

PAPER TITLE

Course and Module

My Name



November 7, 2025

Abstract

Purpose: lorem ipsum...This paper critically reflects on...

Method: lorem ipsum...Using [reflective framework] and engaging with literature on...

Findings: lorem ipsum...The analysis reveals...

Conclusion: lorem ipsum...These insights lead to research questions focused on...

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Acronyms

CJS Criminal Justice System. 11

CPS Crown Prosecution Service. 11

CSAM Child Sexual Abuse Material. 6, 10

CSE Child Sexual Exploitation. 5, 6

NLP Natural Language Processing. 11

NPCC National Police Chiefs' Council. 6, 12

TOEX Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme. 5, 10, 12

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to critically reflect on the professional context of my current role and to engage with relevant reflective frameworks in order to identify and to shape an initial research challenge.

This chapter provides an overview of my professional context and defines an initial problem statement.

Chapter 2 critically reflects upon this context and my role within it, using the Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, incorporating the "What Model". Chapter 3 considers the broader organisational and structural factors which influence the problem statement. Chapter 4 expands the reflective practice to consider cross-sector perspectives, how these relate to my practice, and explores existing biases and assumptions. Chapter 5 defines the emergent research focus and questions which will guide my future research. Finally, Chapter 6 considers the ethical implications of the intended research.

1.1 Professional context overview

I am a police Detective Chief Inspector working as part of a national policing capability called the Tackling Organised Exploitation Programme (TOEX).

TOEX supports police forces in the investigation and analysis of crime which can be thematically linked to organised exploitation. This includes crimes such as human trafficking and modern slavery, and also includes the organised sexual exploitation and abuse of children, often referred to as Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE).

My core role within TOEX is to lead on the delivery of technical capabilities that can be used to bolster investigative and analytical efforts in policing these crimes.

I hold a secondary role where I provide operational supervision and oversight to officers and staff working across serious crime inquiries, including CSE investigations.

These two roles have given me experience in both the delivery of technology to support and enhance investigatory practice, whilst simultaneously experiencing significant technical literacy and technical implementation challenges across policing, [Thompson and Manning, 2021].

1.2 Initial problem statement

Police forces across the UK have teams that are dedicated to the investigation of offending against children. These teams range from investigative teams that deal with contact offending, [College of Policing, 2022], teams that investigate online grooming and the sharing of Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM), [HMICFRS, 2024] and teams that operate in covert roles to identify and disrupt offenders, [NPCC, 2024].

Recent academic reporting, [Choi et al., 2024], and [Finkelhor et al., 2024], alongside practice leads in the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), [NPCC, 2025], confirms the increasing scale of sexual offending against children.

Whilst a proportion of offenders who view and share CSAM do not progress to contact sexual offending, [Krone and Smith, 2017], a cohort of offenders will progress from online offending to contact offending via a grooming process, [Soldino and Seigfried-Spellar, 2024].

Across policing, this offending is primarily identified as a result of "post fact", where instances of CSAM offending or contact offending have already taken place and a child has been abused.

Experience within my current role suggests that advances in technology, particularly in the area of natural language processing, may provide opportunities to identify triggers within grooming conversations that point to impending physical abuse, and thus provide opportunities to safeguard children before they are harmed.

It is this gap between the technical potential that exists and the stretched operational capability in the CSE context that I wish to explore further; I believe that this gap exposes limitations around proactive safeguarding opportunities, and results in policing retaining a predominantly reactive posture in identifying offenders only after harm has occurred.

The following chapter builds upon this context by applying a reflective framework to examine how my role, assumptions, and organisational environment influences my understanding of this problem area and my approach to addressing it.

Chapter 2

Critical reflection on professional practice

I joined the police service in March 2001. Initial training involved a classroom session detailing the **incident learning cycle**. The lesson encouraged new recruits to reflect on their policing experiences by asking four questions after attending at a challenging incident.

1. What happened?
2. What does that mean?
3. So what?
4. Now what?

This incident learning cycle presents as a modified representation of Kolb's experiential learning cycle, [Kolb, 1984], and can be seen in figure 2.1.

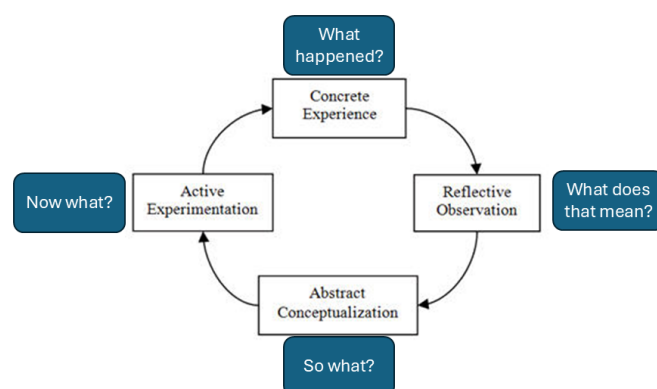


Figure 2.1: Incident learning cycle adapted from Kolb's experiential learning cycle

This cycle, whilst encouraging officers to engage in a dialogic process of reflection with

themselves and with peers, could not be considered to be full critical reflection as the reflective process would miss the broader context of any particular incident, notably organisational, cultural, and systemic factors, [Hatton and Smith, 1995]. Further it would not seek to enact transformative change.

2.1 Reflective analysis using an established framework

There are a number of established reflective frameworks which can be applied to reflecting upon professional practice, with established models such as Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, [Gibbs, 1988], and Schön's Reflective Practice, [Schön, 2017] being well embedded in sectors such as teaching and healthcare. These frameworks are less established in a policing context.

Sow et al. [2025] apply what they refer to as the "What Model" to established frameworks such as Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, [Gibbs, 1988] and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, [Kolb, 1984].

The "What Model" is a direct reflection of the previously noted incident learning cycle. From a sentimental perspective, the union of this model with an established framework affords me a sense of continuity to my initial police training whilst encouraging critical reflection. Accordingly, I will be applying Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, incorporating the "What Model" in my reflections on my professional context. This combined model can be seen in figure 2.2.

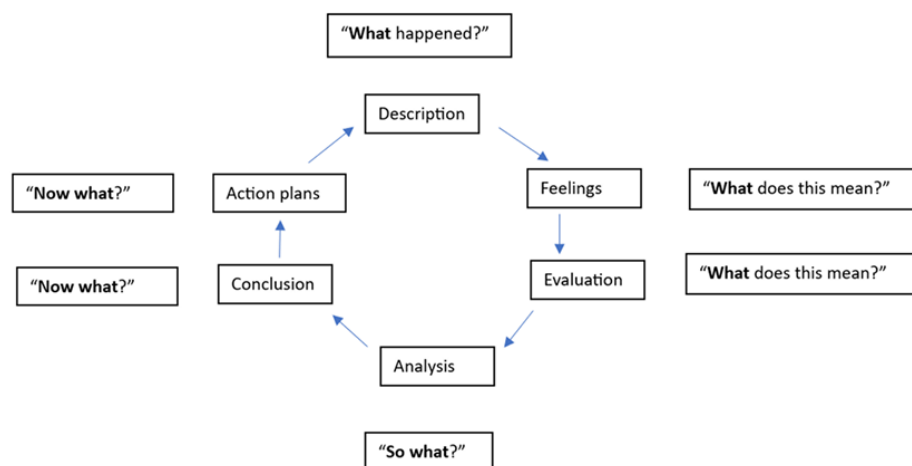


Figure 2.2: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, incorporating the What Model, [Sow et al., 2025].

2.2 My professional practice and role

My core role requires a blend of technical knowledge, operational police experience, project management and stakeholder engagement skills. These skills are required to successfully deliver to forty-three different police forces across England and Wales, each of which has its own culture, priorities, and ways of working.

Section 1.1 commented as to a lack of technical maturity in tackling policing problems. Experience within my current role has identified a significant gap in technical literacy, technical management and strategic technical planning across the policing landscape. This gap is present throughout all ranks of policing from front line officers who, whilst being digital natives, often lack understanding of "how" technology works and why it may fail in an operational context, through to senior leaders who, by virtue of generational and experiential factors, are often technophobic and resistant to change, despite often wanting to see technology utilised effectively within their organisations. These are observations that are supported research such as that by Laufs and Borrion [2022] and Kassem and Erken [2025].

This position by policing results in me frequently delivering into an environment that simultaneously wants technological change but is caught in a moment of inertia due to a lack of understanding and technical expertise. This conflict is both frustrating and exciting; it is frustrating to see an institution like policing struggle to adapt to modern technological realities, but it is simultaneously exciting and challenging due to the opportunity within the role to make a significant positive impact on policing practice.

My secondary role is undertaken through frequent periods of "on-call" and weekend working where I lead the operational detective teams across the County of Norfolk. This role is more traditional from a policing perspective and, viewed from the lens of my core role, often lays bare the challenges within policing practice that are hindered by the previously mentioned lack of technical literacy or strategic technical planning.

Frequent comments from colleagues such as "I'm a luddite" and "I'm not very technical" highlight the cultural challenges that exists within policing. I believe that these comments act as protective statements, preemptively excusing disengagement from technological solutions whilst simultaneously positioning the speaker as unable rather than unwilling to adapt; this reinforces the challenges in my core role.

Considering the "What happened?" and the "What does this mean?" stages of Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, incorporating the "What Model" reveals the tension between my two roles. I am driving technical change across a fascinating policing landscape, but I simultaneously see the implementation barriers that exist which hinder my core role's success. Tentative further reflection suggests that I have a personal passion for solutionism and technology which may bias my approach to my core role, favouring technological solutions over cultural or procedural change.

2.3 Tacit and explicit knowledge in my practice

Smith [2001] discusses the difference between tacit and explicit knowledge in professional practice. Tacit knowledge is described as being intuitive and automatic, being developed through experience and exposure to professional circumstances. Explicit knowledge is noted as being more formalised and structured, it is knowledge which can be codified recorded for sharing with others.

A combination of tacit and explicit knowledge is required from multiple disciplines in order to deliver against the responsibilities of my core role as described in section 2.2.

Considering explicit knowledge, I am in the twenty-fourth year of my policing career. During this time I have sat two promotion exams and completed the Detective qualifi-

cation in addition to completing a number of policing specialist training courses. Since 2016 I have focussed my policing career into a technical niche, which has resulted in my undertaking a number of technical and academic qualifications.

Considering tacit knowledge, the TOEX webpage documents the operational delivery and outcomes which I have led on in the preceding three years, and I know from professional and personal relationships that I am considered as a "solid and steady hand" from an operational policing perspective.

Aligning these comments to the definitions given by Smith [2001], I can assert that I have accumulated explicit knowledge through formal learning in addition to having the breadth of experience in operational delivery to claim tacit knowledge. Considering the "What does this mean?" element of the modified Gibbs' cycle, I can reflect that at this current time I am successful as I have currency with both tacit and explicit knowledge across both technical and policing domains. However, given the fast pace of technological change, and the extremely fluid nature of the policing landscape, [Cooper, Yvette, 2024], this currency is easily lost without continued learning and delivery in both domains.

Gundhus [2013] identifies the clash between tacit "street" knowledge and explicit "book" knowledge across policing culture, with the former being more highly valued by operational police officers. Whilst the reasons for this are out of scope for this paper, I can reflect that this cultural bias towards tacit knowledge may hinder my success in my core role. Thus far, my delivery credibility has been bolstered by my operational experience, but as I progress in my career, and move increasingly away from operational policing into technical delivery, I may find that this cultural bias towards tacit knowledge hinders my ability to lead technical change; I run the risk of being "just a techie" to policing colleagues, and "not technical enough" to technical colleagues.

Section 1.2 suggests a practice gap between technological potential and operational capability which exposes limitations in proactive safeguarding in the CSAM space. Reflecting on this through the lens of tacit and explicit knowledge highlights that this gap may be influenced by the lack of explicit technical knowledge across policing, and the cultural bias towards tacit "street" knowledge.

2.4 Illustrative examples and experiential evidence

The "What Model" noted in figure 2.2 leads with a description of "What Happened". This section provides two examples from my professional practice which led to the identification of the initial problem statement in section 1.2.

2.4.1 Analytical methods in a domestic homicide investigation

In summer 2020, I attempted a novel approach to the analysis and visualisation of digital communications in a domestic murder enquiry. My task was to seek patterns in language and conversation between the suspect and the victim to assist in proving or disproving the suspect's assertion that he was suffering from a mental health crisis at the time of the offence. The analysis, when aligned to witness statements, suggested the defendant was not suffering from any mental health issues, and that the murder was motivated by anger and jealousy.

Whilst I was pleased with the outcome of the analysis, frustratingly the output was not submitted in evidence as I had failed to consider the broader implications of the use of technology in this context: I had not engaged with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to explore how the technical analysis might be challenged or how it could be explained in simple terms to a jury. I had not considered the potential for how the use of the developed tool or its findings may be challenged by an expert witness, [Law Commission, 2011], and I had not fully documented the methodology used. Reflecting critically, this reveals a professional naivety on my behalf at the time in pre-supposing how I could improve investigative practice with technology without considering the potential limitations and challenges.

2.4.2 Widespread online grooming of children

In late 2022, following the conclusion of a complex investigation into the widespread online grooming and abuse of children, an opportunity arose to test Natural Language Processing (NLP) technology as part of an academic trial, [DRAGON-SPOTTER, 2023], to determine if police officer time and welfare could be protected in similar cases.

Having learned from the experiences noted in subsection 2.4.1, I engaged in this opportunity at the conclusion of the investigation, ensuring that I could engage with stakeholders outside of the pressure of a "live" investigation and to allow space to fully consider the implications of any technical opportunities.

The analysis was partly successful in identifying grooming conversations however, when I considered the application of this technology to live investigation or safeguarding contexts, I could not find a use case that would meaningfully enhance policing practice which would justify the effort to tackle the hurdles noted in subsection 2.4.1.

I was however encouraged by the potential merging of concepts from both the DRAGON-SPOTTER [2023] research and the conversation analytics undertaken in subsection 2.4.1 to potentially identify communication markers indicating imminent contact sex offending.

Whilst these two examples formed part of the journey in identifying the initial problem statement, it is significant that both incidents resulted in successful prosecutions without the novel use of technical solutions, potentially highlighting that the problem area may not be one of necessity, but of enhancement to policing practice, and that the challenges in embedding improved practice through technology in both policing and in the wider Criminal Justice System (CJS) may require a longer term evidence based approach to change as opposed to quick seeking immediate technological fixes to immediate problems; the enthusiasm for such solutions potentially being symptomatic of my solutionism bias noted in section 2.2.

Chapter 3

Critical analysis of practice and context

3.1 People, power dynamics and cultural influences in technical adoption

Policing in the UK operates as a hierarchical system, extending from the Home Office through to the NPCC to individual forces with clearly defined command structures. These structures generate distinct power dynamics that shape decision-making and cultural norms. However, these cultures vary markedly between commands and across forces, creating a fragmented landscape for national delivery.

My position with the TOEX Programme enables me to access the ranking individuals in police forces who have the organisational power to mandate technical adoption. However, the observations of Gundhus [2013], backed up by my own experience, suggests that the separation of senior officers from tacit "street smart" front line officers introduces a tension, with the front line frequently expressing frustration at the decisions of their senior leaders and then presenting as resistant to change.

Reflecting on these dynamics and considering the "So what?" stage of the reflective cycle, I can reflect that to deliver technical change effectively at scale, it is necessary to inhabit a dual insider-outsider role; there is a need to be outside the tacit knowledge heavy front line culture in order to introduce novel approaches and technologies, but there is also a need to be inside that culture to understand the challenges and to build trust and credibility. This duality is difficult to maintain, and I often feel pulled between the two roles.

3.2 Organisational structures and barriers

3.3 Assumptions, values, and constraints

3.4 Refining the problem or area

Chapter 4

Critical interrogation and validation of the problem

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4.1 Cross-sector or societal perspectives on the issue

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4.1.1 What works in other sectors?

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4.2 Unpacking personal biases and assumptions

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4.2.1 What does this reveal about my specific context?

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4.3 Engaging with literature and theoretical perspectives

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4.4 Validating the problem post reflection

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Chapter 5

Developing the research focus and questions

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5.1 Emergent research focus

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5.2 Main research question

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5.3 Supporting sub-questions

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5.4 Potential contribution to professional practice

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Chapter 6

Ethical Considerations

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6.1 Anticipated ethical challenges in the intended research

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6.2 Ethical implications of positionality and professional boundaries

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6.3 Strategies for ethical research conduct

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Chapter 7

Conclusions

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7.1 Summary of key insights from reflection and analysis

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7.2 Implications for the next stage of research

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