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Institution: The Open University	
Unit of Assessment: C17 Business and Management Studies	
Title of case study: Challenging the Blame Culture at the Metropolitan Police: Shaping Legislation, Improving Learning and Saving Lives	
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2017-2020	
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:	

Name(s): Dr Leah Tomkins	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Senior Lecturer in Organization Studies	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 01/07/2015 - present

Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2017 - December 2020	
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No	

1. Summary of the impact

The 'blame culture' in policing creates defensive behaviours, including denial, scapegoating and resistance when there are problems and/or complaints to the police. To tackle this, the Blame to Praise model was developed for London's Metropolitan Police Service ('the Met') by the Open University's Dr Leah **Tomkins** in an action research project running from 2017 to 2020. The model provides a rigorous yet user-friendly toolkit for identifying the main reasons for failure and directing different kinds of corrective action accordingly. It has been implemented both in the Met and by the police regulator, the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), resulting in a change to statutory legislation in an Act of Parliament (the Police Conduct Regulations Act, 2020 **[C3]**). It has also led to a range of process, culture and behavioural changes in both the Met and the IOPC.

2. Underpinning research

The 'blame culture' is a well-known problem in policing. It is a problem for organizational efficiency, because it leads to large numbers of minor complaints being referred for disciplinary action, the vast majority of which are not upheld. This makes it hard to separate serious from trivial instances of failure to follow approved procedure. It is a problem for police morale, because being referred for disciplinary action leaves officers with a cloud hanging over their heads, their career in limbo for months, if not years. It is a problem for organizational learning, because the fear of being blamed unfairly for things going wrong creates anxiety and defensiveness: This prevents officers from being open to the genuine learning and improvement opportunities that failure creates. With over 30,000 police officers across 12 Borough Command Units in London, the scale of this problem of efficiency, morale and learning is significant. Whilst many scholars have identified the presence of the 'blame culture' in policing, few have developed any practical solutions to address it. The Open University's project is, therefore, a rare exception.

Research conducted by Dr **Tomkins** at The Open University aims to investigate and influence practices of organizational learning in London's Metropolitan Police Service **[O1]**. The project was commissioned by the Met via an initial approach to the OU's Centre for Policing Research and Learning (CPRL) in May 2017 and is a longitudinal commitment of 3.5 years. Developed as an Action Research project, it involves an abductive methodology of strategy and context analysis; fieldwork; theory/proposition development; and implementation support. The aim throughout is to produce, socialise, challenge and embed organizational knowledge that is relevant and resonant as well as rigorous. The research took place in three phases:
• Sept - Dec 2017: a scoping study **[O1]**.
• Jan 2018 - June 2019: research on the front-line of borough policing **[O3, O4, O5]**.
• July 2019 - Dec 2020: developing and supporting the implementation of findings **[O2, O6]**.

Dr **Tomkins** collected two types of qualitative data - interview and participative-ethnographic - with research participants ranging from trainee constable to chief constable **[O1,** Jan 2018, **O2,** Feb 2020**]**. Her principal analytical technique for both data-types was Thematic Analysis. The former (N=82) consisted of semi-structured interviews with leaders, officers and staff from central HQ and policing's front-line, including response units and neighbourhood policing. The latter (N=30, longitudinal) involved shaping and delivering a range of initiatives to build collective engagement in the research findings and their implications. This emphasis on co-construction and co-ownership meant that impact was woven into the very fabric of the research design.

The initial research question targeted enablers and barriers of organizational learning **[O1]**. The key finding was that a major barrier to learning is policing's 'blame culture', especially in relation to learning from failure **[O4,** Jan 2019, **O5,** April 2019**]**. There is a wide-spread perception that, when things go wrong, the automatic assumption is that an individual officer is to blame, i.e., that failure is because of an officer's deliberate deviation from approved procedure or 'best practice'. As a result, failure gets treated as both individualised and culpable, triggering an often lengthy and career-threatening disciplinary process. This can have a devastating effect on the officer concerned and those around him/her, and become a serious issue for individual and collective well-being **[O3,** April 2019**]**. Such perceptions of blame and scapegoating act as a barrier to establishing a learning culture in which people feel safe to admit to uncertainty, ask for help or try to innovate. A quote by a police constable in phase 1 illustrates the human impact of the 'blame culture': "*You just can't admit to needing help or training in a particular area that's not gone so well. You'll be ripped to shreds! It's guilty before innocent. And once guilty, you're guilty forever.*"

Dr **Tomkins**' analysis led her to develop a new model - the Blame to Praise model - which maps different possible reasons for failure in policing **[O4, O5]**. This model is being used as a toolkit to put failure and fault in a broader organizational context, encouraging explicit awareness that things can go wrong in policing even when every single rule and regulation has been followed. It underscores that coping with failure is a crucial aspect of both learning and well-being, and that organizational health and organizational learning are closely intertwined **[O3, O4]**. Dr **Tomkins**' insights include the particular challenge faced by police leaders, who lead the way in fostering (or inhibiting) a healthy openness to learning, and must *take* responsibility for failures on their watch without necessarily *being* responsible for them **[O2, O5]**.

The Blame to Praise model **[O4, O5]** demonstrates that:
• There are five main reasons for failure in policing, all with different implications for learning.
• Only preventable failures should trigger a misconduct investigation; other sorts of failure arise with the sheer complexity of policing and/or indicate the need for procedure change.
• Operationalising 'Reflective Practice' will separate learning from misconduct and blame.
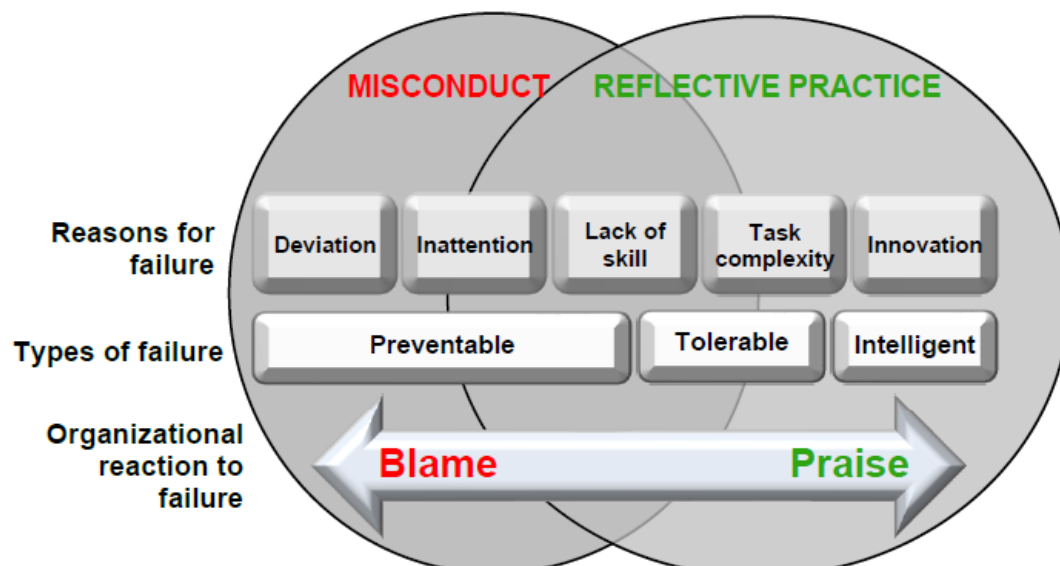
Articulating the different reasons for failure has highlighted the need to revisit the Met's approach to evidence-based learning. On the strength of **Dr Tomkins'** research, learning from the 'best available evidence' now includes evidence of systemic and task complexity and the significance of ethics and values, and is not just a search for who/what to blame. This crucial finding from the research was road-tested at the CPRL conference in Oct 2019; presented to the Met's OL Board in July 2020 **[O6]**; and developed as an academic paper for the 4* journal *Human Relations*, where it is currently in R&R following very promising reviews.

3. References to the research

O1. **Tomkins, L.**, Hartley, J., & Arney, E. (2020) Organizational Learning and the Metropolitan Police Service: Report from the Scoping Study. *Action Research Report for the Metropolitan Police Service.* Available at http://oro.open.ac.uk/73316/

O2. **Tomkins, L.**, Hartley, J., & Bristow, A. (2020) Asymmetries of Leadership: Agency, Response and Reason. *Leadership, 16(1),* 87-106. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715019885768. Available at http://oro.open.ac.uk/66363/

O3. **Tomkins, L.** (2019) Learning and Health: Discourses of Reinvention. In L. Tomkins & K. Pritchard, *Health at Work: Critical Perspectives.* Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 67-82. ISBN 978-0-8153-8393-2. Available at http://oro.open.ac.uk/66680/

O4. **Tomkins, L.** (2020) From Blame to Praise in Policing: Implications for Strategy, Culture, Process and Well-being. *Action Research Report for the Metropolitan Police Service.* First presented to the OL Board Jan 2019; developed and operationalised 2019/2020. Available at http://oro.open.ac.uk/72773/

O5. **Tomkins, L.** (2020) From Blame to Praise in Policing: Implications for Leadership and the Public Conversation. *Action Research Report for the Metropolitan Police Service.* First presented to the OL Board April 2019; developed and operationalised 2019/2020. Available at http://oro.open.ac.uk/72775/

O6. **Tomkins, L.** (2020) Bridging the Theory/Practice Gap in Policing: 'What Matters' versus 'What Works' in Evidence-Based Practice and Organizational Learning. *Action Research Report for the Metropolitan Police Service (OL Board Report).* Available at http://oro.open.ac.uk/73315/

4. Details of the impact

Over the course of the project, Dr **Tomkins** shared the findings and the emerging Blame to Praise model with key stakeholders in the Met, the IOPC and the Consortium of 20 UK police services in the OU's CPRL. This was done via reports and presentations to the Met's OL Board and the Police Commissioner's Management Team meetings, networking events with the Met's new 'learning champions', consultations with the Police Federation, presentations at policing and academic conferences, and submissions to academic journals. It resulted in three distinct types of impact:
• New legislation.
• Development of new policy and process.
• Positive changes in culture and behaviour.

Impact on legislation: The Police Conduct Regulations Act (2020)
The Blame to Praise model was adopted by the IOPC, the independent police regulator responsible for investigating complaints against the police, and for developing and implementing statutory guidance for the 43 police forces in England and Wales. The IOPC has substantial input and approval powers on all new legislation regarding police conduct. Dr **Tomkins** worked closely with leaders at the IOPC to introduce the Blame to Praise approach into a new category of regulatory action, the 'Reflective Practice Review Process' **[C2]**. This new category of Reflective Practice (RP) replaces the previous default position of 'Management Action', which had strong connotations of individualised culpability. It gives statutory and policy legitimacy for the IOPC to mandate corrective action which is developmental rather than punitive/disciplinary. This new power was instated in an Act of Parliament, the Police Conduct Regulations (2020) (UK Statutory Instruments, No.4, Part 6), which came into force in February 2020 **[C3]**.

Impact on policy and process at the Met and the IOPC
Dr Tomkins worked with key stakeholders to embed the Blame to Praise model **[O4, O5]** and the new Reflective Practice Review Process **[C3]** into daily operations at both the Met and the IOPC. Within the Met, this resulted in a new policy and process for dealing with officers who receive repeated complaints from the public, often of a similar nature. The new scheme is the Complaint and Conduct Reflection Scheme (CCRS), replacing the previous Complaint Intervention Scheme, and explicitly based on the Blame to Praise model **[C5, C6]**. It was piloted in one district of SW London from April to July 2020, and rolled out across all 12 Borough Command Units from August

2020. The success of this new scheme is being monitored in the Met's new performance metrics which track improvements in organizational learning and experiences of psychological safety **[C7]**.

Within the IOPC, the impact has been a shift towards issuing 'learning recommendations', which proactively identify opportunities for learning from failure, rather than the previous emphasis on reactive, punitive action. The Deputy Director General of Operations at the IOPC, who was responsible for the introduction of this new approach, testifies to the impact of Dr **Tomkins'** Blame to Praise work on IOPC investigations **[C2]**: "*The Blame to Praise model has had a significant impact on the work we've been doing […] balancing accountability with maximum impact for learning*" **[C2** video time-stamp 0.07 - 0.31**]** *"[…] It's been a very useful tool for training our staff. It's one that's quite intuitive. It's very user-friendly. And we've had some very good conversations about where particular investigations or particular officers sit on the model, and that's allowed us to challenge in a very constructive way the way an investigator may be approaching a case, or perhaps where a decision or sanction or outcome needs to fit*" **[C2** video time-stamp 1.23 - 1.48**]**.

The Deputy DG gives a concrete example from Nov 2019 of where the emphasis on 'Reflective Practice' and 'learning recommendations' gives the IOPC scope to intervene in police operations in a proactive, advisory and developmental capacity, not just a retrospective disciplinary capacity: "*One of the areas where we've made a recommendation in exactly that context, which I think has saved lives, and will save lives, is in a recent example where a member of the public who'd been detained by the police had removed a cord from a disabled toilet in a custody suite and later tried to use it as a ligature. The force was going to remove the pull cords just as a normal course of business. And we thought that, actually, there's some learning here, which potentially we can get out across the 43 forces. So, we've drafted a very practical, pragmatic 'learning recommendation' […] and that recommendation has now been rolled out across the forces, and people and forces are being audited to make sure they come to that standard*" **[C2**: video timestamp 2.13 - 2.59**]**.

The new Reflective Practice **[C3]** is proving particularly significant with the controversial 'stop and search' policy, especially in cases of suspected racial profiling **[C4]**. It has allowed the IOPC to recommend that officers be given a safe space to discuss why their behaviours cause offence, rather than automatically being subject to censure in a formal misconduct hearing. In an illustrative case from Sept 2020, the IOPC Regional Director for London reports: "*We did not uphold the complaint in respect of discriminatory behaviour, as a review of the officer's previous stop and search records suggested he used the single ground of the smell of cannabis to stop and search people of all ethnicities and genders. This supported our view that he would benefit from Reflective Practice […]. The importance of police officers recognising, and being aware of, the disproportionate impact stop-and-search has on black communities in particular cannot be understated*" **[C4]**.

Impact on positive change in culture and behaviour in the Met
The impact of Blame to Praise on culture and behaviour has been felt at three levels:
• Front-line policing.
• Embedding change through a new network of 'learning champions'.
• Leadership behaviours.

In front-line policing, the Blame to Praise model has been introduced as a way of encouraging officers to feel that it is safe to admit to the need for help, advice and/or additional training. In Feb 2019, Dr **Tomkins** developed her Blame to Praise model into an insert for officers' warrant card holders, so that it is a permanent *aide-memoire* to support constructive learning, moving away from the fear of blame. The Chief Superintendent of the SW London Borough Command Unit has made this warrant card insert available to all the officers in her command (c. 2,500 officers), as well as recommending its implementation across the other 11 boroughs. She describes why this tool-kit is making a difference: "*The Open University created this fantastic card that I carry in my warrant card, and so do many of my colleagues. And it really helps us to articulate both to each other and to our bosses what deliberate failure is, and what merely is something that could be*

Better" **[C1**: video timestamp 0.14 - 0.30**]** *"[…] [The Blame to Praise approach is] a real game-changer for us in how we deal with ideas of failure, and you know, what's right, what's wrong […] A real game-changer"* **[C1**: video timestamp 0.50 - 0.58**]**.

The Blame to Praise work has been the focus for establishing a network of 'learning champions', who have spearheaded the implementation of these findings at local level. Six networking events were held (Oct & Nov 2018; Feb, May & Sept 2019; Feb 2020) to workshop the detailed practical implications of the Blame to Praise approach, and hence build collective engagement and ownership of this significant change in culture and attitudes. The events were all co-designed and co-facilitated by Dr **Tomkins** and a small group of Met colleagues acting as 'change agents'. They were extremely well received, and over 100 people attended each one in person, with many more subsequently accessing the materials on-line **[C1**: video timestamp 4.16 - 4.37**]**.

Finally, Dr **Tomkins** and her research have impacted significantly on leadership behaviours. The Chief Supt testifies to the change in style and tone of the Met's Organizational Learning Board, the key leadership forum for organizational learning, innovation and performance improvement. This Board was established in Jan 2018 and held quarterly thereafter, with **Dr Tomkins** a full Board member **[C8; C9]**: "*One of the really positive outcomes of having the Open University present at every Organizational Learning Board in the Metropolitan Police is that it's really supported me and other colleagues to challenge executive behaviour, both within that meeting and more generally. So what we've found, actually, is that the Organizational Learning Boards have really changed in their feel, from being completely structured meetings where people don't generally feel free to share their views to more discursive boards that are really making a difference in dealing with wicked issues. And that's almost wholly, I think, due to having the Open University there*" **[C1**: video timestamp 1.37 - 2.16**]**.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

C1. Video testimonial from a Chief Superintendent (Superintendent at the time) at the Met on the impact of the Blame to Praise model. ORDO https://figshare.com/s/a89feb5b6b1103f4bdb6
C2. Video testimonial from the IOPC Deputy Director General of Operations on the impact of the OU's Blame to Praise model. ORDO https://figshare.com/s/b365e332f1f5ad2a46f4
C3. Link to the new legislation instating the Reflective Practice Review Process (UK Statutory Instruments, No.4, Part 6). https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/4/part/6/made
C4. News report on IOPC website, evidencing the new category of Reflective Practice in action, 10 Sept 2020. https://policeconduct.gov.uk/news/iopc-upholds-cyclist%E2%80%99s-stop-and-search-complaint-against-metropolitan-police-officer
C5. Announcement of the New Complaint and Conduct Reflection Scheme, developed within the Met's Directorate of Professional Standards, and explicitly based on the OU's Blame to Praise model, Met Intranet, July 2020.
C6. Blog on the New Complaint and Conduct Reflection Scheme, and its links with Blame to Praise, by the Inspector responsible for implementation. Met Intranet, July 2020.
C7. MPS Organizational Learning Performance metrics. Please refer to the COVID-19 statement on this point.
C8. Email from the Assistant Commissioner of the Met's professionalism and learning command, evidencing the impact of the Blame to Praise model on policy developments at IOPC.
C9. Sample quarterly MPS Organizational Learning Board meeting agenda, testifying to the influence of the OU's Dr **Tomkins** on the Met's culture change programme.