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# **‘You can’t win’: The non-profit double-bind and experiences of organisational contradictions in the non-profit and voluntary Sector**

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## **Abstract**

There is growing evidence that in the UK demands for non-profit and voluntary sector organisations to comply with funders’ target driven priorities are often in tension with organisations’ social goals. The implications of this for employees are not yet sufficiently understood. The present article builds on Bateson et al.’s (1956) theory of double-bind to develop a socially contextualised model to understand employees’ experiences of workplace contradictions in the sector. Drawing from data provided by 49 individuals working in three case study organisations our conceptualisation of a ‘non-profit double-bind’ provides a new and novel way of understanding how social meta-communicative processes serve to embed or reframe contradictions within intense employment relationships.

**Key words:** contradictions, double-bind, non-profit organisations, voluntary sector

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## Introduction

Workplace contradictions are common within organisations (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Such contradictions are especially stark in the non-profit and voluntary (NPV) sector where, under pressures of a neoliberal agenda, organisations' social goals increasingly conflict with funders' demands for measurable outcomes (Cunningham and James, 2009; Davis, 2011). This agenda has resulted in work intensification and deterioration of employment conditions (Aronson and Neysmith, 2006; Baines, 2004; Broadbent, 2014; Cunningham and James, 2009). Our research into non-profit care organisations identifies similar tensions for front line workers and highlights how communications around the pressures described by Tonkiss and Passey (1999) of 'doing well' (to comply with funders' priorities) and 'doing good' (to meet service users' needs and the organisation's charitable mission) can create irreconcilable contradictions. The article examines the impact these competing demands may have on employees and illustrates how their experiences can be explained by what we have conceptualised as the 'non-profit double-bind'.

Empirical data from 49 individuals working in three case study organisations in the UK NPV care sector reveal significant resonances with conceptions of a *double-bind* originally developed within family therapy by Bateson et al. (1956). Bateson et al.'s original conception of double-bind focussed on psychological processes as individuals in intense relationships (usually between parent and child) sought to navigate irreconcilable contradictory messages from which they could not 'escape'. The present article reconceptualises double-bind to develop a novel approach to understanding experiences of work in non-profit care organisations and provide a new angle from which to explore the impact of organisational tensions on the workforce. Our non-profit double-bind emphasises the ways in which social meta-communicative processes (the communication about communication that enables

individuals to make sense of messages, see Craig (2016) for a recent review) serve to reframe experiences of contradictory messages. For Bateson et al. meta-communication described individual interpretation and responses to verbal and non-verbal cues. Others emphasise the social processes of meta-communication through which messages can be framed and re-framed (Goffman, 1974). Our conceptualisation of the non-profit double-bind draws from this latter application of meta-communication.

Building on Bateson et al.'s double-bind 'conditions' we highlight how contradictions in the NPV sector have especially dire effects when they take place within intense relationships from which individuals cannot easily remove themselves. The NPV sector attracts highly committed individuals, many of whom live their values, and define their identity, through work (Cunningham, 2010). Work contexts cannot be described as intense or inescapable in the sense that familial relationships may be. Nevertheless, the NPV sector provides a particularly good context in which to explore 'double-bind' owing to the workforce's well documented strong emotional ties, high commitment to social goals and identification with work that has been suggested to result in tolerance of poorer conditions (Baines and Cunningham, 2011).

The article makes an important contribution to two key debates. Firstly, through employees' rich accounts the article furthers understanding of the impact on employees (and the implications for the quality of care) of well documented tensions between NPOs' social goals and increasingly competitive, target oriented contract funding (Davies, 2011). Secondly it demonstrates the value of double-bind to the sociology of work by moving beyond the limitations of existing applications in employment settings through the conceptualisation of a non-profit double-bind.

### **The original double-bind**

The double-bind emerged from Bateson et al.'s (1956) work exploring communication patterns associated with simple stimulus response learning - *proto-learning* - and more complex 'insight' into the context and form of that learning - *deutero-learning*. The term double-bind was given to pathological forms of deutero-learning resulting from dysfunctional communications in which messages were given that operated at a different order of logic, so that one denied the other. double-bind described dysfunctional family communications in which the 'victim' (usually the child) felt unable to discern appropriate responses to conflicting communications. Fearing that failure to respond to each communication would attract punishment left them in an untenable situation in which they learnt that no course of action avoided 'punishment'. For example, Bateson et al. (1956) describe a situation in which, for whatever reason, the mother feels anxious or hostile to the child responding to her as a loving mother while simultaneously feeling that hostility to the child is unacceptable. She therefore demonstrates overtly loving behaviour to persuade the child to respond to her as a 'loving mother'. This contradiction within the critical relationship results in a situation in which the child is 'punished' if (s)he responds with love and affection and also punished if (s)he does not. Where contradictory communications are repeated and regular, such learned responses become habitual resulting in double-binds and generating negative behavioural outcomes including paranoia, paralysis of action, withdrawal and lack of independent thinking (Bateson et al. 1956).

For double-binds to emerge contradictory communications occur within intense relationships on which the individual depends and therefore feels it 'vitaly important that he discriminate accurately what sort of a message is being communicated so that he may respond

appropriately' (Bateson, 1972: 208). The dependence on, and intensity of, the relationship mean the contradiction becomes inescapable as the individual is unable to physically withdraw from the situation. 'Escape' is further prevented by the absence of meta-communicative opportunities that might help individuals reframe contradictory messages.

### **Double-bind in organisational contexts**

The application of double-bind theory has proliferated beyond its original setting to examine organisational contradictions and tensions. However there is a lack of clarity around the term's meaning which has been used to allude to a 'general sense of inner contradictions, dilemmas and conflicting tendencies, pulling employees in different, often irreconcilable directions of a subjectively experienced "damn if you do, damn if you don't" nature' (Visser and Van der Heirjen, 2015: 692). Few definitions capture the interrelatedness of the conditions underpinning Bateson et al.'s conception. Some have diluted double-bind simply to refer to contradiction. For example, Jamieson (1995) discusses double-bind as the 'catch 22' that women face when criticised in some social discourses for pursuing a career while criticised in others if they do not. Similarly, DiPrimio's (2011) application of double-bind to contradictory regulatory communications in the finance industry focuses on communication without examination of the perceived consequences of failure to negotiate their contradictions, which is central to the double-bind. The importance of relationship intensity is also often overlooked (e.g. Baumard, 2014; Parush and Koivunen, 2014).

The centrality of learning to double-bind theory has more usefully been applied to explorations of organisational learning and its basis in organisational communication. For example, Tossey et al. (2014) taking the example of Staffordshire NHS trust use double-bind to explore the dynamics of organisational learning to understand why it is that organisations

may fail to learn, despite efforts to do so. Tossey et al. (2014) highlight how organisational learning processes create situations in which individuals find it impossible to point out continued contradictory organisational communications.

Such applications illustrate how double-bind theory, despite its origins, may be applicable to organisational contexts. However, application of double-bind to organisational environments has been criticised, suggesting that it loses the relational aspect (Visser, 2003) and that the intensity of relationship is rare in employment settings (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Double-bind's 'inescapability' has been argued to exclude employment situations because, short of situations such as modern day slavery, workers can escape physically and can provide feedback to others (i.e. meta-communicate) (Putnam, 1986). This renders problematic the wholesale application to organisational contexts of double-bind as originally conceived.

While most studies focus on organisational implications of double-binds, a small number of studies have sought to explore the implications of double-bind for individuals within them. Tracy (2004) examined prison officers' reactions to organisational contradictions in correctional facilities and concluded that processes of meta-communication are critical to individuals' understanding of, and consequently responses to, organisational contradictions. Tracy illuminates how meta-communicative processes may, or may not, serve to reframe contradictory communications enabling individuals to determine which to prioritise and therefore how to act. The present article builds on Tracy's work to argue that the role of meta-communication renders the double-bind an inherently social process and in doing so provides a valuable interpretive framework to understand experiences of, and responses to, organisational contradictions.

Despite acknowledged limitations in the application of double-bind to organisational contexts Visser and Van der Heijden (2015) sought to operationalise Bateson et al.'s original conceptualisation of double-bind and test for its presence among a large sample of Dutch nurses. Although many of their double-bind indicators were not evident Visser and Van der Heijden argued that the intensity of the relationship, the incongruence of the communications and the extent to which the situation was escapable appeared to inform the extent of negative outcomes for employees. While, Visser and Van der Heijden's work hints at a potential value of applying double-bind to workplace settings, it has several weaknesses, not least its reliance on psychometric scales which serve as proxy operationalisations of double-bind characteristics and outcomes. This raises questions about the utility of double-bind, as it was originally conceived, in a workplace setting.

We have argued that most existing applications of double-bind to the workplace suffer from one of two key flaws. Some applications seek to apply wholesale Bateson et al.'s (1956) definition of double-bind and are unsuccessful, we argue, because the intensity and escapability of the concept cannot realistically be replicated in an employment context and because the social and structural nature of the work environment is overlooked. By contrast other applications are so far removed from the original characteristics that they are limited in their ability to draw out the distinct conceptual value of double-bind. Unlike cognitive dissonance, which refers to contradictions between the beliefs an individual holds (Festinger, 1962), double-binds refer to the communications received from others and, we argue, therefore warrant a more socially situated examination than previously accorded. A social contextualisation enables us to understand qualitatively unusually intense workplace relationships in the NPV sector and the processes through which individuals become tied to



contradictory situations despite their potentially negative outcomes. Thus the NPV sector displays conditions that lend themselves to elements of a double-bind analysis.

### **Non-profit and voluntary sector context and contradictions**

The UK NPV sector (comprising organisations established for non-profit and charitable goals, that do not distribute profits, that are self-governing, constitutionally independent and that operate with some degree of voluntarism Cunningham 2008) has become increasingly important for the delivery of public services, often delivered under contract as traditional grants become less common (Cunningham et al. 2013). Funders' judgement of the 'success' of such contracts is fundamentally informed by the extent to which organisations are 'doing well' by meeting measurable targets at specified costs (Cunningham and James, 2009). The survival of many NPOs now depend on their effective response to statutory funders' priorities. However, funders' priorities may not be reflective of the NPO's broader organisational goals (Dacombe, 2011). These tensions between priorities have implications for identity formation processes, resulting in a range of contradictions and leading to negative reactions including confusion, anger, frustration and anxiety (Putnam 1986). Smith et al. (2013) highlight how contradictions between social and business objectives create competing organisational identities and generate tensions for organisational leaders and employees. The navigation of these contradictions result in 'elasticity' in organisational identity as individuals retell the ebbs and flows of tensions that 'simultaneously stretch identity while holding it together' (Kreiner, 2014: 982) Organisational identity elasticity usefully describes the pressures NPOs face to, on the one hand, professionalise and compete in a marketised environment while simultaneously striving to maintain core organisational values and focus on service users' needs. As contract-like funding becomes more prevalent such tensions are

likely to increase within the NPV sector and it is unclear how far identity can stretch before the experience of contradictions in the NPV sector can cause it to ‘snap’ or recoil.

Traditionally employees are attracted to the NPV sector by their identification with the organisations’ moral goals, seeking to live these values through work and, arguably, tolerating lower pay and poorer employment conditions as a result of this commitment (Baines, 2004, 2009; Cunningham, 2010; Davies, 2011). These characteristics create a set of conditions that may encourage stronger organisational and individual identification and create unusually intense employment relationships that may have implications for the extent to which organisations and employees tolerate contradictions.

### **Conceptualising the non-profit double-bind**

The contribution of the present article is in its move beyond the limitations identified above through a re-conceptualisation of double-bind to recognise the social processes in which experiences of contradictions are embedded within the employment context of the NPV sector. A central premise of this research is that the NPV sector features a particular set of conditions within which employment relationships may be unusually intense and from which employees may be less willing to withdraw. These conditions resonate with elements of Bateson et al.’s (1956) double-bind on which the present article draws to make sense of the experiences of contradictions that we find in the non-profit care sector. The particular elements we focus on are contradictory communications that are reinforced with perceived negative consequences, which take place in the context of emotionally tied, highly committed relationships in which individual identity is heavily invested so that walking away is difficult.

### **Methodology**

The data presented here derives from a study that explored how NPOs in the health and social care subsector are responding to the pervasive influences of new public management. Case studies were purposively selected with input from umbrella sector organisations and analysis of publically available material on organisations within the subsector. Case study selection was based on theoretical replication (Yin, 2009) and on the organisations' response to the burgeoning 'contract culture'. Three case studies, operating under similar partnering arrangements with public sector health agencies, were selected, each working alongside a range of health professionals (e.g. occupational and physical therapists, specialist nurses, and mental health practitioners) who influenced NPO organisational practices. 'DisCare' provides a range of services to people with disabilities, aiming to improve quality of life, reduce isolation and facilitate social inclusion. 'DomCare' delivers a range of homecare services, for older people, dependent adults and children and their families. 'ComCare' delivers holistic services to support individuals and communities affected by HIV.

Eighteen interviews were undertaken with CEOs, Directors and Senior Managers to glean information on organisational context whilst seven focus groups were conducted with 31 paid workers. Questions focused on gaining insight into the nature of work roles, motivations and day-to-day experiences of work (see Table 1 for details of the organisations' contexts). The sample was female dominated, reflecting the demographics of the sub sector's workforce (24 females and 7 males). The analytical focus is based on the perspectives of employees responsible for delivering services directly to service-users. Further focus groups involved volunteers but are excluded from this analysis.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

This primary data (350 pages of verbatim text) was supplemented by analysis of organisational, governmental and third party documents. Data was coded and analysed thematically using the framework approach (Ritchie et al., 2003) to explore the patterns of meaning within the data and to identify quotations illustrative of emerging themes. An abductive approach to understand emerging themes (similar to that adopted by Conroy and Collings, 2016) was used for further analysis (Van Maanen et al. 2007). Returning to the literature we identify previously unconsidered theory that could inform a new analytical framework to capture experiences of work in the non-profit sector and the prevalence of contradictions and paradoxes described by the data. The double-bind theory, as outlined above, provided a useful starting point.

### **Empirical findings**

This section presents empirical findings that illustrate how the conceptual framework of a non-profit double-bind sheds light on employees' experiences in the sector. We show that individuals form intense relationships and experience regular contradictory communications, enforced by negative consequences. We suggest that in DomCare limited opportunities for meta-communication reduced workers' opportunities to reframe contradictions resulting in some noting that no course of action averted negative repercussions. By contrast within ComCare and DisCare, although contradictions remained unresolved, their reframing prevented the more dire consequences evident in DomCare.

#### *Repeated and regular contradictory communications enforced by negative consequences*

A non-profit double-bind emerges when individuals face contradictory communications where failure to comply with both demands result in negative consequences. To illustrate non-profit double-bind experiences, the present article focuses on how in each organisation,

repeated contradictory messages were perceived by their recipients as likely to result in negative consequences.

### DomCare: Autonomy versus rule adherence

DomCare's contradictions arose from demands for care workers to make autonomous decisions about individual service-users' needs while simultaneously being expected to comply with standardised care delivery in strict accordance with care plans developed by NHS clinical staff. Growing numbers of service-users with complex conditions and unpredictable daily needs meant care plans became rapidly out of date. Focus group (FG) participants described feeling powerless to "do anything right", that "you can't win" and suggested they were at constant risk of being disciplined for autonomous decisions as they were "only supposed to be doing what's in the care plan". They simultaneously believed that strictly following the care plan when it was not appropriate (for example getting the service-user up, washed and dressed if they needed bed rest) would lead to reprimands.

"We would get warnings if we do anything wrong, and I'm not saying doing it wrong, if we don't do what the other person at the other end of the phone thinks we should have done. What are you supposed to do?" (DomCare FG)

The frustration resulting from being unable to discriminate between these contradictory messages was exacerbated by care workers' perceptions of little managerial support. Many felt they had to make their own call and "deal with the consequences later", and while some managers failed to recognise the contradictions others were keenly aware of care workers' perceptions but unsure how to address them.

“...there is a care plan in the house and it’s wash, dress, toilet,... hoist... [care workers] feel that if they don’t there will be implications, and, some of them, ... will be able to phone up and say, listen this woman isn’t well today, we have washed and dressed her and left her in bed. Others will say, this woman, yes they recognise she is not well today, but we’ve washed and dressed her and got her to sit in the chair, ok? Why did you do that? Because that is what we were [meant] to do, and if we didn’t do it that way we [managers] probably would shout or the family would shout.” (Family Carer Manager).

Struggles to discriminate between contradictory messages were compounded by a funding structure modelled on cost efficiency that required care workers to complete visits within ever narrowing time slots. This structure created immense stress among care workers and has implications for the quality of care delivered:

“By the time you get onto the last one your head is splitting and you have to start to do dialysis and they tell you that “this person is critically ill” and that “this is very serious” and ... “don't make any mistakes” and my head is splitting and the sweat is lashing off me.” (DomCare FG)

#### DisCare: Close versus professional relationships

Managers stressed that professional boundaries must be maintained and discouraged staff from developing close relationships with service-users or offering assistance beyond that required to fulfil their role. One manager explained the dilemma employees face:

“... parents are very isolated, they are very tired and they welcome staff coming in. It’s a break to them. They enjoy interaction and staff themselves will talk very highly of the parents but it’s about them understanding that this is a professional relationship and they must never work outside the rules and responsibilities because it can bring serious issues.’ (Children’s Services Manager)

Participants explained how when working with a service-user, perhaps for many years, close relationships inevitably form. They suggested that avoiding becoming involved with service-users was especially problematic given the strong counter message issued regarding DisCare’s propounded person-centred service delivery ethos. This strategy was integrated within the organisation’s balanced scorecard approach to performance management that measured success through service-user satisfaction. On one hand staff were encouraged to develop a personal understanding of the individual needs of service-users, and their ability to do this would inform how their performance was measured, while on the other hand they were discouraged from developing personal relationships and overstepping professional boundaries.

#### ComCare: Employment security dilemma

In an environment of increasingly scarce statutory funds ComCare sought to diversify income streams. Despite their efforts an increasingly competitive funding environment, combined with growing service-user’ needs, meant ComCare participants felt they now had to “do more and more for less and less”. Senior management believed cutting service delivery costs while increasing capacity, was fundamental to ComCare’s survival. Two redundancy rounds were initiated and service delivery capacity was maintained through increasing use of volunteers. Simultaneously management communicated that the scarcity of funding made

further redundancies likely, generating a fear that if volunteers could do the work, paid jobs would be lost. This restructuring resulted in work intensification and reduced job security amongst remaining employees “Every April I expect I may be made redundant” (ComCare FG). Senior managers were aware of the inherent contradictions, as one noted “there are challenges to persuade paid staff that volunteer support to their role is not necessarily a threat to their role when sometimes quite clearly it is.”

Contradictory communications were present in each case study organisation. However, a double-bind is generated by these contradictions existing within intense relationships that seem ‘inescapable’. These aspects are explored below.

#### *Intense relationships in the NPV sector*

We define intensity of relationships in the non-profit double-bind as the extent to which individuals identify with and are emotionally tied to their organisation, the sector and / or their service-users. For those who were not motivated by the NPOs particular mission but ‘just needed a job’ or were improving employment prospects relationships with the NPO were no more intense than might be expected in any occupation. However, many of the sample had pursued employment with that NPO because of its support for particular social groups. Although, these values could be lived in other NPOs, so reducing dependence on specific employment relationships, the ties to their employer were intensified by strong relationships developed with service-users. Workers therefore became dependent on the employment as the means of maintaining these relationships. The nature and intensity of these relationships varies often depending on the nature of services and the personal background of workers. Analysis of data across the three case studies identified three types



of relationship intensity (RI) each of which have implications for escapability. All three of these RI types were displayed across the case organisations.

#### Type 1: Sector relationship intensity

Sector RI refers to those passionate about working in the sector because they saw supporting vulnerable people as part of their identity. Exemplifying this one participant said “This is what I want to do and believe in ... I’m not cut out for corporate work life” (ComCare FG). Those with Sector RI were attracted to the sector by a wider interest in social welfare but may not feel tied to a specific NPO.

‘I got my kicks - if you like ... using the skills and the assets that I had to help people further their cause... I didn’t get the same kicks out of it being for monetary purposes. So I knew I wanted to work for a non-profit organisation, but using those skills if I could.’ (DisCare FG)

#### Type 2 Service-user relationship intensity

Service-User RI refers to those with personal motivations to work with specific groups of service-users (often informed by some personal connection).

‘Well probably down to my area of experience ... having HIV, living with the condition, going from really bad health to really good health and feeling good... so yeah, it’s all about feeling good and achieving things for other people and carrying them through to a better future really.’ (ComCare FG)

In all three case organisations workers had the opportunity to develop long term relationships with their service users. For example, in domiciliary care, service users may traditionally experience a large turnover of carers, but due to the rural landscape for DomCare, care workers and their clients frequently established more personal relationships. Workers went beyond what the job required, often sacrificing personal time or finances to meet service-users' needs, as one DomCare participant told us "you get attached to your clients, you get attached to your run, you are not going to let your service-users down... that's why you do it". Another told us "I am very aware that if I were sick there is no one else" (ComCare). Although some managers recognised such commitment several informants believed this dedication was often exploited.

"We have staff who are earning, ... not a huge amount of money, ... you know last year ... when the snow came, [those providing care in the community] had the least number of people who couldn't get into work. When the snow fell and they knew those people's lives depended on them, they got out by hook or by crook and some people who worked in offices couldn't get in!" (DisCare Living Options Manager)

Many participants exhibited both sector and service-user RI. They described their work as a way of life, "who I am" not what they do. The organisation became the vehicle through which this identity was performed and confirmed. One participant (DisCare) explained "this is my job to help that person but I want to help that person even if it's not my job". These individuals felt they could not, or would not, withdraw from their relationships with the charitable mission or service-users and felt dependent on the NPO to live their voluntary ethos and realise these identities.

### Type 3 NPO relationship intensity:

NPO RI refers to those who developed a relationship with the NPO because of the specific organisational mission and approach. NPO RI was less evident than sector and service-user RI. For example, in DomCare, while many employees identified strongly with service-users, they did not identify strongly with the organisation and rarely referred to its goals or mission, despite synergies with their personal motivations. In fact DomCare participants struggled to articulate the organisation's values and were derogatory about its practices. By contrast DisCare and ComCare participants exhibited pride in, and high levels of organisational commitment.

### *Escapability and the experiences of organisational contradictions*

The final condition of a double-bind concerns the lack of 'escape' from the field in which the contradiction occurs. Although it may be argued that any employment relationship is escapable, the intensity typology above illustrates how strong emotional ties bind individuals, making willingly leaving work and service-users unusually problematic. This section argues that escapability is emotional not just physical and that opportunities for effective meta-communication (as a means of reframing contradictions) which impact upon escapability are socially contextualised.

Although willingness to leave may be influenced by labour market context, our data suggests that such explanations do not fully explain why some workers tolerate such situations. Relationship intensity (in the context of a non-profit double-bind) provides further insight here. Given the minimum skill requirements for some care work, it may be possible for disillusioned staff to get a different job, with better pay and fewer obstacles elsewhere.

“You know they can go and work in Tesco’s and get the same money and not have any travel costs, and not be in and out of the car four times in an hour in bad weather ....., it’s a vocation...” (Director of HR and Quality, DomCare)

Additionally, although some study participants were qualified to work in public health services or elsewhere many stayed because of relationships with the sector, NPO and service users. The relationship intensity typology highlights why ties are stronger for some than others. However, even within the context of strong emotional ties and contradictions a non-profit double-bind is not inevitable. The following sections illustrate that where contradictions exist, within intense relationships, there are social processes, particularly related to metacommunication around the contradictory messages, which militate against the emergence of the non-profit double-bind.

#### Escapability and meta-communication: Experiencing a non-profit double-bind

Organisational contradictions are experienced as a non-profit double-bind if the conditions outlined are present *and* there is no opportunity to meta-communicate about the contradictory messages in order to discern how to act in response to them. However, these experiences vary according to the extent of the individual’s relationship intensity as defined above. Non-profit double-bind outcomes were more apparent in DomCare. Withdrawal, lack of independent thinking, suspicion, wariness, stress and anxiety characterised the narrative of many participants who postulated that no course of action would avoid criticism. Some explained how they feared making autonomous decisions: “You make a common sense decision there and then, that wee woman I’ll light the fire as the house is freezing, it’s snowing outside, but the house burns down. Who is at fault?” Others expressed a constant need to “cover [their] backs”. The inability to discriminate between the contradictory messages and discern

appropriate action led some participants to describe themselves as “stressed” and “anxious”. Some described suspicion and wariness that discouraged them from using their initiative when situations required it:

“We have a service-user ... who was continually getting [different] creams for different parts of her body. But we said “there is nothing documented here about where these creams are supposed to go, so we can’t do it”. Obviously the wife had said, so the District Nurse had left us a note – “this has to be put here and this has to be put here”. But what do you do, anyone could have written that note.”

These feelings were exacerbated by mistrust between care workers, office staff and management. Care workers felt that office staff “played on” their commitment. DomCare’s management were aware of the fractured relationships. The Deputy CEO commented, “it’s like it’s us against the care workers, that we are almost here to achieve different things”. Another manager qualified this position, noting that while they would have liked to have improved working conditions, they were constrained by the demands of external stakeholders and funding arrangements which led to a “sort of piggy in the middle [position] ... so you are always being that advocate both ways, you understand the strains that the Trust are under but you can see the impact that it is having on the ground as well.”

The negative outcomes of experiences of organisational contradictions appeared more pronounced in DomCare. Restricted opportunities for meta-communication, amongst DomCare’s geographically dispersed workforce limited chances of reframing contradictions. Care workers noted “we never see each other – it’s like we’re not allowed to talk to each

other!” Care workers also felt isolated from managers, with whom there were limited consultation opportunities.

‘They just tell you to ring in. but they never get back to you.’

‘We have tried to give feedback on the care plans to the admin function but no one seems to come back on these issues.’

‘It took us three months to get a meeting for our run. Nothing has happened and that was three months ago.’

DomCare’s lack of autonomy from funders and a cost based funding model (e.g. spot purchase arrangements), discouraged investment in training and the creation of opportunities for engagement to facilitate meta-communication and enable employees to reframe contradictions.

#### Escapability and meta-communication: Avoiding non-profit double-bind

DisCare and ComCare were better able to manage tensions. Engagement strategies based on team structures, training and development and transparent leadership created opportunities for meta-communication around the contradictory messages.

Although some employees expressed stress, anxiety, frustration and guilt that they could not do more for their service-users, they did not demonstrate the more serious outcomes evident in DomCare.

Relatively transparent and democratic leadership helped maintain good relationships between paid staff, management and volunteers in ComCare despite potential for tension. The effects

of contradictory messages were diffused as narratives developed around staff feeling they were all “in it together”, and that management were “on our side”. Employees described how managers, front line workers and volunteers would support each other

“You’re not just a specialist position, you have to be able to do this and that and the other so that you cover for other areas... So, if anyone needs people here to just plug a hole we can all try and do something.’ (Volunteer Coordinator ComCare)

Management described feeling personal responsibility for staff.

‘When you say five redundancies, people sort of say, ‘What? Just five?’...But I know them. I know their partners. I know their children. I know they’ve got mortgages. So yes. It’s not that distant. So that felt hard.’ (CEO ComCare)

In DisCare, organisational contradictions were navigated through creating opportunities for discussing tensions. Employees suggested ‘managers would be very supportive’ and that they could raise any issue ‘you know you can put anything in there’, and ‘speak to our manager at any time’. Contradictions were further narrated through training and development strategies emphasising organisational values and “the DisCare way of doing things”. Managers described a concern to ensure that interactions between management and staff were not seen as a ‘done to you’ exercise.

DisCare’s values-led leadership generated widespread pride in the organisation. One manager commented that: “I honestly think it’s from the leadership, I really really do”. Cultures characterised by inclusion, dignity, self-determination and workforce participation

in decision making in DisCare and ComCare generated high levels of commitment and loyalty and diffused the impact of contradictory communications. The contingencies driven by the particular institutional environments of DisCare and ComCare gave greater autonomy from funders and more flexibility in how they managed organisational processes. Meta-communicative processes helped reframe the contradictions in a collective narrative of we are “all in it together”. By contrast DomCare had less successfully managed contradictions and an “us and them” narrative had emerged resulting in non-profit double-bind experiences that had implications for the workforce.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Across the three case study organisations, experiences of work were characterised by stress and frustration, resulting from exposure to contradictory messages from which workers found it difficult to discern appropriate action. In DomCare, these experiences often resulted in suspicion, wariness and a reluctance to think independently. By contrast most of those working in ComCare and DisCare, although subject to similar stresses, were able to negotiate more positive experiences with greater flexibility and thoughtful discretion. Many workers in DomCare experienced double-bind, while those in ComCare and DisCare did not. There were opportunities for escape through meta-communication in ComCare and DisCare (facilitated by effective communication, team structures, democratic culture and leadership), whereas workers in DomCare were geographically dispersed and had little opportunity to discuss and make sense of their experiences. Although in DisCare and ComCare the contradictions were reframed, it is important to note that the underlying tensions from which these contradictions stem were unresolved and frustration, stress, work intensification and anxiety remained.



The present article highlights the widespread occurrence and far reaching consequences of contradictory communications issued by management across the case study care organisations. Contradictory communications were issued as the organisations sought to negotiate the inherent tensions between the demands of funders for accountability, efficiency and performance measured against specified outcome targets on the one hand and the priorities associated with meeting the organisations' social goals on the other. The intensity of employees' relationships with the organisation, its social goals or the service users they supported had important implications in terms of the degree to which they felt able to extract themselves from the contradictions or had little choice but to tolerate them. The organisation of work across the case study organisations served either to facilitate or hinder meta-communicative processes through which employees might reframe and make sense of contradictory messages and determine how to act within them. Where reframing did not occur the experiences that emerged could most usefully be understood in terms of a non-profit double-bind which has significant implications both for the quality of care provision and for the wellbeing of employees.

This research contributes to two key areas of debate. Firstly, it contributes to the exploration of workplace contradictions as double-binds, suggesting that recognition of employment contexts is needed. It is argued here that a wholesale application of the psychological concept of double-bind that Bateson et al. (1956) developed in the context of family therapy is of more limited conceptual value in an organisational context (e.g. Visser and Van der Heijden, 2015). However, a dilution simply to contradictions misses the value that this lens might bring (e.g. DiPrimio, 2011; Jamieson, 1995). Rather our reconceptualisation of a non-profit double-bind enables us to explore how relational and social contexts of work inform experiences of contradictions. The NPV sector provides a particular appropriate context to do

this owing to the strong high levels of commitment which has been suggested to result in the toleration of poorer conditions (Davies, 2011) and where individual identity is often invested by living one's values through work. Non-profit double-bind adds insight through its focus on how variations in the intensity of emotional relationships between individuals and organisations, and the social processes of meta-communication in which they are engaged, impact on experiences of workplace contradiction. In this way a non-profit double-bind helps explain why some workers experience dire consequences of contradictions while others are better placed to reframe them.

The non-profit double-bind thus provides a useful means of making sense of resulting behaviours, such as withdrawal or lack of independent thinking, that may contribute to the perception of a loss of emotion from care work (Baines, 2009). An increasing prevalence of such behaviours should be of concern because of their implications for employee wellbeing (Baines, 2006) and the adverse link to the provision of personalised care (Newman et al., 2008).

Secondly, these findings contribute theoretically to understanding employment conditions and experiences within the NPV sector. Pressures from funders, and concomitant declining employment conditions within a neo-liberal and competitive funding environment (Davies, 2011), may be eroding a voluntary sector ethos and encouraging 'mission drift' away from the organisations' social goals (Cunningham, 2010). Our research furthers the understanding of the implications of these processes for experiences of work in the sector. Kreiner's (2014) conception of elasticity in organisational identity is useful here to highlight how tensions in managing these competing priorities become embedded within organisational identity. Our research illustrates how the ebbs and flows in the narratives around competing priorities

become manifested in management communications that in turn impact the workforce as they seek to discern appropriate courses of action within unreconciled contradictions. Recognition is needed of inherent contradictions that may exist between the priorities and demands of funders and those of organisations seeking to address the social goals for which they were established. Funding models in which organisations have little autonomy from funders are particularly problematic and more equal power relationships are critical to addressing these concerns. Although more equal relationships between funders and service providers have been widely articulated within the political discourses of successive governments, in reality this has rarely emerged (Davis, 2011).

Mission drift has been suggested to lead to disillusionment amongst a workforce that has traditionally been perceived to be highly motivated, highly committed and willing to tolerate lower pay and conditions because of a belief in the central purpose of the organisation and its social good mission (Davis, 2011). Our research highlights that when employees are unable to reframe contradictions, variations in the intensity of the emotional ties that bind can result in dire consequences for some employees both in terms of their own wellbeing and the quality of care delivery. Our typology of relationship intensity, developed from the data highlights the complex nature of identity work in the NPV sector where employment may be a vehicle through which workers live their values. While this has been discussed in the identity literature (Kenny et al., 2011), the lens of a non-profit double-bind adds further insight by highlighting how such identity work creates intense relationships that may limit escape from organisational contradictions.

Based on three case study organisations our research is inevitably exploratory. Although, beyond the scope of this paper, further research to understand the ways in which the

experiences identified here may be informed by broader demographic factors (e.g. gender, education, training, qualification, tenure, age, and socio-economic background) may allow the development of a more nuanced model of relationship intensity. Explorations of how such experiences are gendered would be particularly interesting in the light of existing evidence that gendered perceptions of 'care' lead to forms of work organisation based 'on notions of the endlessly stretchable capacity of women to provide care work in any context' (Baines, 2006: 129). An examination of how such notions may be linked to relationship intensity and non-profit double-binds would be fruitful.

The novel lens of non-profit double-bind presented in this paper raises serious concerns about the implications that working within contradictory management communications has for the quality of care. This work provides the foundations from which to explore alternative interventions to address the negative experiences identified and prevent a further loss of emotion work from the delivery of care (Baines, 2009).

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**Table 1: Case Study Organisations**

	<b>DisCare</b>	<b>DomCare</b>	<b>ComCare</b>
Purpose	Delivers services to improve the quality of life and reduce isolation of people with disabilities	Delivers homecare services for older people, dependent adults and children and their families	Delivers services to support and improve the lives of individuals and communities affected by HIV
Context	Broad mission	Narrow mission	Narrow mission
<i>Funding</i>	Multiple funding sources (high levels of autonomy)	‘Spot purchase contracts’ Reliance on unpredictable single source funding (limited autonomy)	Increasing diversification of funding streams (some autonomy)
<i>Management</i>	Sophisticated management practices strongly influenced by core values and relationship orientation	Less sophisticated management practices, task focussed	Management focus on efficiency Burgeoning innovation re: service provision
<i>Culture</i>	Strong innovative, team based, democratic culture	Limited innovation and diversification of services	Strong communal culture (‘all in it together’)
<i>Other Features</i>	Highly visible leadership	Dispersed and isolated workforce (fragmented culture)	Growing volunteer presence
Management Interviews	Chief Executive Head of Organisation and Service Development 4 x Heads of Services HR Manager	Deputy Chief Executive Director of HR and Quality Family Carer Training Manager 2 x Operational Manager	Chief Executive 2 x Directors 3 x Heads of Services
Focus Groups	Brain Injury Team Children Services Team Living Options Managers	Domiciliary Care Workers Automated Peritoneal Dialysis (APD) Skilled Care workers	Service delivery co-ordinators Volunteers

