The fallacies of non-agility: Approaching organizational agility through a dialectical practice perspective

Abstract

Complexity, paradox, tension, and contradiction are increasingly seen as permeating all aspects of organizational life. Yet despite ongoing advancement, both our understanding of the nature of complexity as well as how to use this increased appreciation of it in practice are still developing. In this spirit, this paper considers organizational agility and how to achieve it. Here, current discussions of organizational agility have failed to sufficiently address the fundamental tensions inherent in learning stemming from conflicting goals and incentives, evident in an ongoing discussion of theory-informed approaches for bringing about organizational agility. In this paper, we claim that incorporating a dialectical perspective of learning would provide a means of understanding the successes and failures of practices aimed at bringing about agility. We consider the maligned dialectic, four fallacious ways of thinking that hinder agility, and the extent to which these can be overcome. As evidence, we present a case of Agile implementation in which one of the authors acted as a consultant and involving a large-scale social change. Considering this from a dialectical perspective, we discuss ways that dysfunction in achieving agility might be reduced through disruptive interventions like Agile.

Keywords: Organizational learning, change management, Agile, dialectics, project management

1 Introduction

Organizational scholars have long sought means for achieving organizational agility, the ability to know and do what is needed to compete and survive over time. Given major disruptions and increased competitiveness, it is perhaps unsurprising that agility has become the "New Holy Grail" (Pulakos et al., 2019) of organizational practice, corresponding with an increasing interest in ways to support it and significant conceptual disagreement (Walter, 2021). For the purposes of our discussion, we will focus on what Walter (2021) refers to as "agility capabilities", which Lee et al. (2015) present as proactiveness, radicalness, responsiveness, and adaptiveness. Agility is linked with organizational ambidexterity (Clauss et al., 2020), the achievement of both exploration of new opportunities and exploitation of current ones. Thus, agility can be conceived as a state in which individuals and organizations actively seek new ways of knowing and radically applying that knowledge to meet their goals, proactively identify and implement change when needed (Braun et al., 2017). In essence, agility is the capacity to do what is needed, when it is needed.

Recent discussions of a complicated, complex, or even paradoxical organizational environment would seem to demand new ways of providing "what is needed". For example, Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) discuss tensions and paradoxes inherent in ambidexterity as the need for breakthroughs versus the need for profit, the need for meeting client requirements versus re-envisioning and experimenting, the need for well-defined processes, targets, and roles versus the need for creative expression, challenge, and self-pride. An organization's ability to focus on competing needs simultaneously is limited. For example, Haunschild et al. (2015) draw attention to how organizational focus on exploration or

exploitation oscillates over time. Discussing a focus on safety after serious errors, they note a trade-off of periods of learning and periods of forgetting in which organizations decrease activities related to error-prevention in favor of innovation and experimentation, until the next error brings attention back to safety. Finally, works such as Pedler and Hsu (2019), Antonacopoulou (2009), and Grisold et al. (2020) highlight the role of *unlearning* as well as learning as critical aspects of agility.

If managed correctly, organizations can achieve a virtuous cycle of ambidexterity in which a synergetic effect emerges from tension. Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) discuss the possibility of fueling such cycles through careful attention of activities of integration, stressing interdependence of the sources of tension, and differentiation, focusing on a distinct part of a tension. These authors call for embracing tension as critical for the long-term advantage. Along with Greig et al. (2013), these works highlight the centrality of mindset challenging our knowledge about the world in which we work, questioning what is known, in order to achieve agility. Following a basic definition of learning as the change of behavior in response to the processing of information (Huber, 1991), the challenge is in arriving at ways in which individuals and organizations can *learn* to be agile, i.e. to change behavior from non-agile to agile based on experience. But the tensions, some of which are rooted in our biological makeup (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977) make such work challenging, and rather than virtuous cycles, tensions are just as likely to lead to defensive behavioral routines that handicap an individual and organization's ability to formulate and achieve long term goals.

However, our knowledge of how to bring about such a mindset given these tensions in practice, and to then foster it over time is developing. Some recent research on organizational learning practice has sought to address tensions in learning directly that could

be relevant for promoting agility. For example, Vince et al. (2018) explore critical action learning as a means of surfacing, acknowledging, and reflecting upon tensions that arise through organizational intervention. Mease (2019) applies a similar approach through applied tension analysis. She points out that the constitutive nature of organizations demands behavioral repertoires of response strategies rather than "best practices", offering organizational actors multiple responses to respond to a particular tension and their consequences.

The context of project management is one such context offering the opportunity to develop such behavioral repertoires. Responding to tension has been the interest of a nascent *project-as-practice* movement, which emphasizes the day-to-day experiences of the people involved and how these experiences are translated into practices (Blomquist et al., 2010). Within this movement, the role of managerial action in managing complexity within projects has been highlighted (Maylor and Turner, 2017; Turner et al., 2016), while van der Hoorn and Whitty (2017) outline a number of activities meant to bring about shared understanding.

Here, despite advances, recommendations for "what to do" to achieve the *complexified* agility are still needed. The first need is in understanding the nature of complexity, and especially tensions, within project management, as our understanding is fundamental in informing our response (Tsoukas, 2017)**.** The second need is in the continued development of our responses to complexity at a sufficient level of granularity to so that they can be useful in practice. Finally, while Turner et al. (2016) focus on managerial action, they also note a structural element to these, suggesting that the roles of managers in addressing tensions can be assumed by other roles, perhaps even by the structure itself.

The contribution of this paper is to address these needs by adopting a dialectical approach to consider a project which used Agile approaches. Agile approaches are one

popular means intended to bring about agility in practice to teams working in dynamic environments, which have enjoyed continued interest in the past two decades (Lee and Xia, 2010). Originating as a set of guidelines, approaches, and best practices for software development (Agile Alliance, 2001), Agile approaches attempt to respond to environmental dynamicism and uncertainty though iterative planning, so that project requirements and how to meet them can be redefined collaboratively by self-organizing, cross-functional teams (Dönmez and Grote, 2018). The core of Agile could be considered to be its iterative design, which supports rapid and flexibly changes in requirements. Since the publication in 2001, a number of methods drawing on the principles of the manifesto emerged from practice such as scrum, lean software development, eXtreme Programming, and others (Dingsøyr et al., 2012). Despite its foundations in software development, its concepts have been increasingly applied to other contexts (Dingsøyr et al., 2012). Indeed, in a survey of project management professionals and senior executives across industries by the Project Management Institute (2017), 90% of respondents reported using Agile methodologies at least occasionally.

The use of Agile approaches are fruitful grounds for observing learning tensions in practice. It is a subject of debate as to how, when, and why Agile is effective, and which behaviors it is meant increase or improve, whether operations, or collaboration, co-ordination, and communication (Abrahamsson et al., 2010; Batra, 2018; Dikert et al., 2016). Furthermore, in a case study, McAvoy and Butler (2007) find evidence that depending on how it is carried out, Agile may even promote *dysfunctional* learning, whereby individuals keep their views to themselves, and collective decision making may actually go against the views of all the members. Therefore, Agile appears unable on its own to resolve tensions in learning that would lead to agility over time.

The aim of this paper is to explore agility through a dialectical framework and offer insights into organizational learning interventions. We intend to move beyond Agile methodologies to a more general understanding of how to promote agility, and how this can be achieved under a complexity framework.

Broadly, dialectics is philosophy's answer to the question: *What is the nature of change?* (Morgan, 2013). Our central claim is that successes and failures in seeking agility can be reconceptualized with a dialectical perspective as something that *is* as well as a way of thinking and doing. The perspective allows both the complicating of the organization (Holmqvist, 2009) *and* offers a means of approaching such complexity in the day-to-day practice of organizing in spite of, and indeed even through, contradictions, tensions, and dilemmas that inevitably arise as organizations and individuals pursue their goals. We present the actions of Agile approaches as *behavioral repertoires,* which we group into conceptualization facilitators, action facilitators, and change frameworks. By integrating action, mindset, and organizational structure, these offer the possibility to support agility in practice.

To achieve our aim, we consider the case of a large-scale change effort that sought to integrate a new behavioral repertoire in teams collaborating across organizations. The case, while in many aspects a massive success, is also illustrative of the sometimes-paradoxical nature of learning over time, and how organizations exist regardless. We consider the limitations of the interventions from a dialectical perspective, and how these might be overcome in the future. Implications and future research directions are then discussed.

2 Background

Our interest in dialectic is in its potential to help us think about change and to bring it about change in practice. In so doing, we incorporate philosophy as a means of critically examining our modes of thinking (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) by deliberately adopting a set of assumptions about what the world is like and how we can come to learn about it. This reflection alone can be helpful given the disparate assumptions within organizational learning theory, and is intrinsically linked with how we understand our role as management scholars, and the recommendations we make for practice (Graetz and Smith, 2010). Beech et al. (2010)**,** for example, claim "that life, by its very nature, is dialogic since things and events are rendered meaningful through their relation to others". It is of little surprise that their discussion focuses on generative dialogues in their recommendations for practice.

In this paper, we consider a subset of the assumptions of Roy Bhaskar's (1993, 1994) *Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR),* which we use to consider the ability of organizations to truly bring about transformational change that the environment would seem to require and Agile approaches mean to offer. Our point here is not to argue for the suitability of using DCR for studying organizations generally, nor provide a comprehensive coverage of its concepts. Apart from the seminal texts of Bhaskar, this has been attempted elsewhere (e.g. Fleetwood, 2005, 2014) Likewise, the tenets of basic critical realism, which underly DCR have been explored in Edwards et al. (2014) and in relation to IS and case study methodology (Wynn and Williams, 2012). However, we will attempt to provide a brief grounding in Bhaskar's ontology in order to set the stage for a discussion on dialectical thinking and its applicability to agility.

What is Bhaskar's dialectical world like? Reality, for Bhaskar, is stratified into what we can experience, what we capture (the empirical), and everything else, the "real". The real world is open and complex, made up of an ever-changing web of interrelated social, cognitive, and material entities, which Bhaskar captures in his four planar model of social being. The four planar model highlights how any social event can be understood as an interaction between the material, the relational, the interpersonal, and the intra-subjective: *"For Bhaskar, it is the dialectical interaction of agents with structural properties and/or practices on these analytically distinct planes (material transactions with nature, i.e. co-operative labour to produce subsistence; social relations between agents, i.e. as incumbents of structured 'positions' and 'practices' of the social system; interpersonal relations, i.e. interactions between individuals as subjects rather than as agents of positions or institutional roles; and intra-subjective relations, i.e. internal relations of the subject, such as the self-construction of personal and cultural identities), which constitute the social cube"* (Creaven, 2013: 31). These entities exist atop a sea of absence at every strata, so as organizations are constituted and become (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), they also 'bego' as, say, old ways of thinking are unlearned or forgotten, new practices replace the old, or physical spaces are occupied or vacated.

Lastly, reality is full of contradiction and constraint. For Bhaskar, contradiction is 'any kind of dissonance, strain or tension' (Bhaskar, 1993), and negating these is key for arriving at the ultimate goal of eudemonistic society, universal human flourishing. For Bhaskar, this involves both the free-flourishing of all and the free-flourishing of each, and achieving it requires an ongoing critical evaluation of the power relations that enable agents to defend the advantages lent to them on the basis of their class, age, gender, and so forth.

Some of these contradictions are beyond our capacity for intervention, others are accessible. Our interest here are in internal contradictions, those that involve two-sides of the same coin type relations in which addressing one end comes at the expense of the other, or those relations in which one is "*opposed*, in the sense that (at least) one of their aspects negates (at least) one of the other's, or their common ground or the whole, and perhaps vice versa, so that they are *tendentially mutually exclusive*, and potentially or actually tendentially transformative" (Bhaskar 1993, p. 58; original emphasis).

INSERT TABLE 1

Addressing contradiction requires *dialectical thinking*, "the art of thinking the *coincidence of distinctions and connections*" (Bhaskar, 1993). Broadly, it holds that to understand something and take transformative action, it should be studied as "processes in their wholeness, inner contradiction, and movement" (Bolis and Schilbach, 2020, p. 522). Dialectical thinking takes the form of four "moments" (Table 1). These are *non-identity*, *negation*, *totality*, and *praxis*, which Bhaskar discusses under the MELD schema, for First Moment (1M), Second Edge (2E), Third Level (3L), and Fourth Dimension (4D), and together, they make represent the elements of Bhaskar's dialectical thought.

Frist, we consider the benign dialectic: First, we conceive of an issue as discreet structures in a particular moment in time. As scholars of management, we may focus on explaining a particular lack, e.g. a lack of performance, a lack of understanding, a lack of revenue. We attempt to go beyond appearances, judgment, or singular experience to understanding real underlying causes. Next, we consider transitions—or the absenting of absence, "the exercise of causal powers in rhythmic (processual) causality" (Bhaskar, 1993)in which multiple possibilities might be realized. We may make an initial attempt at

change, or an imagine what change can be brought about through our own creative freedom. Contradictions, dilemmas, and paradoxes of practice arise. At 3L we reconceptualize phenomena in terms as totalities and wholes. Practically speaking, contradictions, tensions, and dilemmas are understood (and potentially overcome) by relating them to other parts and wholes, or considering different perspectives of the same issue—using both/and rather than either/or and "drawing together" assumed opposites (Alderson et al., 2020). Finally, the awareness gained during the previous moments is directed at achieving transformative change.

Dialectical processes can be maligned by way of four interrelated errors. The critical error at 1M is in taking things at face value or judging which is referred to as the *epistemic fallacy* (Bhaskar, 1975). To our knowledge, the exact forms the epistemic fallacy can take have not been summarized, but they are wide-ranging; denying the views and experiences of participants of the change processes is one example common to change projects. Likewise, in negating problems the critical fallacy at 2E is seeing reality in terms of presence only, *ontological monovalance*, and denying change as a unity of space, time, and causality. The fallacy at 3L is ontological partiality: failing to see the interconnected nature of reality. The fallacy at 4D is de-agentification, the many thoughts and actions which deny our real capacity for change. This would include, for example, restricting our own actions or those of others due to a misplaced lack of belief in our abilities.

The ideas of DCR share much in common with other discussions of dialectic within management, which has a long history. It has been used to describe organizations generally (Benson, 1977), tensions in change management (Seo and Creed, 2002), leadership (Collinson, 2005), organizational resistance (Mumby, 2005), knowledge creation (Nonaka et

al., 2000) and marketing (Holt, 2002). These approaches focus on the transcendence of opposing (generally political) forces. For example, Van De Ven and Sun (2011, p. 71) note that a "dialectal process of change fails when power inequalities limit or inhibit confrontation among opposing parties". They present dialectic alongside other process models based on their mode (prescribed or constructed) and their unit (single or multiple), where dialectic is seen as a process model that is a constructed form to deal with multiple entities. We would highlight that the four planar ontology of DCR includes dialectic in a broader sense than confrontation or dialog. In this sense, we lean with Dovey et al. (2017) who consider a complexity foundation that includes interactions between the material, physical, aesthetical, and symbolically mediated aspects of leadership. In making their recommendations, they emphasize a view of practice that is contingent upon these interacting elements of complexity, and in which thought, action and the outcomes of these are intimately linked.

2.1 A dialectical exploration of organizational learning practice

In this section, we consider the achievement of agility as hindered by two critical contradictions arising from the nature of any organizational learning endeavor: the nature of learning itself, goals, and the pursuit of ambidexterity. While these are certainly not the only contradictions to arise in practice (see, e.g. Vince et al., 2018), these appear frequently as two sides of the same coin relationships. Once the interest moves to intervening (2E), contradictions, dilemmas, paradoxes, and tensions will inevitably arise. Recent scholarship has linked defensive behavior and defensive routines to our cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses to how contradictions are experienced (Mease, 2019; Smith, 2014) so understanding them is at the heart of facilitating organizational learning.

2.1.1 Goal contradictions

The first set of contradictions arise from the nature of absence itself, and especially as it relates to goals. Goals and their perceived feasibility motivate the behavior of both individuals and organizations, and provide a performance standard against which to evaluate the outcomes of behavior (Bandura, 1978, 1997, p. 477). However, goals are often ambiguous (Sawyer, 1992), continually shift (Pask, 1969), fail to align, or even conflict (Locke and Latham, 2002). Goals need to shift to meet changing priorities and environment, and challenging goals play a central role in motivation (Linder and Foss, 2018). But individuals are likely to limit both goal specificity as well as difficulty during goal formation out of perceived threats or constraints (Bryson et al., 2016; Greve, 2017; Xu, 2011). The process of goal formation also frequently draws attention to new determinant absences that result in creative tension and can feel overwhelming (Senge, 1990, p. 151). For example, the goal to increase sales may initially be seen as related to a lack of salespeople. Upon reflection, however, we see it is related to a lack of budget, a perceived lack of training, and so forth. For groups especially, a salient issue is that to avoid embarrassment or threats to status, individuals may not state their actual goals, and so actual goals may not correspond with stated goals (Linder and Foss, 2018). In short, organizations learn in relation to goals, but we are often hard pressed to find what those goals are.

2.1.2 Ambidexterity contradictions

The second set of contradictions arise from conflicting from different types of learning needed to meet organizational goals. Agility is meant to promote the achievement of two

goals that have been referred to at the organizational level as exploration—the pursuit of new knowledge—and exploitation—"the development of things already known" (Levinthal and March, 1993, p. 105). Organizations need exploration and exploitation to compete over the long-term, but have a hard time achieving both for very long (Brix, 2020).

Levinthal and March (1993) attribute the tendency towards exploration and exploitation to short-term rewards, presumably referring to how humans respond to reinforcement. Indeed, decades of research on associative learning demonstrates our continued susceptibility to feedback that positive, immediate, and certain feedback will tend to win out over feedback that is negative, uncertain, and delayed (Daniels and Bailey, 2014). Overcoming the pull of positive reinforcement in the short-term requires reflection, awareness, mindfulness, but these can be quite threatening. Indeed, given the choice, many people will avoid critical reflection (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Diamond, 1986), hindering a critical component of proactivity and responsiveness essential to agility. Because of this, organizations often oscillate between failure and crisis (Haunschild et al., 2015; Seo and Creed, 2002) or between exploiting and exploring, and where short-term reinforcement drives organizations pathologically towards one or the other.

The natural response to ambidexterity and goal tensions is defensive, and these drive people to seeing and choosing one alternative where multiple may exist (Smith, 2014). Bhaskar (1993, p. 112) refers to these as Tina (There Is No Alternative) formations, and we could consider them to be anathema to transformative change. For one, there is evidence that individuals and organizations alike will be unable to maintain rigidly held positions and thus will alternate between extremes (Haunschild et al., 2015; Kernberg, 1984). In psychotherapy, this is referred to as "splitting", where individuals tend to think in terms of "either/or" rather than "both/and" (Linehan, 1993, p. 34). In organizations, we might see this as a disjunctive

style of thinking, which, paradoxically, privileges explaining things as they are by decontextualizing them, attempting to separate them from values, and dismissing change (Tsoukas, 2017)**.** The tensions of goals and exploration–exploitation can be cast in this light when they run in the extreme: *Either I am pursuing my goals or the organization's goals.*

To summarize the argument up to this point, achieving agility in the sense of "doing what is needed" is challenged by two pervasive tensions in practice between the goals of the individuals and the organizations within which they work on the one hand, and the need to explore new opportunities versus the need to exploit current ones on the other. Both of these resist resolution by approaches meant to address them, and would seem to require alternative approaches. We have presented two forms of dialectical thinking, benign and maligned, as a backdrop for both for understanding nature of these tensions, and their potential resolution in practice. We now turn to our case, in which we adopt the dialectical lens to consider the application of Agile approaches to meet this need.

3 Methodology

The claim of this paper is that organizational agility can be both understood from and supported through a dialectical framework. In developing this claim, we considered an organizational change initiative that took place over a five-year period, from 2013 to 2018 (see Table 2), that used Agile approaches and which sought to promote an entire repertoire of behaviors in everyday practice. The change initiative involved a coalition of non-profits, government agencies, and foundations in the Los Angeles metropolitan area that aimed to improve the county's system for providing services to homeless individuals. During the

project, one of the authors served as a consultant to implement practices associated with Agile methodologies, the specifics of which are considered in the following section.

Our research can be considered as clinical field work (Schein, 1987), a type of action research (Baskerville and Wood-Harper, 1998). Action research takes on a wide range of forms in which the researcher takes on a helping or facilitative role and in which theory plays a key role in formulating diagnoses and remedial action (Baskerville and Wood-Harper, 1996). Clinical field work differs from other types of action research in that projects are initiated by a client to assist in the resolution of a particular problem, and the process involves the exchange of facilitative services for a fee. Accordingly, though our approach allowed both for local impact as well as to develop and evaluate theory in the field, in the field work, the priority was the former, i.e. in using professional knowledge in helping the client to resolve the issue.

The clinical approach allowed us to observe the functioning of Agile practices as they played out over a time. Here, the initial theory was the implementation of a set of practices associated with the Agile methodology (Agile Alliance, 2001) would improve the organizations' collective capacity to address homelessness over their previous approach. Data collection in the form of research notes, observation, and co-creating practitioner-oriented reports and artifacts was also guided by the framework, which included protocols to direct the phases of planning, ideation, action, and reflection as described in the next section.

We originally chose to consider this case because we wanted to understand how and why Agile had benefited the organizations in some ways and was limited in others. Furthermore, having Agile as an initial guiding theory provided fertile ground to put it to the test without a clear idea of the outcome, an ideal setting for action research (Dick and

Greenwood, 2015). Participants were involved throughout the research process, which presented benefits and challenges. On the one hand, it allowed for the pursuit of a key aim of the approach, and one under scrutiny here and one in common with other action research approaches—to support individuals in reflecting critically on their actions and to learn from experience. On the other hand, it allowed us to evaluate the extent to which such learning took place. Secondly, the clinical approach put the researcher in the position to interact with both line workers and management from multiple organizations. Here the proximity of the researcher–clinician was seen as an advantage—participants are more likely to reveal what is "really going on" at multiple levels of the organizations because the researcher is in a helping role (Schein, 1987).

After the intervention had ended, we analyzed the case retrospectively to develop our framework, reviewing archival data, fieldnotes, websites, and other material related to the case, much of which is a matter of public record. We also reviewed our findings and asked for clarification with people involved with the project for accuracy. Two characteristics of the case drew our attention. Firstly, despite a seemingly similar *absence*—the absence of stable housing—the organizations and individual members understandings of the problem were quite different, and we could observe contradictions within and among organizations as these arose or were avoided. Second, as we reviewed the case, we were challenged to understand impact after it occurred. The outcomes of the project in terms of "successes" and "failures" was difficult to establish as these too were subject to the differing understandings. The clinical field work approach provided a means of keeping the large number of organizations engaged over a long period of time, and so allowed us to observe these outcomes.

4 Home for Good

To understand our grounding for agility, we begin by presenting the context of the intervention. The project described here was a part of a nationwide effort to eliminate homelessness through an approach known as *Housing First*, which emphasized addressing the need for stable housing as a precursor to addressing other issues a person might have. It contrasted with the typical approach at the time of *Housing Ready,* which often required homeless individuals be drug and alcohol free before they could become eligible for assistance (Tsemberis and Eisenberg, 2001). The approach, which had enjoyed a few notable but geographically limited successes since its development in the 1990s, represented a significant shift in both mentality and strategic focus for the many organizations and programs addressing homelessness—governmental and otherwise.

At the same time, in the early 2010s, the U.S. Federal Government under the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was offering significant financial incentives to develop Coordinated Entry Systems (CES) to facilitate collaboration among service providers to implement *Housing First* nationwide, including a list of criteria against which programs would be evaluated.

We consider "Home for Good", an initiative, involving multiple organizations that spanned several years and that employed Agile methodologies during a portion of those to achieve its objectives. The Agile practices were encapsulated in the Rapid Results approach, and selected because they were seen as a viable means of achieving large-scale change in a short period of time. The use of Agile approaches ran from 2013-2015 in its initial phases,

and the methodology was applied again in 2016-2017. In 2018, many of the initial structures created as part of the project for cross-organizational collaboration and communication were still in use, though the focus had shifted to carrying out operations as opposed to continuing the change process. Following the *Housing First* approach, the objective of the project was to eliminate homelessness in Los Angeles County, which was significant—approximately 54,000 people at the beginning of the project. It should be noted that the word "eliminate" is not hyperbole, but rather the operationalized measure for the approach. Indeed, past results suggested that a total reduction of known homeless individuals *was* possible (Bornstein, 2010).

Multiple organizations participated in the project, including collaborating on the use of funding and a multitude of other human, physical and technical resources (see Figure 1). The United Way of Greater LA coordinated and contributed funding, while two non-profit organizations facilitated operational change: Community Solutions and The Rapid Results Institute.

INSERT FIGURE 1

The activity centered on the execution of 100-day sprints during which plans of action were conceptualized, executed, and reflected upon, and which were facilitated by the Rapid Results Institute and Community Solutions. These organizations worked in tandem to facilitate project-based initiatives involving multiple organizations with a range of characteristics, from relatively small, local organizations to large non-profits operating on a across the nation. An overview of the intervention is provided in Table 2.

4.1 Tensions at the start

At the beginning of the work, a number of tensions were immediately apparent and presented challenges to collaboration. A significant challenge was with coordinating different types of expertise and resources needed to find, assess and match individuals without stable housing, many of which suffered from significant mental, physical and addiction issues. Such coordination was particularly challenging given that many of the organizations focused on different aspects of homelessness, generally as a part of a related objective. For example, one organization would provide support only to women as a part of its mission to support women in need, while another provided support for the health of veterans, and under this mission would provide housing support. Others only worked with youth, or LGBTI individuals, or just those living with HIV/AIDS. Many of these focus areas and restrictions had to with both an organization's mission, but also the funding available at the time. Other major differences of focus had to do whether a person qualified for federal support or not. For example, in most cases a person needs to be a legal resident, not be a registered sex offender and not have been convicted of certain drug crimes to qualify for federal funding.

Organizations also differed in their approach to homelessness. While many adhered to *Housing First*, other organizations subscribed to the belief that a person needed to resolve certain issues before being housed. In such instances an organization would expect that a person makes significant progress on, for example, addiction issues, before being considered for housing. So, there was significant variation in how homelessness was prioritized.

Further, at the start of the project many organizations were competing for a limited pool of funding, and were aware of the competition. These factors were seen as contributing to a competitive and sometimes distrustful environment, despite seemingly shared goals. One key tension of note was a suspicion shared by many organizations that other organizations

were "cherry picking" clients, only helping clients that had less severe problems. Such a focus would allow an organization to house more individuals and appear to be more efficient when compared to other organizations. While some organizations supported this approach on philosophical grounds ("triage so you can house as many people as possible with the money you have") most disagreed with the practice. Nonetheless, most workers felt, correctly or not, that other organizations were guilty of doing so.

4.2 Agile development of coordinated entry

Many of these contradictions were addressed during 100-day working "sprints" in which members of many organizations participated. The condition for participation in the sprints was being a line worker in an organization that provided services to individuals without stable housing. These included both direct service providers such as social workers, shelter managers, as well as supporting staff such as housing program managers, and housing application evaluators from government funders. Project leaders summarized the project's aims as follows:

> *To end homelessness, we needed to ensure everyone living on the street was known, connected to interim supports, and matched to the housing that fit their needs. To achieve this, we—the individuals and organizations that made up the system—had to build radical trust, as well as find new ways of coordinating a complex matrix of services. And we had to do it on a massive scale while working with a vulnerable population.*

Apparent in this description are a number of related lacks or ills: A need to accurately describe homelessness, a need to develop trust, a need to provide *the appropriate* housing to the individual needs. The initial organizing framework for addressing these and other issues

took place during three rounds of 100-day sprints were conducted. The first round included two teams operating separately. The second round consisted of one team which was formed by the members of the previous two teams. These groups focused on the limited geographic area of Skid Row. The third round, which focused on expanding the CES across LA County's eight Service Provision Areas ("SPA"), involved one team of 10-12 individual in each SPA.

INSERT TABLE 2

The immediate outcomes of the initiative, and of the learning that took place, could be found in the massive changes to the system in a relatively short period of time. The bulk of the intervention took place over a 15-month period, during which a Coordinated Entry System ("CES") was piloted, refined multiple times and then scaled. The unified system allowed organizations across the country to collaboratively identify, assess and match chronically homeless individuals to appropriate housing resources. As a team leader noted:

We convinced a non-profit to use CES to lease-up 80 units of supportive housing. On move-in day we could see that the people housed through CES were more acute, that they were needier. Other housing providers were watching. Once we showed what "high priority" meant and that we could not only define it collaboratively, but also work together to support these individuals, people started to pay attention.

CES replaced the independent processes and systems for such activities, which had generated poor coordination in the provision of services, including a high prevalence of duplicate service provisions in some areas and gaps in services in others. Table 3 contains an overview of changes produced by the implementation of the CES model.

INSERT TABLE 3

Between 2015-17 the CES was formalized, standardized and its use was increasingly mandated in rules and funding requirements across various federal, state, local and private funding streams used in the county. This was largely done through the efforts of senior leaders represented in the Home for Good coordinating body. At the same time, a centralized administrative and operation group was created to oversee operational and quality control aspects of the system. Thanks to these efforts, CES very quickly became the main avenue for allocating most of the services and resources for homeless individuals in the county.

From 2016, the system continued to grow and become increasingly centralized. While the system continues to function, the centrality has reduced the system's flexibility and resulted in a growing backlog of opportunities for improvement. Notably, despite significant gains in efficiency in terms of number of individuals placed in housing, homelessness in LA County increased from 2017 due to other factors.

5 Agile practices in Home for Good

We propose that the organizations involved in this project experienced a period of agility in which they were able to radically and proactively respond to their environment. As no additional staff was brought on for the project, teams carried out the system transformation in addition to their existing workloads. The additional activities included the use of Agile methodologies, meetings to update the evolving CES and to coordinate services at the neighborhood and client-specific levels. We can understand the result of the intervention as a period of agility in which the organizations were able to both explore new ways of doing while maintaining or increasing their effectiveness (exploitation).

We now consider the events using the MELD framework. While non-dialectical practice may have involved thinking and attitudes, our focus remains on the events and either what the second author could observe directly over the course of the intervention or what was recorded in the evaluative reports created following the project.

5.1 Agile and contradiction

MELD, or indeed any dialectical framework, is a model for understanding change. Ideally, when faced with inevitable contradictions arising in practice, a benign dialectical process results in an ongoing cycle of understanding, intervention, connection, and subsequent application. Contradictions are absensed and new ones arise. Though there were many contradictions related to this project, we select three that we feel were representative of the others, and that fit into three types:

First, there were contradictions that were successfully addressed, where tensions decreased after the intervention. An example of one such contradiction was an initial practice of “cherry picking”, which involved avoiding processing high-complexity cases in favor of “easy wins”, instead of the espoused approach of “giving the most to those with the least”. While the extent of the practice was never established, the belief that it was occurring fostered resentment and distrust between organizations. Ultimately, the practice was permitted through the existence of a wide range of criteria with which individuals in need were prioritized. The development of CES required agreeing to a shared prioritization list that used a point system. Participants interviewed afterward agreed that although documenting adherence to such a system was sometimes onerous, there was general agreement that the most vulnerable were being properly attended to.

Second, there were existing contradictions that came to light and were redefined as the project met with success. This was the case when the new data available made the lack and types of housing more readily visible. Not only did a critical shortage in terms of availability become more readily apparent, more evidence that an additional problem was also there were the wrong *types* of housing available. So, there could be excess availability for people meeting one criterion and a shortage for those meeting another. This issue fell outside of the original mandate for the Agile project.

Finally, contradictions arose from the intervention. It was recognized that pursuing a unified approach to housing would sacrifice flexibility for consistency. But this tradeoff manifested itself in several unexpected ways. For example, tried and true approaches to outreach could no longer be used because they now violated the principles of a fairness and shared responsibility upon which the project was based. While paper flyers used to be distributed in a small area to recruit individuals in need, now such a practice would favor one area over another, when these areas were meant to be sharing funding.

Additionally, the creation of CES, while inclusive, and the standard prioritization checklist, inevitably ignored how some individuals and organizations understood homelessness. These new contradictions were so great that in one case it immediately gave rise to a new project aimed at developing a special CES for Youth. CES itself also became hard to change, as it moved from a flexible but low-power information system to a more rigid structure requiring professional development and massive data storage. Decision making moved from line workers to a special CES committee.

Thus, we note the paradoxical nature of success itself within the project. The project was successful is true and not true: the ill of the piecemeal approach to addressing homelessness was righted to some degree, and yet it created problems of its own. What we

would like to propose is that the organizational approach during the time of the project was able to handle the continuous existence and emergence of these contradictions. To consider how, we turn to the functioning of Agile itself in the following section.

5.2 Agile as facilitating dialectical learning

Although we resist a simplified view of Agile as "resolving problems", we did witness Agile to have some impact that can be considered positive. Most obviously, the project resulted in gains in efficiency in placements, the increased trust and collaboration between participating organizations, and addressing new problems as they came along. During the project, there was a continual experimentation during which contradictions were surfaced, and the participants came together to address them. So, we could understand agility in this context as not getting stuck in one extreme position or another. Table 4 contains an overview of the Agile tools employed and how these were seen as facilitating change during the project. In the following section, we consider how the Agile tools were able to perform this function in practice.

INSERT TABLE 4

5.2.1 Conceptualization Facilitators

The project made use of several approaches to overcome contradiction in how the world is conceived, including goal formation. Accordingly, we refer to these as conceptualization facilitators, and we propose that they supported agility by helping create a state in which the actors could *know* what was needed, despite widely differing understandings of the nature of the issue of homelessness. Thus, we see conceptualization facilitators as playing a role in

arriving things as they are and are not (1M) and in integrating apparent opposites (3L) especially.

Arriving at clearly defined measures of performance at the outset of LA's CES program was problematic because the different groups understood the ideal outcome of the project in different ways. Added to this was the fact that like many complex change efforts, the LA project struggled to use existing performance indicators as the basis of action. Available data was so tightly focused on existing processes, services and measures, that it was of little use in efforts to develop new service models.

To overcome this challenge, the project used two agile tools to elicit, represent and modify ideas around the definition of success: Project Metaphors and User Personas. In the case project, a project metaphor in the context of Agile methodologies is a picture, statement or story that encapsulates the sought-after change (see Figure 1). User Personas are half-page descriptions of a typical user (e.g. a vulnerable person living on the street) that detail their hopes, challenges and motivators, and are a type of Use Case. We should note that many Agile frameworks also make use of User Stories, which are one-line statements that define change in terms of discreet functions. While project metaphors and user personas are meant to be inspirational, and user stories technical, the project did not employ User Stories, as they were not appropriate to the context. All three tools are meant to serve a similar purpose: Helping stakeholder focus on, and collaboratively develop definition of success through an evolving vision and set of goals.

In the context of Agile in a social impact project, a minimally viable product or MVP is the simplest possible version of a theory of change, translated into a testable prototype. It is a simplified but still complete version of the change (e.g. your new process or model) you

wish to implement. New elements or features are added only once the MVP is shown to be effective at achieving project objectives as defined in project metaphors and definitions of done. Priority is placed on what adds most to impact. MVPs allow teams to engage in controlled experiments that test innovations incrementally and robustly.

In the case of Homes for Good, the project progressively increased coverage (e.g. areas covered, types of funding sources integrated into the system, number of organizations involved) while also incrementally adding-in functional features and improvements (e.g. tools and processes for information sharing, prioritization of clients, service coordination, and resource optimization). The teams designed and implemented each MVP quickly, gathering evidence as they went on which additions were seen as adding value and adjusting as needed.

Dialectically, these activities supported conceiving of reality as it is despite, and indeed in conjunction with, the need for performance measurement and management. Where previous measures had been seen as restrictive, the use of the knowing facilitation tools allowed individual stories to be represented (1M), change to be imagined (2E), and connections to the wider context to be made (3L).

5.2.2 Action Facilitators

We refer to *action facilitators* as project approaches that encouraged reflective action, roughly corresponding with the dialectical moments of 2E and 4D. In this initiative, two such approaches were used: Time Boxing and Definitions of Done. Time Boxing is a practice that involves not only about setting deadlines, but also the practice of stopping work once a

deadline is reached. Traditional project management approaches extend deadlines until pre-planned milestones are achieved. In Agile, the end of the time box marks the start of new round of planning. At that point, stakeholders assess the value of continued work on unfinished elements and drop them if implementation is more difficult, or results are less than expectations.

For example, LA's second round team stopped work on a unified application for housing vouchers because they felt it would not simplify client intake. Such time boxes, along with Definitions of Done, create productive pressure in which results against the definitions will be evaluated and potentially positively reinforced by the group during the sprint retrospective, setting a clear (but temporary) definition of success. This pushes teams towards faster decision-making against specific criteria.

Definitions of Done are lists of acceptance criteria that define success for each round of work. It is precise enough that, ideally, everyone can easily tell if success is achieved. LA Home for Good teams defined "done" as the number of clients made "document ready" (i.e. having the certifications needed to apply for housing) or matched to a housing unit. Teams set their own Definitions of Done and were encouraged to see it not as a performance target but as a tool for focusing decisions. As one team leader observed:

> *Few of us at the junior level had been involved in a reform effort. And it was the first time we [employed by non-profits] worked directly with colleagues from government. It was challenging and exciting because we had room to think creatively and act quickly. We never felt pressure to develop a perfect solution right away. We were responsible for making sure our solutions evolved.*

The action facilitators most directly helped imaging concrete change, determinant absence, and carrying that change out. Accordingly, we associate these primarily with moments 1M and 4D.

5.2.3 Change Framework

Each round can be understood as a part of an overarching project framework, consisting of 100-day iterations of action—the sprint—and reflection—the sprint retrospective. The sprints were held in 100-day iterations, corresponding to each team's perceived level of experience. These tools helped teams run controlled, rapid experiments focused directly on achieving the change that the leadership sought. They also provide a platform for collaboration between different levels of hierarchy. A member of the LA Project leadership, summed up his experience as follows:

> *We [on the leadership team] knew the system needed significant change. However, none of us had the authority nor the expertise to dictate such radical change. Eventually we realized that we could create a collective authority. We had to work together to create a space in which the teams showed us ugly truths and developed beautiful solutions.*

A sprint retrospective is a planned moment of reflection and retrospection. It supports team-driven innovation, engaging teams in a learning dialog that continually refines the collective vision of change. As used in this project, the retrospectives aligned teams around this vision, while integrating new insights into funding streams and regulations. Home for Good's leadership did much of this during 2-hour reviews held every 25 days. The change framework invites participants to reflect on the current situation, to commit to a plan of action, and repeats the process.

5.3 Dialectical fallacies in action

During the workshops, and in subsequent discussions, several behaviors were observed that stymied the agile process of learning. While others (e.g. Ashforth and Lee, 1990; Oreg, 2003) have observed defensive behavior previously, we noted that the behavior appeared to correspond to Bhaskar's dialectical fallacies: the epistemic fallacy, ontological monovalence, ontological partiality, and de-agentification. These are described further in Table 5.

INSERT TABLE 5

These actions and ways of thinking that appeared to get in the way promoted what we would see as non-agility or what Seo and Creed, 2002 termed non-adaptiveness. These were presented as behaviors and ways of thinking that were *non-dialectical* that resulted in the actors remaining stuck or non-agile, preventing transformative action. For example, ontological partiality—the denial of internal relationality—was evident initially in the particular ways each organization understood and acted in relation to homelessness. That these organizations were able to synthesize these views is evident in the extent to which they ultimately were able to collaborate as seen through the creation of a shared priority criteria as well as pooling a portion of their funding.

6 Discussion

INSERT FIGURE X

The dialectical framework we present makes two related contributions to current discussions of organizational learning. The first is in using DCR as a foundation for understanding the

nature of organizational learning that may be suitable for the emerging view of organizations as inherently complex entities (Antonacopoulou and Chiva, 2007; Dovey et al., 2017). Deeping an understanding of the ontological aspects of learning is closely tied with the second contribution, in applying the framework to critique agile approaches to project management, which can be extended to include *any* approach meant to bring about organizational learning in practice. In the following section, we consider first what how DCR might address current debates on the nature of learning (including agile learning), and second, the implications for the framework for promoting learning in practice.

6.1 Describing the successes and failures of agility

The case for Home for Good brings up ongoing challenges in describing the reality in which organizational learning takes place, which DCR helped us to grasp. In particular, we note the potential contribution of the framework in addressing issues of evaluating multi-level phenomena that integrates considerations of absence, time, and the inherently imperfect nature of impact. First, the case for Home for Good highlights the inherently complex and seemingly contradictory nature of organizing. These tensions appeared to be a part of the organizational fabric, and potentially constructive rather than something to be avoided. Of note in the case of Home for Good is how these tensions existed between and across organizations in spite of their seemingly similar goal to provide stable housing. These shared goals were, to some degree, ultimately captured in prioritized lists, which reflected a shared, actionable understanding of the issue.

The case provides an interesting vantage point to observe tensions in agility over time. On the one hand, the project was reflective of what Turner et al. (2016) refer to as "point

ambidexterity"—where a single individual coordinates exploratory and exploitative action. As the project continued and was expanded, ambidexterity became more and distributed, and, as these authors report, harder to manage. At the same time, the nature of the project deliberately aimed at expanding and exporting the success of the project: CES, for example, was meant to be "big", used at the county level. Not only did this make future change more difficult (a type of competence trap), the successes could be at odds with the understandings of the home organizations.

There is growing consensus that the complexity we witnessed are par for the course. Tsoukas (2017) makes the case that the key to improving practice is to embrace complexity. Our results suggest imperfection also needs to be embraced along with tension (Andriopoulos and Lewis, 2009) and change.

We find DCR's focus on absence as helpful in understanding the issue. Transformation involves not just "becoming" (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), but also "begoing", the ways of doing, thinking, or being that are replaced by the new. We see this in the project in the material sense and also in understanding. For example, the new prioritization list replaced the approaches used by the participating organizations prior to the project. The loss of nuance transformed the system into one that was, at the county level, better able to place those seeking stable housing. Sometimes, however, individuals that might seem to be "priority" to one particular group would now fall outside the criteria at the county level. The capacity for using one's judgment in making placements was reduced as well, as the list demanded a certain adherence to order.

Our results, therefore, could help us arrive at a new understanding of scholarship with *impact*. Antonacopoulou (2009) identifies impactful scholarship as influential, memorable,

practical, actionable, co-created, and transformational. On reflecting on the impact of this project, we note *imperfection* as another one of its key characteristics that permeates all the rest. Embracing imperfection as well as change was a fundamental part of the project. But given the real need to satisfy stakeholders to maintain legitimacy and obtain resources, embracing imperfection may be seen as a tall order when those defining *success* sit outside those involved with the project. To the extent that these stakeholders view success as a fixed entity, these views may also represent a constraint to be addressed. That is not to suggest that the goal of eliminating homelessness in LA country was not a legitimate or unattainable aim. Rather, realizing the goal requires embracing emerging understandings of its nature and causes, and how these are addressed on multiple levels.

One contribution of our case, then, is in providing a complementary view of *dysfunction* in organizational change projects. While not directly indicative of a solution, developing a more complete view of dysfunction can help guide interventionists toward possible courses of action We consider dysfunction here as dialectical issues in thinking and action that could be thought of as a special category of imperfection which hampers transformative change. We consider these here as contributing to a state of *non-agility*, manifested in the behaviors of participants, and encoded into organizational structures and routines. The outcomes of the case reveal a certain fragility of agility: That the most obvious indictor of success for the program, CES, became more and more difficult to change as time went on is perhaps also the most suggestive of what Smith (1995) refers to as *ossification*, an inherent resistance to change those organizational structures have, resulting from the perceived losses in giving up the way things are. Addressing ossification requires us to

"restore the past to its own present" (Tsoukas, 2017: 132), by providing a space in which this could take place.

Our case suggests that approaches like Agile can serve as a countermeasure to the tendency toward non-agility, but that it will not overcome a general pull generated by the organizational structures we create and the actions we take toward fallacious thinking. This suggests that practices meant to promote agility must include elements to address structure, action, and thinking between actors, and that this needs to be engrained in the routines. Our consideration of Agile approaches is perhaps of a larger scope than Maylor and Turner (2017) see in viewing these as a means of promoting flexibility, as we see Agile approaches also ideally encompassing planning, control, and relationship development that form the core to managerial responses to complexity. Of course, arriving at clear categories of responses given the interrelated view of reality subscribed to is rather difficult. As these authors note: "There is not complexity or response—both are ongoing, co-exist, and interact" ((Maylor and Turner, 2017: 1087).

6.2 Implications for Agile projects

What we find exciting about using dialectic as a framework for change are the questions it demands of our methods as scholar/practitioners. Our discussion could serve to meet Tsoukas (2017) calls to keep theory complex in developing ways to bring about agility in practice. Here, we limit our discussion to micro-practice, making no claim on organizational agility. Our discussion has little direct applicability to strategic decisions to invest in strategic agility in the form of, say, whether or not to invest in R&D, which can have serious implications in an organization's ability to adapt.

Rather, one clear area potential for the dialectical framework is to look at the micro-practices (Ashcraft and Trethewey, 2004) of Agile, and demanding of each: Does it demand we let go of the way things are right now? Does it require empathizing, understanding viewpoints we may find threatening? Does it require action we may not wish to take? The answers to these overarching questions might provide some indication of the capacity of an approach to promote agility. In our case we have presented a preliminary answer to these questions by categorizing the behavioral repertoires (Mease, 2019) of agility, which we frame as conceptualization tools, action facilitators, and an overarching change framework that provides planned moments of action and reflection (see Table 4). We see parallels between change framework practices and the discussion of the interpretive arc of Hibbert et al. (2016: 29): "human life in its flow of change is made possible by an interpretive arc: an arc that swings back to individual past experience, rooted in tradition… and swinging forward to the present in the adaptation and application of practices." The change framework provides a type of pulse for the arc, conceptualization facilitators serve to support adaptation and a critical view of the past, while action facilitators demand application and with it, new experiences.

Of course, due to the limitations of our approach, this study should be considered as both preliminary and exploratory. The clinical approach to developing our discussion has some clear drawbacks. First is the retrospective manner in which our dialectical framework was developed. While retrospective methods have the benefit of feasibility (Leonard-Barton, 1990; Pettigrew, 1990) there are significant limits to practitioner reflection (McKelvey, 2006). Even Schein (1987), the elaborator of the clinical field work, notes that its capacity to validate beyond the local context is limited. Though subject to limitations, we chose the case

of Home for Good because the intervention supplemented, rather than replaced, the normal activity of the organizations involved during a time when radical change in operations was achieved, and so provided a rare opportunity to observe agility in action.

6.3 Future directions for change practice

Our case suggests two potentially fruitful lines of future inquiry. The first is in further developing a complexity view of *learning dysfunction*. In our analysis of Home for Good, we have considered the drivers of non-agility as a *dialectical* failure involving the epistemic fallacy, ontological monovalence, ontological partiality, and de-agentification. Our case suggests that these fallacies were manifested in the thoughts and behaviors of participants, but sustained also through organizational structure and routine. Further observing the interrelations between thought, action, and structure could provide much needed nuance in identifying the breakdowns of change projects.

The second line of inquiry involves incorporating our discussion into the developing research in the *project-as-practice* movement to inform how to support dialectical thinking in practice for agility and other types of organizational learning that foster transformational change.

Exploring how to intervene in practice given its complex nature first requires some reflection as to our role as consultants. In her discussion of Applied Tension Analysis, (Mease, 2019) eschews a universal value of best practice, and instead identifies three roles for scholars in promoting organizational learning: 1) in compiling responses learned from observing other organizations and highlighting these for participants as possible response strategies; 2) in innovating strategies that may not be apparent to participants, leveraging the

"outsider" status; and 3) merging the previous two approaches to bring researchers and practitioners together. Our experience supports these observations. Imperfection aside, the project represents a largely effective integration of what had worked elsewhere--the foundation of "evidence-based management"--*and* fitting, adapt, and even discard parts of it when facing the entirely unique situation at hand (see (Piazza and Abrahamson, 2020).

The dialectical framework and our experience with Agile approaches has also made us wonder at a fourth possibility: to develop means for our own graceful "absenting" from the organization when needed. We as outsiders—whether consultants, scholars, facilitators, coaches, and so forth—are also subject to constraints and contradictions limit our ability to bring about transformative change. The need to sell ourselves and our methods, or to receive positive reviews to bring on future business, can represent significant constraints themselves that should not be ignored, and could hinder the benign dialectical processes discussed previously. Including ways of continuing the practices outsiders promote when they are gone would be one means of achieving this.

Finally, we can cautiously seek some transferability across organizational context to identify effective practices for promoting agility. Recent works suggest that the behaviors of managers can support ambidexterity in practice and overcome the inherent limits to capturing it (Maylor and Turner, 2017; Turner et al., 2016, 2018). (Hibbert et al., 2016) additionally identify three learning practices key to promoting transformative change: exploring limitations (either personal or disciplinary); developing connections; and developing shared interpretive horizons. They highlight the importance of maintaining "a multiplicity of views of a situation", and "maintaining a curiosity-driven, dialogic engagement" (p. 40), ideas very much in line with the dialectic view presented here. We witnessed Agile's conceptualization

facilitators as driving similar outcomes, and imagine that any number of approaches could serve for facilitating action and structuring change.

What this suggests is a degree of *interchangeability* or functional equivalence of approaches to supporting agility which merit further exploration. For example, van der Hoorn and Whitty (2017) discuss creating a vision, storytelling, seeding ideas, identifying drivers, appealing to higher good as ways of developing alignment of stakeholder vision in projects, all of which could be seen as conceptualization facilitators. Antonacopoulou (2009) and Greig et al. (2013) suggest a role in asking guiding questions of participants in ways that would also promote arriving at “arresting moments” when knowledge of the way things are can be challenged and modified. We suggest that a promising future direction could involve exploring other practices through dialectical lens used here. This could both provide both further needed support for a view of non-agility as a dialectical failure, as well as provide a means of evaluating the capacity of a given approach to promote change in a given context.

Finally, there is an opportunity to consider the framework for understanding other aspects of organizational learning that may relate to a group’s capacity to do “what is needed”. For example, it has been suggested that developing individual and organizational resilience are needed to maintain agility over time, and that without it, groups will be less able to respond to surprises and shocks (Braun et al., 2017). Resilience, therefore, could represent another constraint deserving of attention through micro-practice.

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Element	Moment	Description	Related Fallacy
1M: First Moment	Non-identity	Understanding things as they are and as they are not in determinate space time.	Epistemic Fallacy
2E: Second Edge	Negation	Transitioning or becoming, the exercise of causal powers in rhythmic (processual) causality	Ontological Monovalence
3L: Third Level	Totality	Understanding things as emergent wholes with determinations of their own, which in turn affect the component things of which it is made up. Understanding things in terms of holistic causality, process-in-product	Ontological Partiality
4D: Fourth Dimension	Praxis	Product-in-process: Intentionally acting with the knowledge gained in 1M to 3L to transform practice	De-agentification

Time Period	Organization of Stakeholders	Focus
Winter, 2013	2 teams of approx. 10 line workers	Design and build basic CES with small number of organizations ● Continue to develop CES system, adding in more organizations (approx. 20)
Spring, 2013	1 team of 12 workers, all from previous round	● Making existing features more robust, Refine policy manual, ● Experimenting with new process and system improvements
Winter 2014	8 teams spread across LA County's 8 "Service Provision Areas" (SPA)	Expand CES to their geographic areas, adjust as needed and report back recommendations for system-wide changes/improvements
Summer 2014-2016	● 8SPA-based operational teams of 10-12 individuals each ● County-wide senior leadership team charged with formalizing and standardizing use of CES	● Ad hoc by coordinated improvement efforts by each SPA-based team; Not using RRA framework ● Use of CES to house high priority individuals ● Integration of use of CES as a requirement for most funding
2016-2018	● 8 SPA-based operational teams ● County-wide admin team to oversee quality and improvement efforts	● System continues to be used and expanded ● Increasing forces of atomization and growing back-log of opportunities for improvement

Process	Without CES	With CES
Street-level outreach	Weak coordination leading to over-coverage in some areas and gaps in others	Coordinated outreach efforts cover more ground with fewer resources
Assessment	Clients assessed multiple times by multiple organizations, using separate tools; many homeless individuals never assessed at all	Clients assessed once using a common tool; information combined into a real-time prioritized use to manage resources
Prioritization	Clients helped on a "first assessed, first served basis;" some case managers focused on clients with less complex situations, perceived as "easier" to house	Collaborative system for defining and prioritizing the most vulnerable clients; ensures that clients are matched to the right-fit housing for their needs
Supporting services	Organizations unknowingly provide overlapping services. Case managers only access their own organization's services	High-priority individuals have one primary case manager supporting them. Case managers can access resources and services from other organizations
Searching for housing unit	Case managers find units via personal networks	Supportive housing units combined into a shared list

Source: The authors

Element	Agile Tool	Description[1]
Change Framework	Sprints (Iterative Development)	A short time interval within a project during which a usable and potentially releasable increment of the product is created.
	Sprint Retrospective	A regularly occurring workshop in which participants explore their work and results in order to improve both process and product.
Conceptualization Facilitators	Project Metaphors and User Personas (Use Cases)	Use Case: An artifact for describing and exploring how a user interacts with a system to achieve a specific goal.
	Minimally Viable Products	A concept used to define the scope of the first release of a solution to customers by identifying the fewest number of features or requirements that would deliver value.
Action Facilitators	Definitions of Done	A checklist of all the criteria required to be met so that a deliverable can be considered ready for customer use.
	Time Boxing	A short, fixed period of time in which work is to be completed, such as 1 week, 2 weeks, or 1 month.

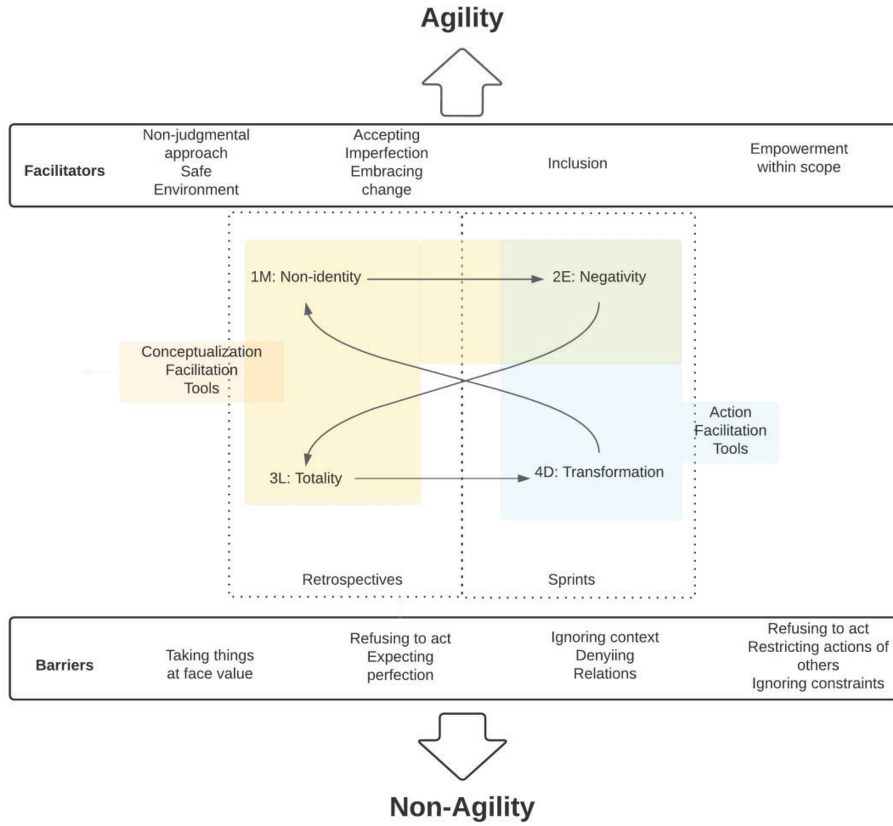
Source: The authors
[1]From Project Management Institute (2021)

Observed Case Outcomes
Working in 100-day rounds had a reported motivating effect, reduced perceived risk, and allowed for results to be more easily monitored Planned moments of retrospection allowed ineffective strategies to be publicly tested and, if needed, provided a environment in which these could be abandoned without fear of reprisal.
Supported systemic thinking and proactive identification of risk factors. Allowed groups to clearly define goals in a context of high ambiguity. Required limiting the project's scope, further acting as a prioritization mechanisms, and also limiting risk.
In the context of a sprint, creating Definitions of Done were used to inscribe the group's theory into concrete outcomes. In combination with retrospectives, time boxing was a practical means of ensuring public testing

Fallacy	**Theoretical Description**	**Observed in Practice?**
Epistemic Fallacy	Confounding what is experienced with what *is;* taking things at face value.	Yes
Ontological Monovalence	Seeing reality in terms of presence only, ontological monovalance, and denying change as a unity of space, time, and causality.	Yes
Ontological Partiality	The denial of internal relationality.	Yes
De-agentification	Thoughts and actions which deny our real capacity for change	Yes

Source: The authors

Examples from case
Judging others for "cherry picking". Seeing "success" strictly in terms of antiquated performance measures
Doing things the way they have always been done. Refusing to consider new performance measures
Ignoring the types of homelessness outside of local scope.
Ignoring constraints; passing the buck; refusing to act; Being restricted by local legislation



A dialectical framework for agility and non-agility

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