively. We read the transcripts and created original first order categories as suggested by Gioia et al. (2012). During this phase, and in line with Delmestri and Greenwood's (forthcoming) approach, we compared emerging themes with the existing literature on Africa and paradox through repeated iterations, conducting a dialogue between the data and the theory. We had several discussions during this process in order to clarify the meaning of more ambiguous quotes. During this progressive process of categorization (Gioia et al., 2012), we ended up having to move backwards and forwards between sources and interpretations through constant comparison, until we reached a stabilized interpretation. We then submitted our interpretation to experts to test the conceptual adequacy of our interpretations, as well as to

assess interpretive accuracy. We complied habitual measures of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), resulting from personal prolonged exposure to the context by some team members as well as the composition of a team with diverse degrees of proximity to the case. These measures gave us the reassurance that the interpretation was plausible and trustworthy for the purpose of theory elaboration (Lee et al., 1999).

RESULTS

Four tensions emerged from the data analysis and were clear in the explanations of the managers. A first tension opposed (1a) the felt need to empower employees and (1b) the fear that delegation and empowerment may be perceived as a weakness. A second tension opposed (2a) the need to increase the followers' qualifications and (2b) the possibility that more qualified and demanding subordinates would expose the limitations of leaders themselves. Third, respondents mentioned the tension between (3a) respect for a tradition of communal welfarism and (3b) the inclination towards paternalism. Finally, (4a) a propensity for "muddling through" as a preferential problem-solving mindset was contrasted with (4b) the limitations that it provokes in terms of perfecting efficient routines. Table 2 offers firsthand evidence in the form of quotations from the interviews that illustrate the thinking of the managers in the sample and derives propositions amenable to further empirical testing. Figure 1, at the end of the section, graphically depicts the tensions. We next elaborate the four emerging paradoxes.

Table 2 about here

Paradox of reciprocal empowerment (a paradox of organizing)

The data suggested a tension between the need to empower employees and the fear that empowering and delegating could be represented as a sign of leader weakness, a perception that emphasized the possible personal benefits of centralization, especially in settings where leader self-effacement is not necessarily seen as adequate (House et al., 2004). This can be interpreted as a paradox of organizing as it deals with issues of organizational design. The possibility that leaders are respected when they centralize and when they "own" power, and that they will be perceived as weak when they give up on centralizing power, limits the motivation to empower and influences an organization's design. Structural empowerment (i.e. the managerially-

inducted policies and processes aimed at cascading power and authority down to lower organizational levels [Sun, Zhang, Qi & Chen, 2012]), thus, is viewed as a double edge sword.

This tension is conceptually underpinned by the distinction between the reified representation of power as a thing, something powerful people "own", and the process view of power as a circulatory process (Clegg, Courpasson, & Phillips, 2006). In the minds of some of our interviewees, the prevalence of the reified version of power as contained in the hierarchy constitutes an obstacle against the desire to invest in empowering employees. This reinforces the enactment of organizations as traditional hierarchies, as mentioned by two informants:

> There is *"an excess of hierarchical levels, too much bureaucracy, rules, internal regulations; all those add rigidity which inhibits creativity; team members do not feel confident or safe to bring new ideas."*

> *"One constraint to leadership is the distance between the leadership at the top and the middle management, which causes a lack of boldness. This reflects their results negatively."*

Yet, as Kamoche (1997, p. 554) pointed out, African "managers will also need to be more proactive and pay more attention to developing and retaining the existing labor force owing to the scarcity of highly skilled labor. This requires more empowerment of middle and lower level managers who are currently unprepared to take risky decisions and prefer to rely on the "higher authorities." From this perspective, managers may gain power by giving power away (Gloor & Cooper, 2007, p.81). In this case, power and, namely the power to decide, is not a privilege to conserve but a force to expand organizational talent, as our interviewees told:

> *"We should cultivate the habit of delegating detail to competent subordinates and not for convenience reasons only."*

> Leaders should *"help others become better members of the organization."*

In summary, the opposition between the need to develop and empower, the notion of power as a zero-sum game, and the deference to the higher-ups, seem to confuse the leaders in our study, as paradoxes typically do. While stimulating participation, ambidextrous leaders may just abdicate too much authority (Seo, Putnam & Bartunek, 2004). Moving in the direction of a new organizational, post-hierarchical paradigm seems promising but risky.

Paradox of mutual growth (a paradox of learning)

Associated, in part, with the previous tension, yet distinct from it, this paradox relates the need to qualify people and the risk of losing control over them. Interviewees mentioned the need to contribute to the qualification of their subordinates. But they also expressed fear that that qualification will expose the limitations of the leaders themselves. This constitutes a paradox of learning, in the sense that it influences the organization's capacity to enrich its action repertoire via new knowledge acquired by members. Given the knowledge/power correlation (Foucault, 1980), transmitting knowledge may mean giving up on power. We interpret this dimension as being distinct from the "Empowering vs centralizing" tension in the sense that empowerment refers to authority and power distance (Hofstede, 1980) whereas this tension refers to development, more precisely self-development and the development of others.

In this category, interviewees mentioned the development and qualification of people as a major requirement for contemporary Angolan organizations. This may be facilitated by the adoption of new, people-oriented management leadership styles. Here is how an Angolan manager explained such a need:

> *"We have to overcome the old dogmas that are based on the idea that the leader owns certain characteristics that make her/him more apt to lead the others on the execution of tasks, as the others play the role of followers."*

> *"The country is now letting a long destructive war behind, a system of centralized economy, with organizational fragilities in its public and private organizations. Over the years the investment in education has been very low (…) which explains the current lack of highly qualified human resources …"*

On the other hand, managers who participated in the study considered that leaders may have reservations about supporting development because they fear that this will expose their own limitations as leaders, often trained in the old hierarchical mode mentioned above, in which *fiat* precedes persuasion. The situation was described as follows:

> *"We sometimes fear that our weaknesses be known."*

"When the leadership is unprepared, it is the blind leading the blind. This dimension is so important that some people claim that this is the only weakness of an organization. All the others derive from this one""

"Adverse response to criticism, lack of communication and worker recognition (…) are other weaknesses of the Angolan business leadership."

Paradox of dynamic community (a paradox of belonging)

This dimension contrasts (a) the community facet of business, welfarism, which Kamoche (1997) described as meaning that people expect to be "looked after" by an organization, with (b) a form of lenient paternalism. On the one hand, respondents mentioned the importance of the communal view of management, i.e. the fact that managers, *individually*, should be sensible to the specific needs of their employees as members of family and community. This self-other connection is now well-known as characteristic of the African ethos under the notion of the Ubuntu (Gomes et al., 2014; Horwitz and Smith 1998; Kamoche et al. 2012; Mangaliso, 2001). Kamoche (2001, p. 214) explained that "communalism stipulates that one does not merely exist as an individual separate from the community but as a member of a community which gives him/her a sense of identity and belonging." Managers are thus bound to communal activities, their relationship with employees extending beyond the work sphere.

We interpret this as a paradox of belonging, one that articulates the organization with its external environment. As one interviewee explained, managers should express:

"sensitivity toward the wellbeing of the employees and of the community where it [the organization] operates."

"The appreciation of the worker and respect for family life are characteristic of the Angolan society and have an impact on the management of organizations. Keeping that tradition will help to facilitate communication between managers and employees (…)"

This dimension is both similar and different from the situation in most Western organizations. In the West, the organization adopts a number of corporate social responsibility initiatives. In the representation of our interviewees, managers in Angola are expected to cultivate an individual sensitivity to the problems of their members at the boundary between work and non-

work. Consideration for problems associated with personal matters, such as illness, and tolerance for non-work duties, are viewed as an obligation of a manager.

This, however, may have a downside. As an illustration, managers, especially foreigners, tell the joke that the same elder family member may die several times, given the number of occasions in which the worker justified missing work to attend the funeral of the same person . In other words, a certain degree of leniency may result from the fact that individual discretion sometimes prevails over company rules. This is not specific of the Angolan or African context (Aram & Walochik, 1996), but it may be more widespread there, given the more personalized nature of the relationship. This "bad proximity", as another informant called it, may have the effect of mutual accommodation and protection between managers and employees. Here is how a manager explained the process:

> *"We need to promote a more professional and ethical attitude. I can care about the wellbeing of my employees, which is clearly good (...) but I have to impose limits. There can be no such a degree of familiarity that the employee will adopt a careless way towards work."*

Paradox of structured improvisation (a paradox of adapting)

This last tension echoes Kamoche's (1997, p.553) compact observation that "strategic management in Africa is a combination of short-term planning, 'muddling through', passive compliance and the use of politics." This propensity for reaction rather than planning may result from the perception that the environment is unpredictable and that it is better to "muddle through" and to "manage by deciding" (Kamoche, 1992), i.e. managing issues on *ad hoc* basis, instead of planning and anticipating (Munene, 1991). We see this as a paradox of adapting in the sense that it aims to maintain fit between an organization and its' unpredictable and sometimes hostile environment (Munene, 1991). This preference is in line with the observation that there is a dimension of improvisation in Indian management that distinguishes it from adaptation challenges in more structured environments (Gomes et al., 2014; Cappelli, Singh, Singh & Useem, 2015). We have found evidence of the presence of comfort with "muddling through" in excerpts such as:

> *"Even at the top level, sometimes we are focused on the day to day type of decisions"*

> *"Our recent past forged in ourselves creativity given scarcity and the difficulties of several sorts; these have only been overcome due to significant levels of creativity and ingenuity."*

But interviewees were also keenly aware of the downside of this operating mode. They were generally confident that comfort with "muddling through" added flexibility, but also that it carried a number of negative implications. The following quotation summarizes this view and suggests the need for more ambidextrous leaders capable of managing the tension between improvisation and long-term planning:

> *"There is need to "reinforce the long term planning (...) and execute accordingly, avoiding management of the firefighting type."*

Figure 1 about here

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Implications for theory and research

Results supported the theoretical prediction that leaders in Angola were confronted with relevant specific paradoxes that emerge in function of contingencies and institutional factors that may combine present and historical forces, as recent research in the case of a former Portuguese colony, Mozambique, indicates (Dibben et al., 2016). This suggests that a contingency theory of paradox will possibly contribute to a more granular view of paradox in organization and, more specifically, in HRM. This is not surprising in itself given that, as discussed in the theory section, organizations can be understood as inherently paradoxical. As Bartunek and Rynes (2014, p. 12) explained, "tensions are core to organizing itself". We interpret the findings as meaning that ambidextrous leadership can be represented as paradox work i.e. as the tackling of opposing, mutually-contradictory demands, in such a way that a unit (team/organization) is kept functional. Such ambidextrous paradoxical work involves two axes. The first represents a tension between change and the preservation of stability. The second represents the tension between internal and external demands. The typology emerging from these conceptual axes covers emic and etic elements, and presents ambidextrous paradox work

as constituted by interrelated rather than independent paradoxes. The implications for HRM, especially in its international dimension, seem pertinent. In a way, preparing HR managers implies the development of sophisticated forms of understanding paradox as emerging from local reality and developing genuinely *contextual* forms of ambidexterity. The study advances three important contributions in this regard.

First, the emergence of paradoxes of adapting to an uncertain environment led to the recognition of paradoxes at the boundary between the organization and its environment (paradoxes of belonging and of adapting), which were less salient in previous studies and that may be contextual i.e. influenced by contingencies. Therefore, paradox and contingency theories can be articulated rather than mutually excluded as the previous literature sometimes indicated (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Second, these paradoxes relate to other paradoxes, an observation that opens interesting possibilities for future research in terms of the multiple connections between paradoxes. For example, our paradox of learning may be influenced by the ambidextrous management of the paradox of organizing. Third, we explored the idea of ambidextrous *paradox work* as a process that extends beyond the recognition of the paradox and that highlights the importance of a number of process elements in the unfolding of paradox management. For example, the way an organization is structured may stimulate strategies for tackling tensions involved in learning in such a way that, over time, a selection approach (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989) becomes a default mode of solving the qualifying vs controlling dilemma.

This observation may constitute a fruitful way of extending ambidexterity and paradox theories as, so far, the human and cross-cultural elements of organizational paradoxes have been neglected, which creates possible conceptual blind spots, such as the importance of articulating paradoxes that reach out to the articulation between organization and its environment, in terms of community and high environmental uncertainty (Munene, 1991; Uzo & Mair, 2014). *Contextual paradoxes* include the response to specific local features such as the practices associated with transition to a new economic model, as well as immature institutions that render predictability and planning less effective than in other contexts (the ambidextrous paradox of structured improvisation), or the supportive and dysfunctional sides of community (the ambidextrous paradox of dynamic community). *A-contextual* paradoxes may include the notion that leadership is an inherently paradoxical process, as well as a number of tensions associated with status (the paradox of reciprocal empowerment) and development (the paradox of mutual growth).

In line with recent research, we observed that managers tend to feel confused or possibly to prefer selection, i.e. choosing one pole over the other, rather than other possibilities to handle paradoxical demands in a sustainable and persisting way, which may constitute a formidable practical challenge. As Jules and Godard (2014, p.125) pointed out, "managing paradox is hard and is not for the faint of heart." We derive this conclusion from the observation that very few times was some form of duality mentioned by interviewees as need or possibility. This observation is consistent with previous research (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014), but selection does not constitute the most fruitful way of benefitting from the generative power of paradox. The fact that a tension was identified does not mean that tackling it will be easy or even likely, as managers may approach paradoxes via selection (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989), which impedes them from untapping the generative potential of paradox (Luscher & Lewis, 2008) by preventing the adoption of a genuine ambidextrous duality lens (Farjoun, 2010; Jackson, 1999).

As a general theoretical conclusion, our work suggests that managers are faced with the need to engage in ambidextrous paradox work and that paradox work may be inherent to ambidextrous leadership work. By ambidextrous paradox work we refer not only to *what* (i.e. the paradoxes that managers have to solve) but also to *how*: how can paradoxes be approached and tackled, and how can paradox be viewed as process rather than as episode, as implied in concepts such as duality, synthesis and paradoxification (Bergstrom, Styhre & Thilander, 2014), as well as others that approach tension as a process to be embraced rather than a problem/episode to be solved. Ambidextrous paradox work involves a component of reflexivity about paradox and its manifestation in specific cultures (Silva et al., 2015). One of our informants explained how paradox work may occur:

> *"Very often, the more we try to cover our weaknesses the more we make them visible and some people, recognizing that movement, use this artifice as an opportunity for manipulating us and making us their hostages. Recognizing and accepting that we have competences that need to be developed help us to position ourselves better in front of situations."*

Ambidextrous paradox work can be defined as the development and maintenance of a state of comfort with paradox and the capacity to use tension in a generative way through recognizing, reflecting and acting over paradoxical tensions. Recognizing the presence of opposites is important, but is not necessarily generative, as the selection approach, for example, "solves" the paradox through denial without actually dealing with the core tension it contains. Our study

suggests, in summary, that recognizing a paradox is only the beginning of the process of ambidextrous paradox work, a form of practice that needs to be considered along with other varieties of work, such as those identified by Phillips and Lawrence (2012).

Implications for practice

What practical implications can be derived from this study? We respond by revisiting the four major tensions uncovered in the previous section. In terms of "empowerment vs. centralizing", the study indicates that a hierarchical mindset tends to prevail, which is in line with previous research (Gannon & Pillai, 2013). The flattening of firms in the West (Rajan & Wulf, 2003) has been concomitant with the rise of knowledge-based economies and a new understanding of authority (Hirschhorn, 1997). In the case of the Angolan economy, most firms are now learning how transition from a centrally-planned economy to a market economy. Empowerment, as our interviewees mentioned, is important but it should be done in a way that respects leader face. Leaders will need to pedagogically explain the role of empowerment in creating new, more nimble organizations, better prepared to operate under conditions of market competition. Presenting empowerment as a response to changing environmental conditions will probably help to reduce the fear that it will represent a loss of authority. In addition, leaders can explain the importance of adopting new habits and organizational processes in response to markets that no longer necessarily offer the time to consult higher organizational authorities. A combination of empowerment, clarification of boundaries for such a practice, perfected management systems, and pedagogy of new ambidexterity leadership models, will be appropriate to empower without appearing weak or losing face. In practice, leaders will gain from initiating empowerment in a gradual way.

In terms of managing the "qualifying vs. controlling" tension, companies may simultaneously invest in two parallel processes. First, they can support leader development, not only in terms of technical skills but also on the personal and social dimensions of leadership. The adoption of coaching practices for top and low-level managers may offer a mix of challenge and support that will respond to the challenges at the core of this tension. If this occurs, managers may feel better equipped to respond to more demanding subordinates. In fact, preparing employees to operate in less hierarchical environments will imply preparing the leaders to be able to expose themselves to some personal discomfort. As Ibarra (2015) defended, discomfort may constitute a sign of readiness for personal growth. Training processes, coaching and other possibilities of personal development will be necessary to support this effort. The qualification of others should

thus be complemented by the qualification of the leaders themselves. As indicated by recent research this effort will predictably be more effective in case it crosses domains of personal development, namely work and non-work (Hammond, Clapp-Smith & Palanski, 2016). Given the fluid boundaries between work and non-work. Cross-domain development will be important to help leaders deal with, for example, the work and non-work dimensions of the relation with subordinates who expect these lines of demarcation to be blurred.

With regards to the "welfarism vs. paternalism" tension, Angolan organizations may manage to protect a sense of community without being overly protective and paternalistic. Companies in other parts of the world may learn from Angolan firms about the importance of a spontaneous care for the communitarian side of organization, a common feature of companies in the African context (Adler, 1997), but a generative balance can result from a synthesis of challenge and protection (Cunha, Rego & Vaccaro, 2014; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996). As previous work indicated, organizations can use protection to create safety and a sense of safety to foster acceptance of challenge. Leaders can be coached to practice a hard *and* soft form of leadership.

Finally, "muddling through" has been associated with some pre-modern features of management that tend to manifest in contexts with limited regulation and compliance (Cunha, Neves, Clegg & Rego, 2014). Some authors have underlined the fact that this measure of flexibility can be beneficial and context-specific (Cappelli, Singh, Singh & Useem, 2010; Uzo & Mair, 2014), but our interviewees defended the advantages of combining such flexibility with a higher degree of structuration. Improving the quality of planning and substituting "muddling through" with structured forms of improvisation, which synthesize freedom to adapt with rules for organizing (Clegg et al., 2002; Kamoche & Cunha, 2001), may constitute a first step to increase structure without violating the need for "muddling through", which may be adaptive when facing highly unstructured and unpredictable environments. In summary, the four tensions uncovered offer ample space for organizational intervention. They all point in one direction: to support the process of leadership development, it is crucial to articulate mainstream management theory with indigenous knowledge (Iwowo, 2015). Otherwise managers will potentially be trapped in the dilemmas uncovered here.

Overall, the paper contributes to the literature on HRM, paradox and ambidexterity by adding to the literature on the tensions confronting HR managers and explicating the contingent nature of paradox (e.g., Havermans, Den Hartog, Keegan & Uhl-Bien, 2016) and by studying a context that is culturally highly diverse from Western cultures, as recent data has evidenced (Silva,

Roque & Caetano, 2015). The study clarifies the importance of developing contextual ambidexterity and to do so with local sensitivity. In other words, the tensions and dilemmas confronting managers in some contexts have a local component that cannot be discounted. As Silva et al. (2015) have pointed out, Angolan cultural patterns may not impede modern management but they certainly demand complex and non-obvious forms of synthesis between Western and indigenous knowledge. The challenge applies equally to local managers and to expatriates although for different reasons. Specifically, indigenous managers can benefit from adopting mainstream management practices in a way that suits their local stakeholders, the most important challenge being in how to use management best practice, whereas expatriates need to understand the context they are in. The HRM literature on paradox and ambidexterity is still scarce (Aust, Brandl, & Keegan, 2015) but the significance of a number of business drivers including internationalization, suggests that the preparation of HR managers to work productively with paradox will not decrease in relevance.

Limitations and avenues for further research

The design introduces some limitations. First, we aimed to collect data from a sample of managers operating at a variety of levels in a diversity of industries, in the public and the private sectors. The advantages of such an approach are obvious, but so are its disadvantages. We managed to overcome the boundaries of our personal networks, but the conclusions may be too broad to capture, with precision, the specific aspects of some particular type of leader (e.g., CEOs of private firms, leaders of state-owned companies). In addition, in this process of randomization, the data collection was conducted by a variety of different individuals. Differences between interviewers may have resulted in a less than homogeneous approach to data collection. This heterogeneity has disadvantages but allowed us to collect managerial representations in a broader way, overcoming the borders of our potentially small networks. It, in other words, reduced the researchers' bias as well as some possible liabilities of foreignness related to the composition of the research team. It was this weighing of advantages and disadvantages that led us to select this approach in spite of the problems it posed.

A limitation belonging to a different order can also be considered: we tried to build knowledge from our informants, on the basis of their information and interpretation. To stay close to our intention we composed an insider-outsider research team and use a grounded theory approach that seeks to build theory from data rather than from pre-existing theory. Nonetheless, the theories that framed our theorizing are dominated by a Western epistemology, which means

that, at the end, we may not have escaped a "universalizing" mode of theory building rather than a truly endogenous understanding of the topic (Jackson, 2013). Our Western management theories may fail to capture non-Western concepts and philosophies (Holtbrugge, 2013).

Boundary conditions

This study explored the presence of paradox in the ambidextrous leadership process. It did so by considering the case of Angolan managers. The challenges faced by these professionals incorporate specific and contextual elements. The study was conducted to discuss and problematize these specificities, but they nonetheless draw a boundary to the applicability and generalization of the conclusions. Before considering the applicability of the results to other settings, we should mention that institutional and social-psychological factors vary worldwide (Barkema et al., 2015; Smith & Bond, 1993) and that the social-historical-institutional conditions found here may combine general and specific facets that may apply to some contexts but not to others.

CONCLUSION

As Andriopolous, Miron-Specktor and Smith (2014) pointed out, paradoxical tensions "provoke questions and confusion, encouraging both scholars and practitioners to pause and reflect." We reflected about the contextual and a-contextual paradoxical dimensions confronting managers in Angolan companies thereby contributing to the literature by integrating the usually separate literatures on paradox and contingency, with a focus on leadership. Angola is a transitioning economy, a contingency that adds texture and complexity to the inherent presence of paradox in the work of managing. We concluded that managers recognize the tensions, and that paradoxes appear as intriguing and possibly, sometimes, paralyzing. This may lead to the preference of selection over other, more fruitful possibilities of articulating the poles of the paradox. We observed that some paradoxical features are associated with a-contextual elements belonging to the domain of the work of leadership, in general, whereas others seem to result from local conditions and institutions. The study points in two promising avenues for further research: a cross-cultural theory of organizational paradoxes confronting HRM, and the ambidextrous paradox work involved in the managerial profession.

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Table 1

Method	Data sources and empirical examples
Interviews with managers	A total of 91 interviews with managers working in a variety of organizations, at different levels.
Review of literature on Angolan history	Documents of African history, culture and organization were consulted. These include typical academic sources but also companies' annual reports and other documents that could help to understand the context.
Different levels of personal experience in the context	We composed an insider-outsider research team (Bartunek & Louis, 1996). Members of the research team have a variety of exposure and knowledge of the Angolan context. This offers personal experience that is not irrelevant (see Kets de Vries, 2001). The team includes local a local national, a foreigner that travels regularly to Angola and that worked closely with several Angolan academics, and foreigners with no direct experience of the country. This combination of experiences was intended to provide a zooming in-zooming out approach to the topic (Nicolini, 2009)

Table 2

Illustrative firsthand evidence (i.e., quotations from the interviews) representing the four paradoxes

Paradox	Poles in the paradoxical tension	Illustrative quotations
Organizing	Empowering	Leaders "should develop the habit of delegating."
		"Leaders incentivize members to participate in the discussions and in decision making"
		We need more communication and more decentralization of work."
	Centralizing	There is "an excess of hierarchical levels, too much bureaucracy, rules, internal regulations; all those add rigidity which inhibits creativity; team members do not feel confident or safe to bring new ideas."
		"we still are in an era of boss and subordinate, the boss occupies a very formal role and not often takes preferences and opinions into account."
		"Lack of humility and democracy (…) are the main weaknesses."
		Proposition 1: When leaders define which responsibilities to centralize and which to retain centralized leaders will be more effective than when centralizing or decentralizing too much or too little.
Learning	Qualifying	"We have to overcome the old dogmas that are based on the idea that the leader owns certain characteristics that make her/him more apt to lead the others on the execution of tasks, as the others play the role of followers."
		"We need to abolish the figure of the boss and to adopt that od the leader because the leader motivates, values the potential of each collaborator."
	Controlling	"We sometimes fear that our weaknesses be known."
		"When the leadership is unprepared, it is the blind leading the blind. This dimension is so important that some people claim that this is the only weakness of an organization. All the others derive from this one""
		Managers express "Adverse response to criticism, lack of communication and worker recognition (…) are other weaknesses of the Angolan business leadership."
		Proposition 2: When leaders active engage in self.-development, they will engage more often in the qualification of their subordinates.
Belonging	Welfarism	"(…) sensitivity toward the wellbeing of the employees and of the community where it operates."
		"The appreciation of the worker and respect for family life are characteristic of the Angolan society and have an impact on the management of organizations. Keeping that tradition will help to facilitate communication between managers and employees
	Paternalism	"We have impose limits. The level of familiarity cannot be so high that people ignore their duties."

		"it is a very friendly leadership, a more personalized leadership, I mean, it is directly from person to person."
		"Familiarity sometimes becomes a problem"
		Proposition 3: There is a curvilinear relationship between leader-subordinate proximity and effectiveness; after a threshold, proximity will project detrimental effects.
Adapting	"Muddling through" as everyday practice	"Even at the top level, sometimes we are focused on the day to day type of decisions"
		"Our recent past forged in ourselves creativity given scarcity and the difficulties of several sorts; these have only been overcome due to significant levels of creativity and ingenuity."
	Improvisation within structure, around plans	"There is need to "reinforce the long term planning (…) and execute accordingly, avoiding management of the firefighting type."
		"There has been great difficulty in planning work, which makes the emergence of great leaders more difficult
		Proposition 4: Leadership is more effective when they stimulate improvisation as a complement for plans rather than its substitute.

Figure 1

Four paradoxical tensions: contextual and a-contextual paradoxes

Preservation of stability ↕ **Change**	**Paradox of reciprocal empowerment** *Tension*: Empowering vs. centralizing *Content*: A paradox of organizing	**Paradox of dynamic community** *Tension*: Welfarism vs. paternalism *Content*: A paradox of belonging
	Paradox of mutual growth *Tension***:** Qualifying vs. controlling *Content***:** A paradox of learning	**Paradox of structured improvisation** *Tension*: Muddling through vs. improvisation *Content*: a paradox of adapting

Internal demands ←——————→ External demands