PARADOX THEORY AND THE PARADOX OF SUCCESS

Miguel Pina e Cunha
Universidade Nova de Lisboa
mpc@novasbe.pt

Linda L. Putnam
University of California, Santa Barbara
lputnam@comm.ucsb.com

1 We appreciate the feedback and insights from Luca Giustiniano, Nicolas Wiedemann and Sónia Oliveira. Miguel thanks funding by National Funds through FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia under the project Ref. UID/ECO/00124/2013 and by POR Lisboa under the project LISBOA-01-0145-FEDER-007722.
Abstract

The study of paradox in strategy and organization studies has grown rapidly over the last 25 years. Paradox, the state of persistent tension between opposite poles that are mutually constituted, can be qualified as a successful theoretical field. Yet success, however sweet, may come at a price, namely, premature convergence on theoretical concepts, overconfidence in dominant explanations, and institutionalizing labels that protect dominant logics. We discuss the risk of paradox theory being vulnerable to the paradox of success and focus on ways to avoid narrowness in theory building.

Keywords: Paradox theory, paradox of success, equilibrium, process
INTRODUCTION

“We should never underestimate the power of foundational works in shaping the course of subsequent developments in a social arena! Theories as well as social systems are subject to imprinting and path dependent processes.” (Scott, 2008, p. 428)

Imprinting and path dependent processes cited in the quotation above may stem in part from a phenomenon known as “the paradox of success”. This paradox, also called the Icarus paradox or the paradox of performance, refers to ways that past successes contribute to the persistence of a given path of action through focusing on the same strategies (Audia, Locke & Smith, 2000; Pinsonneault & Rivard, 1998). Success, as Miller (1990) explains, leads to a path of convergence which diminishes awareness of important forces of divergence. In other words, as organizational members converge on a path of action, “strong performance promotes a defensive mindset that may lead to dysfunctional outcomes” (Amason & Mooney, 2008, p. 407). The paradox of success, while reaping the benefits of convergence may result in worldviews that simplify and desensitize members to divergent environmental demands (Elsass, 1993). Thus, the same practices that lead organizations to becoming successful often simultaneously push them to a downfall (Elsass, 1993). The ways in which this paradox develops, as evidenced in laboratory and field settings, include premature convergence on theoretical concepts, overconfidence in dominant explanations, and relying on institutionalized labels that protect dominant logics.

This type of paradox is problematic because it leads to an organizational architecture that breeds narrowness and complacency (Miller, 1993). In effect, this syndrome spurs its own
vicious cycles through a drive for consistency and homogeneity that surface when actors are not aware of the interrelated and persistent nature of contradictions in their environments (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Lewis, 2000).

In applying this work, we question whether paradox theory could become trapped by its own successes. Paradox theory offers a "a dynamic equilibrium model of organizing, which depicts how cyclical responses to paradoxical tensions enable sustainability—peak performance in the present that enables success in the future.” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p.381). As an organizational concept, paradox is defined as, “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p.382). As documented by Schad, Lewis, Raisch, and Smith (2016), the study of paradox and adjacent themes in organizational studies has grown rapidly over the last 25 years. This view is reinforced by Putnam, Fairhurst, and Banghart (2016) who identified over 850 publications that focused on organizational paradox, contradiction, and dialectics in disciplinary and interdisciplinary outlets. This growth is clearly evident in the strategic management literature as scholars have brought a paradox theory into the study of innovation processes (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009; Atuahene-Gima, 2005), top management teams (Carmeli & Halevi, 2009), CEO strategies (Fredberg, 2014), and strategy work (Dameron & Torset, 2014). To what degree does this growth represent success? What features of a success syndrome might surface in paradox studies?

To address these questions, we examine several factors that might point to the paradox of success and discuss possible unintended effects of what some scholars have called “the premature institutionalization” of paradox theory (Farjoun, 2017). In theory development, efforts at consolidation are normal as research accumulates (e.g. Scott, 1987), but this practice could also introduce narrowness and an unquestioned acceptance of existing knowledge. In this essay, we examine three symptoms of the paradox of success as it applies to paradox
theory, namely, premature convergence on theoretical concepts, overconfidence in dominant explanations, and institutionalized labels that protect dominant logics. Then we explore four ramifications or unintended effects of this success: (1) conceptual imprecision, (2) paradox as a problem or a tool, (3) the taming of paradox, and (4) reifying process. The final section of this essay focuses on suggestions for moving forward in theory building; namely, retaining systemic embeddedness, developing strong process views, and exploring nested and knotted paradoxes.

Why should we be concerned about the paradox of success or the institutionalization of paradox theory? These trends are problematic for several reasons. First, following this path leads to reducing the inherent complexity of paradox, especially the tendency to exclude or severely diminish theoretical imagination from alternative perspectives. Second, these trends push practical application in a particular direction that overrides reflection-in-action as the basis for responding to contradiction. Third, these trends raise questions tied to strategic management, such as how to define and measure proficiency in responding to contradictory, interrelated, and persistent paradoxes? Is this proficiency determined at the strategic level and how does it close off or open up options for organizing? In general, the goal of paradox theory in strategic management and organizational studies is to keep the field vibrant and polyphonic rather than narrow it through converging on theoretical premises.

Although this essay refers to the work of Lewis (2000) and Smith and Lewis (2011), our concerns centers on the community of scholars that embrace specific features of paradox theory as a mantra or as orthodox views in reviewing and developing paradox theory. In particular, we focus on the translation of this theory into research and a growing trend to institutionalize concepts and explanation. This essay, then, is not against the work of Smith and Lewis (2011); in fact, we hold great respect and admiration for their contributions. Rather
it aims to extend paradox theory in ways that will keep the field vibrant and polyphonic. To continue to thrive, research programs need to receive routine feedback about their development from within or outside the scholarly community (Tsoukas & Papoulias, 1996). With this goal in mind, we approach this essay from within the community of paradox scholars.

**SYMPTOMS OF THE PARADOX OF SUCCESS**

One indicator of the success of any theory is publications—the standard measure of scholarly success. As previously noted, the number of articles on paradox in management and organizational studies has increased significantly in the past 25 years (Schad et al., 2016). The theme has attracted special issues of highly prestigious journals [see Jules & Good, *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 50(2), 2014; see Smith, et al., *Organization Studies*, 38(3-4), 2017]. These references also show how paradox studies appear in practice, particular ones aimed at managers and organizational leaders (Smith, Lewis, & Tushman, 2016). In academic circles, the paradox subtheme is a Standing Working Group in the European Group on Organizational Studies. Moreover, we see scholars readily adopting theoretical premises and concepts without contestation or translation—a practice that points to routines involved in institutionalizing established knowledge (Scott, 2008).

Based on the rapid growth of this topic, three symptoms suggest that paradox theory may become vulnerable to the paradox of success. The first one, premature convergence on theoretical concepts refers to reaffirming theoretical stances while inadvertently dismissing divergent views. For example, scholars generally agree that both-and approaches to managing paradoxes foster creativity, enable virtuous cycles, and produce successful outcomes over time. Although a number of studies support the benefits of embracing both-and approaches (Heracleous & Wirtz, 2014; Smith & Tushman, 2005), two consequences fall out of prematurely converging on this recommendation. First, scholars cast either-or responses as inadequate for and detrimental to meeting the challenges of complex environments (Chen, 2002; Smith,
Binns, & Tushman, 2010). Hence, they urge leaders to consistently communicate a both/and vision (Lewis, Andriopoulos, & Smith, 2014) and to avoid the “tyranny of the OR” (i.e., either-or thinking)(Collins & Porras, 1994: 43). For Collins and Porras (1994), visionary companies are distinctly yin and yang, “at the same time, all the time” (p. 45). In effect, either-or approaches, which encompass a complex array of responses to paradox, become aggregated, treated as ineffective, and labelled a tyranny.

Rather than prematurely converging on both-and approaches, scholars might treat responses to competing demands as repertoires that organizations and their members use to deal with multiple types of contradictions that develop over time. In some cases, effective responses to contradictory demands entail a combination of either-or, both-and, and more-than approaches (Putnam et al., 2016). Thus, scholars may need to avoid equating both-and approaches with embracing opposites. Instead, some research contends that an array of either-or and both-and approaches, including source splitting, vacillating between poles, reflexive learning, reframing, humor, and employing third spaces, are pivotal to engage opposites (Berglund & Werr, 2000; Iedema, Degeling, Braithwaite, & White, 2004).

Second, when scholars emphasize the both/and side of paradox (Smith, Lewis & Tushman, 2016), complementarity gains a vantage point over contradiction. As Hargrave and Van de Ven (2017) point out, both-and approaches adopt a bias for synergy, collaboration, and joint actions. The focus on synergy over trade-offs may seem attractive, but it risks emptying paradox of its emergent, surprising, and often uncontrollable effects. As some theorists claim, paradox is for “chaos-thrivers” (Fraher, Branicki & Grint, 2017) and entails both trade-offs and synergy (Li, 2016). In effect, even though divergent views exist as to whether both-and approaches can be sustained over time or end up truly distinct from either-or alternatives (Putnam, 2015), researchers tend to converge in their views that these approaches are
singly effective in helping organizational members manage paradoxes (Clarke, 1998). As a contrast, David and Eisenhardt’s (2011) study of innovation reveals that alternating decision control through rotating leadership produced more innovation than did using both-and approaches of balance and consensual leadership.

Prematurely converging on theoretical beliefs is closely related to a second symptom of the paradox of success, overconfidence in dominant explanations. This symptom refers to accepting prominent features of a theory as established knowledge, irrespective of its fit with context or the complexity of phenomenon. For example, a number of organizational scholars have readily adopted the four types of paradoxes--learning, belonging, organizing, and performing—as a research paradigm (Jarzabkowski, Lê, & Van de Ven, 2013; Luscher, Lewis, & Ingram, 2006; Luscher & Lewis, 2008). Learning paradoxes focus on tensions between the old and the new while belonging paradoxes center on organizational identities, for example, individual versus collective identities. Organizing paradoxes refer to the tensions in competing designs and processes, such as rigid alignment versus flexibility, and performing paradoxes deal with internal and external demands between goals and performance (Schad et al., 2016).

These four types of paradoxes grew out of Lewis’s (2000) and Smith and Lewis’s (2011) work in classifying paradoxes in their exemplary studies. Our concern is that researchers have begun to use them as a typology or a full-scale road map for the paradox landscape rather than as building blocks for generating and classifying tensions. In particular, scholars often treat them as an a priori fully-developed category system (Luscher & Lewis, 2008; Smith, Gonin, & Besharov, 2013) or as explanatory interpretations for research findings (Luscher et al., 2006).

**Not only are the four types commonly reiterated but they are not questioned or problematized.** A cursory search in Google scholar of “Four types of paradoxes” led to the following formulations of this approach, which are repeated ad infinitum:
The literature identifies four main types of paradox that occur at different levels of analysis: the paradoxes of organizing, performing, belonging, and learning. We now introduce each type of paradox and summarize existing knowledge about its role in organizational restructuring. (Jarzabkowski, Lê and Van de Ven, 2013, p.247)

Jarzabkowski, Lê and Van de Ven (2013) empirically investigated organisational responses to the four types of paradoxes, labelled by Smith and Lewis (2011), i.e. how managers coped with different paradoxes over a long time.” (Sandoff & Widell, 2015, p.307).

To illustrate how sustainability concerns can be addressed through a paradox perspective, we apply Smith and Lewis (2011) four types of paradoxes: paradoxes of belonging, learning, organizing, and performing.” (Hahn et al., 2017, p.3)

Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 388) identify four types of paradoxes or tensions that occur when deciding “what they are going to do, how they are going to do it, who is going to do it, and in what time horizon.” These are performing, organizing, belonging, and learning tensions and offer a point of departure for leaders to recognise the existence of a paradox and how to deal with it in strategic decision making” (Peterlin, Pearse, & Dimovski, 2015, p.285).

Two shortcomings--exclusion and isolation--could result from readily adopting an a priori category system. Exclusion refers to ignoring other types of paradoxes that do not fit neatly into the four-part classification system. For example, corporate social responsibility paradoxes (Campbell, 2006), the connectivity paradox (Leonardi, Treem, & Jackson, 2010; Stohl, 2011) and paradoxes of meritocracy (Castillo & Bernard, 2010)--each represent a complex arrays of competing demands that cross organizational levels and/or combine one or more of the four types of paradoxes in unique ways. Thus, scholars who readily adopt the four types of
paradoxes need to be open to other types of tensions that might emerge from the data itself. In effect, this framework should not be treated as a comprehensive or an exhaustive set of types of organizational paradoxes. The second potential shortcoming, isolation, focuses on the practice of breaking the four types into distinct categories and then putting them back together at the end of an article in the discussion section, without empirically focusing on their interrelationships (Luscher & Lewis, 2008; see Jarzabkowski et al. 2013, as an exception to this critique).

The third symptom, institutionalizing labels that protect dominant logics, focuses on concepts that embrace dominant assumptions that need further exploration. In particular, the concept of *dynamic equilibrium model* protects the dominant logic of *order* as a way to respond to contradictions (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The logic of order focuses on ways to restore the status quo and reinstate predictability (Cooper, 1986). In contrast, the concept of *disorder* embraces the logic of difference that treats disequilibrium and interfaces between opposites as the source of organizing. That is, the instability that surfaces from multiple, competing meanings gives rise to new directions of organizing, ones that depart from equilibrium and balance (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2005; Vásquez, Schoeneborn, & Sergi, 2015). Clearly, both the dynamic equilibrium model (order) and logics of difference (disorder) are theoretical assumptions that need to be tested. Both need to enter into paradox theory and be examined through examining the interplay between order and disorder, as Vásquez et al. (2015) did in their study of negotiation processes in three project teams.

In general, we see three symptoms in which paradox theory appears ripe for experiencing the paradox of success. Specifically, scholars may be prematurely converging on both-and approaches as the most effective ways to manage contradictions, as opposed to examining a repertoire of different types of responses. Overconfidence in dominant explanations refers to
unquestioned acceptance of existing knowledge. The ready adoption of the four types of paradoxes as a typology for classifying organizational tensions exemplifies this overconfidence. Finally, we see labels such as *dynamic equilibrium* or *balance* as protecting the dominant logic of order at the cost of examining how disorder drives paradoxical practices.

**UNINTENDED EFFECTS**

These symptoms may also trigger unintended effects that could hinder the development of paradox theory. Specifically, we examine four unintended effects—conceptual imprecision, paradox as a problem or a tool, the taming of paradox, and reifying process. Each has ramifications for future research directions.

*Conceptual Imprecision.* As noted in recent reviews, paradox theory lacks definitional coherence (Lewis & Smith, 2014; Putnam et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2011). Specifically, researchers who invoke the term *paradox* often refer to a variety of organizational phenomena, including puzzling and contradictory situations, conflicts, and difficult choices as well as the simultaneous persistence of opposites (Atuahene-Gima, 2005; Tse, 2013). Thus, the conceptual frontiers of paradox are shaky, depending on the goal of the researcher who employs the construct. Even after 25 years of research, “paradox” is often applied in ways that parallel close yet distinct concepts, for example, contradictions, dualisms, dialectics, and tensions. Such conceptual looseness turns the concept into a cauldron in which different constructs boil together, in a savory yet often confounding stew. These constructs are often difficult to distinguish because “paradox” has become the umbrella that encompasses the conceptual map for all organizational tensions and contradictions. To push theory development forward, this conceptual imprecision needs to be addressed. Recent definitions by Smith and Lewis (2011) that emphasize the three building blocks of paradox—contradiction, interdependence, and persistence—provide a starting point to help scholars start from a precise and shared position regarding the essential features of paradox.
Paradox as a Problem and as a Tool. A second unintended effect is a growing tendency to treat paradox as a problem to be solved or a tool for intervention. Even though many scholars contend that paradoxes persist over time and are “impervious to resolution” (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Schad et al., 2016), researchers and practitioners sometimes operate as if paradoxes are problems that require solutions (e.g. Fredberg, 2014; Tse, 2013). By treating them as problems, contradictions surface as potentially harmful or leading to negative organizational outcomes. When scholars treat paradoxes as “things” to be solved or controlled, they ignore the instability and duality embedded in them (Farjoun, 2010). In this way, paradox loses its processual edge and its dynamic, time-sensitive, and path-dependent properties.

Treating paradox as a problem is also linked to its role as a tool (Gaim, 2017) or an intervention that enhances organizational proficiency (The Price Waterhouse Change Integration Team, 1996; see Takeuchi, Osono & Shimizu, 2008 for a study of Toyota’s successes in managing paradoxes). Yet, we know less about how to assess proficiency in managing contradictory, interdependent, and inherently persistent processes. Rather than treating paradox as a problem or a tool, we believe that scholars should examine how organizational actors respond in paradoxical situations (Putnam, 2015). Responses refer to actions and reactions that occur as part of contextual and ongoing processes of organizing when actors make decisions and move forward amid contradictions. Responding, however, differs from controlling or resolving contradictions; rather it centers on how they emerge, evolve, and transform in the midst of organizational events. Using the typologies of either-or, both-and, and more-than approaches (Putnam et. al., 2016), researchers could track ongoing responses in complex paradoxical situations. Tracking might reveal how patterns of responses open up meanings and preserve the dynamic interplay of opposites over time.
Clearly, paradox theory has practical implications, but we believe that they are best addressed through reflection-in-action, in the tradition of Argyris (1994) and Schon (1983), rather than generating lists of “best paradoxical practices”. By removing paradoxes from their “natural state,” interventions often simplify the vast complexity of paradoxical processes. As researchers suggest, paradoxes are local, embedded, and sensitive to time and history, therefore, aligned with particular circumstances (Barge, Lee, Maddux, Nabrin, & Townsend, 2008; Huxham & Beech, 2003; Luscher & Lewis, 2008). Scholars need to capture these circumstances in developing practical recommendations for addressing paradoxes.

**The Taming of Paradox.** A third unintended effect of institutionalizing this work is the taming of paradox. Taming refers to homogenizing or mainstreaming paradox within the organizational literature. Instead of homogenizing them, scholars should treat paradoxes as conceptually puzzling because they cannot be harnessed or tamed; rather they are wicked (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Sheep, Fairhurst, & Khazanchi, 2017), surprising (Cunha, Clegg, & Rego, 2012), and uncontrollable (Li, 2016). Thus, we urge scholars to draw on the surprising and wicked nature of paradox rather than ignore or homogenize these features.

The taming of paradox results in two other problematic concerns. First, given paradox’s link to tension, contradiction, and ambiguity, this work is especially fruitful for understanding organizational power/knowledge concerns (Carter, 2013). Yet, the issue of power is a major vacuum in paradox studies (Fairhurst et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2016). The tendency to treat paradox as a technical matter likely contributes to neutralizing power (Kornberger, 2013) by presuming equal influence between opposing poles (Schad et al., 2016) and ignoring the power dynamics that emerge in living out organizational paradoxes (see, Kan & Perry, 2004 as an exception). Second, developing paradox as an alternative to contingency theory may have inadvertently tamed it by situating this work with rational choice theories. Paradox, however,
persists because of its unpredictability and its ability to dis-organize, perturb, and dis-equilibrate. In effect, paradox disrupts the boundary zones of organization, leading scholars to move away from rationality (Cooper, 1986). In the face of disorganization, research on paradox requires a departure from traditional organizational theories to embrace a vision of organizing as “wonderland” (McCabe, 2016). In the taming of paradox, scholars have devoted little attention to the critical role that power plays in contradictory relationships and have privileged rational organizational models in theory development.

Reifying process. The fourth unintended consequence, reifying process, also contributes to the taming of paradox. Even though research on paradox emanates from process thinking, researchers note a dearth of management studies that “explore complex and changing systems” (Schad et al., 2016, p. 43). Focusing on efforts to manage tensions over time, researchers have examined negative and positive feedback cycles, counter-productive reinforcing cycles, and dynamic equilibrium models. This research, however, adopts a weak-process perspective (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017) that treats paradox itself as reified and stable while organizations are changing. Paradox then retains its identity, even though responses to it shift over time. Yet, paradox is often transformed in recursive ways; thus, as noted above, paradox is just as much about dis-equilibrium as it is equilibrium. In effect, scholars need to focus on “mutating” (Weick, 1979, p. 47) as a way of examining paradox.

The temporal progression of paradox embedded in organizational activities is a key to grasping the notion of mutating. Process research on paradoxes, however, needs to move beyond sequential stages, time cycles, chronological development, and dramatic episodes to examine everyday routines, connections among episodes, and links between the micro-dynamics of paradoxical interactions and the large scale contradictory organizational events (Jarzabkowski, et al., 2013). Depictions of paradox as extraordinary moments in organizational life, for
example, dramas (vicious circles), romances (virtuous circles), and sagas (never ending tensions), capture the dynamic episode (Langley, 2016), but at the cost of exploring the cumulative effects of circularity as it unfolds (Tsoukas & Cunha, 2017; Weick, 1979). Focusing on episodic moments condenses the development of paradox in ways that ignore the daily routines in which contradictions unfold. Studying everyday routines, for example, the before and after of episodes could reveal paradox as process. In effect, scholars need to explore how paradoxes evolve, interact, change, and challenge one another in every day routines of organizing.

In essence, we see four unintended effects as emerging from the practice of institutionalizing paradox theory. Treating paradox as an umbrella term for interrelated concepts has led to definitional imprecision that masks the subtle and distinct relationships between distinct constructs. Scholars need to apply the essential characteristics of paradox and develop precise distinctions among related terms. Moreover, the move to make paradox practical for managers has led to casting it as a problem to be solved, an intervention tool, or a set of practices to be controlled. Treating paradox as a problem contributes to neutralizing or taming it. Finally, paradox research need to avoid reifying process as well as embracing a weak process perspective in which paradox itself remains static while organizational responses are changing over time. Treating paradox as a “thing” and focusing on dramatic organizational episodes, for example, vicious or virtuous cycles, may contribute to the unintended effect of reifying process.

AVOIDING THE TRAPS OF SUCCESS

How can researchers avoid the trappings of success that lead to convergence and narrowness? How can they rely on existing knowledge while using openness and novelty to engage in theory elaboration? How can we as paradox scholars avoid depleting this construct of its vibrancy, complexity, and breadth (Farjoun, 2017)? In addressing these questions we suggest three
directions: retain systemic embeddedness, develop strong process views, and embrace nested
and knotted paradoxes.

First, researchers should retain the systemic and embedded nature of paradoxes. By situating
them within organizations and society, scholars should examine paradoxes as emerging from
organizing rather than surfacing as isolated problems to be tackled. As a template for doing
this work, Benson (1977) advances a sophisticated process explanation for how contradictions
emerge within organizational systems through examining the role of social totalities in
contradictions. By extension, as organizations work with and through paradoxes, they
introduce contradictions that reverberate and feed into other paradoxes, thus destabilizing the
totality of the system. Focusing on alignments, dis-alignments, and re-alignments reveals the
unfolding of paradoxes. Applying the same logic, scholars could examine the emergence of
paradox in complex, intricate institutional ecologies that embrace complexity (Tsoukas, 2005).

A second suggestion is to adopt a strong process approach (Bakken & Hernes, 2006) to
investigate the ways that paradoxes emerge in ongoing organizational processes. Strong
process perspectives focus on becoming or how something comes into existence (Tsoukas &
Chia, 2002). It embraces performativity or the actions and interactions that develop over time
in the experiencing or the living with paradox (Langley & Tsoukas, 2017). In becoming,
paradoxes are constituted in routine organizational activities and events. Thus, scholars need
to focus on how paradoxes become paradoxes and how actors’ lived experiences of enacting
and responding to paradox differ in particular moments in time. In becoming, researchers
should explore how paradoxes evolve and how they change the managers who respond to
them and the organizations that provide for them.
A third suggestion is to study double paradoxes (Wedeman, 2012) or multiple, bundled sets of tensions (Putnam et al., 2016). Double paradoxes are ones that nest within and unlock other paradoxes. In exploring one paradox the researcher discovers another one triggered by or nested within it (Kuiper, Miller, Martinez, Loeb & Darney, 1997, p. 171). Scholars also need to focus on the interrelationships of tensions and paradoxes that function as triggers, mitigators, or amplifiers of other paradoxes and that lead to tangled knots (Sheep, Fairhurst, & Khazanche, 2017). Specifically, paradoxes that amplify each other become knotted or interwoven through transforming positive features into negative ones, for example, the most innovative talent become the least innovative employees. In contrast, nested paradoxes that mitigate each other transform negatives features into positive ones, e.g., failure is necessary for success. The opposite logics that emanate from these nested tensions may account for persistence as well as the elements of surprise in paradoxes. Continual oscillations between opposite poles may create nested paradoxes or “paradoxes of paradoxes” which, over time, become increasingly difficult to disentangle, comprehend, or articulate fruitfully.

CONCLUSION

Paradox studies constitutes an exciting, vigorous, and vibrant area in strategic management and organization theory. It deals with a central dimension of organizational life that is often ignored. It already offers important contributions to the organizational literature, but its recent success calls for reflecting about its future development. The theory itself suggests that defensiveness and inertia can arise from the ways that actors manage tensions. Research has shown that success promotes defensive mindsets (Amason & Mooney, 2008) and that theory development is not immune to this path dependence (Scott, 2008). Paradox scholars need to recognize that institutionalizing this theory might drive it to the same vicious cycles that this work guards against.
As Andriopolous, Miron-Specktor, and Smith (2014) suggest, paradoxical tensions “provoke questions and confusion, encouraging both scholars and practitioners to pause and reflect”. We have followed this advice and used this essay to pause to reflect. Our reflections suggest that paradox theory is at the crossroads between institutionalizing existing knowledge and exploring new terrains. As paradox-oriented scholars, we see no need to follow an either-or approach. Rather we can take advantage of the trade-offs and the synergy that result from navigating paradox with existing maps, while seeing these maps as incomplete and to a great extent, terra incognita. We have offered some suggestions for future research that we believe would keep the field vibrant and polyphonic rather than becoming another victim of the paradox of success.
REFERENCES


**Biographical notes**

Miguel Pina e Cunha is the Fundação Maria Amélia de Mello Professor of Leadership at Nova School of Business and Economics, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, in Lisbon, Portugal. His research deals with the surprising (paradox, improvisation, serendipity, zemblanity, vicious circles) and the extreme (positive organizing, genocide). He coauthored several books including *The Virtues of Leadership* (Oxford University Press, 2012). Miguel received the 2015 best paper award from the *European Management Review*.

Linda L. Putnam is a Distinguished Professor and Research Professor Emerita in the Department of Communication at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her research focuses on organizational discourse, dialectics and paradoxes, and conflict and negotiation. She is the co-editor of eleven books and a distinguished scholar of the National Communication Association, a fellow of the International Communication Association, and the recipient of life-time achievement awards from the International Association for Conflict Management and *Management Communication Quarterly*. 