

# **THE DARK SIDE OF ORGANIZATIONAL PARADOXES: THE DYNAMICS OF DISEMPOWERMENT**

## **Abstract**

*The idea that interdependent and persistent tensions are intrinsic to organizing is now well accepted. Organizational paradox theory has further stressed the importance of accepting such paradoxes, to convert them into generative forces. However, this recommendation assumes actors have full agency in responding to paradoxes and, therefore, overlooks the role of power dynamics. We expand on paradox theory by drawing attention to organizational pragmatic paradoxes: contradictory demands received within the context of an intense managerial relationship, such as when a subordinate is ordered to ‘take initiative’. Our model highlights how organizational pragmatic paradoxes derive from power relations restricting actors’ capacities for enacting legitimate responses to tensions. Specifically, we link different organizational power dimensions to various manifestations of pragmatic paradoxes. We further outline concrete actions for mitigating the occurrence of these pathological phenomena. Our conceptualization contributes to a critical reading of paradox theory that is sensitive to power inequalities.*

The capacity to manage paradoxical tensions—for example, exploitation and exploration, or competition and collaboration—has been described as the “ultimate advantage and challenge for organizations” (Andriopoulos & Lewis 2009, p. 709). Organizational paradox literature (see Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart 2016; Schad, Lewis, Raisch, & Smith 2016 for reviews) has demonstrated that paradoxes, defined as “persistent contradictions between interdependent elements” (Schad et al. 2016, p. 10), are an unavoidable consequence of organizing (Lewis 2000; Smith & Lewis 2011). The conceptual core of the theory, summarized in the “dynamic equilibrium model of organizing” formulated by Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 389), maintains that acknowledging the interconnectedness of opposite poles can promote organizational learning and transformation (Chen 2002; Farjoun 2010; Miron-Spektor, Gino, & Argote 2011). Challenging the assumption that organization is synonymous with order and linearity, paradox theory highlights the dynamic, complex nature of organizing (Lewis & Smith 2014).

Despite the success of paradox theory, demonstrated by the growing number of publications it inspires (Fairhurst et al. 2016), preserving the vitality of this theory requires challenging its assumptions (Cunha & Putnam 2019; Schad, Lewis, & Smith 2019). In this paper, we focus on two of its limitations. First, we question the presupposition that individuals are free and able to choose how to engage with paradoxical tensions. Actors faced with organizational paradoxes have been observed to respond in various ways (Jarzabkowski & Lê 2017), with those who accept tensions demonstrating enhanced performance and innovation (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith, & Lewis 2018). Therefore, accepting, rather than denying, the existence of paradoxes is believed essential in achieving sustainable outcomes (Smith & Lewis 2011). However, this view ignores the observation that, sometimes, individuals facing paradoxical demands are left without any legitimate course of action. A subject receiving inherently contradictory directives (e.g., ‘be spontaneous!’, or ‘take initiative!’) within the context of an inescapable relationship, where one “is prevented from stepping outside the frame set by this

message” (Watzlawick, Jackson, & Bavelas 1967, p. 212), is left with limited choice. In such situations, described in social psychology either as *pragmatic paradoxes* (Watzlawick et al. 1967) or as *double binds* (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland 1956, 1963), obeying the order implies disobeying it, and protesting its absurdity is taken for insubordination. These phenomena frequently occur in the workplace, and they are well documented in the extant literature (Tracy 2004; Tye-Williams & Krone 2017; Wagner 1978; Wendt 1998); however, they are difficult to accommodate in a theoretical framework that assumes actors always have free agency in choosing how to respond to contradictory demands.

The experience of disempowered agents highlights a second limitation of current paradox theory: insufficient attention given to power and domination effects. Power relations can limit the response repertoire available to individuals trying to accommodate divergent logics. While several studies have analyzed the micro-practices of rank-and-file employees dealing with contradictory requirements (Cuganesan 2017; Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven 2013; Jarzabkowski & Lê 2017), the effects of subordination upon paradox experience are not well theorized. Paradox theory tends to be “rather power-neutral” (van Bommel & Spicer 2017, p. 156), neglecting to acknowledge “what seems paradoxical higher up appears confusing and absurd lower down” (Czarniawska 1997, p. 97).

With this paper, we contribute to organizational paradox theory by conceptualizing *organizational pragmatic paradoxes* as situations in which oppressive power conditions restrict the ability for organizational members to make legitimate choices in the face of interdependent contradictions (paradoxes). Upon surveying the management literature for empirical accounts of pragmatic paradoxes we identified several related phenomena: (1) *Double binds*, (2) *paradoxical predictions*, (3) *Kafkaesque organizations* (with their corollary of *Catch-22 situations*), and (4) *Orwellian doublethink*. Providing order to this disparate terminology, we categorize these experiences as distinct manifestations of organizational pragmatic paradoxes,

deriving from their association four different dimensions of organizational power (Fleming & Spicer 2014): coercion, manipulation, domination and subjectification. We then consider how the intersection of these diverse forms of power further affects agency and response capacity up against paradoxical tensions, generating disempowering vicious circles. Organizational pragmatic paradoxes must be considered a pathology, as they undermine individual self-efficacy and well-being, as well as deteriorate organizational capabilities. We therefore propose mitigating the occurrence of pragmatic paradoxes is both important for improving organizational efficacy and for creating conditions for emancipation from oppressive social conditions. In this context, ‘oppression’ refers to “unnecessary restrictions upon the development and articulation of human consciousness” (Alvesson & Willmott 1992, p. 432). We begin the paper by discussing the role of agency in formulating responses to paradox, highlighting the experience of tensions is situated within a frame of social relationships. We then outline how the phenomena of pragmatic paradox are described in the organizational literature, presenting an explanatory model of how different forms of power shape their manifestation and occurrence. Recognition of these power dynamics helps to identify both planned strategies and emergent forms of resistance capable of mitigating the pathological experience of pragmatic paradoxes. We conclude by articulating the significance of our model in making paradox theory more sensitive to power relations by drawing attention to their ‘dark side’, thereby contributing to a ‘critical’ shift in the organizational paradox literature.

## **PARADOX, AGENCY AND SITUATEDNESS**

### **Paradox and action**

Action plays a fundamental (albeit implicit) role in organizational paradox theory. A central tenet is that, due to their persistence and interdependence, organizational contradictions (for example, between efficiency and innovation, or consistency and flexibility) cannot be ‘solved’

but only navigated via performing “actions that breakthrough paralysis” (Jay 2013, p. 140). Coping actions take various forms, including strategic vision formulation (Abdallah, Denis, & Langley 2011), rhetorical practices (Bednarek, Paroutis, & Sillince 2017), organizing procedures (Jarzabkowski et al. 2013), as well as talk and humour (Jarzabkowski & Lê 2017). Action itself can assume paradoxical characteristics, as with the Daoist concept of *Wu-Wei* (i.e., acting by non-acting), expressed as not opposing the emerging flow of events (Banner 2018).

Opposite demands can be compensated through vacillation and a search for balance (Smith 2014)—for example, addressing different competing norms or demands by oscillating between them at different points in time (Tracy 2004). Some of this controlled oscillation (akin to a tightrope walker’s continuous adjustments to maintain balance) involves cooperation: contradictions can be contested through open discussion in conversational sparring sessions (Lüscher & Lewis 2008), or managed by dividing tasks between colleagues, each attending to different expectations (Tracy 2004). Operating as practical ways to “deparadoxify or to ‘unfold’ paradox” (Luhmann 1995a), these micro-practices facilitate the maintenance of purposeful behavior even in the face of stifling constraints (Jarzabkowski & Lê 2017). The paradoxes are not resolved or overcome, but temporarily displaced to enable action (Bergström, Styhre, & Thilander 2014).

Some tensions can be incorporated seamlessly into practices, as in the case of a plumber who sees no paradox in having to be simultaneously gentle and forceful when unscrewing a corroded pipe joint. In this case, tensions are implicitly coped with, owing to tacit knowledge inscribed within the practitioner’s body (Gherardi 2012), and routines (Jay 2013).

The dynamic model of organizing at the core of paradox theory (Smith & Lewis 2011) proposes that the positive or negative potential of paradoxes manifests as a consequence of actors’ responses. When paradoxes are approached with cognitive complexity and emotional

equanimity (Smith & Tushman 2005) they stimulate creativity and promote opportunity (Poole & van de Ven 1989), triggering self-correcting spirals based on a dynamic balancing of certainty and doubt (Tsoukas & Cunha 2017). Thus, managers are encouraged to accept paradoxes and make them salient to their subordinates (Knight & Paroutis 2017), acknowledging the interconnectedness of opposite poles rather than assuming their separation (Chen 2002; Farjoun 2010). Conversely, defensive responses such as denial and separation (Vince & Broussine 1996) produce vicious circles, and can even paralyze decision making (Clegg, da Cunha, & Cunha 2002; Lüscher & Lewis 2008).

This interpretation of organizational paradox finds its purest expression in an emergent theory on the microfoundations of paradox, which links tension responses with individual trait characteristics (Keller, Loewenstein, & Yan 2017; Miron-Spektor et al. 2018). These studies emphasize the importance of individual interpretations of perceived tensions as antonymic or interrelated, associating the capacity for accepting paradoxes with cultural traits (Keller et al. 2017). While supported by quantitative evidence, this theory underemphasizes the role of material circumstances, such as access to resources or hierarchical position. Accordingly, asserting that “paradox mindsets shape the way we make sense of tensions” (Miron-Spektor et al. 2018, p. 29) implicitly assumes all actors facing paradoxes have the same level of agency. By contrast, we contend individuals exposed to mutually contradictory priorities can lack the capacity to formulate generative responses (e.g., vacillating, relativizing, cooperating, reframing) due to the constraints that derive from the social context in which they are embedded. For example, institutional logics, as “taken-for-granted social prescriptions” (Battilana & Dorado 2010, p. 1419), influence actors unevenly. Thanks to their position and skills, some individuals can flexibly invoke and apply various logics, while peripheral actors have far less opportunity to use logics elastically and instrumentally (McPherson & Sauder 2013). Power relations can also influence mindsets, where coping with paradoxes “requires a

certain ironic disassociation which is much easier to achieve at executive levels than in the lower reaches of the hierarchy” (Czarniawska 1997, p. 97). Focusing narrowly on a paradoxical mindset could, therefore, lead to the “‘psychologization’ of analysis [...] in which forms of domination and exploitation are naturalized” (Willmott 2013, p. 460).

The rich organizational paradox literature already offers conceptual remedies to address this issue. Several studies have shown that dealing with paradoxes is not a cognitive operation but an eminently practical accomplishment (Bednarek et al. 2017; Jarzabkowski, Sillince, & Shaw 2010; Jarzabkowski & Lê 2017; Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee 2015). Focusing on practices draws attention to the observation that, even in the face of paradoxes, individuals find ways to “escape into action” (Czarniawska 2017, p. 149): “Buridan's ass, placed, as it were, between two equally tempting bales of hay, will survive, even if it notices that it cannot decide, for that is why it decides nevertheless” (Luhmann 1995b, p. 360).

Nonetheless, such a response appears obtusely asinine and may induce pathological consequences. As it has been demonstrated, when individuals are exposed to pragmatic paradoxes that leave them without any legitimate course of action (a rich repertoire of such situations is presented in the next section), they will either display paranoid behavior, withdraw from engagement, or seek refuge in ritualistic literal obedience (Tracy 2004; Watzlawick et al. 1967). These actions unfold as “perpetual oscillation between non-existent alternatives” (Putnam et al. 2016, p. 83), a situation typically associated with a feeling of absurdity (Farson 1996; Lewis 2000). Indeed, seemingly ‘irrational’ acts emerge as a reaction to the “untenable absurdity of his situation”, leading actors to conclude they “must be overlooking vital clues” (Watzlawick et al. 1967, p. 217). This search for (non-existent) missing pieces can lead to paranoid behaviors, generating a deep mistrust of other organizational actors (Tracy 2004). Other individuals will attempt to avoid negative consequences by choosing “to comply with any and all injunctions with complete literalness and to abstain overtly from any independent

thinking” (Watzlawick et al. 1967, p. 218), a phenomenon explicitly leveraged by the army to socialize recruits and by ‘total institutions’ to control inmates (Goffman 1961). The third possible reaction is withdrawal from involvement (Watzlawick et al. 1967). Such withdrawal can manifest in cultivating ignorance and avoiding confrontation—for example, ignoring information or becoming lax in enforcement of rules (Tracy 2004).

These observations indicate action is not equivalent to agency. It is beyond our scope to discuss the rich sociological debate concerning agency, a concept made “slippery” (Hitlin & Elder Jr 2007, p. 170) by its complex interrelation with structure (Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Giddens 1984). However, we can focus on two important attributes distinguishing agency from mere acting: first, “agency implies consciousness, free will, and reflexivity” (Fuchs 2001, p. 26); and, second, agency entails “the capacity to transpose and extend schemas to new contexts” (Sewell 1992, p. 19). Accordingly, agency incorporates both an evaluative element, as individuals make judgments regarding alternative choices (Emirbayer & Mische 1998), and a capacity to act creatively, which is contingent on power relations (Sewell 1992).

In sum, “the capacity to think paradoxically” (Lewis 2000, p. 764) is not in itself sufficient for enabling organizational members to effectively respond to organizational paradoxes—it must be combined with a degree of agency. Actors lacking agency are unable to harness the generative potential of organizational tensions due to their incapability towards choosing a legitimate response. Instead they experience the contradictory demands as organizational pragmatic paradoxes. These phenomena do not directly stem from organizing tensions (Smith & Lewis 2011), nor are they the outcome of message ambiguity or logical fallacy (Stohl & Cheney 2001). Organizational pragmatic paradoxes are experienced on account of the unacknowledged *situatedness* of the tensions that derive from organizing.



### **Situated experience of tensions**

Managing paradoxes requires confronting them “via iterating responses” (Smith & Lewis 2011, p. 389), adopting a “consistently inconsistent decision pattern” (Smith 2014, p. 1613). The contradiction cannot be solved logically, but must be confronted practically through situated acts of “bricolage” (Clegg et al. 2002, p. 498). As argued above, actors must be able to legitimately enact this type of flexible behavior. The possibility of doing so is constrained or enabled by the context in which they are situated.

Situatedness “refers to the quality of contingency of all social interaction” (Vannini 2008, p. 815). Hence, it is not simply a consideration of an agent’s location in an ‘objective’ set of spatial and temporal coordinates, “excluding issues of history, language and power” (Contu & Willmott 2003, p. 290). Rather, situatedness is the outcome of a “frame game” in which actors advance their own narrative of reality, defining both ideal and problematic states of affairs, highlighting and legitimizing agency, as well as defining the subject and the object (Taylor & Van Every 2010, p. 63). These games imply power. Power manifests not just in explicit attempts to influence behaviors, but also as “a network of relations constantly in tension” (Foucault 1979, p. 26) and embedded in organizational and knowledge structures (Foucault 1980). As they participate in organizations, individuals are provided with symbolic resources “for identity negotiation and for the legitimation of social practices” (Brown, Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter 2010, p. 528).

The network of relations and meanings in which organizational actors are placed is inherently laden with contradictions. On the one hand, the instrumental rationality underpinning most contemporary organizational settings associates the legitimacy of actions to their effectiveness in attaining calculated ends (Weber 1922 [1978]). On the other hand, organizational members are also enmeshed in a calculable process of production, based on formalized hierarchical relationships where rationality is treated as a given (Willmott 1993).

Consciously or not, from the perspective of individual agents, these tensions imply a dual requirement: to *both* legitimize their actions by ‘logically’ accounting for them, *and* to act in accordance with orders, preserving the unquestionable rationality of the authority structure from which their own roles and professional identities stem. If directives are inconsistent or contradictory, the agent encounters a pragmatic paradox. Complying means failing to pursue organizational goals (exposing them to censure); challenging an order is to second guess the leader who is supposed to know better (implying insubordination).

The experience of paradoxes is therefore always situated in a context where rational rules, institutional logics and social relations all determine available courses of action, thus shaping individual response capabilities. With the inhibition of response capabilities, pragmatic paradoxes can emerge. Purposefully making a latent paradox salient for lower-level managers could, therefore, represent a double-edged sword: to enact proactive responses, individuals require not only appropriate interpretive contexts (Knight & Paroutis 2017), but also need resources empowering their ability to choose (e.g., decisional autonomy, psychological safety, material assets, and cognitive capabilities). Otherwise, they will perceive the salient tension as an undiscussable, contradictory demand they are incapable of meeting.

The ability to enact iterative responses in the face of salient paradoxical tensions is therefore dependent on an agent’s situatedness in the specific set of power relations determining the conceivable and legitimate courses of actions available to them. For example, in the case of a team commanded to produce innovations within a rigid timeframe in a context where trialling errors is punished, learning will be hindered by a lack of psychological safety, creating a vicious circle (Edmondson 1999). In such a context, accusing staff members of lacking “behavioral complexity and emotional equanimity” (Smith & Lewis 2011, p. 389) amounts to victim-blaming.

Considering the role of agency in responding to paradoxical tensions and acknowledging that an actor's situatedness in a specific set of power relations can limit such agency, it logically follows that disempowered organizational members will experience interdependent tensions as untreatable contradictions (organizational pragmatic paradoxes). In the following section, we survey the literature indicating that organizational pragmatic paradoxes are not merely a theoretical possibility, but a widespread actuality. We will also look at the morphology of pragmatic paradoxes, linking specific manifestations of the phenomenon with different dimensions of organizational power.

## **THE MORPHOLOGY OF PRAGMATIC PARADOXES**

### **The role of communication**

The notion of pragmatic paradox first emerged in philosophy (O'Connor 1948) to label "a statement that is falsified by its own utterance" (Cohen 1950, p. 86), as in the sentence 'everything written on this page is false'. The concept further expanded to communication and family therapy theories (Watzlawick et al. 1967) to explain intractable contradictions that ensue, not from linguistic ambiguities in utterance formulation, but from relational binds. Such "paradoxical communication" (Watzlawick et al. 1967, p. 187) arises when a subordinate, who can neither question authority nor discuss demands, is given an order "that must be disobeyed to be obeyed" (Watzlawick et al. 1967, p. 195).

A vivid exemplification is offered in the classic barber's paradox described by Bertrand Russell: "who shaves the only barber in a village, if the barber shaves all villagers who do not shave themselves?" (Schad 2017, p. 32). Logicians regard this as a contradiction emerging from inconsistencies in natural language that can be 'solved' by concluding there is no such barber (Irvine & Deutsch 2016). However, Watzlawick (1965) offers a pragmatic version of the paradox by imagining the barber is a male private to whom a peremptory is issued by his

commander: he has to shave only those soldiers who cannot shave themselves. In this case, the unfortunate soldier is left with no practical course of action. If he shaves himself (or asks someone else to shave him), he will disobey the order; if he does not shave, he will contravene regulations; and if he attempts to discuss the order, he will be accused of insubordination. The cause of the soldier's predicament is not simply the order's absurdity, but also his inability to discuss and negotiate it.

This pragmatic version of the barber's paradox illustrates the essential relationship between pragmatic paradoxes and communication, originally discussed by Gregory Bateson (1972; Bateson et al. 1956). The self-referential nature of communication (i.e., saying something always means also saying something about ourselves saying something) opens the possibility for contradictions (Taylor & Van Every 2010). In other words, communication always includes an element of *metacommunication*, used not only to transmit messages but also "to communicate *about* communication" (Watzlawick et al. 1967, p. 40 emphasis in the original), thus providing instructions for framing messages and facilitating comprehension (Bateson 1972). For example, a threatening gesture means something entirely different if framed within the context of play (Holt & Zundel 2017).

Metacommunication also offers a way out of the impasse caused by communication ambiguity: when faced with self-contradictory conditions making rational action impracticable, the sensible response is to reframe or renegotiate situational constraints. It is a 'victim's' incapacity for alternating between communication and metacommunication by stepping outside the frameset to discuss the order or the whole relationship that entrenches pragmatic paradoxes (Bateson 1972).

### **Pragmatic paradoxes in organizations**

Even if organizational bonds may appear weaker than family ones (Putnam 1986), pragmatic paradoxes are a common organizational occurrence. The organizational literature offers a rich

catalogue of impractical situations wherein actors are trapped “between non-existent alternatives” (Putnam et al. 2016, p. 83). If employees are not granted the opportunity to make their predicament salient (and they cannot afford to leave the relationship), they experience a pragmatic paradox. With the recurrence of this pattern, schizophrenia-like symptoms can ensue (Wagner 1978). Hennestad provides a repertoire of contradictory and interconnected requests which employees can neither discuss nor refuse: “Take the initiative/Don't break the rules; Give immediate notice when mistakes occur/You will be punished if you make a mistake; Think long term/Your present behavior will be punished or rewarded; Think of the organization as an entity of responsibility/Don't trespass on others' area; Co-operate/Compete” (1990, p. 272). Injunctions of this sort produce not just frustration but vicious loops: “when management do not get the response they expect or want, they will probably increase their signaling and this will increase the degree of ambiguity” (Hennestad 1990). Pragmatic paradoxes are associated with a variety of workplace circumstances (see Table 1 for examples).

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Pragmatic paradoxes also manifest alongside other, more manageable, contradictions. Tracy’s (2004) empirical research into correctional officers revealed they experience multiple contradictions—for example, between inmates’ respect and suspicion, or between consistency and flexibility in enforcing rules. Such tensions can be variously framed as simple contradictions (which are managed through selection or oscillation between alternatives), complementary dialectics (which can be transcended through reframing), or pragmatic paradoxes (which lead to paralysis and other pathological consequences).

Comparison between the experience of pragmatic paradox and other forms of organizational paradox illustrates the conceptual link between agency, situatedness and paradox response (as

proposed above). When individuals are exposed to a contradiction between communication and metacommunications in the context of power relations preventing them from broaching the issue, pragmatic paradoxes manifest and become entrenched. In organizational contexts, metacommunication is not limited to seeking clarification or pointing out blatant inconsistencies in directives; it further implies a degree of critical inquiry, which may include questioning why an order was issued, challenging its legitimacy, or discussing its implications or feasibility. In organizations which encourage “functional stupidity”, an “inability and/or unwillingness to use cognitive and reflective capacities in anything other than narrow and circumspect ways” (Alvesson & Spicer 2012, p. 1201), metacommunication can be taken for insubordination.

Disempowerment can also derive from cultural/ideological framing that belittles low-ranked individuals, treating them as mere minions (Parker 2000); spatial arrangements, making decision-makers inaccessible (Clegg & Kornberger 2006; Dale & Burrell 2008; Dovey 1999); or the role performances of self-interested individuals (Putnam 1986). These examples could be taken to suggest low-ranked individuals are the more likely victims of pragmatic paradoxes. However, any “intense relationship that has a high degree of physical and/or psychological survival” (Watzlawick et al. 1967, p. 212) can lead to pragmatic paradoxes. Hierarchical subordination is therefore not the only condition that determines their emergence in organizations. Highly-ranked actors can also get stuck in pragmatic paradoxes. For example, partners in public-private megaprojects are sometimes initially required to be entrepreneurial but then severely criticized for their entrepreneurship (van Marrewijk, Clegg, Pitsis, & Veenswijk 2008). Executives can also be impaired in their capacity to ‘embrace complexity’ both by material restrictions (e.g., financial constraints deriving from investors’ expectations) and by identity management practices (Alvesson & Willmott 2002; Fleming 2013), leading to self-disciplining phenomena (McCabe 2014). Mutually constitutive contradictions can cause

both the oppressed and their oppressors to be entangled in pragmatic paradoxes (van Bommel & Spicer 2017). Finally, top managers are particularly vulnerable to nested paradoxes (Jarzabkowski et al. 2013), having to navigate organizational contradictions flexibly and cope with the “dilemma of speaking a rhetoric of decisiveness, certainty and clarity while experiencing a life of doubt” (March 2010, p. 68).

These examples of empirical manifestations of pragmatic paradoxes within organizations indicate the diffusion of the phenomenon, but also to the variety of its manifestations. To systematically survey the many forms in which organizational pragmatic paradoxes materialize and account for the phenomenon’s varied morphology, we next consider the role of power in curtailing individual capacity for responding to paradoxical tensions. We particularly consider how different dimensions of organizational power produce distinct manifestations of pragmatic paradoxes, both by impeding the possibilities of metacommunication and by hindering actors’ ability to navigate tensions via oscillation or reframing.

### **Pragmatic paradoxes and power**

As previously noted, power relations can constrict organizational members’ capacities for coping with contradictions, while inhibiting the possibility for signaling the absurdity of their condition to decision-makers. To map how these disempowering effects materialize we turn to theories of power, addressing a gap in the extant paradox literature (Fairhurst et al. 2016). Rather than a singular entity, power is better represented as a cluster of concepts (Clegg & Haugaard 2009) attempting to explain the determinants of an agent’s will being imposed despite resistance (Weber 1920 [1964]). Organizational power has frequently been defined in narrow terms within management theory (Lawrence, Mauws, Dyck, & Kleysen 2005) as the capacity for altering other agents’ behavior by purposefully leveraging differential access to relevant resources (Dahl 1957; Pfeffer 1992; Shen & Cannella 2002). This view equates power to a substance “that some agency has” (Clegg 2009, p. 49) and can be transferred (Fiol,

O'Connor, & Aguinis 2001) or possessed to various degrees (Anicich & Hirsh 2017). A broader perspective of power further incorporates pervasive (albeit less visible) forms of influence embedded in human relations—including within organizational and institutional settings—forming structures of domination (Hardy & Clegg 1996). This expanded view highlights the role of language and discourses in fixing meanings that articulate relations and identities into a “particular order of taken-for-granted categories” (Clegg 1989, p. 183). The web of power relations that is constitutive of knowledge and rationality (Foucault 1979) “enables and constrains all actors, albeit unequally and in different ways” (Hardy & Maguire 2016, p. 85). Building on the distinction between agentic (based on episodic acts) and systemic (institutional and discursive) influence, Fleming and Spicer (2014) propose an analytic typology of power comprising four different dimensions, as follows. *Coercion*, the “direct exercise of power by individuals to achieve certain political ends” (2014, p. 242), is the more visible manifestation of agentic power. *Manipulation* is instead the indirect, implicit variety of episodic power, where behavior is influenced by setting agendas, defining legitimate topics of discussion, and “by shaping the anticipated outcomes of various behaviors” (2014, p. 243). *Domination* is a form of systemic influence based on hegemonic values and ideologies, and the creation of systems of relations (e.g., corporate hierarchy) that become accepted as natural and unquestionable. Finally, *subjectification* is another form of systemic power, aiming to “determine an actor’s very sense of self, including their emotions and identity” (2014, p. 244). This typology of organizational power is particularly useful in categorizing the dynamics of disempowerment that (re)produce pragmatic paradoxes, including both situations in which the targets of power are capable of agency, as well as those wherein the targets are passive subjects of implicit domination (Kim, Pinkley, & Fragale 2005). While other conceptual frameworks reflect on these plural modalities of power (for instance Giddens 1984), Fleming and Spicer’s



typology offers the opportunity for a more analytical distinction between different forms of power.

We observe a correspondence between these four faces of power and the heterogeneous terminology used in the literature for describing phenomena akin to pragmatic paradoxes: *double binds*, *paradoxical predictions*, *Kafkaesque organization* (with their corollary of *Catch-22* situations), and *doublethink*. We propose (Table 2) these labels can account for categories of pragmatic paradoxes that emerge as a consequence of different types of power curtailing an agent’s capacity for metacommunication in the face of contradictory requirements.

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**Coercion: Double binds.** Following Watzlawick et al. (1967), Tracy (2004) describes double binds as pragmatic paradoxes experienced within the context of an intense relationship where an actor receiving a contradictory request is not “able to escape the message by either metacommunicating (commenting) about it or by withdrawing physically from the scene” (Tracy 2004, p. 122). Unfortunately, the conceptual distinction between pragmatic paradox and double bind is not always well-defined in the literature (Rieber & Vetter 1995). To clarify the terminology, we propose the use of ‘double bind’ to indicate a specific type of organizational pragmatic paradox in which the agency of actors facing contradictions is constrained by the direct exercise of power in the form of coercion. More specifically, situations in which actors’ capacities for dealing with contradictory demands are inhibited through direct interdiction. Affected individuals are impaired both in their capacity for formulating generative responses (negotiating the tension flexibly), and for engaging in metacommunication (discussing an order, questioning its feasibility and appropriateness). For example, a subordinate’s genuine attempts to navigate contradictions between organizational requirements and personal

goals/professional values using ambivalence (Meyerson & Scully 1995) may be interpreted as insubordination or challenging the status quo. Subordinate attempts to metacommunicate can further be construed as an affront to managerial authority, with refusal to engage justified as a means of maintaining order and focusing on the task-at-hand (Alvesson & Spicer 2012).

Different explanations can be found for the existence of explicit acts of power limiting autonomy in the face of paradox or actively silencing metacommunication. Double binds can emerge either as an unintended side effect of episodic power dynamics or, at the other end of the spectrum, as the outcome of political strategies specifically aimed at perpetuating workplace inequalities (Oakley 2000). Persons in positions of authority who unwittingly issue a paradoxical injunction may not want to acknowledge they made an absurd demand, concerned that admitting a mistake would undermine their authority. Additionally, they may want subordinates to shoulder the risks of ‘cutting corners’ in the pursuit of efficiency and profitability and not be held accountable if caught in the act, as in the case of employers implicitly encouraging employees to ignore environmental regulations to achieve KPIs (Lundmark & Westelius 2012). Or—lacking a paradoxical mindset—they may even refuse to consider the possibility of contradictions between formal prediction and the messiness of practical reality (Keller et al. 2017).

Organizational double binds are not always maliciously created to bully subordinates, since they can manifest as the unintentional by-product of oppressive power relations. Some orders appear logical from the perspective of those who issue them, with the contradictions only noticeable from the receiver’s viewpoint. For example, managers demanding employees to become more proactive may not realize the self-defying implications of such a paradoxical injunction (Watzlawick et al. 1967), where obedience would further entrench the passive attitude of the staff. Paradoxical tensions can also be the consequence of contradictory directives issued from different authorities, one insisting on compliance and another on

productivity or customer satisfaction. The binary divisions between mental (managerial) and manual labor frequently lead to an unacknowledged contradiction between the formal representation of a job and what it *actually* entails as a situated practice. Workers are knowledgeable individuals (Thompson, Warhurst, & Callaghan 2001), whose activities involve a degree of improvisation and bricolage (Bechky 2006; Orr 1996) that often requires them to ignore organizational policies and prescriptions.

***Manipulation: Paradoxical predictions.*** Contradictory demands can serve a specific political purpose, yet be tacit and sustained by purposefully limiting the range of legitimate arguments available for discussion (Bachrach & Baratz 1962). For example, pragmatic paradoxes can be structured in a manner whereby the victim's reaction becomes constitutive of their paralysis, manipulating their perception regarding their own ability to cope with the request. Such is the case with "paradoxical predictions" (Watzlawick 1965, p. 369)—contradictions derived from the clash of reason and trust (Rieber & Vetter 1995). A typical exemplification is the case of a teacher announcing there will be an unexpected exam during the week: reflection on these conditions leads students to logically determine that such an exam cannot take place on Friday (since come Thursday it would no longer be unexpected). By the same reasoning, all other days of the week would also be ruled out (first Thursday, then Wednesday, and so on), bringing them to the conclusion the teacher cannot hold the exam. As they relax, the teacher is free to hold the exam on any given day, knowing it will be unexpected precisely because students have convinced themselves it cannot be held. The 'elegance' of this case is that, for the achievement of this result, students need not be versed in logic, since a class of unthinking pupils would simply accept the teacher's statement as true (Watzlawick 1965). This idealized example has strong parallels with the dynamics described in the organizational literature. Gondo and Amis (2013) demonstrate actions discursively legitimized and objectified as 'best' practice are more likely to be accepted by organizational members as both useful and

easily implemented. Such eager acceptance, however, dampens critical assessment and reflection during implementation, consequently limiting the benefits (i.e., predicting an innovation will be useful undermines its utility). Even success can make practitioners simple-minded, increasing organizational inertia (Miller 1993); therefore, any condition where individuals lack the willingness or capacity for questioning and challenging the interpretative and relational frames in which they operate is fertile ground for the emergence of pragmatic paradoxes. Due to implicit expectations, supported by powerful discourses (e.g., ambition, competence, customer orientation), impulses to resist exploitation become fragmented and are effectively neutralized (Kärreman & Alvesson 2009). In sum, paradoxical predictions are pragmatic paradoxes where the capacity for responding to contradictory requests is inhibited by indirect, implicit forms of power (manipulation). In practice, manipulative power is deployed by strictly limiting legitimate courses of action and condemning any form of appeal (i.e., metacommunication) as invalid or unreasonable.

***Domination: Kafkaesque organizations and Catch-22 situations.*** Systemic power also has a strong impact on individual and collective capacities for managing contradictions (Hargrave & Van de Ven 2017). Some structures of production and social organization based on hegemonic ideologies become taken-for-granted or presented as the only sensible choice. Consequently, job design characteristics, reward systems and technologies act as disciplinary mechanisms, creating material conditions that limit and shape individual action potential, affecting all layers of organizational and social hierarchies. Even technologies are not passive objects—that is, they deploy agentic power in a manner that goes beyond their users’ capacity to control (Leonardi 2011). Routines and infrastructure are socio-material assemblages that filter possibilities for action (Orlikowski 2007). For example, work organization and role assignment can make cooperation impossible, as in the case of correctional officers who, having to work alone, cannot collaborate in paradox management by playing ‘good cop-bad

cop' (Tracy 2004), a situation likely to occur with a casual workforce and/or in virtual organizations (Da Cunha & Cunha 2001). Structural arrangements can also affect capacities for metacommunication. For example, architecture can be deployed as a means of spatial control, fixing individuals in their rightful positions (Dale & Burrell 2008) and effectively creating physical communication barriers that obstruct metacommunication between decision-makers and those subjects affected by their decisions.

A compelling illustration of the organization as a mode of disciplinary power comes from the work of Franz Kafka. Inspired by the author's lived experience as a petty bureaucrat, his oeuvre highlights the dystopian effects of organizational contradictions within an oppressive context, which in turn lead to alienation, loneliness and marginalization (Warner 2007). In his writing, Kafka develops a 'counter-mythology' of organizational life, contradicting managerialist views of organizational rationality (Munro & Huber 2012). An exemplary organizational pragmatic paradox is experienced by the protagonist of *The Trial*:

'At least for the moment they think your guilt is proven.' 'But I'm not guilty,' said K., 'it's a mistake. How can a person be guilty anyway? We're all human, every single one of us.' 'That is correct,' said the priest, 'but that's the way guilty people talk' (Kafka 2009 [1925], pp. 151-152).

Contemporary bureaucracies indeed appear to be more Kafkaesque than Weberian (Hodson, Martin, Lopez, & Roscigno 2013; Hodson, Roscigno, Martin, & Lopez 2013) due to the vicious circles created by the proliferation of conflicting rules that create contradictory behavioral expectations (March, Schulz, & Zhou 2000) and open spaces for power abuse (Crozier & Friedberg 1980). Powerless stakeholders, not in a position to question the status quo (e.g., employees and customers), accordingly experience helplessness, meaninglessness and paralysis (Clegg, Cunha, Munro, Rego, & de Sousa 2016).

One of the most exemplary manifestations of Kafkaesque bureaucracy is the experience of a “Catch-22” situation. The concept was first named by Joseph Heller (1961 [2004]) in his eponymous novel: an air pilot can be excused from flying combat missions if mentally insane, but asking for an exemption is considered sufficient proof of a rational mind. Both statements seem logical and sensible in the context of a legal-rational bureaucracy but absurd when considered in conjunction (Lewis 2000). The paradox emerges from the ambiguous definition of mental health, which is treated *ab absurdum* as if sanity/insanity were binary, on/off conditions. In the case of the air pilot, this is designed absurdity, engineered to ensure no shortage of cannon fodder for the war. Organizational literature presents numerous examples of such situations: harassed subordinates trapped between maintaining their dignity or disclosing their predicament, potentially inviting contempt for their weakness (Sayer 2007; Tye-Williams & Krone 2017); staff ‘empowerment’ programs turning into intrusive modes of control (Stohl & Cheney 2001; Wendt 1998); and managers charged with implementing participatory policies that undermine the purpose of participation (Currie, Lockett, & Suhomlinova 2009). These examples are not restricted to traditional bureaucracies but are also relevant to virtual organizations (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud 1999). In some cases, the victims of these vicious circles contribute towards the enactment of the routines that entrap them (Clegg et al. 2016).

In sum, Catch-22 situations (a typical manifestation of Kafkaesque bureaucracy) are pragmatic paradoxes that are both the medium and the outcome of visible forms of systemic power (domination). Domination effects restrict the range of strategies available to subordinate actors, simultaneously exposing them to formally legitimate, but incompatible, demands. Catch-22 situations further paralyze their victims, creating a vicious circle. Correspondingly, the possibility of denouncing the absurdity of the situation is negated by the existence of multiple hierarchical levels and the complexity involved in redressing policies and procedures.

**Subjectification: Doublethink.** Systemic power also operates via the organization of meaning and identity. Extant membership categories and organizational roles significantly limit alternative sense-making (Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere, & Vaara 2014), operating as sense-giving devices (Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991) that curtail reframing possibilities. Furthermore, strong social status imbalances can cause vicious circles, underpinning the logics commonly associated with low-powered individuals (Huq, Reay, & Chreim 2017). Socially constructed cognitive blueprints can also be influenced by the repeated experience of contradictions (Hennestad 1990). An example is when powerlessness becomes constitutive of identity, as is particularly the case for many female workers (Wendt 1995). In such circumstances, even absurd contradictions become unquestionable, since “nothing is as invisible as the obvious” (Farson 1996, p. 25). Dominant cognitive frames can also impair metacommunication by reinforcing a “climate of silence: [the] widely shared perceptions among employees that speaking up about problems or issues is futile and/or dangerous” (Morrison & Milliken 2000, p. 708) due to the collective belief that employees’ views are self-interested or ill-informed, and that only consent is positive. This can cause the active self-censoring of metacommunication through behaviors of self-vigilance (Sewell 1998), peer control (Cederström & Spicer 2015) and self-discipline (McCabe 2014).

An ideal-typical representation of subjectification becoming embodied as interiorized cognitive frames is the notion of *doublethink*, imagined by George Orwell in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, which, despite its fictional nature, has had a lasting influence on organizational literature (Martin de Holan 2011; Timothy Coombs & Holladay 2012; Willmott 1993, 2013). In the work, a totalitarian regime alters language to produce doublethink as a means of controlling the populace. Such doublethink patterns are defined as “the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them... To tell deliberate lies while genuinely believing in them, to forget any fact that has become inconvenient” (Orwell 1949,

p. 220). By normalizing paradox, doublethink safeguards the totalitarian regime from collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, keeping citizens in a state of constant uncertainty that inhibits resistance and self-determination.

Doublethink is not necessarily the product of an all-controlling, big-brotherly entity: many contemporary societies appear to be affected by its 'weak' version made of 'alternative facts', 'fake news' and 'post-truths' (Lynskey 2019). These disorienting, numbing effects, amplified by the echo-chamber of social media, are founded on the notion that what makes an account of reality valid is its resonance with affects, values and expectations rather than its grounding in evidence. Contemporary corporations seem to mirror this weak version of Orwell's dystopian fantasy, particularly through 'soft' forms of control, where "autonomy" is defined "as obedience to the core values of corporate culture" (Willmott 1993, p. 527). Particularly in fluid post-bureaucratic contexts (Josserand, Teo, & Clegg 2006; McKenna, Garcia-Lorenzo, & Bridgman 2010) reliant on trustworthiness built on professional values and identity regulation (Grey & Garsten 2001), doublethink emerges to control the "autonomous educated worker able and willing to program and decide entire sequences of work" (Castells 2009, p. 257). Corporations bestow empowerment, freedom and self-determination to their "intrapreneurial" employees (Antoncic & Hisrich 2001) as a mode of soft-power, seducing employees to subscribe to a hegemonic normative framework that reshapes their identity (Willmott 1993). The doublethink phenomenon also has concrete manifestation in the 'autonomy paradox', where mobile work technologies offer individual autonomy and flexibility while dissolving barriers between private and professional life—often to the detriment of the latter (Mazmanian, Orlikowski, & Yates 2013). In this case, doublethink could be the designed outcome of a strategy for maximizing exploitation under an illusory impression of self-determination (Willmott 2013). Dissolving personal identity into a corporate identity thereby becomes the



only available strategy towards overcoming the threatening tension between individual and corporate interests.

Individuals operating in the face of contradictions employ doublethink by bracketing off contradictory roles (El-Sawad, Arnold, & Cohen 2004). This cannot be assimilated to paradox acceptance, however, since those who employ it “appear oblivious to it” (El-Sawad et al. 2004, p. 1180). In sum, doublethink is a type of pragmatic paradox where the experience of contradictions derives from inconsistent requisites incorporated within professional and social identities. Since these contradictions affect the subject’s very sense of self and since humans desire coherence (Weick 1995), they cannot be navigated via oscillation. The possibility of transcending them by reframing is hindered by the powerful sense-giving processes that underlie identity regulation.

### **Power intersections and disempowerment effects**

We have seen how pragmatic paradoxes manifest when disempowering conditions limit individual agency in the face of paradoxical tensions. This disempowerment can be caused by exposure to different faces of power: lack of control of resources, no positional access to agenda setting, subordination in relational structures, or the fragility of social and professional identities. Fleming and Spicer’s (2014) framework helps to distinguish between these forms of power analytically but does not examine their interaction. We consider how organizational pragmatic paradoxes unfold as tensions of power dynamics within the broader context of the intersection between episodic and systemic power relations.

Day-to-day struggles among agents (episodic power) transpire in a context of rules and routines fixing relationships of meaning and membership, and of a broader set of disciplinary mechanisms incorporated into the socio-materiality of work technologies and production systems (systemic power (Clegg 1989)). Systemic aspects of power thereby permeate and structure relations, normalizing and maintaining asymmetries—with episodic interactions

flowing along the path of least resistance, as in a metaphorical electric circuit (Gordon 2007). Consequently, some actors' positional advantages reinforce their capacity for coercing and manipulating others, producing persistent regimes of inequality (Acker 2006). For example, while institutionally-defined risk management practices influence all organizational members, some key actors can define what constitutes a risk and decide how it should be managed (Hardy & Maguire 2016). This has a specific impact on the experience of pragmatic paradoxes: top managers are particularly likely to be exposed to the need for accommodating multiple contrasting logics; yet, these tensions are less likely to be experienced as pragmatic paradoxes because executives have both access to a broader range of resources, and positional advantages (e.g., status, authority, possibility to determine the design of jobs, spaces and technologies), offering them multiple legitimate strategies of action.

In other words, while all actors are affected by ubiquitous power relations, some preserve agency in dealing with contradictory demands thanks to their capacity for enacting alternative strategies or for renegotiating the relational bounds limiting legitimate courses of action (Clegg 1989). Conversely, those exposed to the full disempowering effects of the intersection of systemic and episodic power relations will experience the entire gamut of pragmatic paradoxes, which will add insult to injury by further undermining the victim's capacity to react. Ken Loach's 2016 award-winning movie 'I Daniel Blake' vividly depicts such a situation through the story of a mature-aged blue-collar worker restricted from manual work due to a heart condition, and subsequently denied employment or a support allowance. Incapable of lodging an appeal due to a lack of computer literacy and unwilling to renounce his professional identity as a craftsman, Blake embarks on an ill-fated crusade to see his right acknowledged. He is seen locked in an endless series of pragmatic paradoxes, from the double binds imposed by compassionless bureaucrats at a government work center, to the Catch-22 imposed by requisite

use of a technology he is unable to negotiate. These Kafkaesque experiences escalate as the movie progresses, causing Blake to clash with justice and ultimately die.

Fortunately, such a tragic outcome is neither universal nor unavoidable. While the synergy between institutionalized systemic power and resource-based episodic power can create persistent oppressive conditions, the possibility for resistance and change remains (Acker 2006). Emergent social and technological innovation generates tensions and contradictions that can disrupt structures of domination and subjectification. The dominion of large bureaucratic corporations that was almost uncontested just a few decades ago is increasingly challenged by new organizational forms (Davis 2013), while IT-enabled collaboration is allowing new forms of community-based cooperation organized as meta-organizations, as with Wikipedia or Linux (Gulati, Puranam, & Tushman 2012). Episodic power can leverage these transformations, forcing disruption and renegotiation of practices and relationships. An example is the use of social media during the Arab Spring to coordinate anti-government protests among otherwise disempowered actors (Eltantawy & Wiest 2011). Individuals can also find opportunities for micro-emancipation by exploiting contradictions in managerialist discourses and bureaucratic controls, selectively employing the former to construct a positive self-identity, or circumventing the latter to accommodate personal needs (Zanoni & Janssens 2007). Micro-emancipation can also take the form of irony and sarcasm, employed for coping with paradox (Hatch 1997; Hatch & Erlich 1993; Jarzabkowski & Lê 2017) and defying “routine absurdities” embedded in the labor process (Korczynski 2011, p. 1421).

These acts of resistance may not foster emancipation on a larger scale. For example, sarcastic remarks can be ineffective in subverting the status quo, as they “emphasize victimhood rather than agency” (Gabriel 1995, p. 487), while resistance articulated as humor can act as a safety valve (Godfrey 2016), diverting energy from overt contestation and debate (Clegg 2002; Rosen 1988). Moreover, leveraging contradictions can be a risky strategy for subordinates. For

example, Cuganesan (2017) demonstrates that police officers exposed to contradictory identity requirements from senior managers (who favor generalists to achieve flexibility) and from their high-status colleagues (who instead only respect specialists) can negotiate the paradox and avoid being locked in a double bind by selecting one of the two sides of the tension. Despite its ‘defensive’ character, this paradox-management strategy can work, but it constitutes a gamble that pays off only if actors can demonstrate their identity choice delivers value to the organization.

Notwithstanding their limitations, these micro-emancipation strategies demonstrate that the relationship between tensions, forms of power and pragmatic paradoxes is not linear but dynamic and interdependent (Figure 1). On the one hand, different forms of power limit individual agency in responding to paradoxical tensions, exposing ‘weak’ actors to various forms of pragmatic paradoxes. Such experiences further disempower agents towards a vicious circle strengthened by the interlocking effects of episodic and systemic power which coalesce in systemic structures of domination. On the other hand, as power implies a “multiplicity of force relations [...] which constitutes their own organization” (Foucault 1984, p. 92), these structures of domination, as with any other form of organizing (Lewis 2000), are bound to generate paradoxical tensions. For example, Lok and Willmott (2013) illustrate how staff members cope with their incapacity to escape alienation by scapegoating and denigrating colleagues, with the paradoxical consequence of hindering alliances that would allow a reform in the status quo. This example shows that even peer groups can become embroiled in political struggle leading to organizational deadlocks, and even to the reproduction of pragmatic paradoxes.

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## REMEDIAL STRATEGIES

The more perverse, negative effects of pragmatic paradoxes can be addressed either by increasing capacities for adopting iterative responses in the face of paradox and/or by enhancing opportunities for metacommunication. Since these capacities are depleted in the presence of strong power differentials that limit the agency of subordinate organizational members, we will return again to the ‘faces of power’ model (Fleming & Spicer 2014), showing its relevance towards identifying ways of addressing the various disempowering conditions that produce pragmatic paradoxes (Table 3). We further distinguish between remedies that can purposefully be planned and implemented as attempts to ‘reform’ the system (while mostly preserving the pre-existing system of relations and meanings) and more ‘revolutionary’ transformations that can spontaneously emerge to disrupt the status quo.

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**Mitigating coercion.** Double binds derive from coercive tyrannical organizational behavior characterized as a “tendency to overcontrol others and to treat them in an arbitrary, uncaring, and punitive manner” (Ashforth 1994, p. 756). As coercive power is based on the control of relevant sources of uncertainty, such as rules of interpretation, specialized knowledge, access to information, and gatekeeping (Crozier & Friedberg 1980), power differentials can be moderated by reducing the control of such resources. Here, relevant strategies include increasing organizational transparency (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson 2016), or preserving bureaucratic formality as a safeguard against capriciousness, particularism and a

lack of accountability (Du Gay 2000; du Gay & Vikkelsø 2016). Since coercive power differentials cannot be completely removed, it is also necessary to minimize individual predispositions to act tyrannically (Ashforth 1994). Cultivating organizational compassion, the capacity for noticing the suffering of others, and acting to alleviate it (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius 2006; Simpson, Clegg, & Pitsis 2014; Worline & Dutton 2017) can reduce the tendency to lord it over others. The intertwining of practices of compassion with power can moderate the most extreme forms of coercion, making leaders aware of the necessity to manage the tension between power over and power to (Simpson & Berti 2019). Tyrannical behavior can also be supported by situational factors—for example, institutional norms legitimizing despotism or high concentration of decisional power (Ashforth 1994). To address these situational conditions, Sharma and Good (2013) propose a number of strategies specifically aimed at empowering middle managers in dealing with paradoxes, not just by developing their individual capacities, but also by creating systemic conditions that are “integrative” and facilitative of “behavioral complexity” (2013, p. 112).

As discussed previously, not all double binds derive from tyrannical behavior, and sometimes they simply arise from a denial of the contradictions implicit in an apparently straightforward directive. This does not reduce their harmfulness, as their emergence as unplanned side effects can make them less visible to key decision-makers, thus dampening reformist drives to curb the excessive use of coercive power. Nevertheless, transformation can also emerge spontaneously (e.g., when the internal power equilibrium is disrupted by an external agency). A case in point is that of Uber’s ‘dog-eat-dog’ workplace culture, which was maintained by a vicious circle of pragmatic paradox, where denouncing the toxicity of the system of relations implicitly meant admitting personal deficiency. It was a mass media exposé (Isaac 2017) that enabled actors to organize resistance and to force top management to address concerns.

This latter example also highlights the multidimensionality of resistance, which can emerge either as individual or collective, and either as hidden or explicit phenomenon (Mumby, Thomas, Martí, & Seidl 2017). Collective resistance can be consequential without being explicitly ‘political’ or highly visible: organizational members can silently build up a communal impulse that enables them to fight back the demand to accept unacceptable conditions (Courpasson 2017).

**Mitigating manipulation.** Paradoxical predictions derive from manipulation and lead to self-censoring behaviors that paralyze action. They can be mitigated by restoring individual and collective capacities to metacommunicate, voice issues and expose contradictions. Metacommunication can be further reinforced by promoting organizational polyphony—the coexistence of different discourses, voices and principles (Carter, Clegg, Hogan, & Kornberger 2003; Kornberger, Clegg, & Carter 2006)—which can be achieved by developing institutional channels for expressing employee voice, including by re-evaluating the role of unions as a vehicle for intra-organizational communication (Budd, Gollan, & Wilkinson 2010). Restoring ‘voice’, however, is not easy. Institutionally-endorsed speaking up assumes paradoxical connotations (as the establishment commands employees to question the establishment, to preserve the establishment) and, therefore, requires guaranteeing actors conditions of psychological safety (Cunha, Simpson, Clegg, & Rego 2018).

The transformative potential of these planned reforms, informed by instrumental rationality, is limited since they legitimize employees ‘speaking up’ only insofar as is permitted by the specifications of their formal role, implicitly stymieing self-determination and opening the door to further pragmatic paradoxes. Collective frustration with these conditions can generate an emergent resistance process including a mix of compliance and confrontation built around specific objects of resistance, and potentially achieving productive outcomes for the organization (Courpasson, Dany, & Clegg 2012). Agency can also be partially restored through

forms of hidden resistance (Scott 1985), which can further coalesce in structured public opposition initiatives (Courpasson 2017), thus assuming an adversarial and disruptive character.

**Mitigating domination.** Bureaucratic absurdities (e.g., Catch-22 situations) derive from the expectation that directives that are supposed to be “free from internal contradictions” (Weber 1922 [1978], p. 311) must be applied unquestioningly in an ambiguous and interdependent context. Addressing complex predicaments by reducing their treatment to a set of preordained instructions generates absurdity (Farson 1996). Solutions include minimizing the recourse to rigid norms and policies, as well as creating conditions more reliant on self-managed, autonomous agents. Accordingly, McIver, Lengnick-Hall, Lengnick-Hall, and Ramachandran (2013) propose that knowledge management initiatives should seek alignment between specific performative work requirements and their underlying knowledge requirements, rather than simply codifying and accumulating knowledge regardless of type. However, if pragmatic paradoxes are part of a domination strategy, deeply seated in systemic forms of power and supported by a large cohort of powerful agents, it is unlikely any attempt to ‘reform’ or mitigate the effect of domination will succeed. In this case, only a radical power shift can produce change. One possibility is that uncorrected system contradictions that paralyze or waste the energies of many members will ultimately lead to a general systemic collapse, as happened in the Soviet Union (Deroy & Clegg 2015; Ledeneva 1998). Neo-liberal capitalism may similarly be spurring its own systemic demise through policies that, since the 1980s, have seen the redistribution of wealth away from society to the wealthy, thus precipitating the rise of nationalistic anti-globalism (Aldred 2019).

**Mitigating subjectification.** Doublethink derives from subjectification, the most pervasive and difficult form of power imbalance since it shapes the self-concept, ambitions, and will of the workforce, aligning them with particular discourses and goals. Despite the



apparent managerial advantages of such subjectification, organizational leadership, regardless of their sympathy for the predicament of their workforce, should be concerned with the depletion of dynamic capabilities that derive from the lack of reflexivity, critical spirit and imagination caused by doublethink conditions. Doublethink can be mitigated by promoting conditions facilitative of *communicative action* (Habermas 1984), which refers to open dialogue between different actors, aimed at creating norms and practices grounded in shared understandings. Open dialogue is not synonymous with polite conversation but implies political confrontation since it offers the opportunity for unveiling distributive inequities and unfair positional advantages. Also helpful may be the less ‘radical’ strategies proposed by Alvesson and Spicer (2012), who recommend counteracting functional stupidity by introducing structured practices for critical reflection aimed at legitimizing and encouraging challenges to any form of ‘received wisdom’. Practical examples include creating ‘devil’s advocate’ roles and routinely performing ‘pre-mortems’ when initiating projects (Kahneman 2011) to identify potential stupidity traps based on previous experience.

System contradictions can also serendipitously combine with individual acts of courageous dissent and collective protest, enabling the disruption of an oppressive status quo. The #MeToo movement is a case in point, illustrating both the paralyzing effects of pragmatic paradox on victims (as one of their main ‘assets’, sexual appeal, became a source of exploitation) and the possibility of breaking the vicious circle using unplanned forms of refusal which, in the right conditions, produce ripple effects leading to alternative organizational practices. In a less visible form of micro-emancipation, individuals can leverage some aspects of their prescribed identities—for example, the request to be self-managing and ‘responsible’—to carve out spaces for autonomy and self-determination (McCabe 2009; Sutherland, Land, & Böhm 2014).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As management scholars have become aware of the inherently paradoxical nature of organizing, a conceptual core has been developed around the idea that tensions should be accepted and navigated rather than denied (Hargrave & Van de Ven 2017; Smith & Lewis 2011), with the associated corollary that it is useful to make them salient (Knight & Paroutis 2017). However, this theory has also developed a strong ‘managerialist’ undertone and gloss, treating paradox as a technical challenge for management (Cunha & Putnam 2019) and giving insufficient attention to the circumstances of disempowered actors exposed to paradoxes. This inattentiveness to the dark side of paradoxes derives from giving insufficient consideration to asymmetrical relations of power, as noted by Fairhurst et al. (2016). Building on this insight, this paper has examined the relationship between agency (understood as the capacity to formulate and perform legitimate actions in response to tensions) and paradox experience, as well as explored how response capabilities are limited by different forms of power. It has thereby accounted for a range of organizational pragmatic paradoxes—double-binds, paradoxical predictions, Catch-22 situations, and doublethink—which have been identified in empirical studies and variously labeled in the literature.

We are aware there are two possible ‘readings’ of this contribution, informed by alternative paradigms (Burrell & Morgan 1979; Gioia & Pitre 1990). From a ‘functionalist’ perspective, pragmatic paradoxes can be understood as a ‘glitch’ in management practices that can have negative consequences on staff well-being and/or organizational capabilities. Unlike ‘normal’ organizational paradoxes, contradictions stemming from an inescapable pressure to attend to opposite but interrelated demands (Lewis 2000; Smith & Lewis 2011) can be considered a pathology that emerges when asymmetrical relations of power inhibit or impede actors in formulating productive responses to organizing paradoxes. From this viewpoint, it is also possible to reflect on concrete actions that can be positioned to prevent or mitigate their

occurrence. We hope our contribution will inspire empirical research on the multiple manifestations and consequences of organizational pragmatic paradoxes, and on the strategies that can be enacted to counteract them.

Consideration of how power inequalities generate (and are reinforced by) organizational pragmatic paradoxes, suggests an affinity (and possibilities for developing a stronger connection) between the analysis of paradox and contributions to Critical Management Studies. Paradox research risks becoming “prematurely institutionalized” (Farjoun 2016, p. 100) and domesticated when it reifies tensions and focuses on the (performative) goal of efficiency and productivity (Cunha & Putnam 2019). To avoid this undesirable outcome, we should ‘rediscover’ the etymology of paradox, as distancing oneself from (*para*) taken-for-granted opinions (*doxa*). Thus, Paradox theory and Critical Management Studies share a common goal: questioning taken-for-granted ‘truths’ about organizing.

A ‘critical’ paradox theory must acknowledge that organizations are “deeply implicated in the production and reproduction of structures of domination” (Adler, Forbes, & Willmott 2007, p. 132), and that the management of tensions is not a politically neutral process. When attention is given to the dark side of paradox, awareness of oppressive dynamics of power may then be leveraged to transform organizations in an emancipatory direction of greater compassion and meaningful sustainability.

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**Table 1. Examples of pragmatic paradoxes in management literature.**

<b>Victim</b>	<b>Situation</b>	<b>Source</b>
Any organizational member	An emphasis on employees' innovative and entrepreneurial capabilities leads to exploitation and control	Fleming (2013)
	Flexible work arrangements that blur the boundaries between work and home life, leading employees to work well above their number of paid hours	Putnam, Myers, and Gailliard (2014)
	Career employees feeling trapped between rational and non-rational organizational norms	Wagner (1978)
Junior employees	Staff members reporting to multiple 'masters'	Pérezts, Bouilloud, and de Gaulejac (2011)
	Victims of workplace bullying being advised either <i>not</i> to act (e.g., by avoiding emotional responses or ignoring the issue), or to take impractical actions such as fighting powerful bullies on their own or leaving the job	Tye-Williams and Krone (2017)
Managers	Autonomy-seeking and risk-avoiding employees imposing contradictory demands on their managers	Ekman (2012).
	Middle managers having to champion change initiatives which threaten their own roles	Dopson and Neumann (1998)
Female employees	Female bodies expected to simultaneously be sexualized and de-sexualized objects	Wendt (1995)
	Female engineers who are implicitly required to renounce their femininity to be accepted as a peer by male colleagues	Gherardi (1994)
Female managers	Having to be authoritative to be taken seriously, but "will be perceived as 'bitches' if they act too aggressively" (p. 324)	Oakley (2000)

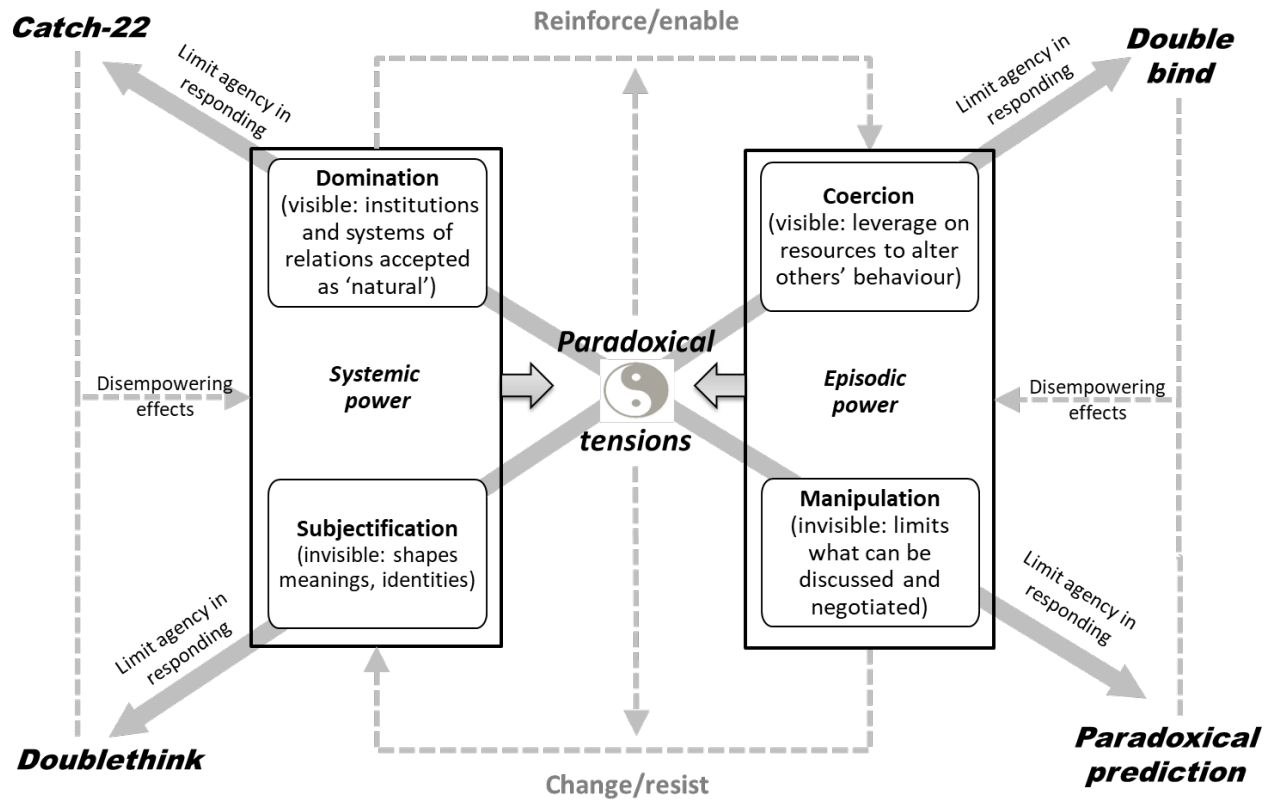
**Table 2. Power conditions (re)producing different varieties of pragmatic paradoxes.**

		<b>Dimensions of Power</b>			
		<b>Coercion</b> <i>Explicit power acts</i>	<b>Manipulation</b> <i>Limiting possible outcomes</i>	<b>Domination</b> <i>Imposing hegemonic values</i>	<b>Subjectification</b> <i>Shaping sense of self and identity</i>
<b>Effects om paradox experience</b>	Type of pragmatic paradox	<b>DOUBLE BIND</b>	<b>PARADOXICAL PREDICTION</b>	<b>KAFKAESQUE ORGANIZATION/ CATCH-22</b>	<b>ORWELLIAN DOUBLETHINK</b>
	Hindering effects on oscillation and/or reframing	<b>Active disempowerment</b> (blocking actions)	<b>Curtail legitimate outcomes</b> (agenda setting)	<b>Filtering</b> (reducing practicable strategies)	<b>Sense-giving</b> (reducing reframing opportunities)
	Hindering effects on metacommunication	<b>Active silencing</b> (curtailing speaking-up)	<b>Illogicity</b> (delegitimizing questioning)	<b>Distancing</b> (difficult access to decision-makers)	<b>Self-censoring</b> (reproducing a climate of silence)

**Table 3. Examples of strategies towards counteracting pathological paradoxes.**

<b>Dimensions of power/pragmatic paradox</b>	<b>Planned strategies (reforming)</b>	<b>Emergent transformation (disrupting)</b>
<b>Coercion (double bind)</b>	Organizational Transparency (Schnackenberg & Tomlinson 2016); 'good' bureaucracy (du Gay & Vikkelsø 2016); nurture organizational compassion (Worline & Dutton 2017); and foster integrative complexity (Sharma & Good 2013)	Realignment of resources enabled by exogenous transformation (e.g., Uber case)
<b>Manipulation (paradoxical predictions)</b>	Improve metacommunication capabilities by enhancing voice at collective (Budd et al. 2010) and individual levels, making it safe to 'speak up' (Cunha et al. 2018)	Emergence of productive resistance (Courpasson et al. 2012)
<b>Domination (catch-22)</b>	Avoid rigid norms and excessive emphasis on 'capturing' knowledge (McIver et al. 2013)	Systemic collapse (e.g., USSR case)
<b>Subjectification (doublethink)</b>	Develop conditions for communicative action (Habermas, 1984) and structured practices for critical reflection (Alvesson & Spicer 2016)	Endogenous transformation through political action deriving from multiplication of microemancipation acts (e.g., #MeToo movement)

**Fig 1. Constitution of Organizational Pragmatic paradoxes.**





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