Article

Paradox enactment: A power-performative view

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Abstract

Paradox theory increasingly acknowledges power, yet we still lack a clear account of how power dynamics shape the lived experience and constitution of organizational paradox. Addressing the question 'what is the role of power in shaping organizational paradoxes?' we develop a power-performative model grounded in Clegg's circuits of power to show how tensions become enacted, legitimized or suppressed through interactions, institutions and material infrastructures. The article contributes to paradox theory by (1) articulating an ontology of paradox as performed through situated, multilevel power relations; (2) theorizing how power dynamics influence when and how tensions are surfaced, framed or rendered invisible; and (3) advancing a critical, reflexive agenda that asks whose contradictions are recognized, whose are silenced and with what organizational effects.

Introduction

Paradox theory highlights that organizations are inherently shaped by persistent, interdependent tensions, such as the need to balance stability and change, and offers strategies to leverage these contradictions as drivers of innovation (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Smith and Lewis, 2011, 2022). While paradox theory was once critiqued for underplaying power and conflict (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017), recent research has highlighted the salience of power dynamics in organizational

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paradoxes. Power relationships shape polar oppositions (Huq et al., 2017), and they enable individuals (Berti and Simpson, 2021b) and collective actors (Pamphile, 2022; Schrage et al., 2025) to cope productively with paradox. Building on this literature, Fairhurst and Putnam (2023) argue that power is constitutive of paradox, since 'tensions and contradictions enact power struggles' (p. 107).

Despite this increased interest in power, we still lack a clear account of 'the power dynamics that emerge in living out organizational paradoxes' (Cunha and Putnam, 2019: 101) without which current theorizing risks oversimplifying the very complexity it seeks to illuminate. For organizational actors, paradoxes are not intellectual puzzles but concrete struggles experienced through power relations (Wenzel et al., 2019). Addressing power relations is therefore crucial for unlocking the transformative potential of paradoxes (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023; Schrage et al., 2025). A power perspective can help illuminate the social processes through which ubiquitous but latent tensions become salient as concrete decisional challenges, as well as explain the decisions and choices made by individual and collective actors in relation to these challenges. Thus, we ask: *what is the role of power in shaping organizational paradoxes*?

To clarify the relationship between power and paradox, we propose a *power-performative* model of organizational paradoxes. This model presents paradox and power as dynamic, situated and relational phenomena, constructed through interaction and interpretation, conditioned by institutional and material affordances, and continually evolving as power is exercised and redistributed. To develop our model, we build on Clegg's (2023) 'circuits of power' (p. 26) framework, a model analysing how power operates through interactions, institutional norms and sociomaterial resources, to show how latent paradoxes are enacted and crystallized in decision challenges. Clegg's framework integrates agency and structure, incorporating both social (e.g. relations and institutions) and material (e.g. technologies) processes, tracing liquid flows of power through three interrelated circuits. These circuits converge at obligatory passage points that are liquid rather than static, where those who control access can exert disproportionate influence.

Applied to paradox, this model explains how various power dynamics shape, first, the salience of paradox as situated decisional challenges; second, the conditions under which individual actors can respond to these challenges; and third, the collective capacity to coordinate responses to paradox, which in turn frame future manifestations of persistent tensions. More specifically, our power-performative model shows how different circuits of power emphasize or dampen the trade-offs between different requirements (paradox polarities); how the dispositional circuit influences the *decidability* of these challenges, that is, actors' ability to make rationally justifiable choices (Berti and Cunha, 2023), and identifies the power conditions favouring a response to paradox that is integrated, rather than fragmented.

Our model makes three contributions to paradox theory. First, it explicates how paradoxes are performed through situated power relations. Second, emphasizing the fluid nature of paradox, it describes how different power dynamics influence how tensions are surfaced, framed or suppressed. Third, it fosters a more critical and reflexive approach to paradox, attuned to the structural, discursive and political conditions under which paradoxical poles gain visibility and legitimacy.

Power and the ontology of paradox

What are organizational paradoxes?

Challenging the idea that 'organizations are orderly, logical and predictable entities' (Berti et al., 2021: 2), paradox theory claims that organizations are potentially affected by 'persistent oppositions between interdependent elements' (Schad et al., 2016: 16), such as between exploration and

exploitation, competition and cooperation, profit and sustainability, or sustainable value creation and sustainable value destruction (Mancuso et al., 2025). Underlying paradoxes are ubiquitous and irresolvable, and may remain latent (Smith and Lewis, 2011), yet in some cases become manifest to organizational members by 'presenting dilemmas (. . .), the temporally, spatially, and materially contextualized experiences of tensions that beg us for a solution' (Lewis and Smith, 2022: 531). Productively coping with these tensions requires adopting a 'both/and' approach (Smith and Lewis, 2022), which implies cultivating managerial 'mindsets' that think of contradictory requirements as learning opportunities (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018: 26).

A vibrant stream of research has been inspired by this conceptual framework (see Pradies et al., 2023: for a recent review), showing how organizational actors can leverage paradoxes to stimulate innovation (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Papachroni et al., 2015; Papachroni and Heracleous, 2020), collaborate with competitors (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2017; Fiorito et al., 2023; Stadtler and Van Wassenhove, 2016) and achieve sustainability (Hahn et al., 2014; Iivonen, 2018; Ivory and Brooks, 2018). At the same time, scholars have explored how actors respond to paradoxical demands at individual (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Pradies, 2023), group (Keller et al., 2020; Pamphile, 2022; Smets et al., 2015), organizational (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008) and interorganizational levels (Jarzabkowski et al., 2022; Schrage et al., 2025; Schrage and Rasche, 2022).

Other research has revealed the darker side of paradox. In some cases, organizations use impression management to project a false mastery of paradox instead of actively coping with the tension (Gaim et al., 2021). In other situations, paradoxes cease to be opportunities for innovation, because those who are exposed to them lack agency (both in terms of decisional autonomy and psychological safety) to put in place flexible, synergic responses, becoming trapped in absurd 'pragmatic paradoxes' such as self-contradictory, non-negotiable demands (Berti and Simpson, 2021b; Tracy, 2004). These pathological situations can derive from excessive expectations (Li, 2021), from an underestimation of the decisional challenges implied in paradox (Cunha et al., 2023), or even be strategically exploited by toxic leaders to entrench oppression (Julmi, 2021, 2022).

In this literature, a long-standing debate concerns the ontology of paradox. Some materialist accounts emphasize their grounding in inherent material trade-offs that are structural, enduring and ubiquitous in organizations (Berti and Cunha, 2023; Hahn et al., 2010; Schad and Bansal, 2018). According to this perspective, paradoxes have tangible properties and causal powers, arising from structural frictions that result from the material reality of organizations and their environments, or from goal and logic conflicts (Berti et al., 2021). For example, having to operate with obsolete machinery can create a trade-off for a factory manager between meeting production schedules and protecting workers' well-being and safety (Schrage et al., 2025). By contrast, a representationalist perspective contends that paradoxes are socially constructed through sensemaking, discourse and practice (Fairhurst and Grant, 2010; Putnam et al., 2016). In this case, the focus is on the social factors that make inherent trade-offs salient as difficult choices confronting decision makers (Jarzabkowski et al., 2018). These factors include interpretive frames (Ashforth et al., 2014; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), use of language (Bednarek et al., 2017; Tuckermann, 2019) or managerial cues (Knight and Paroutis, 2017).

The dual nature of organizational paradox (material or representational) can be reconciled in a sociomaterial view, according to which entangled social practices and material arrangements jointly shape emergence, enactment and persistence of paradoxes. Hahn and Knight (2021) inspired by quantum theory, propose that paradoxes become salient when organizational measurement systems (e.g. KPIs, reward systems) selectively enact potential contradictions, making material conditions and social constructions mutually constitutive. Berti and Cunha (2023) also argue that when actors face systemic, material trade-offs, their situation is complicated by the existence of

rationality constraints defining the characteristics of an acceptable decision. When they cannot make a rationally justifiable choice in relation to the trade-off their choice becomes undecidable, turning a simple choice into a paradox. For example, Volkswagen (VW) engineers encountered undecidability because of the combination of the uncompromising expectations of powerful stakeholders requiring them to design a fast, cheap, green diesel car and the company's fear-driven internal culture and autocratic leadership (Kellerman, 2024). Failing to deliver was not an option, but delivering was impossible given available technologies: hence any possible choice would contradict the premise of VW engineers as competent, rule-abiding professionals (Gaim et al., 2021).

Power and paradox

Across these different perspectives, power is typically treated as background rather than as foreground: it may influence response capacity (Berti and Simpson, 2021b) or affect the balance between different polarities (Huq et al., 2017), but is not a foundational factor of paradox. Fairhurst and Putnam's (2023) constitutive approach is instrumental in overcoming this limitation. With 'constitutive' they refer to a perspective that 'focuses on the development of paradox over time and the dynamic relationships among its components' (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023: 4), arguing that paradoxes do not 'move from being dormant to becoming salient; rather, they are enacted in performances' (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023: 37). In these performances, power is central, since paradoxes imply 'ongoing struggles over meaning (i.e. how to define "the situation") and practices (i.e. how to respond or act)' (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023: 6).

In this context, *struggle* refers to the ongoing, dynamic and often conflictual interplay through which actors – or actants – attempt to define a situation and determine how to act within it. It captures the dialectical clashes between mutually interdependent opposites, where power is exercised and meanings, practices and responses are continually contested. Through these struggles, actors negotiate agency, make sense of paradoxical conditions and either intensify contradictions or transform them into new possibilities for collective action (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023). In other words, paradoxes manifest in organizations as actors, who are situated within asymmetric relations of authority, legitimacy and resource control, render tensions visible, actionable and consequential.

Structural tensions and systemic trade-offs do not speak for themselves. They become organizational paradoxes only when actors in positions of power elevate them as pressing challenges, measuring and monitoring them through performance systems or demanding to address them. As responses to paradoxes are translated into rules and metrics for dealing with them, or are enacted through communicative practices, actors' experience is shaped by political struggles over what counts as a paradox, which contradictions are made salient, whose interests they serve and whose agency they constrain. Consequently, power relations determine whether trade-off choices can be decidable, enabling or inhibiting the possibility of harnessing the innovative potential of tensions (Berti and Cunha, 2023).

These conceptual contributions provide a convincing rationale for putting power at the centre of the ontology of paradox. Several recent empirical studies reinforce this rationale by offering additional insights into how power dynamics shape the manifestation of organizational paradoxes. Wenzel et al. (2019) show how paradoxes emerge from competing discourses of punishment and rehabilitation in a youth prison. Staff enact sub-tensions through role-based power struggles, whose interactive dynamics sustain contradictions, ironically reinforcing the very paradoxes managers perceive as being balanced through their actions. Las Heras et al. (2024), examining systemic contradictions in Mondragon, the world's largest workers' cooperative, present paradoxes as power-laden expressions of structural tensions, expressed through class struggles over labour, pay and support. Sender and Mormann (2024) explore how paradoxical tensions can trickle up to more

powerful executives by strategies of low-power actors using cognitive, emotional and behavioural jesting techniques that make the social versus business interest paradox visible.

Taken together, these studies point to the fact that while all paradoxes, as all politics, are local, they reverberate with broader social and institutional tensions. Thus, if we want to understand how paradoxes shape organizational life, we need a conceptual model of power that accounts for both agency (i.e. individual and collective intentional actions) and structure (enduring social arrangements and material conditions enabling and constraining such actions). Such a model would complement extant performative accounts on the ontology of paradox (Berti and Cunha, 2023; Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023) by making the political work that sustains organizational tensions visible and treatable.

Struggles are shaped by competitions for resources, for legitimacy and other honours, for discursive sovereignty in local matters of consciousness or power relations (Gramsci, 1971). How specific concern becomes organizational priorities is an expression of established and stable power arrangements functioning as disciplinary social regulation, as manifestations of systemic power (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). Consequently, in developing a power-performative conceptualization of paradox, we need to build on a conceptual model of power that incorporates both agency and structure.

Circuits of power

The 'circuits of power' model, originally developed by Stewart Clegg (2023) in his 1989 book *Frameworks of Power*, recently published in an updated edition, conceptualizes power as a dynamic, multilevel process within organizations. While alternative models of power exist, the circuits of power framework offer the most promising basis for a power-performative account of paradox. Both resource dependence theory (Emerson, 1962; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978) and Crozier and Friedberg's (1980) uncertainty control model are effective in foregrounding micro-political struggles over resources and contingencies. However, these models do not link individual acts of power to enduring arrangements of legitimacy and materiality. Other models of power that incorporate both agency and structure, such as Lukes' (1974) three dimensions of power or Fleming and Spicer's (2014) four faces of power model, remain largely static in mapping overt, covert and latent forms of domination, lacking a processual account of the relationship between agentic and systemic manifestations of power.

Clegg's framework identifies three interlinked circuits of power (episodic, dispositional and facilitative) as the analytical architecture through which power is produced and transformed in organizations, while the corresponding processes of power are the empirical dynamics that flow through these circuits, much like electricity (the process) activating the wiring of a power grid (the circuit). Episodic power, the most visible process on the episodic circuit, consists of concrete moments in which actors exercise power through standing conditions, which include the rules, resource controls and organizational arrangements that shape what others can do, thereby enabling imperative command.

Think of traffic lights: they exemplify overt power processes that direct behaviour towards specific outcomes, where both compliance and deviance reveal the operation of power. Power here is exercised not by a human actor but by an actant (the lights themselves) whose authority rests on the legal and normative system of the Highway Code, a set of rules that shapes habitual practices. Standing conditions stabilize into the 'dispositional' circuit, which fixes meanings and legitimate roles, and these dispositions then shape the concrete episodic power processes of compliance or deviance. In the previous example, the Highway Code, the traffic-light infrastructure and the habitual practices they produce become shared dispositions guiding drivers' compliance or deviance.

Drivers are pre-*disposed* to obey the code, both for safety and to avoid sanction. Thus, power does not reside solely in an actor or actant compelling others, but in the rules and arrangements that make such action possible: if the lights fail, a police officer can direct traffic under the same conditions, with hand signals replacing colour codes but producing the same effects. The fact that these rules are called a 'code' is telling: behind visible actions lies a dispositional circuit linking drivers, pedestrians, laws and norms into a temporary, situation-specific habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) that orients actors towards obedience.

The 'facilitative' circuit refers to the deep structural, technological and institutional arrangements that shape possibilities for action and integrate individual actions; in the traffic-light example, it is the socio-technical infrastructure (roads, sensors, electricity, governance systems, licencing institutions etc.) that makes the Highway Code and drivers' dispositions even possible. These infrastructures operate as techniques of discipline and production that empower some actors while disempowering others by configuring what forms of agency are materially feasible (Boje and Rosile, 2001). Facilitative power operates through taken-for-granted discursive and material fields that structure organizational reality by enabling some actions and identities while foreclosing others, making the facilitative circuit an active conduit that embeds the logics, routines and affordances through which action is coordinated and controlled (Davenport and Leitch, 2005).

The traffic-light example also clarifies how the circuit-of-power approach extends agency beyond human actors to the non-human actants embedded in socio-technical arrangements (Clegg, 2023). Organizationally, actors work with and through these actants to constitute 'obligatory passage points' (Callon, 1986), that channel organizational flows. Traffic lights are therefore not merely control devices; they are strategic artefacts that structure patterns of interaction by making certain actions easier, others harder and some illegitimate. Rules, resource allocations and role expectations prefigure what forms of compliance or resistance are likely. As such, even mundane coordination tasks, like securing the orderly movement of vehicles and pedestrians, reflect deeper political settlements that stabilize meanings, legitimate behavioural expectations and embed taken-for-granted classifications into everyday practice. Episodic power, in other words, is situated within broader organizational architectures that shape sensemaking, define what counts as rational and normalize distributions of agency.

Despite the use of metaphor derived from circuit boards, these three circuits are not fixed structures but fluid processes in organizations (Clegg and Berti, 2021): their flows shift as internal dynamics gain or lose momentum, or as external shocks reconfigure organizational possibilities. Shifts in the facilitative circuit reveal how power becomes institutionalized in, and transformed by, technological and infrastructural change. Early traffic coordination under the Red Flag Act located authority in human functionaries who physically enacted control. Subsequent transitions to gas-powered signals, electrical systems and digitalized infrastructures progressively displaced these roles, embedding past power struggles into new socio-technical regimes. Each shift reconfigured who held expertise, whose interests were prioritized and what counted as legitimate coordination. Contemporary developments such as self-driving cars illustrate an ongoing and contested reorganization across all three circuits of power. At the episodic level, algorithmic systems now make moment-to-moment decisions previously exercised by drivers, redistributing practical control over movement. At the dispositional level, emerging norms of responsibility, liability and competence challenge established categories such as 'driver', 'operator' and 'error'. At the facilitative level, autonomous mobility depends on sensorized roadways, data infrastructures and regulatory regimes that embed values, risk tolerances and strategic interests. As these infrastructures take shape, firms, regulators, insurers and civil-society actors struggle to define whose priorities will be institutionalized.

Since its original publication, numerous studies have applied the circuits of power model to analyse the operation and transformation of power dynamics in various intra- and interorganizational contexts (e.g. Davenport and Leitch, 2005; Ninan et al., 2024; Smith et al., 2010; Vaara et al., 2005). Recently, the model has been applied to explain platform-dominant power dynamics in the gig economy, where platform owners exert episodic power through app-mediated allocation of rides and revenues, dispositional power by framing dependent work as entrepreneurship (Butler, 2017) and discouraging collective action (Giustiniano et al., 2019), and facilitative power resides in the use of algorithmic management to structure access to work and embed discipline (Pastuh and Geppert, 2020; Vallas and Schor, 2020). Cameron (2024) shows how Uber's algorithms blend episodic and facilitative power by offering drivers a stream of binary choices that create an illusion of agency. Drivers can choose whether to accept or decline a fare, yet the algorithmic architecture that structures these options – and quietly governs their behaviour – remains beyond their influence, prompting responses that appear discretionary but are tightly scripted. As a result, efforts to 'beat the algorithm' mask a deeper structural subordination to a system treated as a natural condition rather than a managerial design intentionally shaping and fragmenting workers' agency (Walker et al., 2021).

In sum, the value of Clegg's model resides primarily in its capacity to identify the interaction between different manifestations of power as a conceptual frame, enabling analysis of power processes and relations. Moreover, it reveals the performative nature of social phenomena, in the meaning of constituted through the interplay of matter, interpretation and communication (Gond et al., 2016). In this spirit, we propose to apply it to paradox ontology. We do so to explicate how latent paradoxes are performed through power-laden interactions.

A power-performative model of organizational paradox

Applying the circuits of power model to the ontology of paradox, we develop a *power-performative framework* (Figure 1). The figure schematically depicts the interrelationships among the three circuits of power, shown through bi-directional black arrows linking them. Colour-coding (orange for episodic, blue for dispositional, green for facilitative) highlights how each circuit influences the others. For example, the facilitative and dispositional circuits shape the episodic by empowering or disempowering actors, while episodic power processes can, in turn, stabilize or transform them. The dispositional shapes and constrains the facilitative, and the facilitative enables and integrates the dispositional, and so forth.

At the centre of the figure, we focus instead on how power processes across the three circuits shape the salience of actors' decisional challenges, their responses and the outcomes that, in turn, regenerate new paradox–power dynamics. At its core, the model posits that the enactment of paradoxes is not merely an individual sensemaking accomplishment but emerges from the interplay of multiple agencies entangled in power relations.

How circuits of power enact paradoxes (paradox salience) (steps 1–3)

Step 1 – latent paradox. Any model articulating the ontology of organizational paradox must first explain how the persistent tensions that potentially affect any organization are enacted in a specific context, becoming salient for actors (Figure 1). Paradox literature theorizes these latent paradoxes as matters of fact, rooted in *inherent dualities* embedded in organizing processes (Schad and Bansal, 2018; Smith and Lewis, 2011), such as change/adaptation versus stability/coherence (Farjoun, 2010). However, assuming that something is a matter of fact downplays the complex history and network of associations that brought the matter into being and that sustain it (Latour, 2004). If
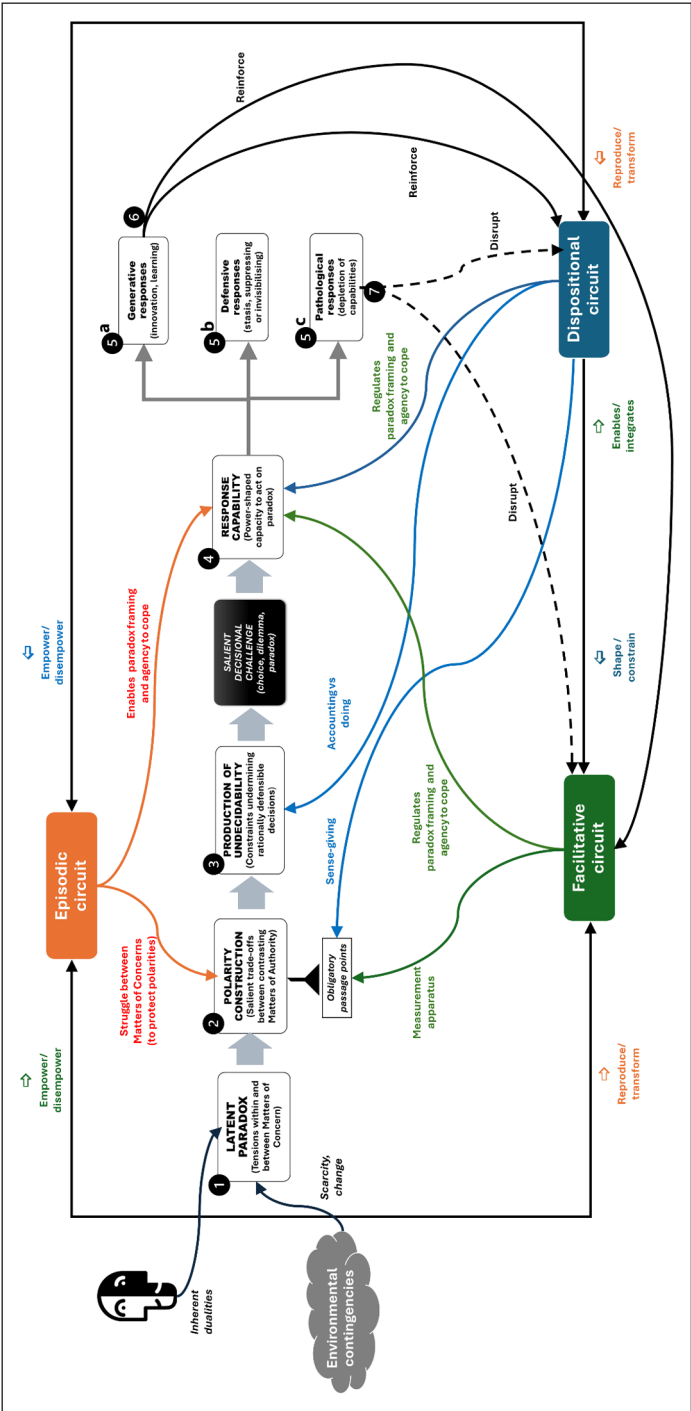
Figure 1. How power performs paradoxes through circuits of power.

we want to show 'how, in terms of flat ontology, paradoxes involve and represent conflicts over priorities, objectives, and logics' (Clegg, 2024: 76), we need to consider how heterogeneous assemblages of actors, interests, technologies and discourses coalesce into issues that individuals or groups regard as important and actively voice or defend. These historically situated, temporary and contested formations which salience must be continuously maintained can be defined 'matters of concern' (MOC) (Latour, 2004; Vásquez et al., 2018).

Illustratively, change/continuity becomes a paradox when actors assemble around a digital transformation project that also requires preserving existing capabilities embedded in routines and identity. *Environmental contingencies* also play a role in shaping these latent tensions, causing *scarcity* or *change* (Smith and Lewis, 2011). For example, time and resource constraints in a digital transformation project foreground the tension between the need to explore new technologies and the need to exploit established routines to maintain reliable service, illustrating *tensions within the same MOC* (digital transformation). Beyond these, organizations also face *tensions between different MOC* (e.g. sustainability and profit) which arise when distinct meaning systems or institutional logics are simultaneously present and interact within the same organizational setting (Gümüsay et al., 2020; Smith and Besharov, 2019). Hence, potential paradoxes are not timeless dilemmas inscribed in the structure of organizations but are accomplished and sustained through situated practices of organizing that continuously enact conflicting demands related to MOC.

Step 2 – polarity construction. For latent paradoxes to become salient, it is necessary that MOC become legitimized, gain collective significance and end up authoring or dictating an organization's strategic course of action. This means that issues that only some concerns will become legitimized to shape actionable decisions, becoming 'matters of authority' (MOA). Power flows shape which framings prevail and how concerns are stabilized into MOA, with paradox emerging as a concrete decisional challenge when *salient trade-offs between contrasting MOA.* When an MOC is not actively defended (Huq et al., 2017), it will fail to become an MOA, because some actors may choose to suppress or silence the issue that they see incompatible with interests. Thus, for a paradox to be enacted as a salient decisional challenge, at least two contrasting MOA need to be present.

In the construction of polarity as an MOA, episodic power plays a role, since episodic power *struggles between MOC* lead to *protect* (i.e. uphold) or to silence *polarities*. Actors' relative capacity to exploit others' dependence on relevant resources (Emerson, 1962), or to control uncertainty (Crozier and Friedberg, 1980) will enable them to uphold certain MOC, transforming it in an MOA. Using again the example of a digital transformation project, the possibility of enacting the latent exploration/exploitation tensions implicit in the project is contingent on the outcome of power struggles between the head of R&D and the head of manufacturing, as they compete for resources and visibility. If one of the two parties can outflank the other, the tension will remain latent. In this process, MOC and authority are sustained by whomsoever or whatever is constituting what will be done. Those who are authorized and legitimated (Clifton, 2025) are able to define dominant interpretations of the nature of tensions faced by an organization. For example, Slawinski et al. (2025) show that cooperation among Canadian oil producers was achieved by leveraging the opposite pole of competition, using strategies such as aligning collaborative goals with company interests, applying peer pressure and granting leaders ownership of the alliance's vision.

The dispositional circuit also plays an important role in forming polarity, through *sense-giving*, deliberate efforts to shape others' interpretations of ambiguous organizational situations (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007), thus regulating the translation of MOC into MOA. The dispositional circuit primarily produces meaning through language games which connect language with action and context, providing what can be taken for granted as situationally rational accounts (Mauws and

Phillips, 1995; Wittgenstein, 1958). Language games are essential for resolving interpretive ambiguities inherent to natural languages, operating as 'a system of expected, prescribed, or justifiable actions associated with the words and the rules the game consists of' (Rindova et al., 2004: 671). Through language games, the dispositional circuit defines the legitimacy of MOC, communicatively constituting them into authoritative statements. In sum power flows in the dispositional circuit can make paradox salient, but can also hide polarization, 'framing out' contradictions by construing them as signs of incompetence or as issues that can be harmonized or deferred (Child, 2020).

A matter of concern (such as sustainability) becomes a matter of authority when it is successfully inscribed into durable, recognizable material forms, such as a formal plan or a standard, that can then be circulated and invoked to authorize and direct future actions (Slager et al., 2024). Sociomaterial elements, including KPIs, regulations, standards, policies, reward systems and management practices (Berti et al., 2021), play a central role in constituting MOA are also constituted through sociomaterial elements. These elements enact potential requirements, such as 'productivity', by operationalizing them through a *measurement apparatus* (Hahn and Knight, 2021). The inseparable entanglement of social practices and material artefacts is best captured in the circuits of power model by considering the intersection of dispositional and facilitative at specific *obligatory passage points* (e.g. performance review meetings, budgeting processes, project stage-gate reviews), where the polarities are discussed, negotiated and contested. For example, Knight and Paroutis (2017) show how, in a publishing firm, learning paradoxes around expanding digital initiatives while maintaining print became salient to middle managers through new strategic plans, incentives, project deadlines and senior communications, all techniques of control and production typical of the facilitative circuit. The latent tension between old and new business models (digital competing with print for revenue, yet mutually dependent for content and distribution) became real only as managers engaged in practices requiring integration of both, alternately valuing and devaluing print- and digital-focused roles (Knight and Paroutis, 2017). At these obligatory passage points, polarities are enacted by highlighting what constitutes a legitimate concern for strategic decisions. For example, concerns about social sustainability are typically presented through a business case frame, as issues of protecting company reputation, by complying with normative requirements, or to attract purpose-driven investors, employees or customers. Implicitly this framing presents as the only legitimate way to conduct a commercial business is by maximizing economic value creation (Hahn et al., 2014).

The effects of power flows at the episodic, dispositional and facilitative level combine to make specific paradoxes salient, or – conversely – to hinder paradox enactment, for instance, when budgeting practices and the interest of dominant stakeholders prioritizes only Return on Investment metrics, thereby restricting funding for exploratory initiatives, even when agility is crucial (Wang et al., 2021). Similarly, an overemphasis on short-term performance measures, such as quarterly financial reports, can frame success solely in terms of shareholder value, in contrast to triple bottom-line metrics that emphasize balancing performance with long-term progress and sustainability (Westover, 2025). It is also possible that these power dynamics render paradoxes invisible, by shifting issues to less salient contexts, postponing resolution indefinitely or avoiding open confrontation to preserve harmony (Tuckermann, 2019).

These dynamics can manifest at the micro level, as individual actors' experience whether their concerns become, through power dynamics, legitimate MOA. For example, Greenslade-Yeats et al. (2024) show how midwives confronting contradictory safety-risk demands during COVID-19 lockdowns were unable to frame these tensions as authoritative because societal leaders' discourse suppressed alternative interpretations, leaving individuals to shoulder the paradox privately. At the meso level, departments or cross-functional teams collectively construct or silence polarities

as power dynamics channel which issues can be voiced. In Amaral et al. (2025) study, sustainability, engineering and other units defended divergent MOC while KPIs, project routines and reporting structures stabilized only some concerns as legitimate MOA, allowing the integration–differentiation paradox to surface, or remain latent, at the group level.

Step 3 – production of undecidability. By distinguishing paradoxes from resolvable tensions, recognition of undecidability refines paradox theory, enabling assessments of how actors can cope with the experience of paradox. Undecidability defines the point at which a tension becomes more than a trade-off: it arises when, in the face of paradoxical tensions there are *constraints undermining rationally defensible decisions* (Berti and Cunha, 2023). In modern organizations, to be legitimated actions must be guided by rationality defined by goals, efficiency and calculated outcomes (Weber, 1922 [1978]), which involves actors making efficacious decisions (*doing*) that they must be able to justify through prospective and retrospective explanations (*accounting*). The relationship between moments of doing and moments of accounting is particularly important in relation to paradox, as actors need both to cope with lived tensions and to retrospectively justify and explain their actions (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023). Doing is always possible (Luhmann, 1995), but when actions are self-contradictory they cannot be legitimized through rational cost–benefit reasoning, and therefore undecidability arises (Bertello, 2025).

When both decision and rationale remain coherent, paradoxes appear as difficult yet ultimately decidable choices. If an actor faces an interdependent contradiction that demands flexible, adaptive behaviour and the dispositional circuit authorizes such discretion, the issue can be resolved through a justifiable decision. For instance, line workers responding flexibly to customer requests can do so because the system either implicitly or explicitly allows them to do so (Schneider et al., 2021). Similarly, a shop assistant who prioritizes a loyal customer, knowing this aligns with the owner's values, makes a dilemmatic but defensible choice. In other words, when a trade-off choice is decidable it can always be solved through a rational choice aiming to achieve an optimal (i.e. acceptable in the circumstances) balance between contrasting requirements (Berti and Cunha, 2023). By contrast, decision-makers encountering a contradiction between what they should do to reconcile opposite demands (i.e. act flexibly) and what – dispositionally – they are legitimized to do (i.e. being consistent with a set formal procedure), they will experience the situation as absurd, knowing that they cannot justify their action.

Undecidability is felt most acutely by individual actors, who experience the immediate impossibility of taking actions they can rationally justify, yet the conditions that generate such contradictions often operate at collective level. Padavic et al. (2020) illustrate this dynamic in their study of a professional service firm: dispositional power works through cultural norms equating commitment with constant availability, while the facilitative circuit reinforces these norms through evaluation systems that reward long hours, jointly producing a narrative in which women are encouraged to use flexibility policies yet implicitly penalized for doing so. At the micro level, women consultants face the impossibility of making a choice – using flexibility policies or signalling devotion through long hours – that can be justified within the dominant rationality, as dispositional and facilitative circuits render any option illegitimate. At the meso level, this undecidability is produced and sustained by shared narratives, evaluation practices and team expectations that collectively reproduce these contradictory demands as taken-for-granted organizational logic.

Summing up, the left side of the model in Figure 1 illustrates how power, operating through interconnected circuits, (1) translates systemic dualities into concrete and legitimate struggles between competing concerns, (2) renders some of these struggles salient to some actors as necessary choices between interdependent polarities and (3) shapes the extent to which such choices appear decidable to these actors, as manageable puzzles or as complex, genuinely paradoxical

challenges. Power dynamics also influence the way in which actors respond to these challenges, and the right side of the model articulates how power influences the capacity of actors to cope with paradox.

How circuits of power shape paradox responses (steps 4 and 5)

Step 4 – response capability. The paradox literature has established that decision makers' capacity to cope with salient paradoxes is strongly shaped by actors' cognitive frames (Figure 1). For instance, mindsets represent a broader cognitive and emotional orientation reflecting acceptance and appreciation of tensions (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018). While initially conceptualized as individual-level, trait-like factors (Smith and Lewis, 2011), recent research has suggested that they are evolving social phenomena, influenced by social networks (Keller et al., 2020) and by leader–follower relationships (Tjemkes et al., 2025). Moreover, if mindsets shape attitudes towards ambivalence, making sense of paradoxes also requires appropriate cognitive frames, understood as templates that guide sensemaking, organizing how individuals interpret specific issues by integrating contradictory elements (Boemelburg et al., 2023; Hahn et al., 2014). Both mindset and frames are thought to be essential for actors to engage in the search of synergistic both/and approaches to paradoxes, enabling learning and innovation (Smith and Lewis, 2022). For the sake of simplicity and concision, we group both under the label 'paradox framing'. The deployment of such paradox framing is not a purely cognitive or educational process but is deeply shaped by power relationships, which often act as barriers to learning. Power dynamics are especially crucial in developing a collective paradox mindset, as they can both shape dialogue and constrain learning: when authority discourages dissent or penalizes mistakes, it undermines psychological safety and limits the openness needed for experimentation (Tjemkes et al., 2025).

Some of these effects involve micro-level exercise of power in specific interactions among actors (episodic circuit). Better-resourced and socially positioned individuals, such as members of the top management team, can shape subordinates' interpretive context, making paradoxes salient, by orchestrating cues that prompt middle managers to become aware of competing demands that must be met with integrative responses (Knight and Paroutis, 2017). In other cases, power relations can be explicitly used to impose implicitly contradictory tasks (e.g. performing both explorative and exploitative activities). Leveraging learning-by-doing, this strategy nudges employees to develop a paradox mindset to align their attitude with their behaviour, their thinking with their doing, rather than from observing a persuasive role model or applying principles acquired through training (Boemelburg et al., 2023). In sum, the episodic circuit *enables paradox framing* shaping response capability.

The dispositional circuit of power also *regulates paradox framing*, by actively producing the interpretive and behavioural repertoires through which responses to paradox become possible. When it legitimizes roles comfortable with ambiguity and cross-domain integration, it enables individuals to engage paradoxes constructively. Gümüsay et al. (2020), for example, show that in a hybrid organization (an Islamic bank), polysemy and polyphony, as organizational and individual practices enabling multiple contextual meanings, dampen conflicts and normalize competing demands. These practices, part of the dispositional circuit, support the elasticity needed to manage contradictions between religious and banking logics. When instead the dispositional circuit incorporates rules of membership that are narrowly defined, it favours actors that exhibit clarity and consistency, tensions that fall outside the sanctioned cultural framework will be suppressed or denied. In absence of a dispositional circuit incorporating communication practices and membership rules that foster ambivalence, actors will perceive claims supporting paradoxical framing as merely rhetorical, regardless of their individual mindsets (Iivonen, 2018). The Wells Fargo sales

scandal illustrates how a culture fixated on sales targets constrained employees' interpretive flexibility, with quotas, managerial oversight and audits discouraging ethical awareness and favouring measurable results (Antonacopoulou et al., 2019).

Facilitative power also provides a platform *regulating paradoxical framing*, offering spaces where employees can engage in dialogue, share perspectives and craft synergic, innovative solutions. For example, a technology such as agile project management, based on iterative cycles, experimentation and quick adjustments, can help teams navigate paradoxes of priority, structure and execution by supporting adaptability and continuous feedback, balancing flexibility and control (Iivari, 2021). Analogously, tools such as office social media or document-sharing portals can facilitate a more unified response to tension across an organization (Hahn and Knight, 2021). Conversely, technology, intertwined with power relations, acts as both medium and process. For example, digital tools may conceal control under the guise of providing empowerment through job enlargement. They do so by making managerial authority less visible while increasing work demands, making the tension between empowerment and control latent for employees who experience an increased burden but lack agency (Tuckermann, 2019; Walker et al., 2021). Similarly, digitally enabled, real-time feedback aimed at developing employees' capabilities may trigger suspicions that 'Big Brother is watching', thus undermining the purpose of such feedback (Hancock et al., 2018: 9).

While the way in which the paradox is framed matters, a sole focus on mindsets places undue responsibility on individuals, risking attribution of failure to individuals while ignoring how power dynamics constrain their options (Berti and Simpson, 2021b). It also oversimplifies paradox responses by privileging both/and thinking as inherently superior, overlooking contexts in which either/or choices, or even resistance, may be more appropriate (Berti and Cunha, 2023; Krautzberger and Tuckermann, 2024; Seidemann, 2024). Thus, it is necessary to factor in how agency and resource access enable or constrain decision-makers facing paradoxes. Agency is not a quality of an isolated individual but a process that emerges from and is constituted by the dynamic, dialogical engagement of actors with their social context; therefore, individuals' capacity to act depends on their position within networks of power (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

Exercising episodic power can increase agency, supporting response capacity, as in the case described by Huq et al. (2017), where managers and higher-status professionals coached lower-status professionals to speak up more effectively in meetings, enabling their voices to be heard and influencing decisions. Similarly, during a turnaround at LEGO, top management addressed the tension between creative freedom and operational control through dialogue and shared decision-making, enabling integrative responses to the paradox (Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). Agency to cope with tension can also be found by forging alliances of power with other actors experiencing the paradox (Pamphile, 2022). Contrariwise, episodic power can limit the agency of actors facing paradoxes through direct coercion, imposing the will of one actor, or through manipulation, by constraining options and discussion topics (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). In some cases, the experience of disempowerment is a side effect of actors imposing their preferences and interests over others, as in the case of VW executive imposing on engineers to find an impossible solution to a technical trade-off between a diesel engine performance, cost and emissions (Gaim et al., 2021). In other cases, toxic leaders may purposefully leverage experience of absurd demands to further disempower subordinates: this is the case of leaders demanding both strict rule-following and innovation, trapping followers in impossible choices that reinforce the leader's dominance (Julmi, 2021). Similarly, leaders can manipulate employees into self-exploitation while suppressing dissent by imposing the impossible goal of maximizing customer satisfaction at any cost (Julmi, 2022). In sum, the episodic circuit *enables agency to cope* with contradictions.

Dispositional circuits also regulate individual agency in responding to paradox, largely by shaping and enabling subjectification effects (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). For example, PhD students can experience pragmatic paradoxes through dispositional power embedded in academic norms and structures: universities promote publication-driven excellence, while limiting resources and enforcing rigid hierarchies, leading students to internalize the 'heroic academic' ideal that normalizes overwork, precarity and blurred work/life boundaries (Bertello, 2025). The disempowering effects of the dispositional circuit in relation to paradox navigation may be an unintended consequence of bureaucratic handling of complexity, causing contradictory rules to accumulate without flexibility (Cunha et al., 2023).

The tools, structures and social capital embedded in the facilitative circuit also affect agency to navigate competing demands, thus *regulating capacity to cope* with paradox. For example, when an organization establishes cross-functional teams, it facilitates collaboration between different departments (e.g. marketing and product development) to address tensions between customer needs and operational capabilities. The facilitative circuit also constrains access to the resources, networks or platforms needed for navigating tensions. For example, in organizations where decision-making is centralized and there is a lack of access to cross-departmental collaboration, employees may face structural constraints that force them to resolve paradoxes through rigid, either/or thinking. In highly hierarchical environments, employees may be discouraged from questioning or discussing contradictory demands, leading to paradox denial or excessive simplification (Miller, 1993). Tracy's (2004) study of correctional officers facing contradictory demands, such as showing respect to inmates while remaining suspicious of them in the context of a total institution, restricts their ability to discuss these tensions with supervisors or even with family and friends, limiting their capacity to develop constructive approaches to tensions.

In summary, power flowing through the different circuits regulates both paradoxical framing and agency to respond, the two factors that – together – determine actors' capacity to formulate effective strategies to cope with salient paradoxes, leading to three ideal-typical scenarios: generative, defensive and pathological responses. These dynamics shape response capabilities both at micro and meso levels. At the micro level, individual actors' ability to cope with paradoxes depends on their mindsets, cognitive frames and access to episodic power, all of which influence how they interpret and act upon competing demands. At the meso level, however, dispositional and facilitative structures enable or constrain the development of collective paradox mindsets and shared response practices, thereby structuring the very conditions under which individuals can exercise agency.

Step 5A – generative responses.   In the first scenario (5a), actors adopt ambivalence-embracing frames that seek synergy and possess the agency to implement the coping strategies they devise. This situation has strong parallels with the idea of creative integration and constructive conflict pioneered by Mary Parker Follet (Bednarek and Smith, 2023; Follett, 1924). Rather than resolving tension through compromise, this view sees it as a source of collective innovation when addressed through participatory, coactive processes that foster 'power-with', shared power grounded in mutual reliance and collaboration. Examination of the power dynamics involved in the processes producing generative resources recognizes that both/and integration is not the outcome of a collective epiphany or of a consensual agreement leading individuals to collectively embrace a paradox mindset. Rather, it represents an effortful accomplishment, involving conflict and contestation, in which relations of power are crucial (Schrage et al., 2025; Seidemann, 2024). For example, introducing AI tools in a university affects both dispositional and episodic circuits. When implemented transparently and collaboratively, AI can reshape norms and legitimize flexible approaches, helping faculty navigate the

tensions between research and teaching commitments. But when introduced reactively or restrictively, it reinforces hierarchical norms, triggers defensive behaviours and limits academics' capacity to engage tensions constructively. Ironically, for a generative scenario to occur, it is not sufficient for actors to be adequately empowered and equipped with the correct mindset. The presence of undecidability is also a necessary catalyst for actors to engage in effortful search for synergistic approaches; conversely, if actors encounter a decidable trade-off, they will likely make rational optimization decisions (Berti and Cunha, 2023). In sum, recent paradox research shows that effective navigation of contradictory demands can produce *learning* effects as actors develop new ways of relating, interacting and approaching issues (Berti et al., 2025), and generative effects may also take the form of *innovation*, for example, by alleviating decisional constraints that produce undecidability or by developing solutions that reconfigure organizational structures and power relations to embed divergent requirements, such as sustainability within a commercial enterprise (Westover, 2025).

Step 5B – defensive responses. The second scenario captures those cases in which actors facing a salient paradox opt for defensive solutions, typically through an either/or approach that privileges one pole over another. In this situation, actors have the agency to respond but lack the drive or cognitive ability to embrace the paradox. Most authors follow Smith and Lewis (2011) in viewing defensive responses to paradox as driven by anxiety and discomfort in the face of contradictions (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), resulting in attempts to deny or evade them by separating contradictory tasks into different units or repressing one demand (Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). Consequently, the generative potential of paradox, as a source of innovation and learning, is lost. However, consideration of power dynamics allows us to paint a more nuanced picture. First, in line with previous discussion, power dynamics play a central role in determining a prevalent framing. Rather than arising from an incapacity to accept and feel energized by ambivalence, the choice of privileging one polarity can be instrumentally partisan (Huq et al., 2017) or be induced by the need to align with approaches that are legitimated and supported by the dispositional and facilitative circuits (e.g. bureaucratic public sector organization routines and decision rules that emphasize compliance with written rules, with regular audits and strict reporting). Second, power dynamics may serve to entrench cognitive predispositions, such as a preference for consistency over ambivalence, even in contexts where the latter could be strategically beneficial (Rothman et al., 2017). If those who frame choices as either/or are in a position of leadership, they can enforce compliance to this framing through exercising power, either directly through imperative command in an episodic circuit or indirectly by shaping dispositional and episodic circuitry, for instance, by setting one-sided incentives, or promoting coherence over adaptability (Es-Sajjade et al., 2021). Third, it is also possible that actors fail to appreciate the paradoxical nature of a challenge simply because it becomes salient to them as something decidable, a situation that can be solved by making a clear-cut choice in relation to a trade-off (Berti and Cunha, 2023). This can be appropriate in stable environments with predictable trade-offs, because such an approach reduces complexity, focuses resources on clear goals and prevents indecision between competing priorities (Krautzberger and Tuckermann, 2024). Even in such cases, power dynamics remain consequential: they determine which single logic is allowed to dominate and which alternative perspectives are excluded, as when sustainability tensions are reframed solely through a business-case lens (Hahn et al., 2010, 2014). This narrowing enables actors to calculate an optimal trade-off but only by imposing a uniform metric for costs and benefits, suppressing the values and viewpoints of stakeholders whose concerns do not fit this standardized calculus (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). As a consequence, the outcome of defensive responses is *stasis*, as the paradoxes are *suppressed* or *invisibilised*.

Step 5C – pathological responses. When power relations deprive actors of agency to deal with salient paradoxes, they will encounter pragmatic paradoxes, self-defying choices producing absurd vicious circles (Berti and Simpson, 2021b). Absurdity does not prevent action, but derives from the awareness that any possible choice, including inaction, has unacceptable consequences, and cannot be justified (Berti and Cunha, 2023; Cunha et al., 2023). Pragmatic paradoxes trigger debilitating responses, depleting psychological and material resources, including literal obedience to orders, paranoia and withdrawal (Tracy, 2004). The consequences of these paradoxes are both social costs (diminished trust, health and loyalty) and organizational costs (higher turnover, absenteeism, reduced innovation and performance) (Berti and Simpson, 2021a). Exposed individuals also experience confusion, displeasure and anxiety (Julmi, 2022), alongside frustration and demotivation (Pamphile, 2022), with repeated exposure leading to mental illness (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Beyond individual stress and discomfort, the combined outcome of pathological responses is a collective *depletion of capabilities* by exhausting attention, eroding coordination and undermining the development of stable routines and learning over time.

How paradox outcomes impact power circuits (steps 6 and 7)

Step 6 – generative responses reinforcing circuits of power. Our model shows how power circuits shape the salience and handling of paradox, while responses to paradox, in turn, reinforce or disrupt these circuits (Figure 1). This mutual dependence creates feedback loops linking paradox navigation and the configuration of power. Generative paradoxes drive learning and innovation while reinforcing facilitative and dispositional circuits of power, even as they may destabilize internal power balances. Generative paradoxes reinforce the dispositional and facilitative circuits of power because the effortful search for integrative solutions reshapes both the norms that guide interpretation and the systems that enable action. In the case of the Sydney Opera House project, the architect Jørn Utzon, driven by artistic vision, and the engineer Ove Arup, responsible for structural feasibility, engaged in constructive friction that pushed both disciplines beyond their conventional boundaries (Gaim et al., 2022). Their collaboration not only generated creative breakthroughs but also stabilized new shared norms of cross-disciplinary problem-solving (dispositional circuit) and led to the development of innovative design tools, modelling techniques and coordination routines (facilitative circuit) that made such integration actionable. Through these dynamics, generative responses embed new meanings and material practices into the organization, reinforcing the circuits that enable ongoing paradox navigation.

Step 7 – pathological responses disrupting circuits of power. The initial negative effect of pathological responses is path dependency and inertia, limiting change in the facilitative circuit and preserving the status quo. This inertia can have detrimental effects, reducing organizational capacity to keep up with exogenous transformation, such as innovations driven by competitors. Oppressive exercises of power generate resistance (Foucault, 1984) which, as well as producing friction, can also be productive, creating space for alternative meanings and practices (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023), in a dialectical process (Clegg and Cunha, 2017; Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017). Thus, opposition can be leveraged to foster desirable change, rather than solely pursuing both/and approaches (Berti and Cunha, 2023; Seidemann, 2024). The #MeToo movement offer an illustration of this dynamic. The gap between organizations' stated commitment to equality and their normalization of sexual harassment exposed power structures that had long sustained silence. As previously marginalized actors gained voice, this tension became a force for institutional reform, leading to the removal of complicit leaders, revised HR policies and new accountability mechanisms. Rather than resolving the paradox, the movement opened space for new MOC (bodily integrity, consent, workplace

safety) which became MOA through renewed investigative and policy processes. These, in turn, generated fresh tensions around due process and voice, illustrating how shifting power can turn contradictions into ongoing drivers of change (Berti and Simpson, 2021b; Knight and Tsoukas, 2019).

Even when resistance does not emerge or is insufficient to trigger dialectical transformation, persistent pragmatic paradoxes erode the dispositional and facilitative circuits sustaining coordinated action, gradually degrading organizational capabilities. Pathological responses corrode the dispositional circuit by normalizing cynicism, distrust and defensive silence, weakening the shared meanings needed for collective sensemaking. They also undermine the facilitative circuit as depleted actors avoid collaboration, disengage from problem-solving or mechanically follow dysfunctional routines, hollowing out the infrastructures that support effective action. For example, Tracy's (2004) study of correctional officers shows how impossible demands to be simultaneously empathetic and hyper-vigilant led to emotional numbing, rule-following rigidity and reduced willingness to communicate, collectively degrading the institution's rehabilitative capacity. Likewise, Padavic et al. (2020) illustrate how the enduring work–family paradox in consulting firms breeds resignation and self-blame among women consultants, ultimately reinforcing turnover, narrowing leadership pipelines and diminishing the organization's adaptive potential. In such cases, even without overt resistance, the accumulated effects of pragmatic paradoxes quietly incapacitate the organization from within, sapping its resilience, learning capacity and long-term viability.

A practical illustration: how power flows perform paradox in the case of a GVC

It is useful to consider how this interplay of power flows and paradox manifests in a single case. Schrage et al. (2025) ethnography of a global value chain shows how social sustainability becomes a matter of concern through Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI) audits involving factory managers, workers, auditors, standards and procedures, while economic profit constitutes a parallel matter of concern expressed through pricing and delivery schedules. These two poles come into tension through the struggle between the corresponding MOC. Initially, the struggle remains latent for German buyers, whose strong power advantage allows them to treat sustainability as a compliance issue and offload the management of contradictions onto Chinese suppliers. By controlling the relevant 'rules of the game' and obligatory passage points – audits, contract terms and supply negotiations, buyers frame sustainability as formal box-ticking, leaving weaker actors to confront the contradictory demands of low prices, fast delivery and strict social standards, often in conditions of undecidability. Even within the import company, the CSR manager experiences a similar tension, caught between purchasing pressure for low costs and the mandate to enforce social standards, yet lacking authority to resolve it. Chinese line workers, compelled to stage fake audits and conceal overtime, experience the tension as a pragmatic paradox. Buyers, by contrast, avoid paradox altogether by shifting suppliers and treating choices as straightforward optimization.

As labour market conditions shift, weaker actors gain leverage, and Chinese manufacturers and CSR managers form alliances to pressure buyers into contractual conditions that support productivity investments, reducing the need for exploitative practices. These episodic struggles prompt actors to recognize their interdependence and develop more generative responses. Dispositional and facilitative circuits are also transformed: audits become channels for bottom-up dialogue rather than only top-down control, enabling more coordinated approaches to balancing economic and social demands. Overall, the case demonstrates that when power differentials are extreme, actors have little incentive to embrace paradox, and that only when political struggles realign interests and authority can 'power-with' dynamics emerge, allowing paradoxes to be treated as shared MOA (Vásquez et al., 2018). Therefore, performing collaborative and generative responses to paradoxes

requires not only 'viewing tensions as an invitation for creativity' (Smith and Lewis, 2011: 391) but also accepting diffused power and productive conflicts.

Discussion

By shifting the analytical focus from paradox as a cognitive puzzle to paradox as a political and performative enactment, our theory reorients how paradox should be understood and studied. We articulate the ontology of organizational paradox as something emotionally embodied, categorically embrained and institutionally embedded (Clegg, 2023), emerging not from isolated cognition but from sociomaterial practices mediated by power. Using Clegg's circuits of power, we show how power flows dynamically constitute paradox: activating latent tensions as MOC, stabilizing or suppressing polarities as MOA (Vásquez et al., 2018), producing undecidability through dispositional constraints (Berti and Cunha, 2023), shaping response capabilities (Keller et al., 2020; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Tjemkes et al., 2025) and influencing whether paradoxes become salient, recede (Hahn and Knight, 2021) or catalyse dialectical transformation (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017). Therefore, this article offers three major contributions to paradox literature.

First, we show that power is a constitutive force in paradox formation, not a moderating boundary condition, articulating the ontology of organizational paradox. Building on Smith and Lewis' (2011) foundational intuition, we demonstrate that plurality, scarcity and change only become paradoxical through power-laden enactments of influence, legitimacy and authority. This explains why paradoxes sometimes surface, sometimes remain latent and sometimes become impossible to articulate, echoing Padavic et al.'s (2020) insight that salience is not an on/off state but a contested accomplishment. Our analysis also clarifies how circuits of power shape paradox differently across levels: episodic struggles structure actors' immediate, micro-level experience of salience and agency; dispositional struggles stabilize or suppress paradox at the meso level through shared norms, categories and roles; and facilitative infrastructures condition macro-level patterns of coordination and inequality. Recognizing these level-specific effects helps explain why paradoxes are lived locally yet produced and sustained collectively, advancing a multi-level ontology of organizational paradox.

Second, we advance performative paradox scholarship (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2023) by revealing how power is implicated in the ontology of paradoxes. Our model (Figure 1) shows that the mechanisms through which they are enacted into visibility and later performed back into the 'primordial soup' of latent contradiction (Hahn and Knight, 2021) are power-infused. Paradoxes gain or lose traction as discourses, material arrangements, routines and technologies reconfigure circuits of power and thereby give political weight and relevance to the divergent and interdependent requirements that complicate actors' decisions. This moves beyond static models of paradox salience to emphasize its dynamic and contested nature. It also enriches the 'dark side' of paradox perspective (Berti and Simpson, 2021b), by showing that not only power dynamics limit actors' agency to productively navigate paradoxes, but also that the way in which paradoxes are construed and responded to affect the circuitry of power, influencing organizational capabilities.

Third, we integrate paradox and dialectical perspectives, demonstrating that paradoxes are not merely opportunities for both/and synergy but also sites of domination, resistance and potential transformation (Benson, 1977; Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2017). By linking paradox response trajectories to shifts in circuits of power, we reconcile synergy-seeking views (Smith and Lewis, 2022) with critical accounts that see conflict as necessary and potentially generative (Seidemann, 2024). This emphasizes why the politics of paradox matter: paradoxes are not neutral tensions awaiting cognitive resolution but contested accomplishments whose articulation, suppression or transformation depends on how power circulates through organizational life.

Future research directions

Our perspective opens several avenues for future research. First, scholars could further explore the causal processes by which paradoxes become salient, drawing on theories of performativity, language games and organizational discourse. As Pradies (2023) notes, paradoxes are not only cognitive but also emotional phenomena that are felt, feared or desired in ways that shape how they are enacted. Further studies could investigate the emotional and affective dynamics that underlie paradox salience and suppression. Second, future research should examine the circumstances that make paradox enactment possible. Not all actors have the capacity or willingness to name and engage with paradox. As Schad and Bansal (2018) suggest, paradox recognition does not necessarily lead to paradox management. Investigating how different configurations of facilitative power, such as digital infrastructures, performance metrics or reporting systems, shape the organizational acceptance of paradox discourse would offer important insights. Third, more attention should be given to the collective constitution of paradox. For example, what appears paradoxical to top management may be routine to frontline staff, or vice versa (Cunha et al., 2006). Understanding how paradox perceptions vary across levels, roles and communities within organizations and how these are negotiated over time requires multilevel, longitudinal and interdisciplinary research designs. For this reason, we encourage the use of discourse, visual and sociomaterial methodologies to capture the nuanced and situated nature of paradox performance (Bednarek et al., 2021; Fairhurst, 2023; Pradies et al., 2023). Fourth, our model necessarily simplifies response variety by treating generative, defensive and pathological reactions as distinct modes. However, actors often combine multiple strategic moves to engage opposites simultaneously (Li, 2025): thus, future research should explore how blended or shifting responses unfold within, and potentially reshape, the circuits of power we identify.

In conclusion, we call for more critical and reflexive paradox theory, attuned to the structural and processual political conditions under which paradoxes emerge, are named and dealt with. Even if it is useful to accept the persistency of organizational paradoxes or to seek to navigate them synergically, we argue that researchers must also ask: Whose contradictions are being addressed? Whose are ignored? What kinds of paradoxes are allowed to persist, and what kinds are silenced or reframed? This view aligns paradox research much more closely with critical organizational studies, emphasizing voice, inclusion and power asymmetries.

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