The Learning Mindset: Learning Through and From Paradox

Other

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2021 Leah Tomkins

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Version of Record

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
The Learning Mindset: Learning Through and From Paradox
Presented to the OL Board July 2021

Lead author: Dr Leah Tomkins
leah.tomkins@open.ac.uk

Table of Contents

Executive Summary ........................................................................................................2
Why Paradox? ..................................................................................................................4
   Paradoxes of Learning ..............................................................................................4
Summary of Our Research Findings ..............................................................................6
   Paradoxes of Knowledge Control: Codification-Discretion ........................................7
   Paradoxes of Knowledge Disclosure: Transparency-Occlusion ...............................8
So What? Key Implications for MPS ............................................................................9
   Implications for Learning and Innovation .................................................................9
   Implications for Resilience and Well-being .............................................................11
   Implications for Retention .......................................................................................12
Key Contributions to Theory .......................................................................................14
References ....................................................................................................................16
Appendix One: Research Methods .............................................................................22
Executive Summary

- The learning mindset is one of the four themes of the OU’s action research project on OL, summarised in the Forward Look and agreed with the OL Board in April 2018 (Figure One).

![OU/MPS Organisational Learning]

**Figure One: Scope of the OU OL Action Research Project 2017-2021**

- Over the course of this project, the learning mindset has been implicitly associated with the concept of **psychological safety** (Edmondson, 1999; 2018), thereby underpinning the **Blame to Praise** model (Tomkins, 2020a; 2020b) and the introduction of Reflective Practice (RP). From this standpoint, the learning mindset involves developing the confidence and curiosity to admit to uncertainty, especially when learning to avoid preventable failure. Without psychological safety, the default mindset is likely to be one of blame-avoidance rather than openness to exploring how failures might be avoided in the future, and how innovation and ‘intelligent failures’ might be encouraged.

![Figure Two: The Blame to Praise Model]

- Unpacking the notion of the learning mindset a little further, it is a concept with numerous connotations. The way we choose to interpret it reveals a lot about how we approach OL in general, i.e., **what kind of challenge we perceive OL to be** and where we decide to focus our actions and interventions.
• Returning to the notion of **tame and wicked problems** introduced at the start of this project (see Organizational Learning and the Metropolitan Police Service Report from the Scoping Study - Open Research Online), if we approach OL as a largely tame/tameable problem, then our definitions of the learning mindset are likely to revolve around a commitment to the capture, storage and accessibility of information. If, on the other hand, we focus on the more wicked aspects of OL, then the learning mindset involves acknowledging complexity and recognising that OL involves emotion and politics as well as rationality and facts.

• In this report, we explore the learning mindset as an ability not just to tolerate, but to productively **learn through and from paradox**. This allows us to pull several strands of OL together in ways that acknowledge and do something constructive with both tameness and wickedness. It also allows us to give voice to the officers, leaders and staff who have shared the challenges (and joys) of policing with us over the past four years - challenges which seem to involve living with a combination of the necessary and the impossible.

• We use a definition of paradox as a combination of elements that are not just contradictory, but also have some kind of interdependency or inseparability (Smith and Lewis, 2011), i.e., they are **either/and not either/or** relationships (Jing and Van de Ven, 2014).

• The report is based on a qualitative thematic analysis of our entire data-set from the four-year project. This yielded two types of learning paradox relating to (a) **knowledge control** and (b) **knowledge disclosure**. They imply that the learning mindset involves learning via:
  o **Either** general rules **and** individual discretion (invoking learning from *either* ‘what works’ and ‘what matters’)
  o **Either** the benefits **and** the risks of publicising and sharing knowledge (thereby emerging as a form of **safeguarding** as much as learning).

• This paradox framing has **positive practical potential** for OL at MPS, because:
  o A paradox mindset fosters innovation (Miron-Spektor et al., 2018), including in ‘paradox-savvy’ leadership (Pradies et al., 2020; Waldman and Bowen, 2016)
  o A paradox mindset nurtures resilience (Zheng et al., 2018)
  o Learning climates that acknowledge tensions and paradoxes are associated with improved morale and retention (Brunetto et al., 2012; Kyndt et al., 2009)
  o Paradox is considered a ‘threshold concept’ with the potential to be genuinely transformative for OL (Knight and Paroutis, 2017; Meyer and Land, 2003).
Why Paradox?

Oppositions and dualities have a long history in both theory and practice of organisations. Classics include: Make or buy?; competition or cooperation?; stability or change?; transformational or transactional?; and indeed, tame or wicked? In early organisation studies, scholars tended to call for trade-offs to address the main oppositions, e.g., if we want more stability, we must expect less change. Consequently, a key focus of individual and organisational learning was on improving decision-making skills in order to make better choices between seemingly feasible alternatives (Schad et al., 2019). As organisations have become more complex, however, researchers have reached for theories that reveal how issues and decisions are intimately, often inextricably, interrelated and not always amenable to trade-offs or simple fixes. Paradox has been embraced as a way of making sense of those ‘contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time’ (Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 382).

Paradox is more than just an awkward combination or juxtaposition of two things. Mainstream paradox theory insists that paradox involves elements that are not just contradictory, but also have some kind of interdependency (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Jing and Van de Ven (2014) define paradox as an either/and relationship. This is more integrative (and less trade-off-like) than either/or. It is also less cosy and conciliatory than both/and, which can imply an artificial smoothing over contradiction in the search for synthesis (Fairhurst, 2019).

Smith and Lewis’s (2011) highly influential theory hypothesizes four dimensions of organisational paradox - organising, belonging, performing and learning. Organising paradoxes involve tensions in goals and principles, such as control-flexibility or collaboration-competition. Paradoxes of belonging address tensions of identity and loyalty, especially between individual and collective identification. Performing paradoxes highlight clashes between interests and perspectives, such as between internal and external stakeholders and between conflicting roles and tasks. Finally, learning paradoxes are the phenomena we will now discuss in some detail.

Paradoxes of Learning

Learning paradoxes affect and reflect the relationship between new and existing knowledge. They recognise the need to both build on and undo the past if we want to progress towards the future (Lewis, 2000), and the tensions between the promise of the new and the comfort of the old (Lewis and Dehler, 2000). The most richly theorised variant is the exploration-exploitation paradox (March, 1991). Exploration refers to the investigation of the as-yet unknown and is linked with innovation and experimentation. Exploitation relates to solidifying and capitalising on
what is already known and is associated with incremental improvement and efficiency. A wealth of scholarship has been devoted to understanding the optimal relationship between exploration and exploitation: Exploration alone creates risk and cost without necessarily benefit; exploitation alone locks organisations in the status quo, unable or unwilling to break familiar, but possibly unproductive, habits and routines. The notion of ambidexterity is often used to describe efforts to make this relationship productive for organisational learning (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2010).

The duality of exploration-exploitation recalls much of the classic literature on OL, such as Guilford’s (1950) divergent thinking (‘thinking outside the box’) and convergent thinking (consolidating within an existing ‘box’). These two modes are often entangled, for instance, when people need or desire to learn something new, but draw on their existing cognitive schemata (frames) to do so, thereby restricting their ‘new’ to what can be accessed and gripped through their ‘old’. This is where blind-spots and unconscious biases can work against learning and improvement, despite even the best of intentions. Such framing issues can have a significant paradoxical effect on individual and organisational competency, for “the more actors stress their core capabilities, the more they invoke their flip side: core rigidities. Extant strengths offer routines that may guide innovative efforts. Yet, clinging to core competencies might inhibit actors from considering more drastic changes” (Lewis, 2000, p. 766).

For Vince (2018, p. 273), the dynamics of OL unfold “in an emotional and political context that is as wedded to the established social order as it is desirous of making changes to it”. Vince suggests that the very concept of the ‘learning organisation’ is a paradox, in which a range of factors both encourage and inhibit learning, often simultaneously. A sense of exploration may manifest as ‘learning-in-action’, which generates new ideas and new ways of building on them; but this is often counterbalanced by a ‘learning inaction’ when adhering to what is already known and tested feels safer and less threatening (Vince, 2018). Thus, the counterweight to exploration might not always be exploitation, but rather, a resistance to learning because of the anxieties it invokes. The notion of paradox is therefore central to theories of OL which incorporate the emotional as well as the rational, especially those emotions triggered by the fear and/or experience of blame (Vince and Saleem, 2004).

The idea that OL involves duality and dichotomy was identified at the very outset of this project. In our Scoping Study report, we framed some of this duality using the theory of tame and wicked problems. We also highlighted that the literature on organisational knowledge and learning tends to be conceived as having two branches - one cognitive and informational, the other constructed, contested and embodied (Rashman et al., 2009). Later in the project, we explored
the dualities and contradictions of evidence-based practice in policing, proposing a model in which ‘what works’ both supplements and is supplemented by ‘what matters’ (Tomkins et al., 2021). As the project has progressed, we have approached these dualities increasingly as explicit instances of paradox. In the following section, we present the results of our most recent analysis through the specific lens of paradox theory (Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011). This body of theory offers constructive ways to crystallise the dynamics of OL and recognise both its positive and its negative effects.

Summary of Our Research Findings

Over the period January to May 2021, we revisited the entire qualitative data-set from the OU’s OL project (2017-2021). Using thematic analysis techniques, we analysed the data according to paradox theory, focusing on paradoxes of learning, knowledge and information. Table One summarises the results of this analysis, synthesised into two overarching themes of knowledge control and knowledge disclosure. It highlights the two defining features of paradox, contradiction (either) and interdependency (and), and their paradoxical effects on learning and emotion. We use the verb ‘modulate’ to reflect a relationship in which the quality or timbre of one side of the pairing is affected by the presence and pitch of the other (as opposed to the quantitative relationship of a trade-off, where an increase to one side means a decrease to the other). In other words, these are either/and, not either/or relationships.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Contradictory elements (either)</th>
<th>Nature of interdependency (and)</th>
<th>Paradoxical effects on learning</th>
<th>Paradoxical effects on emotion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge control</td>
<td>Codification-Discretion</td>
<td>Codification modulates discretion</td>
<td>Either enables and inhibits learning</td>
<td>Either codification reduces anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discretion modulates codification</td>
<td>Either enables and inhibits learning</td>
<td>And codification increases anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge disclosure</td>
<td>Transparency-Occlusion</td>
<td>Transparency modulates occlusion</td>
<td>Either enables and inhibits learning</td>
<td>Either transparency reduces anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Occlusion modulates transparency</td>
<td>Either enables and inhibits learning</td>
<td>And transparency increases anxiety</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table One: Summary of Findings
In the section below, we provide a brief overview of our interpretation of these findings. For an explanation of our research methodology, see Appendix One. For further information about the data, please contact the author.

**Paradoxes of Knowledge Control: Codification-Discretion**

Codification and discretion are felt to be in contradiction (*either*). The former refers to a control through standardisation of knowledge and information; the latter refers to a loosening of control to enable officers to decide on the best course of action using more particularist criteria such as individual judgement, perhaps drawing on implicit as well as explicit knowledge, and on ‘what matters’ as well as ‘what works’. The contradiction is crystallised by one MPS leader, who suggests that the balance shifts and the tension is felt most starkly in the context of failure:

“There are loads of phrases, copper’s nose or you know, street skills…We have individual discretion for officers to act within or without policy, to apply the law as they see it at the time. And then, because something’s gone wrong, at its most extreme, somebody loses their life, there would be an inquiry. We’d try to find out, could it have been predicted? Could it have been prevented? And the outcome would come back and say it could’ve been predicted and prevented if you’d asked this question. So then we say to all our officers: Whenever you’re in these circumstances, make sure you ask this question. Over time, that builds until you reach the point at the other end of the scale where, for very good academic reasons, fully researched and supported, we tell officers: When you go to this situation, here are 30 questions you must ask.”

Within this codification-discretion pairing, official understandings of OL tend to favour codification. Notions of ‘best practice’, ‘learning recommendations’, ‘learning packages’, etc, all reflect a preference for OL as the standardisation and parcelling-up of knowledge. One might expect, therefore, that codification would release officers from the anxieties of learning, i.e., that officers would find some relief in knowing that they are doing what has been sanctioned as the right approach or procedure. In practice, however, codification can *either reduce and increase* anxiety. It can also quash the positive emotions of learning and thus inadvertently lead to demotivation and distrust.

This codification-discretion paradox resonates with the broader question of ‘rules versus discretion’ in public services, which is a matter of long-running debate in the criminal justice system (Kleinig, 1996; Lipsky, 1980). Despite the rhetorical appeal of seeing these in oppositional terms, rules (like codification) are not necessarily the opposite of discretion, for it has long been recognised that the relationship may “often be so close as to constitute a
blending. Discretion suffuses the interpretation and application of rules (as in the processes of defining the meaning, relevance and scope of rules). Similarly the nature and quality of rules will often bear on the kind of discretion encountered” (Baldwin, 1997, p. 364). Thus, all public servants, including the police, have to learn to work with *either* rules *and* discretion. Furthermore, the classic public services literature reveals an interesting link between our two paradoxes, because difficulties with ‘rules versus discretion’ are often resolved through appeals to transparency (Baldwin, 1997). When one paradox proves too difficult, another steps in to ‘pick up the slack’. For more on these broader connections, see Tomkins and Bristow (2021).

**Paradoxes of Knowledge Disclosure: Transparency-Occlusion**

Discourses of transparency and openness are widespread in MPS and amongst its key stakeholders. They seem to be underpinned by an assumption that transparency is inherently good for learning, i.e. that the more openly information is shared, the more accessible, widespread and successful the learning will be. In this pairing, therefore, transparency is seen as the pole most conducive to effective OL. However, as with the control paradox above, our data suggest that transparency *either* enables *and* inhibits learning, and *either* reduces *and* increases anxiety.

As we have highlighted in our previous research reports (e.g., Tomkins et al., 2020), transparency is not an unambiguous good in policing, and is not a straightforward route towards effective organisational or community learning. Our analysis suggests that transparency is - and has to be - qualified by occlusion, or protection from the full weight of ‘the truth’. Occlusion (or selective transparency) helps to reframe and retune (rather than inhibit) learning so that its challenges can be tolerated and managed. An effective learning culture in policing is thus not one of full, unqualified transparency. Rather, the learning mindset involves engaging *either* with the benefits *and* with the risks of publicising and sharing knowledge. This is why we are deliberately not contrasting transparency (good) with secrecy (bad), but developing a more nuanced understanding of transparency dynamics as a mode of *safeguarding*. The reasons for this are crystallised by one of the MPS leaders we interviewed:

> “The public and all the politicians and journos…all clammering for complete transparency, and you know, wanting the full picture. But trust me, they don’t! The real world doesn’t fit so easily into the whole heroes and villains stuff. If people knew how dangerous it was, there’d be a collective mental breakdown! What was that line in that film? ‘You can’t handle the truth!’ Was that Jack Nicholson? [laughs] That’s really what we do in policing. Protect people from a truth they can’t handle as much as from the criminals.”
This transparency-occlusion paradox is arguably less well explored in the academic literature than the previous codification-discretion paradox. In the specific context of policing, it is an extremely thorny issue. On one hand, the police face calls for a ‘statutory duty of candour’ (Gardiner et al., 2021), and are assured that candour is a core element of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018). On the other hand, total candour in policing can be damaging to psychological safety, both within the service and amongst communities, and information has to be disclosed with the utmost care and circumspection. For more on these complexities and their relevance for the difference between transparency-as-control/surveillance (fostering competition and/or defensiveness) and transparency-as-trust (fostering collaboration and/or reflection), see Tomkins and Bristow (2021) and De Vaujany et al. (2021).

**So What? Key Implications for MPS**

Our analysis suggests that a learning mindset in policing is one which acknowledges, tolerates and builds on the paradoxes of knowledge - both in relation to the possibilities/impossibilities of knowledge control and in connection with the possibilities/impossibilities of knowledge disclosure. Adopting such a mindset means finding ways to cope with the sheer impossibility of getting everything right from every perspective, whilst also remaining open, committed and passionate about learning and improvement, as well as fostering OL for the sake of risk management. In short, OL at MPS involves doing ‘all of the above’, even though many of ‘the above’ are in direct contradiction with each other.

In this section, we reflect on why the articulation of the learning mindset as a paradox mindset might be of practical benefit for MPS. We focus on three main themes that have featured strongly in our research conversations with MPS, including with the OL Board:

1. **Learning and innovation**
2. **Resilience and well-being**
3. **Retention**

**Implications for Learning and Innovation**

Leading paradox scholars, Miron-Spektor et al. (2018) propose that a ‘paradox mindset’ can foster greater creativity and innovation. This is of considerable significance for MPS, especially in relation to the right hand side (the ‘praiseworthy’ side) of the Blame to Praise model (figure two), and the way in which innovation is linked to the concept of ‘intelligent failures’. As Edmondson (2018) suggests, attitudes towards intelligent failure are integral to the learning mindset and therefore key to an effective OL strategy.
The concept of the paradox mindset originated in research into the dilemmas of balancing novelty and usefulness. Getting traction from innovation efforts relies on both, but they often seem to be locked in contradiction. Novelty relies on generating new ways of looking at things, and often requires challenging rules, norms and assumptions. It is thus linked with Guilford’s (1950) classic work on divergent thinking (‘thinking outside the box’). By contrast, usefulness relies on a more convergent style of thinking (deriving maximum value from within the existing ‘box’), and it tends not to challenge boundaries, norms or constraints. Novelty has been associated with a more intrinsic psychological motivation, whereas usefulness is linked to a more prosocial psychological outlook (Grant and Berry, 2011). A tension emerges because “the more novel an idea, the more uncertainty exists regarding its practicality, feasibility and usefulness” (Miron-Spektor and Erez, 2017, pp. 434-5). Within the specific context of MPS, one might also add uncertainty about ‘legitimacy’ to this list, for the suggestion that novel ideas may turn out to break regulations and hence trigger censure and blame looms large amongst our research participants especially, but not exclusively, those from the more junior ranks.

The notion of the paradox mindset has been put forward as a way to acknowledge and frame such novelty-usefulness tensions. This is because innovation not only tolerates, but actually thrives on these tensions. Successful innovation requires a combination of skills that are both generative and evaluative (Harvey and Kou, 2013), both passionate and disciplined (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2010), and both flexible and persistent (Baas et al, 2013). As demonstrated via a range of quantitative and qualitative studies, the paradox mindset has therefore been positively associated with all these enablers of innovation.

A second set of arguments for the practical value of the learning mindset as paradox relates to the notion of ‘threshold concepts’ (sometimes loosely equated with ‘lightbulb’ or ‘aha’ experiences). As Meyer and Land (2003, p. 412) elaborate:

“A threshold concept can be considered as akin to a portal, opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something. It represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. As a consequence of comprehending a threshold concept there may thus be a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view. This transformation may be sudden or it may be protracted over a considerable period of time.”

Knight and Paroutis (2017) propose that paradox is just such a threshold concept, and that it has the potential to transform both individual and organisational learning. Threshold concepts are ideas that are so frame- and mind-altering that once seen, they cannot be unseen.
can therefore be used to effect radical change to the ways in which people understand and approach issues, both rationally and emotionally. Whether explicitly or implicitly, they provide learners across multiple organisational settings with “new, previously uncontemplated, handholds for interpreting contradictory tensions” (Knight and Paroutis, 2017, p. 532).

For this transformative promise to be realised, however, the learning environment must be sufficiently safe to tolerate tension, anomaly and failure without excessive blame, deflection or suppression. For organisations to benefit from paradox, they must allow, indeed value, those who give voice and shape to paradox and raise the awkward ‘yes, but’ issues. As Lewis (2000) argues, the capacity to think paradoxically is not in itself enough to realise paradox’s transformative promise. It is here that the connections between the learning mindset as paradox and the Blame to Praise work are arguably most profound.

To sum up, the value of paradox-based approaches to OL lies in “sustaining tensions because they generate possibilities” (Vince, 2018, p. 274). As Lewis and Dehler (2000, p. 713) suggest, “learning through paradox requires analysing contradictions, experiencing tensions, and experimenting with their management”, thus enhancing our ability to read situations from multiple perspectives and both think and feel our way through them. Miron-Spektor and Erez (2017) suggest that a paradox mindset leads to greater creativity and innovation. Knight and Paroutis (2017) propose that paradox is a threshold concept with the potential to transform organisational learning. For all these reasons, we see practical value for MPS in using paradox to frame the learning mindset.

**Implications for Resilience and Well-being**

Throughout this project, we have emphasised connections between learning and well-being (especially Tomkins, 2020a). Our interest is grounded in the question of whether both individuals and the organisation itself are ‘well enough to learn’, that is, sufficiently confident and secure to be able to admit to uncertainty, to ask for help and/or clarification, and to tolerate the anxieties related to the fear of blame (Vince, 2018; Vince and Saleem, 2004). The concept of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; 2018), which underpins the Blame to Praise model, is highly pertinent for this question of well-being.

The paradox mindset also has something useful to contribute to the topic of well-being. Zheng et al. (2018) compare the paradox mindset with a dilemma mindset specifically in relation to tensions between individual and collective accountability. They conclude that, in the face of conflicting demands, those with a paradox mindset are able to build psychological resilience, as
well as greater leadership and management effectiveness. By contrast, those adopting a dilemma mindset tend to approach tensions with the aim of deconstructing them into either/or choices. This is said to lead to depleted resilience as well as reduced leadership and management effectiveness. As Zheng et al. (2018) conclude, the productive value of the paradox mindset is that it motivates people to develop new cognitive and behavioural repertoires to cope with the tensions of learning, decision-making and problem-solving, including those that simply cannot be fixed by trade-off choices - of which there are a myriad in policing. Consequently, the authors recommend that HR initiatives include recognition and exploration of the paradox mindset in their leadership development and change management programmes.

Such connections also point to the significance of leadership behaviours for the tone and culture of OL (see Tomkins et al., 2020; Tomkins 2020b). Pradies et al. (2020, p. 101) argue that, within complex organisations, “as the experience of tensions intensifies so do calls for more paradoxical leaders, those adept at embracing and helping others embrace and thrive through tensions”. Leaders are in a position to role-model what it takes and how it feels to give voice to tensions that might normally be hidden or unacknowledged. Surfacing these tensions enables individuals and groups to challenge the ‘elephants in the room’ about what can – and cannot – be said, creating new possibilities for action and reflection. Waldman and Bowen (2016, p. 316) have developed the increasingly popular concept of ‘paradox-savvy’ leadership. This involves “(1) maintaining a strong sense of self while simultaneously maintaining humility, (2) maintaining control while simultaneously letting go of control, (3) stressing continuity while simultaneously stressing change, and (4) pursuing corporate social responsibility (CSR) for morally based purposes”. Whilst clearly developed in and for a private sector context, it is not hard to see the relevance of these ideas for leadership and OL culture at MPS.

**Implications for Retention**

Retention has been identified as a significant issue for MPS in general and the OL Board in particular. There are many factors that influence retention, many of them intuitively obvious. They include having the opportunity to do challenging work; having a realistic chance of being promoted and of developing new skills and capabilities; feeling supported by the organisation and its leaders; feeling that one’s work is appreciated; enjoying positive relations with colleagues; having a healthy balance between personal and professional lives, etc. (Cotton and Tuttle 1986; Walker 2001). In policing in particular, increasing demands from regulators, communities and public commentators are said to have had a negative effect on retention (Dick, 2011), drawing attention to the need to understand policing as a form of ‘emotional labour’ which
needs to be understood as such if levels of motivation, commitment and retention are to be managed effectively (Brunetto et al., 2012).

Of particular relevance for the work of the OL Board is an interesting stream of literature focusing on the relationships between retention and learning - both individual learning and organisational learning. Kyndt et al. (2009) examine the ways in which retention levels and intentions are influenced both by the range of development opportunities available to individual people and by the nature and tone of the overall learning climate, i.e., by the ways in which OL as a whole is conceptualised, discussed, rewarded and managed. They distinguish between OL cultures that adopt a 'gap' approach and those that seek to develop an 'appreciative' approach. This mapping of the two OL cultures is, of course, simply a heuristic; but it can perhaps serve as a useful framing for the different ways in which OL culture can influence retention, and what role different understandings of the learning mindset might play in this.

The 'gap' culture focuses on what is missing and/or deficit in the current organisation and/or individual. In relation to the themes of our earlier discussions with the OL Board, it triggers an association with perceptions of a ‘blame culture’, in which the idea of learning from failure is often perceived to be a search for who or what to blame. It also bears a certain resemblance to the taming instinct within the overall tame/wicked problems framing in the Scoping Study report. And just like what can happen if one tries to tame what are better seen as wicked problems, a 'gap' culture can tend towards short-term fixes which fail to address the ‘bigger picture’ (Kyndt et al., 2009). In contrast, an ‘appreciative’ OL culture is orientated towards understanding the challenges that people face, rather than implying that there are straightforward solutions to address the issues that arise. It recalls the characteristics of organisations which are adept at handling wicked problems, and see OL as an opportunity to develop an individual and collective ability to learn from complexity (Conklin, 2006; Daviter, 2019).

In their quantitative and qualitative study of these two learning cultures, Kyndt et al. (2009) demonstrate a positive effect on retention with an 'appreciative' learning culture, where employees feel that their challenges and contributions are genuinely valued and understood; and a negative effect on retention (as well as a decrease in motivation and engagement) where there is a greater sense of a ‘gap’ culture. The significance of these findings is that acknowledgement of the paradoxes of learning, that is, an appreciation that there are few absolute, cast-iron guaranteed ‘lessons learned’ in policing, fits more readily within the notion of an ‘appreciative’ learning culture - and by extension, with the prospects for improved retention. Furthermore, thinking about these issues in relation to the either/and of paradox helps
to avoid the pitfalls of splitting and over-simplification. In mature OL cultures, there is clearly a need to incorporate either a ‘gap’ focus and an ‘appreciative’ focus. The risk when organisational pressures build, however, is that ‘appreciation’ loses out to scapegoating (Hennestad, 1990; Vince and Saleem, 2004).

**Key Contributions to Theory**

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, this research makes a significant contribution to debates about the relation between policing, paradox and learning. Despite the rich heritage in policing studies on duality, opposition and contradiction (see, for instance, Baldwin, 1997; Kleinig, 1996; Lipsky, 1980), there has been relatively little policing research through the specific prism of paradox theory, centred on the now mainstream theories of Lewis (2000) and Smith and Lewis (2011). Exceptions include Cuganesan (2017), who suggests that police officers face paradoxical identity demands from leaders (valuing generalist skills to achieve flexibility) and high-status colleagues (valuing specialist skills to demonstrate exceptionalism); and Rocheville and Bartunek (in Sharma et al., 2021), who explore a paradox of trust in US policing in the context of the death of George Floyd, highlighting the need to break a vicious cycle of suspicion to make the police more deserving of public trust and the public more deserving of police trust. Our research therefore addresses an important gap in the academic literature.

Our theoretical contribution to academic debates in this space is being developed as an academic paper for a leading international journal. In summary, the contribution is as follows:

- Illustrating and extending the key concepts of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; 2018) and palliative learning (Bristow et al., 2021), highlighting not just intra-organisational dynamics, but also threshold dynamics between an organisation and its stakeholders.

- Connecting with the public services literature on the classic ‘rules versus discretion’ question (Baldwin, 1997; Kleinig, 1996; Lipsky, 1980), reframing Hood’s (2010) inquiry into ‘blame games’ in public life as a paradox of either pinpointing and diffusing accountability.

- Demonstrating that the dimensions of mainstream paradox theory - learning, performing, organising and belonging (Lewis, 2000; Smith and Lewis, 2011) - are distinct in theory, but considerably more entangled in practice (Lê and Bednarek, 2017).

- Demonstrating that emotions have a significant and paradoxical effect on OL, specifically, that attempts to codify and structure OL (as per the taming instinct) can either reduce and increase anxiety, which in turn either inhibits and encourages learning (Vince, 2018).
• Challenging assumptions that transparency is merely the opposite of secrecy (Coombs and Holladay, 2013), proposing instead that transparency sometimes has to be qualified to be made safe and constructive for learning.

• Demonstrating and reinforcing the suggestion that frustration in the face of paradox can lead to withdrawal, distrust and a retreat to ritualistic literal obedience (Tracy, 2004), e.g., to 'learning recommendations' and 'best practice'.

• Connecting with theorisations of the 'dark side' of organisational paradox (Berti and Simpson, 2020), where organisations under pressure often increase the ambivalence of their rhetoric and ambiguity is sometimes felt to be deliberate (Hennestad, 1990).

• Adding empirical and theoretical nuance to discussions of power and paradox, highlighting that paradox can entangle both leaders and led (van Bommel & Spicer, 2017; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Smets et al., 2019).

• Finally, theorising policing as a paradox of either success and failure, in which success from one perspective is simultaneously failure from another. In ending with the idea of learning from success and failure, we have come 'full circle' on the project themes (Figure One).
References


Appendix One: Research Methods

As with previous work on this project, the overall methodological framework here is action research. Action research encompasses a range of approaches emphasising the application and relevance of knowledge for practice (Cassell and Johnson, 2006; Reason and Bradbury, 2001), and it is one of the methods associated with a ‘practice turn’ in paradox studies (Lê and Bednarek, 2017). The version we use here is modelled on dialogical reflexive action research (Cunliffe, 2002; Ripamonti et al., 2016). This recognises that multiple meanings are always in play in organisations, and it seeks to make constructive sense of these by working through their often unnoticed or unspoken, but potentially consequential, contradictions. The hope is to encourage collaborative reflection and challenge, rather than offer any definitive solution or recipe for action.

The findings reported in this paper result from analysing the entire data-set from the four-year project (2017-2021). The total number of participants (N) from the project is 112. As previously reported, the people represented here come from a wide breadth of functions in front-line policing, including response units, neighbourhood policing and community support, and specialist safeguarding functions, including child protection, mental health and the policing of modern slavery. In addition, some are based in the corporate functions in NSY and ESB, and others in key regulatory/advisory bodies with a stake in OL, principally the IOPC and the Police Federation.

We collected two main types of qualitative data; interview and participative-ethnographic. The former is textual data from semi-structured one-to-one interviews, which were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The latter comprises different data outputs and artefacts resulting from our participation in practice, such as our involvement in shaping and delivering OL network events. The analytical technique was abduction, which is an iterative process of observing, interpreting, modelling, checking and refining (Cunliffe, 2002; Nenonen et al., 2017). In the MPS context, this means working iteratively and flexibly between the questions and concerns identified at the start of the project and those which surfaced as the work progressed. Abduction is a form of generative reasoning that works with and on anomaly, involving elements of deconstruction, exploration and disciplined imagination (Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021); it is therefore very suited to empirical analyses of paradox. This form of reasoning is highly interpretive. It focuses on the ways in which issues and experiences of OL are interpreted and understood by our participants, rather than whether they are in any sense ‘correct’. This kind of qualitative research thereby foregrounds the criterion of resonance alongside generic analytic criteria of rigour and relevance.
Notes

1 It is worth noting that the word ‘mindset’ has certain individualist connotations (i.e., a mindset is something that an individual person possesses or does not possess). These connotations may not always be healthy or helpful for organisational learning and performance, because they situate responsibility and blame for learning/failing to learn firmly with the individual. The syndrome is often referred to as ‘responsibilization’. It is why many OL scholars argue against popular constructions such as ‘the reflective practitioner’ (Schön, 2016), which places responsibility for reflection squarely with the individual, irrespective of the organisational conditions in which he or she operates. Leading theorists such as Vince and Reynolds (2009) try to shift the terminology of this debate away from the notion of ‘the reflective practitioner’ towards the more collective notion of, and responsibility for, ‘organizing reflection’. Successful OL thereby gets recast as a genuinely shared endeavour, rather than something enmeshed with the fear or anticipation of personalised blame.