# Paradoxes of organizational learning in policing: 'The truth, but not the whole truth, for everyone's sake'

Leah Tomkins https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1799-119X

Alexandra Bristow https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8744-5293

**Abstract**

This article examines the complex and often contradictory dynamics of organizational learning through the lens of paradox. Based on a four-year action research programme in policing, our findings reveal two key tensions relating to knowledge control (codification-discretion) and knowledge disclosure (transparency-occlusion). Casting paradox as an '*either/and*' relationship, we use these themes of control and disclosure to explore the interplay of learning (where actions *either* enable *and* inhibit learning) and emotion (where actions *either* reduce *and* increase anxiety). We consider how knowledge and learning are entangled in issues of emotional and institutional security, which operate at the threshold between public-service and public-served. In the psycho-politics of this relationship, the police attempt to safeguard *either* themselves from the anxiety of unwarranted blame *and* their communities from the anxiety of unmediated disclosure of the dangers of the world. From this perspective, we theorise organizational learning in policing as a paradox of *either* success *and* failure, *either* care *and* self-care, and *either* potence *and* impotence. Whilst grounded in policing, our reflections have a broader relevance for the ways in which

knowledge tactics both shape and reflect relations between organizations and their key stakeholders, especially those based on the contingent and incongruous logics of service.

**Keywords:** paradox, organizational learning; policing; knowledge control; knowledge disclosure; emotion; psycho-politics; care

**Prelude**

'Not long ago, I was leading a "meet the community" session in [one of the central city zones]. We'd been told about the "duty of candour" that's supposed to encourage whistle-blowing about things that are wrong, and this filters through into how we talk more openly with the public about how we learn the lessons from failure. I was telling the group about our results on domestic terrorism – that although one person with a history of mental health problems had slipped through the net and gone on a rampage with a machete, we'd had a full case review and worked out what lessons were to be learned to prevent that happening again…I tried to put it in context by explaining that this was just one case against the 50 or so potential terrorist attacks that we'd managed to prevent, and actually, four of them were in late-stage preparation. That was supposed to be good news! You know, that we'd stopped 49 out of 50! But the audience reaction told me this wasn't good news at all. Because what I'd done was make them aware of the 49 that could've happened, whereas previously they would never have known about these…That day, I got us roasted for what we'd got right, not just the one where we'd slipped up. That's where the "duty of candour" gets you!'

This vignette comes from a focus group with police officers who are debating the challenges of organizational learning (OL) and their experience of it as something that is extremely difficult to get right. The speaker is a front-line superintendent who also represents his command unit on the service's OL steering group. His reference to the complexities of a 'duty of candour' sets the scene for the intersections of knowledge control (duty) and knowledge disclosure (candour) that we explore in this paper.[i]

**Introduction and Literature Review**

Dualities and oppositions have a long history in organizational theory, such as the classic 'make versus buy' dilemma (Klein, 2005). In early organization studies, scholars tended to call for trade-offs to address the main oppositions. Consequently, a key focus of OL was on improving decision-making to make better choices between apparently feasible alternatives (Schad et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2017). As our world has become more complex, however, scholars have become more interested in organizational phenomena that are intimately, often inextricably, interrelated and thus not always amenable to trade-offs. Paradox has been embraced as a way of theorising those 'contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time' (Smith and Lewis, 2011:382).

In the domain of learning, there is a complex relationship between new and existing knowledge, i.e. between the promise of the new and the comfort of the familiar (Lewis and Dehler, 2000). This is arguably more of a paradox than a trade-off, because successful OL requires both, as organizations both build on and undo the past in order to progress towards the future (Lewis, 2000). The most richly theorised variant of this is the exploration-exploitation paradox (Benner and

Tushman, 2003; March, 1991). Exploration refers to the investigation of the as-yet unknown and is linked with innovation and experimentation. Exploitation involves 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 ideal relationship between exploration and exploitation: Exploration alone creates risk and cost without necessarily benefit; exploitation alone traps organizations in the status quo, unable or unwilling to break familiar habits. The notion of ambidexterity is often used to describe efforts to make this relationship productive for OL (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2010).

The duality of exploration-exploitation recalls 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 frames to do so, thereby restricting their 'new' to what can be produced through their 'old'. Such framing issues can have a significant effect on individual and organizational 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, 2000:766).

For Vince (2018:273), the dynamics of exploration-exploitation 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'. He argues that the 'learning organization' itself is a paradox, wherein a range of psycho-political factors both encourage and inhibit learning. A sense of exploration may manifest as

'learning-in-action', which generates new ways of approaching transformation and change; but this is often counterbalanced by a 'learning inaction' when adhering to what is already known feels 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. Vince and Broussine (1996) describe various psychological defences against the anxieties of learning, including regression (resorting to what has been reliable in the past) and denial (refusing to recognise a learning need). They argue that these defences are stubbornly resistant to being managed; for the more people try to resolve the contradiction with logic, the more they will *feel* the contradiction and become more viscerally embroiled.

The connection between paradox and emotion helps to explain why paradox seems to become more salient in situations of crisis. Keller et al. (2021) explore paradox in the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting painful contradictions in well-worn pairings such as 'work/life balance' and newer pairings such as 'lives versus livelihoods'. Jarzabkowski (in Keller et al., 2021) argues that the pandemic has surfaced suppressed tensions that are now thrown into sharp relief. Lewis (in Keller et al., 2021) posits a success-failure paradox at the heart of our response to COVID-19, challenging the normally binary opposition between success and failure to argue that the very notion of success in a pandemic (gauged, for instance, in relation to 'flattening the curve') is co-constituted with a very considerable failure.

For some professions, crisis is never far away. Front-line and emergency services operate in near-permanent proximity to often agonising tensions between different priorities and courses of action. On the whole, these services are delivered by the public sector, where duality and dichotomy have

long informed studies of public services in general and - the focus of our research - policing in particular. In his classic work, Lipsky (1980) casts police officers as 'street-level bureaucrats', who face an ongoing tension between what they are motivated and trained to do, i.e. respond to individual people in trouble, and what they are required to do because of financial and/or regulatory constraints, i.e. satisfy criteria of productivity, standardisation and risk-management. Policing is thus at the sharp-end of an efficiency-flexibility dilemma over whether 'to further automate, systematize, and regulate the interactions between government employees and citizens seeking help…or to secure or restore the importance of human interactions in services that require discretionary intervention or involvement' (Lipsky, 1980: xv).

Elsewhere in the policing literature, other dualities of strategic and operational prioritization loom large. For instance, the influence of evidence-based policing with its appealing mantra of 'what works' (Sherman, 1986) has inspired Punch (2015) to counter 'what works' with 'what matters'. Whilst grounded in debates about research methodology, the interplay between 'what works' and 'what matters' in policing also has a profound ethical dimension, speaking to a dilemma between who police officers feel they really are and how they think they have to perform in order to progress (Tomkins and Bristow, 2023). Kleinig (1996) elaborates the contradictions of police ethics in terms of a tension between being exemplars of a general morality for humankind and being representatives of a special, exceptionalist ethics which holds the police to a higher standard.

In relation to police learning, the theme of duality is often traced in debates about professional development, at least here in the UK. There is something of a divide between those who see police learning as linked to externally-validated qualifications, invoking more academic notions of

intelligence and 'police science' (Green and Gates, 2014) and those such as Willis and Mastrofski (2014) who suggest that policing is as much craft as science and that learning initiatives should be designed accordingly, e.g. to hone capabilities such as emotional intelligence. Within this journal, Bristow et al. (2022) surface the ways in which police learning is shaped by apparently contradictory discourses, including a tension between OL as an enabler of individual and organisational flourishing and OL as a manifestation of Foucauldian disciplinary power; and their study of such dualities paves the way for the conceptual, emotional and political complexities that we explore here. In short, whilst not always explicitly invoking the language of paradox, policing studies have long highlighted duality and contradiction, both within the domain of learning and beyond.

### *The Focus of This Paper*

This paper is derived from work on a four-year action research programme at a major UK city police service. The objective of the overall programme was to explore understandings and practices of OL in light of several high-profile crises in which the police service in question had seemingly failed to learn the lessons of the past. These had raised OL to a Board-level issue and led to an approach to our institution with a request to investigate. There were several sub-projects to this programme, one of which was linked to an emergent sense of OL as involving some of the dualities and contradictions highlighted above. This inspired the research question for the current paper, namely: How do the police make sense of the tensions and contradictions of OL in policing?[ii]

Accordingly, this paper explores the dynamics of OL in policing through the prism of paradox theory. It responds to calls for greater focus on the emotional dimensions of the paradoxes of the 'learning organization' (Vince, 2018), recognising Fairhurst's (2019) challenge to the assumption in much of the paradox literature that such emotions are largely benign. Building on the suggestion that the emotions of learning are heightened in and by crisis, our work connects with Keller et al.'s (2021) call for paradox studies to showcase more voices from front-line emergency services, where paradox may be at its greatest intensity, persistency and consequence for learning. We thereby respond to appeals for closer attention to the empirical contexts in which paradox seems to thrive (Fairhurst, 2019; Schad et al., 2019) and to the empirics of police learning in particular (Bristow et al., 2022).

The paper is structured as follows: First, we introduce our project by describing our methods of data collection and analysis, highlighting the particular features of our chosen methodology of dialogical reflexive action research. We follow this with a synthesis of findings relating specifically to the dualities of knowledge. Through the prism of paradox, we then discuss the ways in which these findings reinforce, challenge and extend the literatures on learning, power and the psycho-politics of public service. We conclude by offering some reflexive observations on what may be at stake for both the police and the public in fostering greater understanding of these paradoxical anomalies.

**Methods**

All the sub-projects in this research programme deployed action research as their overarching methodology. Action research encompasses a range of approaches which emphasise the

application of knowledge to practice (Bradbury and Reason, 2001; Cassell and Johnson, 2006). The version we use here is modelled on dialogical reflexive action research (Cunliffe, 2002; Ripamonti et al., 2016). It is dialogical in the sense of being highly collaborative and committed to sense-making *with* our practitioner colleagues rather than merely reporting on what they do or say. It recognises that multiple discourses are always in play in organizations, and that highlighting their often unnoticed or unspoken contradictions can open up space for practitioners and researchers alike to think about things differently. It is a member of the action research family, because it aims to put the results of this collaborative thinking into practice.[iii]

Consistent with this research orientation, we collected two types of qualitative data - interview and participative-ethnographic (P-E). The former is data from semi-structured one-to-one interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. The latter comprises various data outputs and artefacts resulting from our participation in practice, from where we observed, challenged, shaped and delivered a range of initiatives, including board presentations, staff development events, and the creation and facilitation of a new network of OL champions. For this participative-ethnography strand, we took detailed notes during and immediately after our many research encounters, reproducing what was said (and how it was said) as faithfully as possible. These encounters were not typically audio-recorded (unless they were already being recorded by our police colleagues for other purposes, such as in-house blogs). This was both because recording would probably have compromised their naturalistic flavour and because of the sheer scale of this work, which comprised over 200 days of immersion in practice over the four-year period. We analysed both data types using techniques of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), effectively treating them as a single data-set and drawing on recommendations for the integration of group and

interview data (Tomkins and Eatough, 2010). In analysing this range of texts, encompassing formal and informal verbal accounts as well as material and procedural artefacts, we are responding to calls for greater multi-modality in paradox research (Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2017).

To initiate this research programme, we undertook a four-month scoping study to identify the key concerns of our main group of sponsors and OL specialists in the police service in question. As part of this work, we discussed with our practitioner colleagues how the literature on organizational knowledge is often seen as having two branches (Rashman et al., 2009): The first sees knowledge as cognitive and informational, and OL improvements therefore typically take the shape of new systems and processes; the second conceptualises knowledge as socially constructed, contested and embodied, and OL improvements are therefore usually framed in terms of culture and/or behaviour change. In our report from the scoping study, we suggested that these two different, but equally valid, conceptualisations of knowledge might be complicating efforts to improve OL practices, and we designed a programme of field research to explore these issues in greater depth.

Our field research involved discussions with 112 police leaders, officers and staff representing all ranks from trainee constable to chief constable.[iv] In this paper, we will present data from all these ranks, referring to chief superintendent and above as 'police leaders' to ensure anonymity as the hierarchy narrows. Our participants represent a wide range of functions in front-line policing, including response units, neighbourhood policing and community support, and specialist safeguarding functions, including child protection, mental health and modern slavery. In addition, some are based in service headquarters (professional standards, knowledge management, training, etc), and others in key partner bodies such as the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC).[v]

As the field work progressed, we became increasingly involved in developing and implementing new ways of working based on the emerging findings of the research. At the outset of the programme, I (first author) was appointed as a member of a new OL steering group, and I used this position to present snapshots and syntheses of the data and to facilitate discussion about their practical implications. This entailed testing and refining new ideas and provocations in a manner that other research paradigms might call 'member checking'. It underscored the significance of the validity criterion of *resonance* in action research, which may be different to validity criteria in more mainstream research methods (Bradbury and Reason, 2001). Within our particular type of action research, this was a specifically *dialogical resonance* insofar as the aim was to surface issues which 'rang true' using language that really meant something to our practitioner colleagues. As the steering group settled into its remit, we developed a common language to ensure that such dialogical resonance would lead to practical outcomes. This became known as 'the so what? challenge'; and it was a challenge to which both I (as researcher) and the practitioner members of the steering group were expected to rise. The question of what to *do* with our findings thus increasingly became a collective responsibility.

Our analysis therefore involved working abductively between the questions and concerns identified at the start of the programme and those which surfaced as the work progressed and our understanding of the rhythms of practice deepened. From a technical perspective, abduction is an iterative process of observing, interpreting, modelling, checking and refining (Cunliffe, 2002; Nenonen et al., 2017). It is a form of generative reasoning that works especially powerfully with and on anomaly, involving elements of deconstruction, exploration and disciplined imagination

(Sætre and Van de Ven, 2021). The relatively long-term nature of the programme has proved conducive for abduction, enabling vicious and virtuous circles of paradox to unfold over time (Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2017).

Abduction was relevant specifically for the decision to develop a paradox framing because, whilst we had discussed the two branches of organizational knowledge (Rashman et al., 2009) during the scoping study and were therefore alert to dualities in general, the decision to analyse the data specifically through the prism of paradox emerged gradually, as we worked iteratively and dialogically with the ideas and the challenges they represented. Paradox was not a term that had featured strongly in the scoping study discussions, but it came to be more and more helpful as our work progressed. We tested its resonance at our various meetings with our practitioner colleagues, and found it to be a highly effective way of capturing the sense of contradiction in how OL was being defined and subsequent improvement initiatives shaped.

Within the overall lexicon of paradox, the expression that resonated most with our practitioner colleagues was of paradox as an *either/and* relation, which we came across in Jing and Van de Ven (2014). This seemed to capture a sense that the dynamics of OL were not just contradictory (*either*), but also had some kind of interdependency and commonality (*and*). It created a sense of things being the same-but-different. This enabled a neat contrast with the more natural-sounding expression *either/or,* which implies that things can be separated and differentiated, thus suggesting more of a trade-off between two alternatives than a paradox.[vi] Furthermore, our practitioner colleagues were more drawn to the term *either/and* than to the *both/and* language in some of the paradox literature (e.g. Smith and Lewis, 2022). The language of *both/and* can imply a smoothing

over contradiction in the search for synthesis and reconciliation (Fairhurst, 2019), whereas our practitioner colleagues' lived experience was characterized more by disconnects and disturbances. Whatever the reason, we try to work with the words that resonate most with our practitioner colleagues and accordingly, we use the language of *either/and* to shape the findings below.

**Findings**

Table 1 presents a summary of our data, synthesised into two overarching themes of knowledge control and knowledge disclosure and highlighting the two defining features of paradox, contradiction (*either*) and interdependency (*and*) (Smith and Lewis, 2011). 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). Modulation is usually seen as a musical term, where it refers to a shift from one key to another (e.g. from a major to a minor key), retaining certain qualities of the base note whilst altering others. As a way of capturing this sense of same-but-different, it has been used elsewhere in academic discussions of paradox (e.g. Solove, 2021). It is especially apt for our own analysis because musical modulation is said to both signify and evoke emotions (Suda et al., 2008).

[PLEASE INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

***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. The contradiction is crystallised by one police leader, who suggests that the balance shifts depending on context:

'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.' (interview data)

Codification and discretion modulate each other (*and*), for both poles are potentially harmful if unqualified. As discussed below, this involves many paradoxical aspects, especially insofar as codification *either* enables *and* inhibits learning, and *either* reduces *and* increases anxiety.

*Codification modulates discretion*

The standardisation of practice is strongly associated with avoiding unnecessary trial-and-error learning and managing risk through harnessing 'best practice'. It relies on the learning generated in a particular context, but moves away from this particularity in favour of general application. Codification is therefore cast as an enabler, even prerequisite, of effective OL. As one superintendent explains:

'When we hear "organizational learning", what comes to mind immediately is the need to break out of our silos and start capturing and sharing information better. The situations we face, I mean, they all feel like they're unique in that moment when they're happening to you. But also, there's a voice going, someone *must* have faced this before. What did *they* do?' (participative-ethnographic/P-E data)

Codification has a particular salience in the context of failure. When something goes wrong, the institutional response is to analyse the event in detail and extract its key lessons so that the failure can be avoided in the future. This response is enmeshed in discourses of accountability, and in accountability's shadow side, blame. As one constable explains:'Something went wrong, so there must be something to be learned from that. Thanks for the recommendation, make everybody do that. Here's a "learning package", tick, you've now been told if it goes wrong again it's your fault for not doing what we told you.' (interview data)

More positively, the codification of learning is also seen as helpful for community relations. It enables a continuity of understanding of community-specific priorities and sensitivities, connecting with what one leader calls 'community legacy', because:

'Although we're part of the communities we police, we move in and out of them and we post people into different jobs and different locations. But communities have long memories and they remember things that have a currency. So even though the incident happened 30 years ago, 20 years ago, 10 years ago, it's current and meaningful *now*.' (interview data)

Simultaneously, however, there are counter-dynamics through which codification can inhibit learning. Codification requires taxonomy and classification, which means splitting and simplification, for example:

'We began by thinking in terms of victims and suspects, because our computer system says so and the criminal justice system says so, and so it's very binary. And then I think there was an understanding that some of the most vulnerable victims might progress on because of that to become prolific offenders. And actually, some of them will continue to be vulnerable victims whilst they're offenders…Trying to categorise things means we're not getting a proper understanding.' (interview data)

Such simplification can mean losing sight of the connections between events and between different aspects of events. As one detective inspector explains:

'All that categorising into "learning packages". That's only ever going to capture the trees. But there's a wood too, isn't there?...When we get hauled over the coals, it's more often than not because we've lost sight of the wood. And there's no point replanting an individual tree if there's a ruddy great motorway about to flatten your wood! [laughs]' (P-E data)

Codification can also discourage the experiential learning that involves sensitivity to context. The '30 questions you *must* ask' approach can mean that:

'The instinct goes, the personal responsibility goes, because you then say, it's not, as a human, it's no longer my responsibility to ensure that these people are safe… I've been told that if I ask these 30 questions it will be fine, and somebody will do a calculation and assess the risk, and if

it's high I'll be asked to do something else and if it's low I won't. And if it turns out to be wrong, it's not my fault.' (interview data)

In relation to emotions, the codification of learning is a mechanism for reducing anxiety, especially when enveloped in discourses of 'evidence-based practice'. As one sergeant explains:

'If you stick to what the evidence says, and you know, just follow evidence-based practice, you can't go wrong. I mean, there's always a thousand things that *can* go wrong, of course. But you know, if you really thought about all that, you'd be totally paralysed every time you went out there! [laughs] And you have to shield yourself from that somehow.' (P-E data)

It takes courage to resist codification and overcome the anxieties associated with using one's judgement and discretion. However, if anxiety can be reduced or at least managed, there is space for other emotions, such as pride and passion. As one leader explains, codification is also associated with officers wanting to do the best possible job for their constituents:

'They always want to know, what's the thing we should do? And that's, I think, because people are passionate about protecting [their community], and it's nice to be told, do this thing and things will be better, you'll be more efficient or effective.' (interview data)

At the same time, however, codification can also quash positive emotions. As one inspector explains, it runs counter to the motivation many have for embarking on a career in policing:

'The more formulaic you get, the less ownership people take, the less emotional engagement you have.' (interview data)

Codification may thus help to reduce anxiety, but it is also associated with a range of other emotions, which are often contradictory, counterintuitive and confusing.

*Discretion modulates codification*

Alongside this strong association of OL with knowledge codification, considerable importance was attached to the learning that escapes codification. Individual discretion and reflection are seen as vital to offset some of the problems highlighted above. As a detective superintendent explains:

'I think you have to really *sit* with the hell of feeling and just knowing that you could've done it better. Really *sit* with it. When you're pressurised to turn it into one of those, what do they call them, those "learning recommendations", well, that's when I think the actual learning stops. For me, at least. Better decisions come from suffering from your own bad decisions, I think.' (P-E data)

Furthermore, personal discretion is associated with managing the anxiety that codification sometimes entails. When police colleagues depart from standard practice because of the specific, perhaps even unique, nature of the situation they face, they often resist codifying it and making it available to others as a 'learning package' for fear that this will expose its weakness, even its illicitness. Countering the positive rhetoric of OL as systemic collaboration, one sergeant explains:

'You'd be mad to put your head above the parapet like that! There's a huge amount of great policing here, but if you allow the [central OL team] to get their hands on it, the next thing you know, you're up on a misconduct charge!' (P-E data)

Officers also challenge the suggestion that knowledge codification is always benign:

'When you get the latest "learning bulletin", you have to be on your guard for where there's, you know, deliberate ambiguity. You know, what's there to trip you up. When they push the "this is now standard" message, they always leave room for us to trip up and it be all our fault. It's supposed to be helpful, you know, getting everything down, but trust me, it isn't! [laughs]' (interview data)

In these various ways, individual discretion is used to temper codification, highlighting that, despite its appeal of rational neutrality, the classification of learning is a complex business.

***Paradoxes of Knowledge Disclosure: Transparency-Occlusion***[vii]

Discourses of transparency and openness are widespread in the service and amongst the service's key stakeholders, as highlighted in our opening vignette on the 'duty of candour'. 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 successful the learning will be. In this pairing, therefore, transparency is constructed as the pole most conducive to OL. However, as with the control paradox above, such transparency can *either* enable *and* inhibit learning, and *either* reduce *and* increase anxiety.

*Transparency modulates occlusion*

The call for transparency is central to discourses of learning from failure, in particular. As one detective chief inspector suggests:

'We have to bring things out into the open, we all know that. I mean, years ago, things probably were swept under the carpet, you know, things that probably shouldn't have happened. But in

modern policing, everything is open, everything is transparent…That's how we learn.' (P-E data)

Behind this surface understanding, however, other dynamics are in play, suggesting that transparency does not necessarily enable learning. As one superintendent explains:

'We are permanently being scrutinised. But actually, you know, that goes against learning. Scrutiny is great for transparency, but not so great for learning…Nothing prepares you for the amount of scrutiny you get in this job. You know, we try our best, and do whatever we can to try to help. But when every little thing is picked over and ripped to shreds, it's very hard to really accept that as learning. If anything, it just makes you more defensive.' (interview data)

There are strong links between transparency and the concept of 'best practice'. Packaging something as 'best practice' brings tools and techniques to light that might otherwise remain private, local and/or informal. However, there is scepticism over whether what is being promoted in this way really does represent the 'best' way to achieve an objective, for 'best practice' is often:

'Common practice masquerading as best.' (interview data)

Furthermore, the material selected as 'best practice' often feels random, and thus an unreliable source of, or basis for, OL. As one detective inspector explains:

'That may well have worked well once, but there's no guarantee it will work again in the future…So, can you seriously call it "learning" if it's so random? [laughs] All it means is that it didn't fail on this one occasion. That doesn't make it best! Just means it didn't fail this time.' (interview data)

Making things transparent serves a kind of 'feel good' function. It provides some reassurance that even the most terrible events are the stuff of learning and improvement. It is thus associated with positive characteristics of accountability, integrity and positivity:

> 'Nobody ever got promoted by talking about all the problems. You have to show them some learning you've packaged up and ideally put on [the intranet repository]. And best of all, call it a toolkit! [laughs] That's how you get on. You know, the "feel good factor"!' (P-E data)

*Occlusion modulates transparency*

Whilst transparency features strongly in both formal and informal understandings of OL, it is simultaneously felt to be complex and contradictory, often revealing disconnects between rhetoric and reality. Despite (and as well as) the 'feel good' function of transparency to reduce anxiety, transparency also *increases* anxiety and therefore has to be tempered. In order to protect themselves from unbearable anxiety about the prospect of blame, officers develop a skill of providing what one leader calls 'false transparency':

> 'There's so much pressure from the IOPC and from the Daily Mail and, you know, all the others just waiting to pounce when things go wrong. And that really exacerbates the problem of the blame culture, and you know, that *fear* we face *every single day*…You end up offering a kind of false transparency when they ask you to account for everything that you did or didn't do. Perhaps not false, I mean, it absolutely *is* the truth. It's the truth, but not the whole truth, for everyone's sake.' (interview data)

This quote underscores that modulating transparency offers a degree of protection from anxiety not just for police officers, but also for the public. If full transparency were offered all the time, the public would be exposed to information they might not be able or willing to confront. Therefore, occlusion becomes a form of safeguarding:

'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.' (interview data)

Protection from the full weight of transparency is also revealed in interpretations of why OL is different in policing. In other sectors, considerable emphasis is placed on learning from 'near misses', because these contain invaluable information about system vulnerabilities, as well as being heralded as a way to build a 'learning culture'. One chief inspector discusses the challenges of 'near misses' in relation to the anxieties of transparency:

'All that theory about "near misses", you know, absolute gold dust for organizational learning. You know, the stuff that very nearly did go wrong, but for some reason didn't…Aviation is always held up as the best example of that. But here, exposing the "near misses" is a real problem. If people knew quite how many close shaves we face every single day, they'd never be able to sleep at night…And that's not because we aren't doing a good job. It's because we live in a world where a lot of bad things happen…And you know, sometimes I think the whole job is just one long "near miss"!' (P-E data)

Because of the complexities of policing, therefore, modulating transparency protects people within the service from the anxiety of excessive scrutiny, and people outside the service from the anxiety of excessive openness. Against a widespread assumption that transparency is the route to effective OL, occlusion nurtures a kind of learning that recognises the lived experiences of policing. Occlusion helps to reframe and retune (rather than inhibit) learning so that its challenges and complexities can be tolerated.

**Discussion**

Our analysis illustrates the potential of dialogical reflexive action research (Cunliffe, 2002) to surface the tensions and contradictions of OL. Such reflexive engagement draws out the paradoxes of organization not as inherently good or bad, but as woven into the fabric of everyday discourse and experience. In the following discussion, we reflect on how these findings reinforce, challenge and extend the literatures on learning, power and the psycho-politics of public service.

*Paradoxical Binds of Learning*

Our codification-discretion paradox bears a certain resemblance to the well-known exploitation-exploration pairing (Benner and Tushman, 2003; March 1991). Like exploitation, codification refers to a desire to solidify, institutionalise and capitalise on existing knowledge; and like exploration, discretion conjures up a sense of experimentation, where people are free to develop and apply learning more creatively and imaginatively. Codification-discretion invokes a tension between making learning sustainable in the current setting and having the authority and opportunity to do things differently (Vince et al., 2018). Like our action research setting, Vince et al.'s (2018) action learning approach seems especially conducive to surfacing emotions. In

demonstrating that codification can *either* reduce *and* increase anxiety, we therefore connect with scholarship on emotion and power as *either* inhibiting *and* encouraging learning (Vince, 2018).

Our second pairing, transparency-occlusion, surfaces complexities that have been less extensively explored in paradox studies. It bears a certain resemblance to a sharing-privacy tension which seems to have become more salient with COVID-19 (Raza and Keller, in Carmine et al., 2021), with demands for greater technological surveillance of both work and health. However, we see our transparency-occlusion pairing as more deeply and wickedly paradoxical than a sharing-privacy pairing, which seems more trade-off than paradox and is tinged with issues of confidentiality. Furthermore, whilst their analysis frames this tension primarily in relation to technology and information management, we suggest that a sharing-privacy dilemma involves emotions that are themselves paradoxical, insofar as sharing is experienced as *either* reducing *and* increasing anxiety.

Our analysis challenges the assumption that transparency is merely the opposite of secrecy (Coombs and Holladay, 2013). Our findings suggest more co-constitution than straightforward opposition, insofar as transparency relies on occlusion to be tolerable. A safe and meaningful transparency only seems possible if it is qualified; and this is paradoxically *either* for the sake of the police *and* for the sake of the society they serve. Full disclosure of the dangers of the world - and how close we often sail to disaster - would create intolerable anxieties for the public and pose an intolerable risk of blame and censure for the police. This is crystallised in our paper's subtitle, 'the truth, but not the whole truth, *for everyone's sake*'.

Thus, whilst management theory often assumes that transparency engenders trust (Best, 2005; Millar et al., 2005), our findings suggest that, in policing at least, transparency engenders as much fear and anxiety as trust. They reinforce critical scholarship on the notion of transparency as enmeshed with practices of surveillance and control (Ball et al., 2018; Heimstädt and Dobusch, 2020). Indeed, De Vaujany et al. (2021) explicitly use the language of paradox to highlight an interplay of transparency-as-control (fostering competition) and transparency-as-trust (fostering collaboration). For critical studies of power, therefore, paradox is a promising way to 'move beyond the tired dichotomies between discipline and autonomy, compliance and resistance, power and freedom that, at least to some extent, still hamper organization studies' (Raffnsøe et al., 2019:155).

Significant for our analysis is the suggestion that transparency is interrelated with security. Thus, 'even when an organization claims to be transparent, or a state implements Freedom of Information acts, such transparency efforts play out in relation to organizational needs for secrecy (i.e. products or innovation projects) or institutionalized classification systems ensuring that important state secrets are not disclosed (i.e. in security matters)' (Albu and Flyverbom, 2019:279). Appeals to security can, of course, be used to draw a veil over unethical practices. With particular relevance to policing, Alcadipani et al. (2021) discuss how discourses of 'the public interest' are manipulated to suppress racial debate and produce/reproduce an understanding that 'black lives don't matter'.

In Albu and Flyverbom's (2019) formulation, security is constructed as an institutional phenomenon, whether of organization or of state. To complement this, we posit an emotional dimension to the interplay between transparency and security, i.e. a modulation of transparency

for the sake of psychological as well as institutional security. We connect with the notion of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; 2018), which has started to be widely used in UK policing (Tomkins et al., 2020). The psychological safety construct emphasises that people must feel safe to admit openly to concern and uncertainty if OL is to flourish, in relation both to learning to avoid preventable failure and to fostering creativity and innovation.

Whilst the psychological safety literature has usually explored dynamics *within* organizations, our analysis directs the spotlight to the threshold *between* an organization and its stakeholders. Thus, psychological safety is negotiated and contested not just between officers and their superiors, but also between police and public. Efforts to secure psychological safety within the service are both offset and obfuscated by police officers' duty to provide psychological safety for their stakeholders. This is exemplified in our data by the Jack Nicholson line, 'you can't handle the truth!', and it recalls the vignette on the complexities of the 'duty of candour' with which we began this paper. In emphasising the paradoxical nature of these liminal dynamics, our analysis offers a useful extension to the burgeoning literature on psychological safety.

Connections with psychological safety underscore that the security that produces and underpins transparency is not to be taken for granted in organizational life. Unpacking these complexities, Albu and Flyverbom (2019) identify two strands in the transparency literature. The first is geared towards verifiability; it associates information disclosure with positive outcomes of accountability, honesty and insight. The second is performative; it focuses on 'complex communicative, organizational, and social processes rife with tensions and negotiations, and largely unsettles the assumed positive effects of information disclosure' (Albu and Flyverbom, 2019:277). Whilst this

is a useful conceptual distinction (neatly paralleling the two branches of OL in Rashman et al., 2009), these two modes seem more closely intertwined in practice. In practice, transparency initiatives are highly dependent on political and cultural factors, even where information is readily available and accessible. As our findings imply, even with the best information management systems, transparency remains a convoluted and contested aspect of OL.

### *Paradox and Power*

The notion of performativity brings us to issues of power, which has traditionally been underrepresented in the paradox literature (van Bommel and Spicer, 2017; Fairhurst, 2019). As Lê and Bednarek (2017) elaborate, co-constitution of the two elements of a paradox does not mean they are necessarily in an equal or symmetrical relationship. Different stakeholders have different interests in the balancing of organizational oppositions, and a weighting towards one pole may be deemed positive or negative depending on whose interests it serves (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017). Moreover, from the perspective of power, we might question any assumption that those confronting paradox can make their own decisions about where to draw the line, or where a compromise tips from bearable to unbearable (Berti and Simpson, 2021). In short, a power perspective challenges assumptions of both symmetry and agency.

Our findings reveal a weighting in favour of the poles of codification (in codification-discretion) and transparency (in transparency-occlusion), both of which are discursively positioned as more conducive to effective OL. On the whole, the dominant pole tends to reflect official understandings, whilst the non-dominant pole highlights some of the compensating and counterbalancing aspects of lived experience. These paradoxes are thus not two sides of the same

coin (as paradox is sometimes represented), so much as a co-existence and cross-contamination of an official and a black-market currency, each with its own kind of clout.

Through a paradox lens, we see the phenomena of OL intersecting in *either* complementary *and* contradictory ways. Specifically, our analysis reinforces Bristow et al.'s (2022) model of the power relations of OL, which supplements learning as empowering, disciplining and insurging with a fourth learning mode, theorised as palliative learning. This type of learning is geared towards relieving the pain of contradiction (as in the need to 'do more with less') without resolving the underlying injury. As they explain, 'the aim is to find and maintain a pragmatic balance between the contradictory power relations, and the focus shifts correspondingly from learning-to-thrive, learning-to-comply and learning-to-resist to learning-to-cope, which involves learning to "make it work" whilst "holding on for dear life" (as in palliative care) on the edge on non-survival' (Bristow et al., 2022:17).

Our analysis illustrates and extends Bristow et al.'s (2022) proposition. Through the prism of paradox, and our transparency-occlusion paradox in particular, we see a duality within palliative learning, i.e. a tension not just *between* the different modes of empowering, disciplining, insurging and coping, but *within* them too, at least in relation to learning-to-cope. As our findings suggest, qualifying transparency with elements of occlusion protects people both within and beyond the organization from excessive anxiety. This duality of *either* protect *and* self-protect is Janus-like, recalling the threshold dynamics associated earlier with psychological safety. Thus, learning-to-cope involves and sustains a palliative paradox of *either* care *and* self-care.

The pragmatism of Bristow et al.'s (2022) palliative learning recalls the notion of 'pragmatic paradoxes' (Berti and Simpson, 2021). These occur when tension is accompanied by limited agency, i.e. when people have limited scope to resolve dilemmas because they are enveloped in asymmetrical relations of power. Experiencing paradox without agency can result in withdrawal, distrust and a retreat to ritualistic literal obedience (Tracy, 2004). Our data reveal all these reactions, as officers try to protect *either* themselves *and* their communities from excessive anxiety. Literal obedience to 'learning recommendations' stops officers being paralysed by paradox and enables them to muster sufficient agency to be able to keep turning up for duty. Furthermore, such pragmatism is often enveloped in humour, irony and sarcasm (Jarzabkowski & Lê, 2017), as suggested by the frequent occurrence of laughter in our data.

A classic example of paradoxical power is a subordinate being ordered to take the initiative: Obeying this instruction also means disobeying it. Our findings suggest a similar quandary as officers are permanently on guard for the possibility of disciplinary censure for having obeyed the instruction to innovate, thereby disobeying 'the rules'. Our analysis thereby connects with theorisations of the 'dark side' of organizational paradox (Berti and Simpson, 2021), including the suggestion that one manifestation of an organization under pressure is an increase in the ambivalence of its rhetoric (Hennestad, 1990). In our data, this is suggested when officers question the assumption that knowledge codification is always benign and well-intended, and talk about needing to develop the skill to detect and unpack 'deliberate ambiguity'.

However, whilst the dominant poles of codification and transparency may reflect and reinforce official understandings, we do not see this as a straightforward issue of hierarchical power. As

Berti and Simpson (2021) suggest, hierarchical subordination is not the only condition that determines the emergence of 'pragmatic paradox', i.e. this is not a simple asymmetry between senior and junior officers. Our data reveal the effects of paradoxical pragmatism across all the ranks in our study. We therefore dovetail with suggestions that paradox can entangle both leaders and led (van Bommel & Spicer, 2017). Indeed, our data support the suggestion that the apparently most powerful are particularly exposed to nested paradoxes both within and across organizational levels (Jarzabkowski and Lê, 2017; Smets et al., 2019).

For us, the power relations of paradox are also issues of reflexivity, and thus core to dialogical reflexive action research. Introducing the language of paradox into organizational conversations can be difficult, especially in a context like policing, where leaders, officers and staff are often under extraordinary pressure, and where the 'yes, but' nature of paradox is understandably not always welcome. In our experience, appeals to codification and transparency are usually easier than to their counterparts, discretion and occlusion, which feel unsafe, unsystematic and unprofessional by comparison, especially in formal settings like board meetings. The asymmetries of paradox are thus not just of theoretical interest; they impact on practice, too.

***The Psycho-Politics of Public Service***

Paradox offers an interesting framing for the 'rules versus discretion' question 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 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, 1997:364). Thus, public servants work with *either* rules *and* discretion in ways that are contingent on relations of statutory, institutional, inter-agency and interpersonal power. Furthermore, the public services literature reveals an interesting link between our two pairings, because difficulties with 'rules versus discretion' are often resolved through appeals to transparency (Baldwin, 1997). When one paradox proves too arduous, another steps in to absorb and redirect its energies.

The public services context is especially significant in relation to the issue of blame. Our analysis reinforces Vince and Broussine's (1996) claim that blame is a key dynamic underpinning and motivating the enablers and barriers to learning, especially in policing (Tomkins et al., 2020). Blame involves projection and displacement of uncomfortable emotions; indeed, being perceived as incapable of handling paradox can be a form of victim-blaming (Berti and Simpson, 2021). Through the prism of paradox, therefore, our analysis connects with influential literature on 'blame games' in public life, reframing Hood's (2010) inquiry into blame avoidance as *either* sharpening *and* blunting policy debate, and *either* pinpointing *and* diffusing accountability.

Deeply enmeshed with blame, the paradoxes in our study highlight a complex relationship between success and failure. Jay (2013) proposes a 'service paradox' of success-failure in a public/private hybrid organization, which results from juxtaposing the logics of public service and client service, and 'surfaces from beneath the waters and demands navigation when outcomes appear as both success and failure…[when] transactions are considered successes for the public service mission

but failures for the client service mission' (Jay, 2013:148). Such clashes of service-logic help to account for a range of unintended consequences for organizational performance.

Building on Jay (2013), we suggest that paradoxes of service-logic unfold not only in the concrete context of public/private coalitions, but also in the psycho-political context of the public/private relationship. In policing, many experiences can be seen as *either* success *and* failure depending on whose interests are being foregrounded. For instance, our findings suggest that 'near misses' are 'gold dust' for OL, both in a theoretical sense and as material for promotions panels, but they are also a constant reminder of the role that luck often plays in producing something that can be hailed a success. Despite the appeal of rational notions of codification and transparency, what is success from one perspective (a disaster averted) can be failure from another (an indication of personal and systemic vulnerability). Using 'near misses' as the basis for OL is thus just one of the ways in which police organizations engage with *either* success *and* failure. This is not dissimilar to the *either* success *and* failure of 'flattening the curve' of COVID-19 (Lewis in Keller et al., 2021).

Police officers face such a success-failure paradox in the very ethos of their service commitment. Public service involves and instates a collusion whereby 'government derives some of its legitimacy by not confronting citizens with issues they would prefer not to think about…The hapless public official becomes the whipping horse, the one who can be blamed for things that neither citizens nor governments will properly address' (Hoggett, 2006:184-5). Despite (and because of) their power, police officers derive at least some of their authority through submitting to the criticism of others, no matter how unreasonable; and derive some of their success through failure. In the psycho-politics of service, potence is not the opposite of impotence.

**Reflexive Conclusions**

In this paper, we have explored some of the dilemmas of OL through the lens of paradox. The paradoxes we have traced involve *either* success *and* failure, extending our understanding of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018) and palliative learning (Bristow et al., 2022) as liminal experiences of *either* care *and* self-care, as officers strive to protect their communities physically and psychologically, *either* exposing themselves to scrutiny and censure (psychological as well as physical attack) *and* protecting themselves from attack that would be intolerable if unqualified. We have thereby sought to both deepen and broaden the scope of these two key learning constructs.

Knight and Paroutis (2017) suggest that paradox is a threshold concept with considerable potential for OL. Threshold concepts are so frame- and mind-altering that once seen, they cannot be unseen. They have the potential to be genuinely transformative for both discursive and affective repertoires, providing learners with 'new, previously uncontemplated, handholds for interpreting contradictory tensions' (Knight and Paroutis, 2017:532). For such 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. Therefore, if organizations are to benefit from paradox, they must allow, indeed value, those who give voice 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. Without agency and security, practitioners will be unable to harness its generative potential, instead merely experiencing its pain.

Arguing for open reflection on paradox recalls Raelin's work on public learning, where issues are 'brought out in the company of others who are also committed to the experience in question' (Raelin, 2001:11). The notion of public learning challenges the modern assumption that learning is fundamentally introspective, revitalising the Socratic idea that the examined life is a call to public reflection for the common good. Within policing, however, such public learning is fraught with difficulties. Thus, whilst we have suggested that our reflections apply to the psycho-political logics of service *per se*, i.e. to the service sector as a whole, they have particular traction in the context of police service. With policing, the public demands full transparency, yet also needs and wants to be shielded from unpleasantness. We insist on the standardisation, efficiency and cost-effectiveness of police services, but also complain bitterly when we feel we are not receiving personalised attention. In short, we propose that the paradoxes that we have discussed in this paper reflect *our* unresolved tensions as much as those of the police.

Public servants absorb whatever society is unable or unwilling to confront, thereby exposing themselves to irrational as well as rational blame and accusation. Such absorption can be 'a parasitic form of containment which leads to the impoverishment of both citizens and government' (Hoggett, 2006:185). The challenges for public servants thus include 'accepting the dilemmas and paradoxes of the job whilst retaining a sense of one's own authority. In this way citizens can clear a path through their own projections and then really make use of what is available' (Hoggett, 2006:185). With the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had an opportunity to rethink our relationship with the state and its human representatives. In the spirit of reflexivity for which this journal is a standard-bearer, we conclude that it is in our interests as much as theirs to give voice to the paradoxes of policing - paradoxes which the police endure to allow the public to ignore.

# References

Albu OB and Flyverbom M (2019) Organizational transparency: Conceptualizations, conditions, and consequences. *Business & Society* 58(2):268-297.

Alcadipani R, Pacheco Lopes da Silva D, Bueno S and Sergio de Lima R (2021) Making black lives don't matter via organizational strategies to avoid the racial debate: The military police in Brazil. *Gender, Work & Organization* 28(4):1683-1696.

Andriopoulos C and Gotsi M (2017) Methods of paradox. In: Smith WK, Lewis MW, Jarzabkowski P and Langley A (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Paradox.* Oxford: OUP, pp.513-528.

Andriopoulos C and Lewis MW (2010) Managing innovation paradoxes: Ambidexterity lessons from leading product design companies. *Long Range Planning* 43(1):104-122.

Baldwin R (1997) Rules, discretion, and legitimacy. In: Hill M (ed.) *The Policy Process.* London: Prentice Hall, pp.364-388.

Ball K, Bellanova R and Webster W (2018) Surveillance and democracy: Sympathies and antagonisms. In: Ball K and Webster W (eds) *Surveillance and democracy in Europe*. London: Routledge, pp.1-15.

Benner MJ and Tushman ML (2003) Exploitation, exploration, and process management: The productivity dilemma revisited. *Academy of Management Review* 28(2):238-256.

Berti M and Simpson AV (2021) The dark side of organizational paradoxes: The dynamics of disempowerment. *Academy of Management Review* 46(2):252-274.

Best J (2005) *The Limits of Transparency: Ambiguity and the History of International Finance*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Press.

van Bommel K and Spicer A (2017) Critical management studies and paradox. In: Smith WK, Lewis MW, Jarzabkowski P and Langley, A (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Paradox*. Oxford: OUP, pp.143-161.

Bradbury H and Reason P (2001) Broadening the bandwidth of validity: Issues and choice-points for improving the quality of action research. In: Reason P and Bradbury H (eds) *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage, pp.447-455.

Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2):77-101.

Bristow A, Tomkins L and Hartley J (2022) A dialectical approach to the politics of learning in a major city police organization. *Management Learning* 53(2):223-248.

Carmine S, Andriopoulos C, Gotsi M, Härtel CE, Krzeminska A, Mafico N, Pradies C, Raza H, Raza-Ullah T, Schrage S, Sharma G, Slawinski N, Stadtler L, Tunarosa A, Winther-Hansen C and Keller J (2021) A paradox approach to organizational tensions during the pandemic crisis. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 30(2):138-153.

Cassell C and Johnson P (2006) Action research: Explaining the diversity. *Human Relations* 59(6):783-814.

Coombs WT and Holladay SJ (2013) The pseudo-panopticon: The illusion created by CSR-related transparency and the internet. *Corporate Communications* 18:212-227.

Cunliffe AL (2002) Reflexive dialogical practice in management learning. *Management Learning* 33(1):35-61.

De Vaujany F-X, Leclercq-Vandelannoitte A, Munro I, Nama Y and Holt R (2021) Control and surveillance in work practice: Cultivating paradox in 'new' modes of organizing. *Organization Studies* 42(5):675-695.

Edmondson AC (1999) Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(2):350-383.

Edmondson AC (2018) *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Fairhurst GT (2019) Reflections: Return paradox to the wild? Paradox interventions and their implications. *Journal of Change Management* 19(1):6-22.

Green T and Gates A (2014) Understanding the process of professionalization in the police organisation. *The Police Journal* 87(2):75-91.

Guilford JP (1950) Creativity. *American Psychologist* 5:444-454.

Heimstädt M and Dobusch L (2020) Transparency and accountability: Causal, critical and constructive perspectives. *Organization Theory* 1(4):1-12.

Hennestad BW (1990) The symbolic impact of double bind leadership: Double bind and the dynamics of organizational culture. *Journal of Management Studies* 27(3):265-280.

Hoggett P (2006) Conflict, ambivalence, and the contested purpose of public organizations. *Human Relations* 59(2):175-194.

Hood C (2010) *The Blame Game: Spin, Bureaucracy, and Self-preservation in Government.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jarzabkowski PA and Lê JK (2017) We have to do this *and* that? You must be joking: Constructing and responding to paradox through humor. *Organization Studies* 38(3-4):433-462.

Jay J (2013) Navigating paradox as a mechanism of change and innovation in hybrid organizations. *Academy of Management Journal* 56(1):137-159.

Jing R and Van de Ven AH (2014) A yin-yang model of organizational change: The case of Chengdu Bus Group. *Management and Organization Review* 10(1):29-54.

Keller J, Carmine S, Jarzabkowski P, Lewis MW, Pradies C, Sharma G, Smith WK and Vince R (2021) Our collective tensions: Paradox research community's response to COVID-19. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 30(2):168-176.

Klein PG (2005) The make-or-buy decision: Lessons from empirical studies. In: Menard C and Shirley M (eds) *Handbook of New Institutional Economics.* Boston, MA: Springer*,* pp.435-464.

Kleinig J (1996) *The Ethics of Policing*. Cambridge: CUP.

Knight E and Paroutis S (2017) Expanding the paradox-pedagogy links: Paradox as a threshold concept in management education. In: Smith WK, Lewis MW, Jarzabkowski P and Langley A (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Paradox.* Oxford: OUP, pp.529-546.

Lê J and Bednarek R (2017) Paradox in everyday practice: Applying practice-theoretical principles to paradox. In: Smith WK, Lewis MW, Jarzabkowski P and Langley A (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Paradox.* Oxford: OUP, pp.490-509.

Lewis MW (2000) Exploring paradox: Toward a more comprehensive guide. *Academy of Management Review* 25(4):760-776.

Lewis MW and Dehler GE (2000) Learning through paradox: A pedagogical strategy for exploring contradictions and complexity. *Journal of Management Education* 24(6):708-725.

Lipsky M (1980) *Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

March JG (1991) Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization Science* 2:71-87.

Millar CC, Eldomiaty TI, Choi CJ and Hilton B (2005) Corporate governance and institutional transparency in emerging markets. *Journal of Business Ethics* 59(1):163-174.

Nenonen S, Brodie RJ, Storbacka K and Peters LD (2017) Theorising with managers: How to achieve both academic rigour and practical relevance. *European Journal of Marketing* 51(7/8):1130-1152.

Punch M (2015) What really matters in policing? *European Police Science and Research Bulletin* 13:9-18.

Raelin JA (2001) Public reflection as the basis of learning. *Management Learning* 32(1):11-30.

Raffnsøe S, Mennicken A and Miller P (2019) The Foucault effect in organization studies. *Organization Studies* 40(2):155-182.

Rashman L, Withers E and Hartley J (2009) Organizational learning and knowledge in public service organizations: A systematic review of the literature. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 10(3):463-494.

Ripamonti S, Galuppo L, Gorli M, Scaratti G and Cunliffe AL (2016) Pushing action research toward reflexive practice. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 25(1):55-68.

Sætre AS and Van de Ven AH (2021) Generating theory by abduction. *Academy of Management Review* 46(4):684-701.

Schad J, Lewis MW and Smith WK (2019) Quo vadis, paradox? Centripetal and centrifugal forces in theory development. *Strategic Organization* 17(1):107-119.

Sherman LW (1986) Policing communities: What works? *Crime and Justice* 8:343-386.

Smets M, Moss CA, Athanasopoulou A, Moos C and Morris TJ (2019) From taking to making paradox: A multi-level perspective on how CEOs balance nested paradoxes. *Academy of Management Proceedings* DOI: 10.5465/AMBPP.2019.112

Smith WK and Lewis MW (2011) Toward a theory of paradox: A dynamic equilibrium model of organizing. *Academy of Management Review* 36(2):381-403.

Smith WK and Lewis MW (2022) *Both/and Thinking: Embracing Creative Tensions to Solve Your Toughest Problems*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

Smith WK, Erez M, Jarvenpaa S, Lewis MW and Tracey P (2017) Adding complexity to theories of paradox, tensions, and dualities of innovation and change. *Organization Studies* 38(3):303-317.

Solove DJ (2021) The myth of the privacy paradox. *George Washington Law Review* 89(1):1-46.

Suda M, Morimoto K, Obata A, Koizumi H and Maki A (2008) Emotional responses to music: Towards scientific perspectives on music therapy. *Neuroreport* 19(1):75-78.

Tomkins L and Bristow A (2023) Evidence-based practice and the ethics of care: 'What works' or 'what matters'? *Human Relations* 76(1):118-143.

Tomkins L and Eatough V (2010) Reflecting on the use of IPA with focus groups: Pitfalls and potentials. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 7(3):244-262.

Tomkins L, Hartley J and Bristow A (2020) Asymmetries of leadership: Agency, response and reason. *Leadership* 16(1):87-106.

Tracy SJ (2004) Dialectic, contradiction, or double bind? Analyzing and theorizing employee reactions to organizational tension. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 32(2):119-146.

Vince R (2018) The learning organization as paradox. *The Learning Organization* 25(4):273-280.

Vince R, Abbey G, Langenhan M and Bell D (2018) Finding critical action learning through paradox: The role of action learning in the suppression and stimulation of critical reflection. *Management Learning* 49(1):86-106.

Vince R and Broussine M (1996) Paradox, defense and attachment: Accessing and working with emotions and relations underlying organizational change. *Organization Studies* 17(1):1-21.

Willis JJ and Mastrofski SD (2014) Pulling together: Integrating craft and science. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice* 8(4):321-329.

**Table 1: Summary of Findings**

| Theme | Contradictory elements (*either*) | Nature of interdependency (*and*) | Paradoxical effects on learning | Paradoxical effects on emotion |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Knowledge control | Codification-Discretion | Codification modulates discretion | *Either* enables *and* inhibits learning | *Either* codification reduces anxiety |
| | | Discretion modulates codification | *Either* enables *and* inhibits learning | *And* codification increases anxiety |
| | | | | |

| Knowledge disclosure | Transparency-Occlusion | Transparency modulates occlusion | *Either* enables *and* inhibits learning | *Either* transparency reduces anxiety |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Occlusion modulates transparency | *Either* enables *and* inhibits learning | *And* transparency increases anxiety |

---

[i] The 'duty of candour' refers to a requirement on public employees, specifically health practitioners and law enforcement officers, to speak up when they see something that could/should be corrected or improved. It belongs to a suite of discourses promoting OL in public life which aim to foster trust that public institutions are learning from their mistakes. It gained considerable currency in the context of the murder in 2021 of Sarah Everard by serving police officer Wayne Couzens, whose propensity to misogynistic violence was well known amongst his colleagues.

[ii] For more on the scope and objectives of the overall programme, see [LINK TO BE INSERTED ONCE ANONYMOUS REVIEWS ARE COMPLETED]

[iii] This programme was selected as an Impact Case Study for the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF) evaluation of the impact of scholarship on practice.

[iv] The number 112 covers both interviewees and those involved in the participative-ethnographic (P-E) elements of the programme.

[v] The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) is the body set up to oversee the police complaints system in England and Wales. It investigates allegations of serious misconduct by police officers as well as establishing the standards by which such complaints are addressed. See https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/


[vi] In the best-known learning paradox, if the relationship between exploration and exploitation (Benner and Tushman, 2003; March, 1991) were an *either/or,* a choice would have to be made between them. If organizations wanted both, they would have to schedule them consecutively and/or within completely different parts of the organization. On the other hand, seeing this relationship as an *either/and* highlights that exploration and exploitation may pull in different directions (one orientated towards the future and the as-yet unknown; the other working with what is already in place), but they are to be addressed concurrently; indeed, that they may *rely* on one another to be addressed at all. Thus, the confidence needed to use OL as a spur to innovate (explore) is founded on the reassurance one has in existing capabilities (exploit).


[vii] The word 'occlusion' is not an everyday term; but it emerged from our discussions with our practitioner colleagues as the best way to capture a sense of obscurity or opacity that has both active and passive connotations, i.e. that carries no in-built assumption about agency or blame.