Investigating the role of ‘uncomfortable knowledge ’in failures to address longstanding problems harming the trustworthiness of UK policing.

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Abstract

In the context of current challenges to the legitimacy of policing, is seems appropriate to address not just the challenge of improving public trust but the more fundamental question of how to build the ‘trustworthiness’ of policing organisations. This requires the uncomfortable work of examining the organisational conditions that have allowed the trustworthiness of some elements of policing fail. A key process in this uncomfortable work is to look closely at how institutions come to ‘know’ about issues and failures, and yet come to not act on that knowledge in order to prevent the same failures replicating into the future.
A tool for understanding ignorance in organisations is the theory of ‘uncomfortable knowledge’ as developed by Steve Raynor. Raynor calls on us to look at those things that institutions ‘know’ to be true, but where that knowledge has either not been smoothly assimilated throughout an organisation, or where it is ignored in daily practical action (where it is known intellectually, but not in practice). This research draws together findings from a currently ongoing piece of research that explores the value of the concept of ‘uncomfortable knowledge’ in UK policing. We will explore where sites of avoidance of uncomfortable knowledge may be present in UK police forces, such as, for example: where forces engage in trade-offs between urgent operational requirements and longer term operational strategies and priorities; where forces place their middle leaders in a double-bind of contradictory pressures, making them the interface between day-to-day operational priorities and processes from above that are meant to drive change; where forces operate a punitive error culture that depresses mechanisms of change; and where forces engage in displacement activities (what the Casey report (Casey et al., 2023) identifies as “initiativeitis”) at the expense of activities that could fundamentally challenge police culture. Our research will also examine ways in which techniques from the so-called ‘pedagogies of discomfort’ (Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Head, 2020) could be used to help police practitioners to break down barriers between their organisations and the ‘uncomfortable knowledge’ contained therein.

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A key process in this work is to look closely at how institutions, and leaders in them, come to ‘know’ about issues and failures, and yet come to not notice or act on that knowledge in order to prevent the same failures repeating into the future.

In this paper, we outline ways in which theory and research on ‘uncomfortable knowledge’, might be applied in collaborative research designed to support improvements in trustworthiness. We discuss some examples of the role of failures to address uncomfortable knowledge implicated in diverse organisational crises and collapses of reputation. Finally, we point to ways some existing research may provide a basis for collaboration between policing organisations and researchers to identify critical sites of uncomfortable knowledge and support individuals and organisations to engage with action to address it.

Uncomfortable knowledge and the construction of ignorance

Whilst much organizational research concerns the development and use of knowledge, it is equally important to understand how ignorance is developed and maintained. One tool for understanding forms of ignorance in organisations is the theory of ‘uncomfortable knowledge’ as developed by Steve Raynor (2012).

US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld famously spoke of ‘known unknowns’, ‘known knowns’ and ‘unknown unknowns.’ Raynor notes that this typology leaves out a fourth quadrant comprising of ‘unknown knowns’: “the most intriguing combinations: what we don’t know we know” (ibid: 108). With this challenge, Raynor calls on us to look at those things that institutions ‘know’ to be true, but where that knowledge has either not been smoothly assimilated throughout an organisation, or where it is ignored in daily practical action (where it is known intellectually, but not in practice).

Raynor argues that: -

> *“To make sense of the complexity of the world so that they can act, individuals and institutions need to develop simplified, self-consistent versions of that world. The process of doing so means that much of what is known about the world needs to be excluded from those versions, and in particular that knowledge which is in tension or outright contradiction with those versions must be expunged. This is ‘uncomfortable knowledge’” (Raynor, 2012: 107).*

Organisations, in this way, run on narratives about who they are and how they act and are often well practiced in remaining ignorant of knowledge that does not support these internal narrative structures.

Strategies for avoiding uncomfortable knowledge

In Raynor's typology, there are four main ways in which organisations avoid uncomfortable knowledge. These are:

> **Denial:** an outright inability or refusal to accept information contrary to the organisational narrative;
> **Dismissal**: a recognition that there is information available that contradicts accepted narratives, whilst reasons are found to downplay or denigrate it;
> **Diversion:** the construction of decoy activities, aimed to draw attention away from the uncomfortable subject; and
> **Displacement**: where an organisation puts efforts into superficial alternatives to effective action which may appear, on the surface, to address the uncomfortable subject, but are ultimately ineffective.

Examples of uncomfortable knowledge from outside of a policing context are widespread. One clear example is the Chesapeake Bay Programme (CBP), a programme to decrease pollution in Chesapeake Bay, Maryland, which engaged in *displacement* by channelling resources into modelling impacts of interventions rather than systematically monitoring changes in water quality (ibid: 120). In consequence, the failure of the modelled interventions was unnoticed for an extended period.

Another, an example this time of both *denial* and *dismissal*, is the failure of the financial sector to question the risks that logic stated must have been underlying abnormally high profits in the build up to the 2007/2008 global financial crisis (see Tett, 2009).

An example of *diversion* behaviour can be found in the regulation and assurance of large infrastructure projects, where widespread evidence that such projects tend to run massively over schedule and over budget is often invisible from the point of view of regulators. These regulators instead over-focus on other metrics of success, such as the ability to attract investors and to achieve a low cost of capital, or the reputational and political effects of a particular infrastructure intervention (see Bowles et al., 2002 for the example of the Thames Tideway Tunnel).

A common example of *displacement* is the investment by many organisations in short online approaches to mandatory training in equality, diversity and inclusion. There is little evidence that this approach produces improvements in representation and experiences of diverse groups. However, it does often disguise failures to tackle the wicked problems of understanding how attraction, recruitment, selection, and socialisation processes inadvertently discriminate and how management processes fail to support particular employee groups.

Organisations all deal with their uncomfortable and inconvenient knowledge in different ways. There are, however, common sites or foci of uncomfortable knowledge within organisations, many of which will be familiar to those with experience of UK policing organisations.

All organisations face trade-offs between meeting urgent operational requirements and implementing longer term strategies vital to the health and viability of the organisation. Recent work on tutoring and work-based assessment in UK police forces by our centre found that despite the strategic importance of 'uplift' as a once in a generation opportunity to transform cultures, known issues with tutoring are, in many cases, not addressed due to short-term operational shortfalls (Cockcroft et al., forthcoming). Some of these issues threaten goals to ensure new recruits are socialised into the kind of healthy policing culture that can support trustworthiness.

Such issues all too often become invisible due to the difficulty of challenging the primacy of avoiding 'abstraction' from frontline operations, given common capacity constraints in frontline policing.

In another example, some organisations place their middle-level leaders in a double-bind of contradictory pressures, making them the interface between day-to-day operational priorities and strategic processes from above that are meant to drive change. All too often they do not allow space for these individuals to articulate the incompatibility of their tasks.

A legalistic framing of abuse and failings in institutions can channel energies into finding scapegoats and 'bad apples' rather than addressing systematic cultural and institutional issues (see McAlinden, 2013 for the example of the handling of child abuse in the Catholic Church in Ireland). Potentially this legalistic reframing has been a feature of some investigations into failures in policing.

Another feature of organisations, that can increase their inability to confront uncomfortable knowledge, is the presence of a punitive error culture, where decision-makers are discouraged from experimenting and risking failure in their attempts to address longstanding problems. Such difficulties are often amplified by external media and political pressures for rapid results and the identification of culpable individuals rather than the careful work needed to address underlying organisational conditions that allow bad behaviour to thrive.

Finally, there is a clear link between Raynor's concepts of *diversion* and *displacement* and what the Casey report (Casey, 2023: 98) identifies as "initiative-itis" (rounds of initiatives in the MPS aimed at addressing specific issues, but not sustained and infrequently leading to significant change).

Tackling the ways in which organisations fail to address uncomfortable knowledge is a complex process. It involves more than applying the terminologies and theories listed above to the issues and, rather, rests on addressing the gap between knowledge and action in organisations.

We see potential in techniques from the so-called 'pedagogies of discomfort' (Boler and Zembylas, 2003; Head, 2020) which could be used to help police practitioners to grapple with uncomfortable knowledge. This and other work on tackling uncomfortable knowledge, in spheres ranging from racism, and misogyny to violent conflict and climate change, emphasises the importance of appropriate support to help overcome the barriers to engaging with uncomfortable knowledge.

Gatzweiler, Frey Heger, and Ronzani (2022) identify three kinds of barriers that need to be addressed in any learning process that engages uncomfortable knowledge: cognitive overload, emotional detachment, and organisational obliviousness.

> *Cognitive overload* is a problem because uncomfortable knowledge often involves complex, even 'wicked', problems that cannot be solved through simplification.
>
> *Emotional detachment* concerns the human tendency to remain emotionally detached as a defence against the anxiety and difficult emotions that can be generated by engaging with knowledge that threatens our valued identities, or our understanding of the world and our place in it. As Gattzweiler et al. (2022: p232) note "*research has indicated that being "rationally" aware of a social problem or a dysfunctional element in an existing institutional order is often insufficient to provoke action*". Action requires emotional engagement, and, as Fenton-O'Creevy and Tuckett point out in a paper on organisational foresight processes "the more important challenge for strategic decision-makers is not the availability of new information, but the emotions it provokes and the consequences for the attention it gets".
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> *Organisational obliviousness* concerns the strategies of denial, dismissal, diversion and distraction that delegitimize uncomfortable knowledge in organizational discourse, and discourage and subvert attempts to address it in both subtle and more overt ways.

Early findings from exploratory workshop with police partners

In June 2023 we conducted a workshop with police practitioners under the Chatham House Rule. We came to the following, early but suggestive, findings:

- There was unanimous agreement amongst attendees that the ideas presented about uncomfortable knowledge seem both applicable and useful in policing. However, there was some concern about: - a) how do you go beyond identifying uncomfortable knowledge to start addressing it; and b) how can you be sure of identifying it when subject to some of the same pressures yourself – as one participant stated, "isn't it often unconscious"?

- Some particular examples of uncomfortable knowledge were identified. Crucially (due to the recency of the Casey report) the findings of that document were an important anchor to the discussion. Participants noticed the different reactions among their (non-Met) chief officers to the Casey report. These ranged from "I want a team to go through it line by line, identifying key issues, then look at data and generate surveys to gather evidence of the extent of similar problems in this force", to stating "that is the Met not us", and that no further action was needed. This tendency to denial and dismissal was, participants stated, to be found throughout their organisations. One participant noted that "no one asked how women members felt about Casey" and resented that they were "told that [institutional problems with misogyny etc.] are not a problem in our force."

- Barriers to dealing with uncomfortable knowledge in policing were identified. There was, for example, widespread acknowledgement of the tensions between operational requirements and capacity for strategic renewal work – noted as the sacred nature of

"avoiding abstraction" from the front line at all costs. Participants spoke about how on a personal, rather than an institutional level, uncomfortable knowledge may be about career progression and not "upsetting certain senior people." Similarly, it was noted that there are in policing mechanisms by which senior leaders discourage the sharing of "bad news" through overt and more subtle signaling.

- Some spaces where uncomfortable knowledge can be found and combatted in police organisations were discussed. For examples participants questioned if internal grievance data is collected systematically and learned from in forces. What might this data tell us, for example, about misogyny and racism in police forces? Participants noted that grievances against the police are frequently "paid off" and not "looked at or learned from" when grievance data could instead be treated as a resource. Exit interviews can be similarly "pushed under the carpet rather than used for learning." Further, participants noted that there is a recognition that early training and "professional socialisation" are an important site of acknowledging uncomfortable knowledge and changing norms; a participant noting that "it's about changing routines."

- Together this early-stage data suggests that an investigation of the strategies of avoidances used by police forces to avoid addressing uncomfortable knowledge would be fruitful. Taking the example of police misogyny and/or police racism and charting the barriers to dealing with these known issues in a single police force could form a first, scalable, intervention.

Further work

We are at the early stages of seeking funding and collaborators for an investigation into the potential of approaches to addressing uncomfortable knowledge in policing organisations. Our research will evaluate whether the concept of 'uncomfortable knowledge' can provide useful insights for thinking about the knowledge/action gap in policing. It will examine spaces where there are known issues that challenge the trustworthiness and legitimacy of policing and ask how relevant knowledge is conceived of and acted on within the forces. Where it is not acted on, we will identify what kind of ignorance is being constructed around it and draw out strategies for how this 'ignorance' can be combatted in the future.

If these ideas seem of practical importance to policing practitioners, we would like to explore opportunities for collaboration, to research and reduce the role of uncomfortable knowledge in failures to address the organisational conditions in which misogyny, homophobia, racism and associated criminality can arise and remain unchallenged in parts of policing.

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