

Lessons from the street: Leading complex work at the front line

Nita L Cherry

Swinburne University of Technology

ABSTRACT

Emerging academic commentary asks how people can be prepared for work and leadership under conditions of increasing complexity. It has been noted, however, that treatments of leadership in the management literature have been slow to engage with complexity thinking and also remain largely focused on executive and middle level leadership. This paper explores the implications of complexity thinking for front-line leadership work. It does that, firstly, by considering leadership questions implied by newer theoretical perspectives on complex practice and secondly, by revisiting earlier insights into complex work at street level. Lipsky's (1980) exploration of street-level bureaucracy suggested that unresolvable paradoxes in public policy have always created significant dilemmas for front-line practitioners and leaders. Policing, education and welfare are prime examples of this space. Indeed, Perez (2011) suggests that operational police and their leaders face uniquely complex dilemmas. Thirdly, then, this paper references research undertaken with 50 serving police officers in Melbourne to focus on key issues for contemporary front-line leadership.

Introduction

Academic commentary is taking notions of the complexity of contemporary life and work to new levels, identifying super-complexity (Barnett, 2012) and wickedness (Briggs, 2007) as dimensions of contemporary life, work and leadership for individuals, organisations and communities. At the same time, the question is being asked as to how citizens and workers are to be prepared and supported for effective engagement in complex practice and leadership (Barnett, 2012). Much of this thinking is emergent and theoretical, to be regarded as work in progress for some time to come. This paper considers how insights from earlier theory and from current practice domains might contribute to that work. It particularly draws upon perspectives and data based on the practicalities of work and leadership on the street.

The first section of the paper describes the emergence of complexity theory in recent decades in parallel with rapid and significant shifts in knowledge and communication. It explores the idea of paradox: a key dimension in emerging framings of complexity. It then considers Lipsky's (1980,

2010) earlier exploration of paradoxes in the context of what he called street level bureaucracy. Lipsky suggested that complex paradoxes that can't be resolved in public policy and strategy play out in significant recurring dilemmas for day-to-day practice and leadership, where front-line practitioners have wide discretion in administering public benefits and sanctions. He identified policing, education and welfare as prime examples of this space, where policy emerges in practice through the continual day-to-day decisions of many separate individuals. The second section of the paper summarises the ways in which academic literature has characterised policing as a particular site for paradoxes and practice dilemmas at street level. Indeed, Perez (1997, 2011) has suggested that the multiple roles, pragmatic realities and conflicting expectations surrounding police work create paradoxes for public policy, strategy and dilemmas for day-to-day practice that cannot be reconciled and that are unique in their complexity.

The paper then explores how systemic and organisational paradoxes in policing translate into dilemmas for practice at the frontline. While not intended to be a comprehensive research report, this third section references analysis undertaken (by the author) of transcripts created through interviews with 50 serving police officers in Melbourne, in the context of an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant. The purpose of the analysis was to explore whether, and how, police officers describe day-to-day dilemmas in their own words. Their descriptions offer clues for effectively leading people working at the front line in domains of complexity. The last section of the paper suggests how all these theoretical and practical insights can be leveraged in understanding and enacting leadership at the front-line.

The Age of Complexity

Over the last twenty years, many aspects of human life in communities, economies and organisations have been considered through the lenses of complexity thinking (Stacey, 1992). This has been triggered by paradigm shifts in knowledge creation, especially across the fields of science, technology and medicine. The term troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 1999) captures the consequences of some of this knowledge, especially in parallel with the enormous continuing acceleration in electronic information capacities across the world; and, more recently, by the impact of social media in mobilising citizens to defy existing political, geographic and organisational territories, identities and conventions: "the advent of well-organised rioting' and 'mindful mobs' that are 'messed into existence" (Colville et al., 2011: 6). Stacey (1992) has offered a useful way of differentiating the *complex* from the *complicated*: something is *complicated* when either the *what* (the nature of the problem or opportunity) or the *how* (how we should engage with it) is not immediately obvious but can be known, solved or managed, given sufficient effort. It is *complex* when neither of these is definitively knowable. In these situations, the dynamics of the situation or phenomenon are inherently unstable and unpredictable. They can't be made to go away through logic, they defy explicit rules and procedures and are not amenable to decisive intervention. Indeed, action surfaces paradoxes and serious dilemmas in the form of significant and unwanted consequences.

The idea of paradox is quite central to a range of subsequent discussions of complexity, including *wickedness* (Briggs, 2007) and *super-complexity* (Barnett, 2012). If ignored, wicked and super-complex problems get worse, sometimes dramatically; and problems are displaced, creating

paradoxes in other forms and places. As Briggs notes, the scope and nature of the problem can change on a daily basis given the speed of communication technology. The results are imbedded inequities; perpetually dissatisfied stakeholders; citizens who are overloaded with data and yet witness increasing debates about what counts as knowledge; and attendant anxiety, uncertainty and destabilisation (Barnett, 2012: 69). Briggs (2007) suggests that complex and significant social and economic problems are now so intractable that they are accepted as common-place and inevitable, and reflect both the chronic failure of government policy and the failure of the academy to appropriately theorise and research them. Others agree:

The failure of business school research to either anticipate or deeply understand some of the most fundamental challenges of our times threatens the legitimacy of our enterprise (Polzer et al., 2009: 280).

Stacey notes that one common reaction to complexity in the world of practice is to try to simplify it by insistence on rules, technical prescriptions, objective logic and simplistic, even heroic, notions of leadership practice. When rules and logic fail, politicians and opinion leaders engage in fierce ideological debates, take the high moral ground and make charismatic appeals to their constituencies. Rowley and Gibbs (2008), among others, point to the continuing dominance of relatively limited top-down, command and control philosophy in much contemporary academic and practitioner discourse in the field of management, despite the serious limits to competitive advantage posed by rapid changes in technology and the catastrophic failure of financial management in many economies. Based on a comprehensive review of 25 years of empirical leadership research reported in 11 leading academic management journals, De Church et al. (2010) found that the leadership literature is largely pre-occupied with individuals at the top of organisations. They observe that significantly less attention has been devoted to team- and unit-level leadership, and to leadership at the front line. And very recently, based on an equally comprehensive critique of leadership literature reported in management journals over the past 25 years, Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) note the preoccupation of that literature with poorly defined and under-theorised framings of the charismatic and transformational dimensions of executive leadership behaviour.

Against the background of all that has been presented in this section, it is understandable that some view paradoxical complexity as posing the fundamental challenge of our age for sustainable practice, leadership and education (Bowden and Marton, 1998; Barnett, 2012). How are people to be prepared for front line practice in organisations of all kinds, whether in the commercial, government or not-for-profit sectors? How are their leaders and organisations going to assist and sustain them? Does our understanding of front-line leadership need to be explored more extensively, using a different frame of reference from that which seems to dominate thinking about executive leadership? And where might we turn for helpful insight when considering these questions?

This paper suggests that it is useful to acknowledge that some thinkers and researchers have in fact focused on unresolvable complexities of practice, even though their voices might have remained at the margin of mainstream management discourse. As early as 1973, Rittel and Webber discussed wicked problems in the context of urban planning, which face the challenge of conflicting and incompatible issues of public safety, aesthetics, space, access and utility. And in the late 1980s, Schon (1987) used the swamp as a metaphor for what he called the indeterminate zones of practice:

... in the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high hard ground overlooking a swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution (Schon, 1987: 3).

Schon's suggestion was that these indeterminate zones of practice inevitably require practitioners to craft a 'best fit' sustainable solution that effectively holds in tension a number of competing requirements. Examples include the need for something to be both sustainable in energy terms and efficient and affordable; the conflicting demands of the short-term and the longer time horizon; and the tensions involved when the front-line employees of global conglomerates must reconcile corporate strategy and values with the rights, cultural practices and laws of local communities. Individuals working in public administration face the continual challenge to do something effective in the space that lies between grand public policy narratives about what we should do, and contextual practice wisdom about what we reasonably can do, where the needs of the one are set against the needs of the many. In these spaces between official rhetoric and individual practice, explicit and definitive rules of practice are difficult to formulate, wisdom about what to do and how to do it is implicit, theories abound, and both rigorous experimentation and innovative bricolage are used to develop expertise (Cherry, 2010). In this 'swamp' of complex or emerging practice, Schon suggested that interventions range from the shoddy, to the 'good enough', and to those that are superbly crafted or designed (what he called practice artistry).

Even earlier, Lipsky (1980) drew attention to the complex dynamics of street-level bureaucracy: those areas of practice (including policing, schools, welfare and other agencies) where workers have wide discretion in the administration of public benefits and sanctions. In a new edition of this work, he revisits the consequences of what he calls 'resonant moments' in civic life (Lipsky, 2010: xi). These moments are encounters between citizens and street level bureaucrats that are intrinsically paradoxical:

... work as diverse as that of guidance counselors, judges, police officers, and social workers ... could now be seen as embodying an essential paradox that plays out in a variety of ways. On the one hand, the work is often highly scripted to achieve policy objectives that have their origins in the political process. On the other hand, the work requires improvisation and responsiveness to the individual case. ... Essentially all the great reform efforts of the last thirty years to improve performance or accountability in street-level public services may be understood as attempts to manage this apparently paradoxical reality: how to treat all citizens alike in their claims on government, and how at the same time to be responsive to the individual case when appropriate. ...

I argue that the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out. I maintain that public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators. These decision-making arenas are important, of course, but they do not represent the complete picture (Lipsky, 2010: xi-xiii).

One of Lipsky's contributions was to suggest how conceptual paradoxes of policy and strategy translate into practice dilemmas: the concrete and specific choices that many different individuals, often working in isolation and with imperfect data, must make. They must do exactly what Schon suggested: craft a line of best fit between opposing options. Lipsky argues that while some street-

level bureaucrats either drop out or burn out, those who stay on must develop sustainable ways of coping with the paradoxical aspects of their work. Coping requires adjustments, often the lowering of expectations and ideals, both for themselves and for their clients. Those who eventually take up leadership roles face the dilemma of either trying to be reformers or simply settling for the status quo (Lipsky, 2010). The choices they make translate into leadership practices that, for better or worse, send powerful messages to those who report to them.

Policing as Complex Practice

The case for policing as a domain of complex practice has been made by many writers. Policing policy, leadership and practice are continuously explored by the academy through diverse theoretical lenses that include criminology, sociology, law, psychology, public administration and policy, urban studies, ethnicity and culture. Efforts are made to describe and explain how police officers – and particularly police leaders – think about their work, and to understand the culture, leadership and socialisation practices of police organisations. Emerging issues for policing include multi-cultural communities formed through the displacement of large human populations through war and deprivation; issues of judicial governance and ethical practice; and the rapid development of technologies for surveillance and weaponry.

Those who lead and focus the efforts of police organisations at every level must engage with these diverse issues both strategically and pragmatically. Their particular challenge is to find a way to deal with what many commentators have described as the inherently paradoxical nature of policing.

... (police) are currently confronted by conflicting expectations from their superiors, their political masters and the public; they are expected to act definitively (and often harshly) with crime and disorder problems, yet ... they are expected to be all-round, 'friendly' service providers. At the same time, the police are confronted with global neo-liberal political economic policies and arrangements that require them to target their outcomes and to outsource aspects of their traditional policing roles (Shearing & Marks, 2011: 211).

... (policing) deals with conflict and hence has a perpetual Janus face, helping some by controlling others ... General order, the requirement of any coordinated and complex civilization, is conceptually distinct from but inextricably intertwined with particular order – specific patterns of inequality and dominance. Policing deals simultaneously with 'parking tickets and class repression (Marenin 1982).

And like Lipsky, Goldstein draws attention to the adjustments that characterise the work:

... policing is an incredibly complex business. The police function is ill defined. Demands on the police are often in conflict. The police are commonly thought to be omnipotent, but are in fact extremely limited. Public expectations exceed both available resources and authority. As a result, police are frequently pressured into stretching their authority in order to get things done, thereby increasing the potential for abuse. Police are assumed to operate based on highly specific laws and guidelines, but in fact exercise enormous discretion. They must take risks all of the time, but no allowance is made for error ... one could persuasively argue that the police job, as formally defined, is impossible of achievement Police succeed as well as they do because they have ... made an endless number of accommodations. They improvise. They take many shortcuts. And they often resort to 'bluff', hoping

that their authority is not challenged and their true capacity is not revealed. The police should not be forced to be devious, disingenuous, or circuitous in carrying out that which is formally required of them. They ought not to have to operate sub rosa. The fact that they must do so, sometimes euphemistically referred to as 'the art of policing' is acknowledged by most practicing, reflective police in moments of candor (Goldstein, 2003: 23-24).

Perez (1997, 2011) has suggested that its multiple roles, together with significant variation in the expectations and attitudes of its many stakeholders, have always created paradoxes for policing. These paradoxes play out at the levels of policy, strategy and day-to-day practice; and Perez believes these are essentially irreconcilable and unique in their complexity. The resulting day-to-day practice dilemmas for serving police officers involve having to make choices about how to act in specific, often hostile or contested situations, with many people involved, even though information is sketchy or conflicting. Officers and their leaders also know that their decisions and actions can come back to bite them: that they must always be ready to explain and justify their actions in a number of internal and external arenas.

Arguably, then, policing as a practice domain also presents a compelling site for examination of the dynamics of street level complexity. That was the rationale for an analysis of data created during a project funded by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, in partnership with Victoria Police and the Australian Vietnamese Women's Welfare Association. Despite the fact that the first significant numbers of Vietnamese people arrived in Australia in the late 1970s, preliminary discussion with the research partners indicated that police still consider the Vietnamese community hard to reach. This research project explored the attitudes of Vietnamese people to police and their perceptions of being policed, and analysed police officers' perceptions of working in the Vietnamese community. The author was one of the Chief Investigators associated with the project, and took the opportunity to explore whether – and how – the narratives of police officers themselves reflect the complexities of practice ascribed to it in academic commentary.

Police participation was voluntary, from among officers with experience in policing suburbs with high concentrations of Vietnamese people. Interviewees were selected across rank from constables to senior sergeants, and included police performing general duties and police from specialist units dealing with youth, sexual offences, criminal investigation and traffic management. Fifty transcripts of interviews were available, undertaken between October 2008 and March 2010. This data set was particularly useful because the officers were being interviewed about their experiences in working in the Vietnamese community, and were not prompted to name paradoxes of police work or to describe experience in terms of dilemmas.

The analysis used a coding template based on Perez's (2011) most recent description of the fifteen paradoxes that he suggests play out in policing at systemic, organisational and operational levels. The use of legal force to deal with illegal force is one specific example: to be empowered to do things that in other circumstances would be an offence and to make judgments about what constitutes reasonable force. The dilemma involved is that assessments of 'reasonable force' and what constitutes danger can be scrutinised and contested after the event by several parties, including the media and specialist units within the force, armed with data not necessarily available

to the officer at the time. Another example is the ineffectiveness of coercive power and logic when dealing with people who are so frightened, desperate or ill that they have nothing to lose, rendering apparently powerful police officers powerless. Similarly, the exercise of discretionary judgment needed for the delivery of justice on the street can generate the citizen response of: "You're never around when you're needed so why are you picking on me now?" leaving the officer with the dilemma of being damned if they do and damned if they don't. Other examples of paradox and dilemma in operational work involve living with the consequences of choosing between rules and policies that are not aligned; and not having enough resources to do things properly, creating further work down the track.

A complete description of the analysis undertaken, and of the findings, is in preparation, but the major findings can be referenced here. A total of 351 separate dilemma statements were identified across the fifty transcripts; the median number of different dilemma statements per person was 4; only two transcripts contained no dilemma statements at all; and the largest number of different dilemma statements in any single interview was 9. The transcripts reflect, in plain language, all but two of Perez's paradoxes (these related to systemic paradoxes for policing strategy). It was expected that the dilemma statements would focus on issues arising from policing the Vietnamese community but in fact those interviewed moved quite quickly to generalise their experience beyond that community. The following extracts (each from a different interview) convey something of the flavour of the operational dilemmas described:

It's difficult for operational police because of the sheer busy-ness of what they're doing. What you may want and what the community may want from an operational policing unit may not actually be possible. Because you jump in the van for the day, and they say, here's your jobs, go for it. So you just go bang, you go to a job, you get the barest information, horrific things are happening, but you're just taking information, processing, doing what you need to do with it. So probably what you'd want from a police person may not be available in this day and age.

'Cos in a lot of ways this is a very negative job, and its very mentally challenging because you have to back yourself, 'cos a lot of the time you are working one-handed. You've got to back yourself, and it tires you out. I mean, because if you're pulling up people all the time, you get sick of backing yourself all the time.

... they're always worried: should we go and speak to this person, can we go and search that car, what powers have we got. Now they have to be wary all the time ... they've got this fear always behind them, the Ombudsman, the supervisor above you, you know, you stupid idiot why did you do that? you shouldn't have done that. Whereas we should be encouraging them to think on their own ... A lot of that has been hammered out of our troops.

Such statements vividly bring to life the realities of complex practice dilemmas. The fact that they were offered, unsolicited, in the numbers that they were, is also striking. It is suggested later in this paper that their statements offer clues as to the ways in which individuals might be supported, through education and leadership, in developing practices that are not driven by fear and that are not devious, disingenuous or circuitous in the ways Goldstein (2003) described.

Leadership for Complex Practice

The need to educate people who can effectively work, and lead, under accelerating complexity has been recognised in educational literatures for more than twenty years. Doren and Smith (1999) encouraged business schools to prepare students to embrace the uncertainty of managing in multiple highly dynamic environments. More generally, Bowden and Martin (1998) described the challenges for universities in the twenty-first century, faced with the paradoxical task of educating people for jobs and leadership roles that have yet to be invented, using knowledge that has yet to be created. Barnett (2012) has argued that a world of super-complexity is one where new knowledge creates even more uncertainty and even more paradox. This in turn raises some fundamental questions: how is masterful practice in conditions of complexity to be defined? taught? learned? He suggests that "... the idea of skills, even generic skills, is a cul-de-sac. In contrast, the way forward lies in construing and enacting a pedagogy for human being ... human qualities and dispositions" (Barnett, 2012: 65). Similarly, in the complex territory of front-line health practice, Higgs and Tichen (2001) have framed constructive *being* and *becoming*, not just knowing and doing, as central to practitioner development. These questions relate equally to masterful leadership under conditions of complexity.

Barnett suggests that what is needed is a pedagogy that *disturbs* human *being* and engages the self, so that instead of being paralysed in inaction or reduced to simplistic automatic responses, practitioners and their leaders can act with confidence, purpose and thoughtfulness. Learning, then, is "... acquiring the capacity to live with the existential angst that derives from an awareness of the gap between one's actions and one's limited grounds for those actions" (Barnett, 2012: 76). Barnett's argument is that in a world where knowledge creates more uncertainty, curricula must expose uncertainty and dilemma rather than hide or simplify it. He is unequivocal in his judgment of "the nonsense belief that we can generate human being for uncertainty through a new kind of certainty in the curriculum" (Barnett, 2012: 73).

Just how this thinking will translate into the education of both practitioners and leaders will be a matter of continuing interest. Arguably, however, research into the longer standing narratives of street level bureaucracy offers something of value to this work. In keeping with Barnett's suggestions, Lipsky (1980, 2010) has underscored the 'grow or regress' nature of practice development in the unremitting complexity of front-line leadership, where mastery and development is not just a matter of acquiring and polishing techniques. The leader must bring extraordinary qualities and commitment to his or her work if the practice of individuals and teams is to avoid being diminished and compromised. Even just being a 'good enough' leader requires significant and sustained effort, over a long period of time. The leader must be prepared to pay attention – and coach others in paying attention – to dilemmas of practice as they surface and how they are being resolved, for better or worse, by the practitioner.

Stories surfaced through the research project referred to earlier (again, from different interviews) underscore these issues in the context of police leadership at the front line:

I've got 18 and 19 year old kids going to sort out domestics between a lady that's been married for 20 or 30 years and it's really hard for them to do. We've got guidelines of what we have to do, but the life

experience has got to come in with it. And that just takes time to develop. You can't teach them that in a few short weeks of training. They can't teach you this.

They're given 5 months of training, and that's all very well and good, but once they come out of the academy and start working at a station, they realise that they actually know nothing. They've been given a theoretical knowledge and a lot of that flies out the window anyway, especially when they're first on they're own.

If you're running them too lean and mean, they can topple over too easily. So you need to build in your people, the capacity to enjoy this job, even though it is a very hard job.

Building the capacity in their people to enjoy the job is hardly straight forward for leaders, as the fragments of story shared here suggest. But these fragments might hold the kernel of some helpful insights, of relevance beyond the world of policing. Indeed, considered together, the lessons of the street are very instructive, bringing into sharp relief some core dynamics. Individuals are asked to exercise discretion that can significantly change the lives of the people they deal with, making many choices that are intrinsically embedded in dilemmas and that require the maturation of the practitioner. Yet learning to make those choices often happens alone, and initial training is limited in what it can accomplish. This is a situation played out in many other occupational settings. In its mildest form, less experienced and less comprehensively trained workers are routinely given jobs on the counter or over the phone that more experienced people don't want to do or are not available to do. In its most serious form, agencies struggle to recruit and then retain experienced staff – sometimes even skilled volunteers – capable of dealing with the demands of providing services with limited resources to people whose needs are potentially serious but unclear or contestable, and whose capacity to reasonably negotiate them might be impaired. Policing is made additionally complex by a persistent dominant culture that inhibits helpful learning conversations, and substitutes simplified stories of both crime and heroism for the genuine complexities of the work (Loftus, 2012) even in the context of courses conducted in university settings (Macvean & Cox, 2012).

The view from the street level hints at the dynamics created when leaders and organisational structures and processes fail to support complex work that happens in isolation. It is suggested here that Weick's (1993) exploration of sense-making, decision-making and followership under conditions of danger and complexity in front-line emergencies speaks directly to these dynamics. Weick highlighted the key role of familiar tools, language and stories in guiding the sense that people are able to make of things under normal conditions. If the tools, language and stories of isolated workers become thin or too simplistic, they become less and less able to cope either with normal variation in day-to-day practice, or with sudden changes and ambiguities in what is presenting. Dominant stories fix the meaning of the concepts and labels available to narrate events in the organisation, and thereby circumscribe sense-making (Weick, 2011: 145). Drawing on the work of Geiger and Antonacopoulou (2009), Weick notes that organisations don't just become sites for sense-making through story, they are actually created and sustained through story. This resonates with Lipsky's view that policy is created – not simply implemented – through the decisions and actions of those on the street.

Understood in those terms, it has been argued by many that the dominant stories of police culture are too thin to hold the serious tensions experienced in grappling with dilemmas of practice and

reinforce a 'simplistic, decontextualized understanding of criminality, and officers are intolerant of those who challenge the status quo (Loftus, 2010: 1-2). Again, these simplifications echo Lipsky's suggestion that *adjustments* are made in the face of dilemmas, adjustments that involve lowering expectations and compromising ideals. It also resonates with Goldstein's (2003) picture of the *accommodations* and *shortcuts* taken by police. A thicker story, able to support complex practice, needs to contain more complete accounts of masterful practice that hold uncertainty and ambiguity to the extent that Barnett recommends. Such stories are unlikely to come from leaders at the top of organisations that contain street level bureaucracies, because of the many conflicting stakeholders who continuously contest the work of the agencies involved. However, clues as to the kind of stories that might be robust enough to hold complexity come from the street itself:

Police officers, they're not really that well skilled up on general conversation with young people. A lot of them struggle because they have a job to do and they come in to do the job at that time ... and then all of a sudden a simple thing of asking for someone's name turns into an arrest. Which it doesn't need to if they think about what they're doing ... When you're speaking to a young person, that's you know, been here two years and saw their mum and dad get killed, struggling to speak English – maybe if he's swearing and carrying on you might want to put it in perspective, that we're professionals and this is a young angry little person. Because too often police will say, well, they didn't pass the attitude test, so this is how we respond to that ... But more and more police are understanding that this is not the right approach, more and more they are opening up.

This is an example of a more complete practice story, told to an interviewer who is a stranger from outside the organisation. How could this story become powerful in influencing the practice of others? As previously observed, such a story is not going to come from the top-floor suite of the organisation (Lipsky, 2010). It is a story born on the street and told in the language of the street, the place where the culture that creates the organisation is itself created. This suggests that the leadership effort to create thicker, more robust stories of masterful practices that are fit for complexity, must also be focused on the street. Such stories aim to replace simplistic and heroic rhetoric with practical recognition of what's actually involved, and, most importantly, replace simple, inadequate short cuts with useful descriptions of more sophisticated actionable options. Robust stories, in turn, can emerge from a range of front-line leadership and educational practices that deliberately notice and challenge the tools and language that focus and capture attention (and therefore sense-making) during the action of experience – an idea owed in part to the perspective of situated cognition (Brown et al., 1989). Building on Bruner's (1990) proposition that *we act our way into meaning*, Colville et al. (2011) suggest that sense-making is a balance between thought and action, between applying existing frames and responding to the cues and data generated through action in a specific context.

This line of thinking suggests some practical possibilities for front-line leadership: capturing experience while it is 'hot' and formative, de-briefing and re-storying both the confusion of the formative weeks and months on the job and the isolation that can follow in later years. The techniques that are required to do this are already available and used widely in education: scaffolding, focusing on the typical critical moments when insight, expertise and confidence are malleable, and teaching the skilled consideration of diagnosis and options in the face of uncertainty. In the context of practice, such interventions might take the form of planned conversations, but

are most likely to be quick professional de-briefs: what did you/we do? What else might have been going on here? What other options could you have? These won't be in the context of traditional ongoing mentoring or supervisory relationships, but rather will involve the recognition by front-line leaders of Lipsky's *resonant moments* on the run, paying particular attention to the language cues that suggest how a person is trying to make sense of something that has happened, how rigid or flexible their frames are, and whether, in fact, they are trying to make sense of things at all. Leadership at the front line, then, is as much about education as it is about work allocation and assessment. It pays attention to the way the experience is initially experienced and described, for individuals and for teams. Work of this kind, in the moment, initiated with people not known to one, requires confidence from a front-line leader, especially if their mandate is equivocal in the ways suggested in the transcript fragments. The issuing of clearer mandates in relation to that is something available even in the tough world of policing. The issuing of such a mandate is itself both a leadership and an educational act, and one that does need the active involvement of more senior people, not just training instructors. Asking them to describe, explain and role-model what amount to coaching processes is both harder and simpler than trying to craft compelling grand corporate stories that do not, in any case, speak to operational experience. For some organisations and leaders, this involves a major re-thinking of what the work of leadership is in the age of super-complexity at all levels.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that old theory and accounts of current practice can be helpful in understanding and engaging with the accelerating complexities of contemporary front-line leadership. It implicitly challenges the capacity of grand top-down narratives to be adequate in any of those spaces, and turns to the street for insight into how organisations might focus their efforts. Arguably practice and leadership at the front line have been under-theorised and researched relative to corporate and political leadership, and the field holds much potential for further work. And Weick's (1979: 261) urging from over thirty years ago – to 'complicate yourself' if you aspire to a way of *being* that is able to adapt to continual change and engage with complexity – sits well with Barnett's more recent desire for a *pedagogy of human being*. This paper suggests that the scholarship of earlier times is ripe for re-examination on a number of fronts.

References

- Barnett, R. (2012) Learning for an unknown future. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23 (3) pp 247-260.
- Bowden, J. and Marton, F. (1998) *The University of Learning: Beyond Quality and Competence in Higher Education*. Kogan Page, London.
- Briggs, L. (2007) *Tackling Wicked Problems: A Public Policy Perspective*. Public Service Commission, Canberra. Available at <http://www.apsc.gov.au/publications07/wickedproblems.htm>
- Brown, J., Collins, A. and Duguid, S. (1989) Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Researcher*, 18 (1) pp 132-42.
- Bruner, J. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*, Harvard University Press, Boston.
- Cherry, N. (2010) Doing qualitative research in the white spaces. In J.Higgs, N. Cherry, R. Macklin and R. Ajjawi (Eds.), *Researching Practice*. Sense Publishers, Rotterdam. 87-94.

- De Church, I., Hiller, N., Murase, T., Doty, D. and Salas, E. (2010) Leadership across levels: levels of leaders and their levels of impact. *Leadership Quarterly*, 21 (6) pp 1069-1085.
- Doren, D. and Smith, D. (1999) Scenario planning: a new approach to teaching marketing strategy. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 21 (2) pp 146-155.
- Goldstein, H. (2003) On further developing problem-oriented policing: the most critical need, the major impediments, and a proposal. *Crime Prevention Studies: Volume 15*. Criminal Justice Press, New York, pp 13-47.
- Geiger, D. and Antonacopoulou, E. (2009) Narrative and organisational dynamics: exploring blind spots and organisational inertia. *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science*, 45 (3) pp 411-554.
- Higgs, J. and Titchen, A. (2001) Preface. In J. Higgs and A. Titchen (Eds.), *Professional Practice in Health, Education and the Creative Art*. Blackwell Science, Oxford. x-xii.
- Lipsky, M. (1980) *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
- Lipsky, M. (2010) *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. Celebration Reissue, Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
- Loftus, B. (2012) *Police Culture in a Changing World*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Macvean, A. and Cox, C. (2012) Police education in a university setting: emerging cultures and attitudes. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 6 (1) pp 16-25.
- Marenin, O. (1982) Parking tickets and class repression: the concept of policing in critical theories of criminal justice. *Contemporary Crises*, 6 (3) pp 241-266.
- Perez, D. (1997) *Paradoxes of Police Work: Walking the Thin Blue Line*. Copperhouse Publishing Company, Incline Village, Nevada.
- Perez, D. (2011) *Paradoxes of Police Work*. 2nd Ed. Delmar, New York.
- Perkins, D. (1999) 'The many faces of constructivism'. *Educational Leadership*, 57 (3) pp6-11.
- Polzer, J., Gulati, R., Khurana, R. and Tushman, M. (2009) Crossing boundaries to increase relevance in organizational research. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 18(4) pp 280-286
- Rittel, H. and Webber, M., (1973) Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. *Policy Sciences*, 4, pp 155-169.
- Rowley, J. and Gibbs, P. (2008) From learning organisation to practically wise organisation. *The Learning Organisation*, 15 (3) pp 356-372.
- Schön, D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Shearing, C. and Marks, M. (2011) Being a new police in the liquid 21st century. *Policing*, 5 (3) pp 210-218.
- Stacey, R. (1992) *Managing the Unknowable: Strategic Boundaries Between Order and Chaos in Organisations*. John Wiley and Sons, New York.
- Van Knippenberg, D. and Sitkin, S. (2013) A critical assessment of charismatic-transformational leadership research: Back to the drawing board? *The Academy of Management Annals*, 7 (1) pp 1-60.
- Weick K. (1979) *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. 2nd edn. Random House, New York.
- Weick, K. (1993) The collapse of sense-making in organisations: the Mann-Gulch disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 38 (4) pp 628-652.
- Weick, K. (2011) Organised sense-making: a commentary on processes of interpretive work. *Human Relations*, 65 (1) pp 141-153.