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From Blame to Praise in Policing: Implications for Leadership and the Public Conversation

Organizational Learning at the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS)

Action Research Report

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Impact Trail

Conceived and developed with MPS action research participants	July - December 2018
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Woven into discussions on MPS Learning Transformation	From February 2019
Woven into IOPC plans for leading the implementation of new police conduct legislation	From February 2019
Championed with representatives of 20 UK police forces at CPRL	May 2019
Woven into HR/promotions discussions with MPS stakeholders	From February 2020
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Executive Summary

- Leaders play a crucial role in fostering (or inhibiting) cultures of learning. Their influence relates both to their own attitudes towards learning and to the ways in which they do (or do not) encourage learning for other people – both within their own teams and across functional and organizational boundaries.
- Being open to learning involves feeling that the challenges of one's role are recognised by others, especially those who have authority or sway over our careers. Recognition of the real difficulties and paradoxes that MPS leaders face might, therefore, help to encourage organizational learning which is constructive and rewarding for both individuals and the organization. However, securing such recognition is not straightforward in a policing context, where scrutiny is intense, risk is high, failure is inevitable, attributions of fault are often individualised, and even 'damage limitation' takes considerable leadership skill, effort and care.
- Some of these leadership challenges can be crystallised as various forms of asymmetry, or things being off-kilter or out of balance. These are significant for individual leaders and their organizations, because they can reflect and/or reinforce various forms of behavioural and cognitive bias and dissonance. The specific instances of asymmetry explored in this paper are:

Agency	Having more responsibility for, than control over, events
Response	Receiving and/or expecting more blame than praise
Reason	Experiencing and/or expecting interpretations of failure based more on individual fault than on task or situational complexity

- The ideas in this paper build on previous deliverables to the OL Board, in particular, the elaboration of the '**Blame to Praise**' model in the research paper on 'From Blame to Praise in Policing: Implications for Strategy, Culture, Process and Well-being', presented at January 2019's Board, and related conversations with MPS, such as the OL Network events. They are also stimulating work currently underway on Learning Transformation and other leadership development activities (see, in particular, the Impact on Practice and the Public Conversation on p.15). They are especially relevant in connection with discussions about '**resilience**' and '**responsible leadership**'.

Introduction

As outlined in our 'Forward Look' document for the OL Board (10th April 2018), the OU's action research project on organizational learning (OL) is focused on four main themes:

- Learning from success and failure
- Leadership and OL
- The learning mindset
- Evidence-based practice.

This research paper addresses the first two of these themes, considering the question of leadership within the context of learning from success and failure. Our analysis builds on previous work on the 'Blame to Praise' model (see 'From Blame to Praise in Policing: Implications for Strategy, Culture, Process and Well-being'), which it develops specifically for a leadership context. It also connects with work on MPS Learning Transformation, especially strands 4 (Coach, Teach, Influence) and 5 (Wellbeing, Resilience).

In this analysis, we draw on understandings of OL as part of the fabric of everyday institutional life (rather than separate from it as in, for example, training) (Brandi and Elkjaer, 2011); as deeply connected with leadership and with the tone that leaders set for a learning culture (Vera and Crossan, 2004; Waddell and Pio, 2015); and as intimately entwined with failure, blame and anxiety - both individual and collective (Vince, 2001; Vince and Saleem, 2004).

In the discussion that follows, we interweave extracts from our data with ideas from both academic and practitioner literatures. Our working definition of leaders here is mostly inspectors and above, because we define leaders as those who are responsible for other people's actions - in particular, other people's mistakes - not just their own. However, we do not draw too sharp a line based exclusively on rank, so we have also analysed the accounts of some sergeants with responsibility for supervising large numbers of officers and staff.

We do not replicate details of our methodology in this paper, because we assume these are familiar from previous deliverables for the OL Board. If it would be helpful to have further information on this, please contact leah.tomkins@open.ac.uk.

Asymmetries of Leadership

We anchor our reflections in the concept of asymmetry, which is usually held to mean some sort of imbalance or lack of equivalence between things. Asymmetry is significant within organizations because it can distort the way people behave and/or think about what they should prioritise, for instance, in encouraging them to attend to ‘the urgent, as opposed to the important’. Asymmetry can reflect, trigger and reinforce certain cognitive biases (Dasborough, 2006; Johnson et al., 2013; Rozin and Royzman, 2001) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

Leadership at MPS involves dealing with significant issues of scrutiny, blame, failure and fault. Within this context, we suggest that the asymmetries of leadership unfold in three main ways:

- Asymmetries of agency: More responsibility than control
- Asymmetries of response: More blame than praise
- Asymmetries of reason: More fault than complexity.

Asymmetries of Agency: More Responsibility than Control

MPS leaders have a powerful, global sense of responsibility for whatever happens ‘on their watch’, wherein ‘watch’ could mean geographical territory, functional territory or territories of temporality, namely, a particular shift - or indeed, a combination of all three. This is not, however, the same as feeling that the problems that arise can either be attributed to, or averted by, their own actions or decisions. As one chief superintendent explains:

“There’s nothing, *literally nothing*, here that can’t and won’t get laid at my door! And you do feel guilty about what’s gone wrong, and you do, you know, really *cringe*, even if it’s absolutely nothing to do with me or anything I myself have done, or even could’ve done. But it’s my job to soak all that up so that my officers can just get on with it.”

As Ciulla (2018, p.62) suggests, the primary duty of all leaders is to take responsibility, but “*taking* responsibility is different from *being* responsible in the sense that a leader may not be personally responsible for doing something or even ordering that something be done”. For Ciulla (2018, p.62), this distinction lies at the very heart of leadership ethics, for “the most ethically distinctive aspect of being a leader is that leaders receive praise or blame for the good and bad things that happen under their watch - even when they know nothing about them or have nothing to do with them. In these cases, normal notions of agency that include the intent, capacity or causal connection to an action do not always apply”. In other words, when things go wrong, ethical leadership behaviour means taking responsibility for the failure

even when it is not one's own fault. With this analysis, therefore, we argue that such an asymmetrical ethics of responsibility crystallises the very leadership endeavour (Ciulla, 2018; Ciulla et al., 2018; Jones, 2014; Rhodes and Badham, 2018).

In the case of MPS leaders, we suggest that this distinction between taking responsibility and being responsible - between taking responsibility for failure and being personally at fault - applies *in spades*. MPS leaders' sense of responsibility outweighs and looms considerably larger than their sense of control, going to the very core of who they are and what they are there to do. Suggesting that police leaders are not always in full control is emphatically *not* to imply that they are not good leaders, or that they are unworthy of the trust that we, the public, usually place in them; simply that the nature of their remit, and the impossibility of being able to foresee, de-risk and regulate everything, means that their experience of Ciulla's (2018) 'ethical distinctiveness' is, we propose, more profoundly asymmetrical than that of leaders in other sectors.

The need to acknowledge and explore leadership in the absence of full control is increasingly recognised across the public services in general (Crosby and Bryson, 2018). For instance, Brookes and Grint (2010, p.8) propose that the demands for (and of) collaboration, coalition and compromise in public leadership challenge us "to think about how we lead when we are not 'in charge'". In awakening our awareness of leadership when one is not 'in charge', experiences of police leaders have much to contribute to debates in the general field of leadership studies. Being both-in-charge-and-not-in-charge is not any sort of abrogation of responsibility or indication of leader inadequacy; indeed, it may well be *precisely the opposite*.

It is interesting to connect these reflections to theories of 'responsible leadership', both because this model of leadership is being deployed at MPS, and because the theory which underpins it shines a spotlight on the complex relations between responsibility and failure. For instance, we think it intriguing that scholarly interest in 'responsible leadership' has tended to be triggered by organizational failure, such as the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska, or the demise of Enron, Arthur Andersen and Lehman Brothers (Knights and O'Leary, 2006; Pless and Maak, 2011; Waldman and Galvin, 2008); in other words, by a concern to identify the causes, characteristics and exemplars of *irresponsible* leadership. As Maak and Pless (2006, p.33) suggest, one of the assumptions in discourses of responsible leadership is that leaders' irresponsibility has created an institutional and societal malaise in which "the ethical fallout has been attributed to personal greed, grandiosity, and an *everything-is-possible* mentality".

Shifting the focus away from the hysteria of irresponsibility, we suggest that it is more important and more useful to examine the *complexities* of leadership responsibility than to do the much easier and less constructive task of highlighting where it has clearly gone wrong. Thus, we challenge the suggestion in some of the ‘responsible leadership’ literature that failure necessarily indicates irresponsibility. In the context of policing, a degree of ‘failure’ is inevitable. The very presence of policing in society reflects the fact that things go wrong in the world; the police’s dealings with the public are nearly always, and almost by definition, on occasions of trouble or difficulty where something has gone badly which the police are asked to repair, or something is at risk which the police are asked to safeguard. Based on our experiences with MPS, this intimate, existential, relationship with society’s failures seems to *heighten* leadership responsibility, *not indicate its absence*.

For MPS leaders, the possibility of failure is not simply an add-on or afterthought; it is deeply enmeshed, even normalised, within the leadership experience. One senior figure describes the day-to-day challenges of police leadership as:

“Business as usual stuff...I’ve decided to do A, I’ve thought about doing B. I recognise that if I do A, it could go wrong for me because of X, Y, Z, but if I’d done B, that might have worked, but I thought this was more likely to go wrong...and on balance, I’ve judged all those and I think A... And *every* decision you make could potentially go wrong and you do your best to judge all of that and ultimately you come down with a route to take forward...And accept that that’s the way it is.”

In this context, it is trying to *decouple* failure from responsibility that might be seen as irresponsible, because:

“The more you try and design out anything ever going wrong, the slower and more cumbersome you become and, as a result, more *harm* is done. And trying to find that balance of minimising the harm by being flexible and fluid and fast-moving, while still having sufficient checks and balances that the obvious risks are avoided, and the learning from before is included in your thinking, is actually quite hard.”

In contrast to some of the ‘responsible leadership’ literature, therefore, failure in policing does not necessarily indicate irresponsibility, but refusing to acknowledge it, or trying to design or proceduralise one’s way out of it, might. This points to the complex, even counterintuitive, relationships between learning, risk and failure, and indeed, to the complexities of responsibility itself. Thus, the ‘ethical distinctiveness’ (Ciulla, 2018) of police leadership calls for careful reflection on the challenges, constraints and occasional paradoxes of leader responsibility.

The complexities of responsibility have long inspired scholars of public organizations, public leaders, and their relationship with society. Hoggett (2006), for instance, suggests that the space of public officialdom is one of profound contradiction and impossibility, such as the tension between justice and fairness for all versus addressing the particular needs of an individual case. This is not an abstract problem; it both constructs and infuses the everyday delivery and experiences of public services, for “it is often at the level of ‘operations’ that unresolved value conflicts are most sharply enacted, public officials and local representatives finding themselves ‘living out’ rather than ‘acting upon’ the contradictions of the complex and diverse society in which they live” (Hoggett, 2006, p.179). We would suggest that the business of ‘living out’ the paradox of being both-in-charge-and-not-in-charge goes to the heart of an ethic of responsibility for MPS leaders.

Asymmetries of Response: More Blame than Praise

Turning to asymmetries of response, one of our most persistent findings concerns the unevenness between the blame and praise that police leaders both expect and receive. This has motivated much of our work to date on the ‘Blame to Praise’ model (see also papers for the OL Board, January 2019).

At first glance, it is easy to assume that blame and praise are effectively two sides of the leadership coin, i.e., that leaders compensate for the blame they receive (fairly or otherwise) with the praise they receive (fairly or otherwise). This is an interesting discussion point in leadership ethics, for a certain symmetry is implied in the argument (e.g., Gabriel, 2013; Tomkins and Simpson, 2018) that leaders should neither be given all the credit for organizational success nor be handed all the blame for organizational failure.

Our experiences with MPS leaders, however, suggest that we should rethink the relationship between blame and praise in more asymmetrical terms. An asymmetry of response, in which police leaders both expect and receive far more blame than praise, arises partly because what they *might* be praised for (i.e., ‘success’) is frequently more terrifying than reassuring. This is, at least in part, because operational successes in policing are often ‘near misses’, that is, things not going quite as badly as they might have done. Not surprisingly, therefore, MPS leaders tend to demonstrate a certain cautiousness about drawing attention to, or seeking praise for, this kind of ‘success’.

Because of this, it is not surprising that narratives of success at MPS are both quantitatively and qualitatively different from narratives of failure. Whereas stories of failure (or ‘opportunities for learning’) are almost always rooted in operational work, official stories of success are often grounded in the ceremonial, rather than the operational, for instance, with tales of officers receiving awards or commendations or achieving some goal outside work. Ceremonial ‘good news’ is much safer to report, share and celebrate than operational ‘good news’.

Despite great enthusiasm for increased transparency in leadership in general (Avolio and Gardner, 2005; Houser et al., 2014), and policing in particular (Jackson, 2015), there is tremendous ambivalence in our data about the desirability of transparency of success. Whilst there is a strong (arguably excessive) relationship between failure and blame, there is a more tenuous and circumspect relationship between success and praise. Thus, whilst MPS leaders might wish to praise, encourage and motivate both themselves and their officers in ways that are grounded in operational realities, that is, by acknowledging that *considerable skill, effort and care* have often gone into making things ‘not quite as bad as they might have been’, ‘not quite as awful as last time’, or ‘at least not as bad here as in the next borough’, this raises significant issues for the politics of blame. It suggests the fear - and indeed, the irony - of being *blamed for success, not just for failure*.

That the concept of ‘success’ is complex in policing is also suggested in understandings of ‘best practice’, an idea which plays a significant role in discourses of organizational learning. In our leadership data, ‘best’ usually means *safe* (so far), that is, immune (so far) from criticism or censure. Just as ‘success’ often means ‘not as bad as it might have been’, so ‘best’ often means ‘not yet exposed as not-best’. As one chief inspector explains:

“It goes well and everyone’s, oh, this is really good, this is best practice. Every time you go to an incident, you should [take that particular action] straightaway...But a lot of what we’re calling best practice is only based on the fact that it hasn’t gone wrong. So we keep doing something and it keeps working and, well, no one complains, therefore that’s the right way to do it. That’s best practice. And actually you think, the first or second time you tried that, if that hadn’t gone well, it probably would have been mothballed by now.”

As we have suggested in other discussions with the OL Board, such asymmetries of blame and praise, and their interrelationship with what passes for ‘success’, may well be encouraging a certain amount of ‘superstitious learning’ (Levitt and March, 1988). Superstitious learning occurs when the subjective experience of learning is reassuring, but the connections between actions and outcomes are fragile, random or even incorrect. This kind of organizational learning thrives when routines are considered ‘best practice’ not because they are

demonstrably 'best', but because they are associated, however precariously, with the reduction of risk and the avoidance of blame, whether blame-for-failure or blame-for-success.

Whether because of unease about what is praiseworthy, or because of other dynamics of scrutiny and exposure, the spectre of blame exerts more influence over MPS leaders (and indeed, officers and staff, too) than the possibility of praise – an argument that was borne out when this question was raised and debated at the OL Network meeting in February 2019. In this respect, our analysis dovetails with public and political leadership research which emphasises that more leadership efforts go into minimising blame than into claiming credit for success (Weaver, 1986). The literature suggests not only that the public focuses more on what goes badly than on what goes well, in a so-called 'negativity bias' (Rozin and Royzman, 2001), but also that their (our) attributions of blame are neither consistent between events (Resodihardjo et al., 2016) nor consistent pre- versus post-event (McGraw et al., 2011). In other words, what attracts praise in one setting might easily attract censure in another, without the situations themselves necessarily being very different; and what elicits approval before-the-fact can rapidly turn into blame after-the-fact. This latter point also extends our understanding of response asymmetry to incorporate an element of hindsight/foresight. Indeed, being at the mercy of 'the hindsight police' is precisely how one detective chief inspector summarises the challenges of police leadership:

"In the back of your mind, you're *always* thinking, if I get this wrong, and someone is shot or stabbed and there's an IOPC review...And we call them the 'hindsight police', the IOPC...the impression you're given and well, I don't know, The Daily Mail...it's very much...why didn't you do a *fifth* check on his ID card before you arrested him?! And you're supposed to think of every possible variable when you're making decisions...You just end up tying yourself in knots because you're trying to cover everything...Why did you only check his pockets and his bag and his car for weapons, and his wife's bag and her car, and her wardrobe, and I don't know, everything?! Why didn't you *realise* that he'd stashed the knife in his kid's toy?! Surely it was *obvious* that it was there?!"

In short, the complexities of leadership at MPS relate to the constant, embedded presence and pressure of failure and blame, and the ways in which success is fragile, not always safe to acknowledge, and only occasionally connected with the possibility of praise, or even the reassurance of recognition. This comes about not least because of the impossibility of reconciling the demands of, and tensions between, different groups of stakeholders, such as victims and their families, perpetrators and their families, community leaders, regulators, policy-makers, the press, etc. In this, we connect with both responsible leadership theory (Maak and Pless, 2006) and discussions of public leadership (Benington, 2015; Hartley, 2018;

Hoggett, 2006) in suggesting that police leadership is necessarily about flexing and adapting in the face of conflicting forces, expectations and reactions, both with and against a range of stakeholders with often very different needs, interests and points of view.

From this perspective, we question the emphasis in some of the police leadership literature on the importance of leaders creating a common vision (cf Pearson-Goff and Herrington, 2013), because this creates the impression of something immutable and monolithic, and suggests a distinction between strategic and operational leadership which is not perhaps as applicable in policing as in other sectors. Instead, we highlight that police leaders' priorities and emphases morph and adapt in the face of almost limitless combinations of factors, risks and possibilities, often at times of great physical, emotional, temporal and political pressure.

Such tensions and irreconcilabilities are not just abstract concerns; they can have a powerful effect on the human beings who have to live with, and lead through, them. Balancing what is right for one's officers, what is right for the community, what is right for the organization, and what is right both procedurally and legally, is a significant leadership challenge; and it is a combination of factors that leaders in other sectors rarely face. Police leaders are enmeshed in the enactment and embodiment of public value as a *contested* democratic practice (Benington, 2015; Moore, 2013), so it is hardly surprising to discover that leading in this context is *hard*. As one inspector in our study suggests, focusing on any one group of stakeholders at the expense of the others is both necessary and stressful, and involves weighing up different types of hurt and harm, for instance:

“I took the decision to de-arrest the person, on the grounds of it was... it was the right thing to do at the time, in my opinion. The impact it would've had on community tension, and it was just the right thing to do to be fair to the person concerned. But that went against my team, because they think I didn't back the officer up, because my actions have, kind of, almost justified what the community have said...which is quite an uncomfortable position to be in, I have to say, and it was quite stressful. I think the people will come round eventually, but those are the sort of leadership decisions where you are on your own...And it can be quite a lonely place.”

Asymmetries of Reason: More Fault than Complexity

In our discussion of asymmetries of blame and praise, we focused on experiences of leaders, but we also suggested that the spectre of blame has a resonance for a broader group of police officers. The challenge for MPS leaders lies, therefore, not just with their own disproportionate experiences of blame, but also with the difficulties of protecting their officers and staff from a similar disproportionality. In other words, the possibility of being blamed for success as much as for failure is part of a broader cultural dynamic in policing, which MPS leaders try to make as tolerable as they can, both for themselves and for their subordinates.

This broader cultural dynamic can also be seen in the asymmetry we now review, namely a default assumption that when things go wrong it is because an individual is at fault. Indeed, one of the most persistent themes in our data is a dominant narrative of 'guilty before innocent'. This has widespread currency and resonance in both formal and informal conversations, both within the service and increasingly with external stakeholders, such as the IOPC. As one chief superintendent puts it:

"We've *got* to change the way we lead. We still think when we look at what went wrong, or where we've made mistakes, we still look first at what individual officers and staff have done...And we make mistakes *all the time*, but we don't yet address it in ways that really and effectively mean it won't happen again. Our first approach is to submit a misconduct form. It's not: how have we created a culture in which that sort of thing is acceptable? Or: what processes and systems do we have in place that've made that possible?"

In countless examples relayed to us, the default interpretation of the reason for failure is one of individual fault. Whether accidentally or deliberately, something that an individual leader or officer has - or has not - done is held to be the root cause of the problem. Indeed, as outsiders, we have been somewhat surprised by the frequency and immediacy with which apparently low-level breaches seem to get referred to internal, and potentially external, conduct, complaints and disciplinary bodies. Such a tapering of interpretation onto individual fault suggests that the reality is harsher than the picture painted in the literature on responsibility in public life (e.g., Andrews et al., 2006), in which there appears to be more space for acknowledgment that things can go wrong through misfortune or mishap, not just through mistake or mismanagement.

Such entrenching of assumptions of fault - and their serious implications for people's careers, livelihoods and well-being - acts as a significant barrier to organizational learning, because it can trap people in an anxious defensiveness which is the opposite of being open to learning (Vince, 2001; Vince and Saleem, 2004). Assuming that an individual is at fault when it is often more feasible that the complexity or unpredictability of the task is the/a major factor is both unrealistic and unreasonable, but it has widespread cultural currency in policing. It is a significant challenge for MPS leaders, who struggle to protect both themselves and their officers from dominant constructions of culpability. For this reason, this asymmetry between assumption of personal fault and acknowledgement of systemic complexity is something we have spent a great deal of time on, especially in connection with OL Network events.

As OL Board members will recall (see also Appendix One), our work here has built on Edmondson (2011), who suggests that, whilst the rhetoric of learning from failure is compelling, the number of organizations which actually do this successfully is much smaller than this rhetoric implies. Defining organizational failure in terms of "deviation from expected and desired results", Cannon and Edmondson (2005, p.300) suggest that a range of individual/psychological, group-level and organizational factors combine to inhibit learning, and warn against overly simplistic criticism of organizations for not regularly or successfully responding to learning opportunities. For Edmondson (2011), the main barriers to learning relate to two main issues with understandings of the relationship between failure and fault: First, the different *types* of organizational failure are not well understood; and second, the different *reasons* for failure are often confused. The 'Blame to Praise' model that we developed for the OL Network discussions was adapted from this work and designed to explore both the types and the reasons for failure.

Edmondson (2011) proposes three main types of failure: preventable; complexity-related; and intelligent. Preventable failures are those which should not have happened, and from which the priority learning is how to ensure that they will not happen again. By contrast, complexity-related failures are to be tolerated, because they could probably not have been prevented and something similar may well happen again in the future, irrespective of the quality of efforts that go into trying to avert it, not least because future instances may well contain new and unpredictable elements. As Edmondson (2011) argues, seeing these as 'bad' or as the result of individual fault is to misunderstand the nature of the complex systems in which they arise, and any such interpretation is likely to be counterproductive for learning and organizational improvement. Edmondson's (2011) third category is intelligent failures, which can be seen as positively 'good', because they provide potentially valuable information in support of innovation. As she proposes (2011, p.50), a culture of learning and innovation encourages intelligent failures whereby "the right kind of experimentation produces good failures quickly".

Turning to the second point about different reasons for failure, Edmondson (2011) offers a nine-point scale of deviance; inattention; lack of ability; process inadequacy; task challenge; process complexity; uncertainty; hypothesis testing; and exploratory testing. Complementary to this, and within the specific context of public services, Van de Walle (2016) proposes a distinction between individual mistakes and systemic causes, such as disinterest by policy makers in the complexities of the service in question, or a shortage of resources which creates a chronic imbalance between supply and demand. Based on our empirical data, we developed the five-point scale in the 'Blame to Praise' model, with: deviation; inattention; lack of skill or ability; task complexity or unpredictability; and innovation (see also Appendix One). It is hugely significant that the IOPC has developed and is now socialising a similar, six-point scale, which explicitly acknowledges its roots in our work, providing academic credibility for the 'direction of travel' of the new police regulations on conduct/misconduct (instated in law, February 2020).

Given the significance of the politics of blame in policing, we suggest that a core element of MPS leaders' responsibility is to role model the flexibility required to differentiate between these different reasons for failure, especially in discriminating between accusations of individual fault and explanations of systemic complexity. This involves developing the resilience and self-restraint to resist displacing one's own anxieties in the face of failure onto others. Such flexibility is needed both when leaders evaluate their own actions and when they evaluate the actions of their officers. Across our various deliverables for the OL Board, we have been highlighting connections between these interpretations of the reasons for failure and the issue of well-being, proposing that well-being involves feeling reasonably secure in the belief that one will not be unjustifiably blamed for things that are not one's personal fault. In other words, both individual and collective well-being is at stake when the asymmetry of reason we have outlined in this section is allowed to reign unchecked. We hope that this framework will continue to be helpful as a way of crystallising the challenges of leading in a climate where scrutiny is intense, risk is high, failure is inevitable, and individualised attributions of fault are both extremely damaging and, more often than not, unwarranted. As we have emphasised in this paper, this is a climate in which it takes considerable leadership skill, effort and care to do even 'damage limitation'.

So What?

Theoretical Connections and Contributions

An article on the theoretical contribution of this analysis has been peer-reviewed and published in the international journal, *Leadership* (Tomkins et al., 2020). In sum, this contribution includes:

- Enriching the understanding of asymmetry in critical leadership studies, away from an emphasis on leader/follower inequality, which privileges leaders and disadvantages followers (Collinson, 2011; Collinson, 2018; Knights, 2009) and towards an understanding of both the privilege and the disadvantage of leadership (Rhodes and Badham, 2018).
- Elaborating the ethics of leadership responsibility, as something which necessarily involves asymmetry between taking responsibility and being responsible (Ciulla, 2018).
- Decoupling failure from irresponsibility in connection with the literature on responsible leadership (Pless and Maak, 2011; Schraa-Liu and Trompenaars, 2006; Waldman and Galvin, 2008).
- Appreciating the significance of multiple, often irreconcilable, stakeholder interests in public leadership (Crosby and Bryson, 2018; Hartley et al., 2017; Hartley 2018; Ospina, 2017), which challenge the possibility of achieving consensus and common purpose, *no matter how skilled the leadership*.
- Developing the connections between generic leadership ethics (Ciulla et al., 2018) and the specific challenges of leadership in the public services, especially in relation to the contested nature of public value (Benington, 2015; Moore, 2013) and the professionalization agenda in policing (Holdaway, 2017).
- Underscoring the psycho-political role of police leaders in society; and the significance of police leaders absorbing responsibility and blame to release/relieve uncomfortable emotions, moral ambiguities and unresolved societal guilt and anxiety (Hoggett, 2006).
- Surfacing some of the under-researched connections between leadership, learning and well-being, and their paradoxical effects on both individual and institutions (Tomkins and Pritchard, 2019).

Impact on Practice and the Public Conversation

We have been using this paper to stimulate some very useful and powerful conversations about leadership development and leadership practice at MPS in particular and in policing in general, including:

- Focusing on police leaders role-modelling the flexibility required to both recognise and differentiate between the different reasons for failure, especially in discriminating between accusations of individual fault and explanations of systemic complexity.
- Understanding what is being taught under the aegis of 'responsible leadership', e.g., in BCU leadership development programmes, and helping to ensure that it is tailored to the specific, often ambiguous, nature of responsibility within the context of policing.
- Exploring the notion of 'resilience' for police leaders, not as a kind of 'fix it' mentality towards any issues that emerge, e.g., as 'mental health' problems; but as a way of surfacing and examining some of the tensions of police leadership that no training course or development programme is ever going to be able to fully resolve or remove.
- Giving voice to the challenges for MPS leaders who have to cope not only with their own asymmetrical (often unfair) experiences of blame, but also with the difficulties of protecting their officers and staff from a similar (and often unfair) asymmetry.
- Encouraging MPS to have confidence in the skills and values of its own leaders, rather than looking to idealised examples of so-called 'best practice' from elsewhere, and from the private sector, in particular.
- Contributing to the public conversation about the skills and challenges of police leadership, including the responsibility we all have for recognising the psycho-political dynamics of scapegoating. The conclusion of our published article proposes:

"As Van de Walle (2016, p.833) argues, within the public sector in particular, 'failure is in the eye of the beholder'. The triggers, justifications and ferocities of accusations of culpability in public life therefore say as much about the beholder as the beheld. Thus, our societal role in reinforcing, or simply permitting, these asymmetries says at least as much about our own unresolved questions of responsibility, agency and risk; our own disowning of what makes us feel uncomfortable; and our own projects of self-protection and self-preservation as it does about the leadership performances of the police."
(Tomkins et al., 2020, p.103)

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Appendix One: Unpacking the Blame to Praise Model

Type of Failure	Reason for Failure		Organizational Response to Failure
Preventable	Deviation	People deliberately and often recklessly violate rules, instructions or codes of practice.	Corrective and/or disciplinary procedures.
	Inattention	People accidentally violate rules, instructions or codes of practice.	Refreshing of training, briefing and supervision. Also, attempts to understand <i>reasons</i> for inattention, e.g., exhaustion?
	Lack of Skill or Ability	Despite best efforts, people do not have the requisite capability to avoid failure consistently.	Review of recruitment as well as training, coaching, supervision and support. NB 'capabilities' encompass technological as well as cognitive tools.
Tolerable	Task Complexity or Unpredictability	The job is inherently too complex to be executed failure-free every time. Even if all rules are followed, things may not always turn out well; even genuine 'best practice' does not shield us from failure.	Acknowledgement of the impossibility of guaranteeing absence of failure. This does not mean dropping standards because 'it's all too difficult', but understanding that not every single scenario can be predicted and not every risk avoided.
	Innovation	There is an appetite for exploration and experimentation. Failures are seen as potentially valuable; they make sense in context, and provide evidence of current problems and future possibilities.	Encouragement of a culture of 'promising practice', which nudges us away from the rigidity of one-size-fits-all solutions. Possibilities for innovation are collectively debated, so that (individual) innovation does not come full circle and become (individual) deviation.