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## Article

# Finnish Police Supervisors' Conceptions of Workplace Learning and Its Sustainability

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**Abstract:** Workplace learning (WPL) is a complex phenomenon involving the intertwined processes of working and learning. Recent studies have shown the importance of sustainable perspectives in WPL situations. In the literature, sustainable development is still predominantly referred to environmental, economic and social sustainability. In this study, sustainable perspectives denote the widespread use of previous knowledge, the rapid application of new knowledge and the effects of this knowledge on well-being, thus leaning on human sustainability. The purpose of this study is to examine conceptions of WPL among Finnish police supervisors and to reveal whether sustainable learning perspectives manifest. Eight thematic interviews were analysed using phenomenographic and theory-driven content analyses. The analysis produced six main categories of WPL, and sustainable learning perspectives manifested in all categories. This study confirms previous findings regarding WPL and presents similarities in sustainable learning perspectives to those found in previous research. Learning outcomes can be improved by understanding WPL conceptions and sustainable learning perspectives; thus, the findings of this study can help organisations, supervisors and human resources better plan and implement sustainable WPL possibilities for employees and their careers.

**Keywords:** phenomenography; police supervisors; sustainable learning perspectives; workplace learning (WPL)



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## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, working life has faced emerging trends, such as technological development and globalisation. The fast-changing work environment has forced organisations to rethink their strategies and their employees' competences [1] to organise work in new ways [2]. Hence, learning and competence development are seen as increasingly important factors in individuals' and organisations' competitiveness in the labour market. As learning in the workplace has become a requirement for individuals and organisations, workplace learning (WPL) needs to be considered in a more sustainable way [3]. However, little research has been conducted on sustainable development, especially from the human dimension, and a deeper understanding of people's sustainability at work is urgently needed [4,5]. Organisations with motivated people can better steer sustainable development in the rapidly evolving business environment [1]. In addition, globally, the need for lifelong learning has been recognised through education goals, which are among the United Nation's sustainable development goals (SDG4). The aim is to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all [6].

Due to changes in the labour market and working life, researchers have called for subsequent changes in the way WPL is thought about and a better understanding of how society has changed in recent decades [7,8]. Knowledge and competence building at work have become so context-sensitive and intertwined with work itself that work and learning should be approached as one process [7]. According to Manuti et al. [7], there is no longer a 'one-size-fits-all approach' (p. 12) to WPL. People learn to strengthen and refine already existing knowledge or rebuild new knowledge through different roles and organisational

levels [8] and via different workplace activities [9,10]. Therefore, WPL is an important part of today's competence development in organisations.

Sustainability in learning situations is increasingly important in the competence development of people in organisations [5]. Based on previous research, this means the utilisation of already existing knowledge, the rapid application of new knowledge and the effect this knowledge has on an individual's well-being [3]. In modern organisations, people's well-being and motivation matter when looking at an organisation's results, and this means that structure and defined processes are necessary to strengthen people's resources as part of the organisation's success [1] and part of people's sustainable careers [11]. Sustainable careers are built from "happiness, health, and productivity" (p. 11) for the person themselves, but organisations will also gain more committed people by developing competencies, knowledge, skills and other abilities. WPL can be seen as a reflective, communicative, and behavioural [11] way of personal development and well-being in sustainable careers during a person's life cycle. Indeed, a sustainable career is a wider concept than sustainable WPL and also includes other possible competence development activities and life cycle thinking [11].

This study examines Finnish police supervisors' conceptions of sustainable WPL in the preventive action unit. Little research has been conducted on the conceptions of WPL and how sustainable learning emerges in the context of police work from police supervisors' perspectives. The preventive unit's task is to protect the security of citizens, the security experience and confidence in the police through early intervention in activities and development that may decrease security in society. The constant search for information and the capability to anticipate security threats in the environment require deep specialisation and continuous renewal of know-how. Therefore, preventive police work can be characterised as expert work. The purpose of this study is to examine conceptions of WPL and how sustainability of learning emerges at work. The perspective of supervisors is especially important because they need to understand how their supervised employees learn in a sustainable way also in the future. Thus, this study aims to improve police supervisors' understanding of WPL and their conceptions of the sustainability of such learning.

## 2. Conceptualising Workplace Learning (WPL)

Learning is an important part of daily work that is embedded in everyday practices. Indeed, studies suggest that more than 80% of WPL takes place at work [10,12], mainly informally, see, e.g., [13]. Learning itself can help individuals work more efficiently; therefore, workplaces have become powerful sites of learning and competence development [14,15]. Especially recently, WPL has been noticed as a vital tool for enhancing organisations' competitiveness and employees' well-being [7,10].

WPL has various definitions at the individual, team and organisational levels that focus on the process and/or outcomes. One of the most comprehensive definitions of WPL is Tynjälä's [16] 3-P model, in which the three Ps represent presage, process and product. In this model, the presage is the learner themselves, with their knowledge and abilities; the process is based on the different learning activities; and the product represents the learning outcomes that could produce better knowledge or skills in practice. Fenwick [17] asserts that the future formation of WPL should be considered through systemic views based on practice, identities and politics. Learning conditions are also important, as noted by Janssens et al. [18], who explain that WPL is based on work activities. Highlighting the social and cultural environments of WPL, Hager [19] concludes that learning at work reflects all the diverse situations in which individuals have the possibility to learn.

WPL can also be viewed as a process through which learning sustains development for individuals and organisations [7,20]. Brandi and Christensen [21] emphasise how developed competences can be used in practice. WPL is a complex process [22] that can also fail, and the results could be perceived as weak and not creating value for the organisation [21] or for the individuals [17]. Most of all, WPL is a collective and interactive process [9,10] in which professional expertise can be practised [16]. Individuals and organisations will

reach their targets through continuous improvement based on strategic, operational and individual employee planning in the learning process [20]. During WPL, it is important to lead, follow up and keep track of the whole process and, by doing so, strengthen learning in the whole organisation [21].

WPL is bound not only to the context and the characteristics of work but also to collaboration and social relationships. The nature of WPL is tightly embedded in cultural and social contexts [7,8,17,19,20,23], depending on the conditions and situations around us [24]. As Billett [9,25] and Hager [19] summarise that WPL is formed through participation and co-participation from collective practices at work and their relations. Furthermore, employees' values, experiences in social situations and WPL processes [26] affect how they participate in WPL opportunities offered by the organisation [9]. This means that individuals themselves will make the decision whether to participate in learning situations or not [16]. Overall, organisations that have more possibilities to learn are usually more supportive environments. Therefore, these organisations are the best from a WPL outcome point of view [9], meaning that the learning culture is critical in acquiring new knowledge [10,27].

In the literature, it is also typical to divide WPL into formal and informal learning based on its nature and how it occurs at work [7,19,26,28]. However, this division has been seen as old-fashioned and not appropriate for contemporary work life [7], as both forms of learning are, together, important for any learning at work [29,30]. The informal process of learning itself is not "linear" (p. 131) [10], which means that learning is context-bound, depending on the learner and the collaboration across duties. Learning at work can thus be defined in different ways, such as the improvement of skills, personal development in change situations or the collective possibility to learn [17,31]. It can take place through unplanned activities, such as observing and listening, and through planned and supported processes and practices, such as modelling, coaching and questioning, which aim to have an impact on better performance [9,10] and commitment [20]. Informal learning, by definition, has a less formal structure in place, although the goal of both formal and informal ways of learning is to develop skills and knowledge [10,32]. According to Tynjälä [8], who considers the differences between formal and informal WPL, knowledge acquisition is more closely linked to formal learning techniques, such as training and programmes, while knowledge creation is more connected to participation and is therefore understood as informal learning. Today, due to continuous changes in job requirements and structures and in technology, informal WPL can provide enormous potential to employers if they know how to implement it in practice [32]. Therefore, the possibilities of WPL should be intertwined to function more holistically.

Consequently, WPL can be approached from many different perspectives and practised in many ways. WPL is often referred to as structured or planned, such as formal training or in defined work tasks representing informal training. Hence, both formal and informal ways of learning are important for acquiring new knowledge and skills at work. Because WPL is also context-sensitive, the differences between formal and informal learning have also become more blurred [7,9]. Furthermore, informal WPL varies based on the branch and profession [32]. According to Jeong et al. [10], informal learning could be approached as a framework of "learning competence, intentionality, and developmental relatedness" (p. 141), in which the environment and individuals themselves play essential roles in organisations. Manuti et al. [7] argue that it may be appropriate to consider WPL as a single phenomenon due to the social dimensions that are so closely intertwined with learning and to pay attention to the sustainability of WPL by improving personnel's well-being with the help of functional learning processes.

### 3. Sustainability of Workplace Learning (WPL)

Competence development and learning in contemporary organisations are increasingly approached from a sustainable development perspective. Learning and knowledge are thus a means to execute competence and personal abilities for development [33] in

organisations. However, in the literature, the focus has been primarily on environmental, social and economic questions of sustainable development and less, for example, on an individual's psycho-social well-being. In a continuously changing environment, it is critical to focus on the development of individuals and organisations by understanding the potential and value of people's well-being and competence at work [1]. Scully-Russ [34] emphasises that the current ethical discussion within sustainability regarding how it could influence more sustainable organisations and ways of developing people increases the possibilities for more modern human resources development, which would also ensure better performance in business [1]. Studies have shown that organisations that take care of people's sustainability are more capable of attracting and retaining people [4], and organisations that have motivated people with positive well-being can steer sustainable development in rapidly changing business environments [1,35].

In this study, sustainable learning represents the dimension of human sustainability [4,5] that focuses on the sustainability of learning in the workplace. Although there is a need to understand how sustainable learning perspectives are shown in practice, very few conceptualisations of sustainable WPL exist in the field. In this study, we utilise the tentative model of sustainable WPL introduced by Lemmetty and Collin [3]. In their tentative model, sustainable WPL includes the perspectives on well-being, the widespread use of previous knowledge and the rapid application of new knowledge.

Continuous changes in work life may result in excessively demanding learning requirements and thus threaten individuals' and groups' well-being [35,36]. These requirements, combined with employees' increasing responsibility for continuous learning [37], may cause strain [3] and leave employees to face daily challenges alone, perhaps with inadequate resources [38]. Furthermore, previous studies have indicated that time pressure and increasing requirements for continuous learning at work [39] may have both positive and negative effects on employees' well-being, with varying strengths in different occupational fields and contexts [40,41]. In turn, the widespread use of previous knowledge in learning situations can secure deeper learning outcomes and the utilisation of knowledge that people have already gained. The transfer and broad utilisation of the lessons learned are beneficial in multiple present and future situations and can save individual resources [3,42–44]. Employees maintain competencies and in-depth learning outcomes that can be used in multiple ways [45]. The rapid application of new knowledge in learning situations further means that having the right resources can secure deeper learning and understanding to ensure knowledge retention. For instance, Brandi and Christensen [21] suggest that there is only a limited time to implement new competences after more formal training. The rapid application of new knowledge deepens the learning experience and reduces poor information and learning recall, thus preventing the waste of time and resources. At the collective level, it may also allow for individual competences to be transferred to a learning community [45].

For successful organisations, it is meaningful to build up structures that promote personal development and take society into account [34]. To support individuals in WPL, structures, practices and processes need to be set in place with clear roles and responsibilities [2], and support from line managers [38] is essential, as they play a key role in supporting sustainable learning perspectives in organisations. This is why police supervisors' conceptions of WPL and manifestations of sustainability in them are the focus of this study.

#### 4. Research Aims and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the conceptions of WPL by Finnish police supervisors and how learning manifests as sustainable in their work. The aim is to understand what kinds of WPL practices, processes and other related issues are identified by supervisors and how sustainability manifests within them. To understand the complex phenomenon at hand, qualitative research was utilised by examining meaning and experiences [46].

Little previous research has been conducted on the conceptions of WPL and how sustainable learning emerges in the context of police work from police supervisors' perspectives. This research will help develop an understanding of what kinds of WPL practices and processes are present in the context of police work and how sustainable learning may manifest. The findings of this study will help police supervisors, organisations and human resource (HR) experts to better model and support sustainable WPL perspectives in daily learning situations to secure better learning outcomes.

To address the research aim, the following research questions were formulated:

- (1) What kinds of conceptions do police supervisors have about WPL?
- (2) How does sustainability manifest in these conceptions?

## 5. Methods

A phenomenographic research approach was applied to understand police supervisors' conceptions of sustainable WPL. A phenomenographic approach allows for understanding the reality of individuals and how they experience, perceive, conceptualise, understand, apprehend and interpret that reality [47]. This means that knowledge reflects meaning and that conceptions are therefore built into the cultural and social contexts to which people belong [48]. People's conceptions, as the base units of the descriptions from the world around them, constitute the conceptions in phenomenography [48–51]. This second-order perspective in the phenomenographic approach requires an understanding of how participants experience their world in the researched phenomenon instead of searching for the absolute truth [49].

The aim of this study was to examine police supervisors' conceptions of WPL and how sustainable perspectives emerge in the revealed conceptions. According to Marton and Pong [50] conceptions are considered here "categories of description" (p. 335) to understand how people experience the world in which they work [47,50] and the variation of those conceptions within a specific research phenomenon [46]. Marton and Pong [50] also highlight that conceptions can be defined from referential (meaning for the individual) and structural aspects (a combination of features) and that, despite these differences, they are intertwined. To successfully identify these categories, the researcher needs to be faithful to the participants' experiences [52] and understand how similar groups of people experience situations from a collective outlook [47,51]. The phenomenographic approach aims to comprehend the experiences of the participants to provide an answer through the description of categories and, according to Åkerlind [51], how they are related to each other.

### 5.1. Context of the Study: Finnish Police Force's Preventive Action Unit

This study was conducted in the Finnish police's preventive action unit in the capital area of Finland, and all study participants were supervisors. Finnish police work was selected as the context because of, for example, the low corruption and broad expertise afforded to its basic vocational education. According to the Finnish Ministry of the Interior [53] and the strategy [54] planned for 2019–2023 for the police's preventive action unit, the unit's primary duties are to protect the security of citizens, the security experience and confidence in the police through early intervention in activities and developments that may decrease security in society. In recent years, there have been many changes in society that have impacted the operating environment and police work, especially in the preventive action unit, which is still a fairly new unit. The police try to intervene in combatting different threats posed by globalisation, terrorism, violent radicalisation, extremism, organised crime and polarisation with the help of the preventive action unit [53]. Changes in the operational environment will affect the knowledge and skills needed by the police, as their work has become more demanding and widespread than ever before. Furthermore, the importance of the preventive action unit has increased with respect to internal security in Finland. Based on the police's HR strategy [54], activities have been planned to support police work and personal development due to the changing operational environment. This strategy includes actions to promote flexible resources, develop versatile expertise and



coach leadership, well-being at work and new ways of working for the whole Finnish police force [55].

### 5.2. Participants and Data Collection

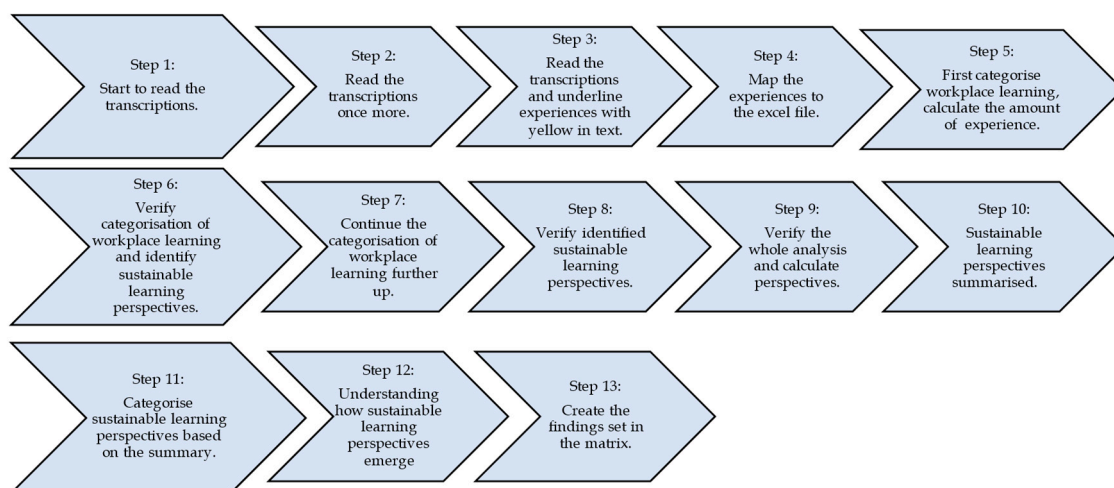
For this study, eight supervisors from the Finnish police department's preventive action unit were interviewed. Of the eight supervisors, five were men and three were women. The supervisors were selected as participant because we have only little research on this group of professionals. However, it has been shown in the literature that the supervisory roles are increasingly important in enhancing employees' workplace learning in the future [2,38]. The educational background of this group consisted of police training in vocational or polytechnical police schools and the formal competence to work as a supervisor. Many of the supervisors also had other educational backgrounds or previous work experience in other occupational fields, such as health care, law and social work. Work experience within the police force varied, but employment relationships were longstanding, ranging from more than five years to decades. Many of the supervisors had extensive experience in the preventive action unit, especially in the field. A few had worked in the department since it was established in 2012. These experienced police supervisors were expected to have a good understanding of how sustainable perspectives on WPL could emerge.

Individual thematic interviews [56] were chosen to attain valid information about Finnish working life and WPL, to increase knowledge on sustainable learning perspectives and to help develop the tools and means to promote sustainable WPL. The research data for this study consisted of individual thematic interview transcripts. The thematic interviews included questions on the following themes: (1) competence and competence development, (2) WPL, (3) problem-solving and development of work, (4) responsibilities and self-direction, (5) well-being and motivation, (6) supervisory work, leadership and work community and (7) development ideas. The questions were operationalised into open-ended questions, such as "What can you do well at your work, and from where does this know-how come from?" or "What kind of problem-solving situations do you meet daily in your work?" In every theme and question, more questions were raised to acquire a deeper understanding of the answers. Interviews were approximately 40–60 min long. They were recorded using a sound recorder and were conducted face to face at police premises. Each interview created 13–31 pages of information about the themes of WPL, which eventually amounted to 165 pages of transcripts from the targeted group of eight police supervisors, which allowed for rich descriptions of the study topics.

### 5.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis for the first research question was conducted with the help of the phenomenographic analysis [51] to determine polices' conceptions of WPL. This analytical process was a highly data-driven enterprise that concentrated on organising "the pool of meanings" (p. 325) that police gave to their experiences of learning, and it resulted in the final categories and conceptions of WPL [54]. All of these conceptions were analysed in Excel by the first author using different colours and meanings, which were reduced to 16 different "pools of meanings" of WPL, creating 8 subcategories of WPL that were further narrowed down to 6 main categories of WPL. By doing so, the analysis of conceptions was secured for interpretation in the same logical way throughout the entire study. In addition, during the analysis, some verification points were also created just to secure the most right and logical way of analysing and categorising the conceptions. Concerning the findings for the second research question, theory-guided content analysis [57,58] was applied. Hence, the analytical lens provided by Lemmetty and Collin's [3] model for perspectives on sustainable learning was looked for in the conceptions given for WPL. Manifestations of well-being, widespread use and rapid application of knowledge were revealed in the conceptions.

The data analysis was performed in 13 steps, which are described in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The data analysis process described in 13 steps.

The data were thus compiled into three main processes in the data analysis: categorising WPL (1–7), understanding and identifying sustainable learning perspectives emerging from conceptions of WPL (5–10) and categorising the sustainable learning perspectives into a WPL matrix (11–13). Through the 13 steps, conceptions of sustainable WPL were created from the perspectives of police supervisors in the preventive action unit. In Steps 12 and 13, the full understanding of WPL and the sustainable learning perspectives were summarised into a matrix (see Figure A2).

The two different analyses of this study were conducted as one process to identify the categories of WPL and the sustainable learning perspectives that arose in each category. The first analysis was based on the phenomenographic approach and on understanding the conceptions of WPL among Finnish police supervisors. The six main categories were formulated using the different subcategorisations. After the WPL categories were found, the manifestations of sustainable learning perspectives were identified in these. Sustainable perspectives were identified by using theory-guided content analysis. Mapping all of the conceptions to different sustainable learning perspectives was achieved by using the already-found sustainable learning perspectives. In addition to sustainable WPL perspectives suggested by previous research [3], one new perspective of sustainable learning—collaborative learning—was identified as a result of the thematic analysis. Altogether, 500 manifestations of sustainable learning perspectives were found in the data. The analysis was conducted by the first author alone.

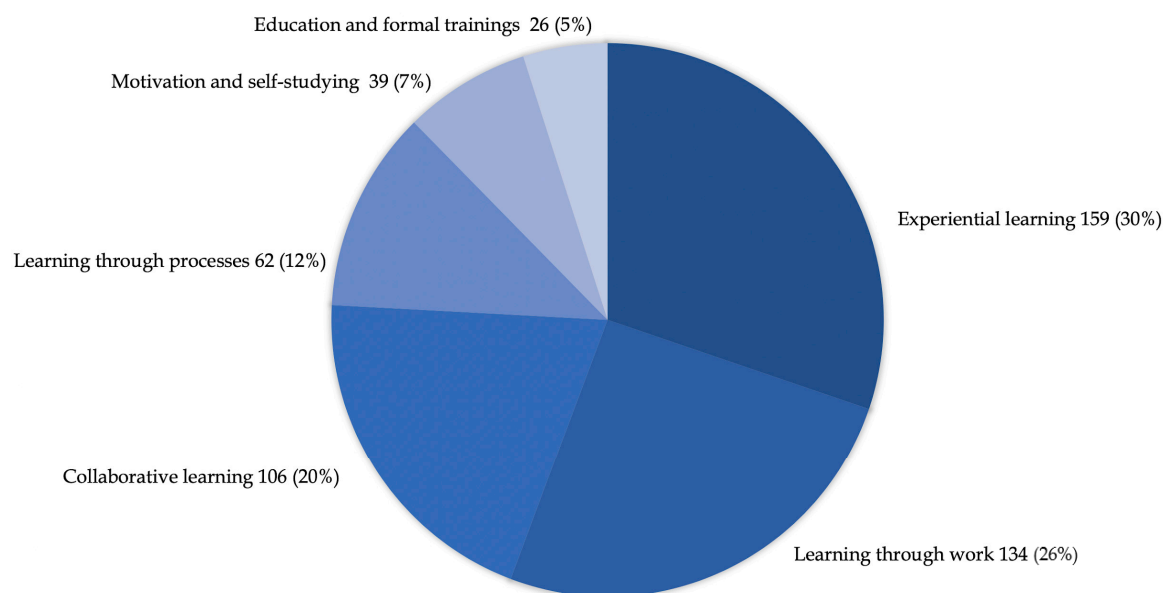
## 6. Findings

The findings of this study are presented in two subsections. In the first subsection, the main categories of WPL are presented, and in the second subsection, the sustainable learning perspectives that emerge from WPL are presented in more detail. The categories of WPL first needed to be identified to understand how sustainable learning perspectives manifested in them, which was the main interest of this study. Authentic examples of WPL can be found in Table A1, while authentic examples of how sustainable learning perspectives emerge in WPL are included in the text.

### 6.1. WPL as a Diverse Phenomenon

In this study, six categories of descriptions of WPL were derived from the conceptions of Finnish police supervisors: (1) experiential learning, (2) collaborative learning, (3) learning through work, (4) learning through processes, (5) motivation and self-studying and (6) education and formal training (see Figure 2). The findings of this study support the results found in a previous study on design engineers [22], and there are many similarities between the conceptions of WPL, even though the roles in these studies are different.





**Figure 2.** Findings of WPL categories from police supervisors.

The first category of experiential learning consisted of learning through meaningful work, learning through reflection, learning through experience and self-actualisation. Many powerful experiences were connected to emotions at work. First, police supervisors strongly identified the meaningfulness of their work in society and emphasised this feeling as necessary for managing daily tasks. Second, reflection, both at the individual and group levels, and feedback were tools used to understand different issues, relations and consequences at work. Third, in this working environment, there are no strict guidelines or frameworks, so individuals need to be able to test and fail and, by doing so, learn through experience. Finally, self-actualisation through work played an important part in how the participants benefitted from the expertise they developed.

The second category—collaborative learning—can be seen as an essential method of learning in the whole unit. With respect to conceptions of WPL, police officers recognised the importance of external and internal stakeholders and different kinds of teamwork. Additionally, with respect to support, information and knowledge seeking, problem-solving and self-studying, the results were similar. According to Vanhanen’s [55] study on the multidisciplinary collaboration of police, one of the skills needed most is collaboration, which is strongly linked to work expertise and the role of autonomy in the police. In the current study, the police supervisors viewed collaborative learning as consisting of learning through collaboration, dialogue with different stakeholders and learning through doing together. Collaboration and dialogue with different stakeholders are critical because they include all internal and external interfaces that need to be managed [55]. Doing this work is significantly based on discussion and doing things together, and by doing so, learning at work.

Learning through work, the third main category, consisted of support or non-support at work from supervisors, colleagues or the closest work community. A supportive working environment strongly embeds the possibilities of WPL and plays an important role in promoting learning possibilities in the workplace. Lacking the necessary support obviously creates frustration and consumes many resources. This was also found in a relevant Swedish study, which discovered that, within the police force, an “us-vs-them” (p. 114) dynamic was sometimes present between the top management and other layers of the police [59]. In the preventive action unit, which is still fairly new, learning through building up the structures at work and learning through the role itself, including one’s own responsibilities and expertise, are important.

The fourth category, which involved learning through processes, included learning from benchmarking, problem-solving and knowledge and information seeking. Police

supervisors highlighted the need for a self-directed approach to learning through problem-solving and through seeking future-oriented information and knowledge. These two ways of learning require more initiative from individuals to be responsible for finding the answers to present and future questions at work. This proves how intertwined work and learning are from the outlook of police supervisors. In addition, benchmarking the unit to other similar functions allowed for learning while growing the unit.

In the police context, with regard to the fifth category, individuals need to be interested in finding answers to different questions, be motivated and have good self-studying abilities in place. When police supervisors described WPL, an individual's true motivation, curiosity and the need for self-studying were important factors. However, the supervisors noted that the material for self-studying did not always support learning outcomes, and this could have a negative impact on some learning situations.

The sixth main category of WPL was education and the formal training needed to manage the job. Regarding conceptions of WPL, to work in the roles of the preventive action unit, supervisors saw a continuous need for more structured training and, in some cases, more formal education. The foundation for police work is obtained through formal education, and to be able to work as a supervisor, an individual needs to be qualified through other formal training. Supervisors identified a large gap in police education in terms of preventive action work, which is only represented in a few courses. Attempts were made to organise additional training, but the requests for trainers were made by the preventive action unit.

Education and more formal training need to be in place to acquire basic knowledge and skills, but to be competent in daily work, WPL needs to be supported. These findings can be summarised to establish that supervisors' conceptions of WPL strongly reflect the intertwined phenomenon of work and learning in the highly expert police work context. Learning occurs through experiential learning, doing together, work duties and responsibilities and mostly through problem-solving and information-seeking situations. Finally, learning situations are highly characterised by strong motivation and self-studying skills.

## 6.2. Manifestations of Sustainable Learning in the Conceptions of WPL

Findings regarding how different sustainable learning perspectives [3] manifested in WPL categories were identified from police supervisors' interviews (see Table 1). The police supervisors identified the rapid application of new knowledge 161 times, and the widespread use of previous knowledge was mentioned 86 times in categories of WPL. In addition, the positive effect of learning situations on well-being was noted 122 times, and the negative effect on well-being was mentioned 60 times. The boundaries of sustainable learning perspectives partly overlapped, meaning that, in some of the sustainable learning perspectives, even two experiences were found at the same time in the material (e.g., concurrence of rapid application of new knowledge and the effect of positive well-being), but the most often mentioned has been taken into consideration in this summary.

In Table 1, it is evident that sustainable learning perspectives manifested from WPL situations in every category. In this analysis, sustainable learning perspectives were built on three factors: widespread use of previous knowledge, rapid application of new knowledge and individual well-being. As found during the data analysis, the collective perspective of WPL was mentioned so strongly by Finnish police supervisors that we decided to also include this experience in this summary.

The summary of the identified WPL situations and the emerging sustainable learning perspectives are described in more detail in Figure 3.

In the following description of the findings, the categories of WPL and sustainable learning perspectives referred to in quotes from empirical data are indicated in brackets after the quote.

**Table 1.** Sustainable perspectives in WPL situations found among Finnish police supervisors, shown in six main categories.

Six Main Categories of WPL	Number of Appearances	* PK	** NK	*** WB+	*** WB−	**** C	Empty
Experiential learning	159	29	44	50	21	9	6
Collaborative learning	106	10	19	16	4	50	7
Learning through work	134	29	23	37	29	11	5
Learning through processes	62	6	51	1	1	1	2
Motivation and self-studying	39	1	11	18	4	2	3
Education and formal trainings	26	11	13	0	1	0	1
SUMMARY	526	86	161	122	60	73	24

\* PK = widespread use of previous knowledge; \*\* NK = rapid application of new knowledge; \*\*\* WB+ = well-being positive effect or \*\*\* WB− = well-being negative effect; \*\*\*\* C = collective.

Sustainable learning perspectives / Categories of workplace learning	Widespread use of previous knowledge	Rapid application of new knowledge	Individual well-being +	Individual well-being -	Collective
Experiential learning	Reflection and resilience	Courage to renew	Meaningfulness	Frustration with restricted possibilities to influence	Making common purpose
Collaborative learning	Social knowledge	New Information through network and collaboration	People and work as a resource	Uncertainty in role to act	Shared knowledge
Learning through work	Strong expertise foundation	Ability to build-up new information	Support and appreciation of expertise	No support, unclarity of roles	Shared support in working together
Learning through processes	Complex problem-solving abilities	Constant information seeking	Successful problem-solving	Unsolved problems	Shared resilience
Motivation and self-studying	Motivation in developing high expertise	Self-driven new learning	Good personal resources and success stories	Lack of personal resources and doubt	Shared understanding
Education and formal trainings	Basic knowledge and skills	Opportunity to improve knowledge and skills		Frustration in unsuccessful learning situations	

**Figure 3.** Findings on how sustainable learning perspectives emerge in categories of WPL from Finnish police supervisors' conceptions of sustainable WPL.

First, in the category of experiential learning, the sustainable perspective of the widespread use of previous knowledge was found to emerge through reflection and resilience, and the rapid application of new knowledge was found to emerge from the courage to renew. Arnesson and Albinsson [33] found in their study on reflective talk that sustainable learning arises from social sustainability, which means that “knowledge, understanding, skills, capacity, ability, values, and approaches” (p. 246) are created through reflection with others and at a personal level. In the current study, the meaningfulness of work, and even of the whole unit, had a strong impact on well-being. However, the frustration regarding the restricted possibilities to influence had more individual recourse with respect to negative effects on well-being. From the collective perspective on sustainable learning situations, finding a common purpose was strongly experienced. The rapid application of new knowledge played a major role compared to the widespread use of previous knowledge. The positive effects on well-being in experiential learning were felt more strongly than the negative effects on well-being, as expressed in the following quote:

*Our people can realise themselves and create ideas as much as possible, so you will not put a lot of frames to this [work], or maybe a little bit, but that you can really realise yourself, and we do not have . . . when we do not have any one right way to execute, so that everyone needs to work with their own personality. You cannot copy others; you need to be your true self. (Experiential learning, meaningfulness of sustainable perspective in positive well-being)*

In the category of collaborative learning, the social dimension of learning was heavily present in the way that sustainable learning perspectives emerged. The widespread use of previous knowledge emerged as social knowledge in learning situations, and the rapid application of new knowledge was recognised in the search for new information through networks and collaboration. Shared knowledge was recognised from the collective perspective as a resource. Positive effects on well-being in collaborative learning situations were found to emerge from other people as a resource, and negative effects were found to arise if there was uncertainty in the individual's role. In collaborative learning, sustainable learning perspectives emerged in connection with other people. The rapid application of new knowledge was more strongly represented than the widespread use of previous knowledge. In collaborative learning, a strong positive effect on well-being was observed.

*When you are in a leading position, and then when . . . Actually, based on this background, you just create quite a good picture about what kind of work we are doing and what kind of duties we have, what kind of people we have and . . . I suppose this still carries us on today . . . (Collaborative learning, social knowledge in sustainable perspective of widespread use of previous knowledge)*

Learning through work is strongly based on expertise in police work. The widespread use of previous knowledge was seen as emerging from the strong expertise foundation of the work, and the rapid application of new knowledge was recognised as the ability to build upon new information when needed. From a collective perspective, shared support in working together was important. Well-being was positively impacted when support and appreciation of expertise were in place but was negatively impacted by a personal resources perspective if there was no support in place and, in some respects, if there was role uncertainty. The category of learning through work was the most balanced category with regard to how sustainable learning perspectives emerged in the entire study. Positive effects on well-being were more prevalent than negative effects.

*So, our own organisation's ability to understand this work and then the support for that has been totally lacking. Now, we have succeeded in increasing the understanding—and the understanding for our society's phenomenon, and why we exist and what we do to solve these phenomena. So, it has been a big jump from traditional police fieldwork to preventive action work, and now, there is better understanding, but this has really meant a lot of pioneering work. And mentally, this has been heavy. (Learning through work, no support, role of unclarity in sustainable perspectives of negative well-being)*

The fourth WPL category was heavily bound to workplace processes, such as problem-solving and continuous information seeking. From the sustainable learning perspective, the widespread use of previous knowledge was identified as being connected to complex problem-solving abilities, and the rapid application of new knowledge was recognised as taking place through constant information seeking, which is a strong characteristic of the work in this unit. Shared resilience from failures was a resource found from a collective perspective. In terms of well-being, solved problems had a positive impact, and unsolved problems would bother individuals, therefore having a negative impact on personal well-being. Overall, the rapid application of new knowledge was heavily weighted in this category.

*We need to maintain the right picture [of society] all the time. That snapshot is actually a truly important matter. I did not mention that earlier, but we need to know what is happening in Helsinki. (Learning through processes, constant information seeking in sustainable learning perspectives of rapid application of new knowledge)*

Regarding motivation and self-studying, the widespread use of previous knowledge was strongly identified in the motivation to develop high expertise. The rapid application of new knowledge was seen as emerging from a strong self-driven learning attitude to gain new information. Shared understanding was the main finding of the collective perspective. In terms of well-being, good personal resources and success stories were seen as strengthening an individual's resources and having a positive effect on well-being, whereas a lack of personal resources and doubt, which mostly arise externally, could be seen as resource demanding. The rapid application of new knowledge and the positive effects on well-being were shown more strongly in this category.

*They [employees] understand the task, and they can do it themselves, so I will not tell them how to do it. Instead, they embrace the tasks, and then they [learn] . . . (Motivation and self-studying, self-driven learning in sustainable learning perspectives of rapid application of new knowledge)*

Finally, in the education and formal learning workplace category, the widespread use of previous knowledge was seen through the basic knowledge and skills needed in police work. The rapid application of new knowledge was identified as an opportunity to improve an individual's knowledge and skills. In this study, there was no clear evidence of positive effects on well-being through education and formal learning. This could be due to a lack of education and formal training for this specific unit, meaning that positive effects were not seen. In terms of the negative effects on well-being, the frustration of unsuccessful learning situations was a pure fact. However, there were no findings for this from the collective perspective either, meaning that this could be irrelevant in this workplace category.

*But otherwise, our learning [sighs], if we think about it at the organisational level, we are developing all the time enormously. Police should be a kind of walking data bank; you need to know everything from heavy traffic's full weight to all sorts of things in the world, and to some international messaging, and everything in between. So, we are trained by webinars, so I don't think that is a very motivating way of learning. (Education and formal training, frustration with unsuccessful learning situations in sustainable learning perspectives of negative well-being)*

The widespread use of previous knowledge and the rapid application of new knowledge were even more common in the education and formal learning categories, which might reflect how new knowledge is built based on an individual's existing knowledge.

The collective perspective of sustainable learning perspectives in WPL (see Figure 2) was heavily linked to collaborative learning, but it was also found, to a small extent, in other WPL categories, especially learning through work and experiential learning. Fenwick [17] explains that, within WPL, relationships with other people are the enablers of development. The collective perspective was seen as shared knowledge in collaborative learning. Winch [15] also highlights how workplace environments can be complex in a collective way with regard to people, activities and information and knowledge sharing. The collective perspective of WPL was identified in not just the category of collaborative learning; as such, more ways exist for team members to support each other in learning, recovering, sharing and finding the common meaning and overall understanding of the questions in WPL. In this study, the collective perspective was found to be a new perspective compared to previous studies. Due to the small number of police supervisors interviewed in this study, this finding needs to be researched in future studies.

Previously researched sustainable learning perspectives that emerged from these WPL categories can accurately capture the possibilities and challenges of WPL for the Finnish police. The findings of this study may strengthen the understanding of how important



human sustainability is in learning situations and, in this regard, how important it is to have the right resources to learn at work.

## 7. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine Finnish police supervisors' conceptions of WPL and how sustainable learning perspectives emerge in their conceptions. Six WPL categories were found: (1) experiential learning, (2) collaborative learning, (3) learning through work, (4) learning through processes, (5) motivation and self-studying and (6) education and formal training. Similar results can also be found in a study by Collin et al. [38], which established that professional agency and learning are strongly connected to seeking information, learning new things, experimentation and participating, and in a study by Janssens et al. [18], which found that learning conditions based on "information, feedback, reflection, and coaching" (p. 92) predict good learning results in the overall organisation [10,32]. Learning in the workplace obviously also happens through strong collaboration and with expert colleagues [9,19], which has also been evidenced among police supervisors as one way of learning [23]. However, at the same time, there is a lack of structure, such as unclear roles and responsibilities, which the current study found to weaken the well-being of employees. In this respect, the results of the current study are supported by earlier findings [2].

Sustainable learning perspectives manifested strongly in WPL, and this finding strengthens earlier research [1,4]. The collective perspective was also found, but this needs to be analysed further to determine whether it really is part of the individual learning perspectives or if it can be identified at the team or organisational levels. Overall, sustainable perspectives in learning situations manifested strongly in the categories of WPL, particularly the rapid application of new knowledge and the positive effects on well-being [35]. Due to the small number of police supervisors and the relatively young research area of sustainability in learning situations, more research is still needed.

The context of the police workplace is unique in its need to meet and anticipate society's rapidly changing needs and features. Supervisors' conceptions of WPL and how sustainable learning perspectives manifest are the keys to understanding what kind of support supervisors may need from their superiors and HR in police organisations. Leadership is demanding due to the continuous changes and complexity embedded in the organisational culture [60]. Leaders play an essential role in developing employees and supporting them in professional agency, autonomy and creativity through agile HR processes [38]. Supervisors as coaches can enhance individuals' abilities to learn, both in terms of competence development and personal growth [20,21,61,62]. As a coach, the supervisor has all the WPL practices at hand to promote learning and change and, therefore, can have a positive impact on work results, such as "skills, well-being, performance, work attitudes, coping and goal-directed self-regulation" (p. 692) [61]. Existing studies have proven the importance of WPL in the professional competence development of police organisations [23,63], and in this respect, the findings of this study will help supervisors better understand and lead sustainable WPL situations in these work contexts.

There are some specific questions in the phenomenographic research approach in this study that need to be considered. Sin [46] highlights the importance of reliability and validity from the perspectives of the study subject and findings. Sandberg [52] stresses that the researcher's role is to faithfully and accurately record the voices of participants. We have kept our backgrounds as HR practitioners and researchers in mind by being reflective during the entire data analysis phase. Reliability is bound to reproducibility so that any other researcher can find the same categories based on the results and, to a great extent, understand that the researcher's interpretative awareness plays a key role in the reliability of the results [46,52]. However, there are some critical views about the "how" and "what", as well as the referential and structural aspects, in terms of how these are used in defining conceptions and whether they are understood in the same way by different researchers [63]. Due to the researchers' background, careful data analysis was at the core of the current

study, which reflects the credibility of true and honest findings [46]. Reading through the transcripts many times, categorising themes in the most logical way and, at the end of the process, verifying the data to secure the same way of categorisation were all carried out to improve the ethical execution of this study. In a phenomenographic study, research validity is key, which refers to how well the internal consistency can be realised from the object of the study, the researched data and the findings [46].

As this study was conducted as part of a larger research and development project at the University of Jyväskylä, the ethical safeguards, such as the research permit and the privacy statement, were put in place, and all study participants were well informed during the process. Confidentiality throughout the research process and anonymity in the findings followed common research ethics. Storage of the research material in this study was implemented according to project instructions [64]. In addition, security clearances for the researchers of this project were completed due to the confidentiality of the material from the Finnish police.

This study continues to prove that WPL should be viewed as a holistic and diverse phenomenon that nourishes the development of organisations [1,23,65] by taking advantage of the different processes and practices involved and understanding the meaning of sustainable learning perspectives in WPL situations for individuals. In addition, sustainable learning possibilities and understanding need to be shared with organisations so that WPL can remain a resource and strengthen people's possibilities of developing and growing [3] as a part of their sustainable careers [11] and in line with the United Nation's development goal for the learning possibilities for all [6]. Today, after the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, we should carefully evaluate the balance of hybrid work and understand how much learning happens when people meet, discuss and debate. Depending on the organisation and the competences needed, this could have an effect on how learning creates more value for the business through new ideas and operational development. The findings of this study will help develop an understanding of what is needed in WPL and how learning situations can be supported in more sustainable ways [23] in highly expert work. In this respect, the transformability of this study could be within the area of highly expert work roles. This information should be brought to the heads of organisations, as well as to line managers and HR professionals. Currently, sustainable learning perspectives are approached from the individual point of view, but it could be interesting to research how sustainable learning perspectives emerge at team and organisational levels and whether this approach could provide more insight into the collective perspective on sustainable learning found in this study.

One of the most important resources is employees' capacity to handle and cope with the changing requirements of (working) life. This capacity is grounded in employees' learning, development and well-being [12,35]. The humane basis of sustainable work thus includes opportunities for individuals to grow personally, to learn at the group level and, as such, to become more sustainable in all respects. For this reason, research should pay particular attention to the sustainability of learning situations, learning processes and related actors from the perspective of individual people and communities [5,35]. WPL has become a powerful tool for the success of organisations and individuals, and it can be strengthened through a deeper understanding of sustainable perspectives. Therefore, understanding the power of sustainable learning perspectives and situations in organisations after a pandemic could be critical for some businesses in which competence plays a major role in creating value and money. The widespread use of previous knowledge, the rapid application of new knowledge and the positive or negative effects of well-being, even the collective perspective, need to be implemented as a main directive in WPL situations, processes and practices. Therefore, there is no shortcut for sustainable WPL in terms of processes, practices and resources, but now there is definitely a deeper understanding from supervisors' perspectives on how the learning situations in police work should be constructed and supported in a more sustainable way.

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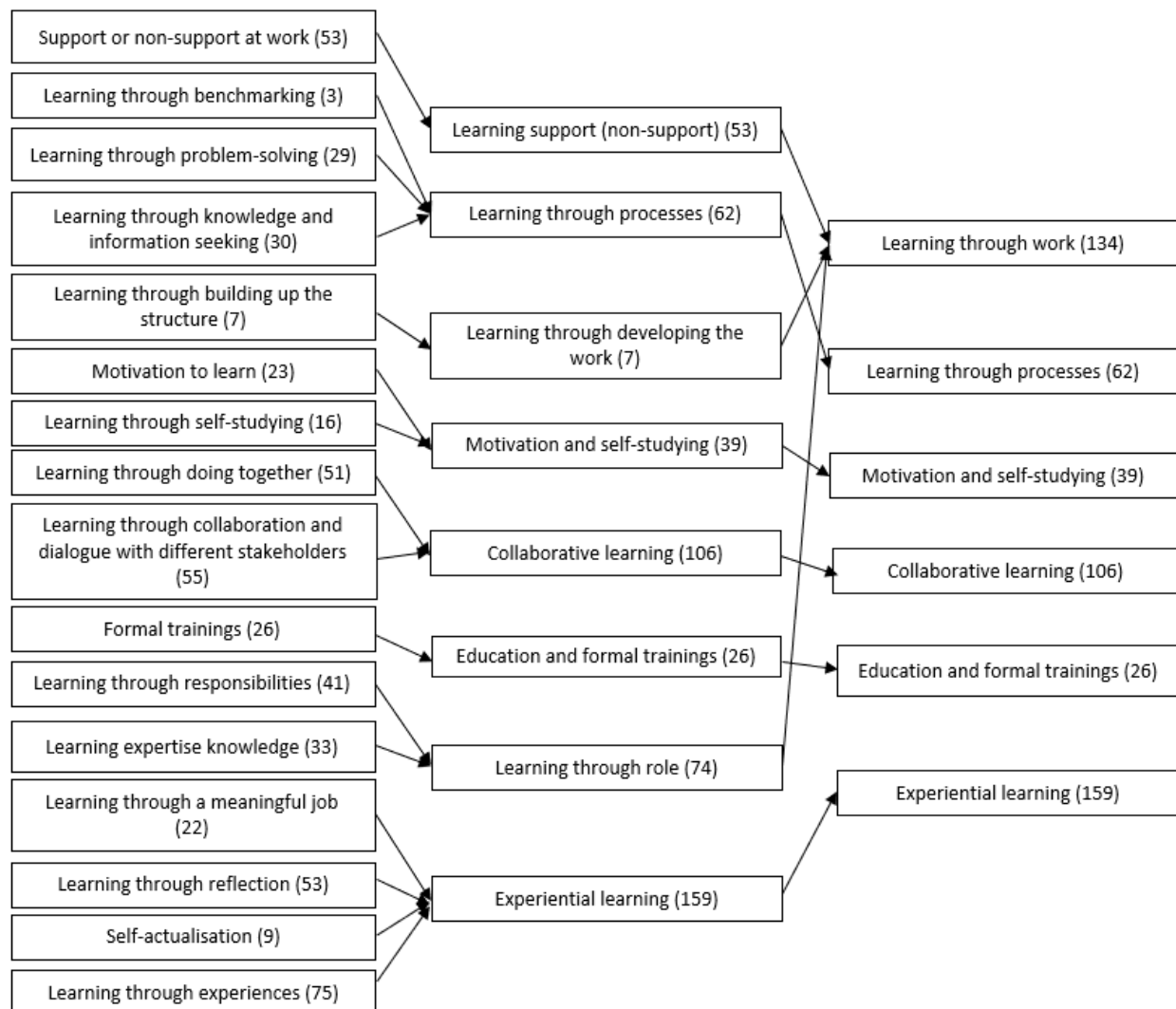
**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The study was conducted in accordance with the Ethics Committee of University of Jyväskylä, Finland.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Appendix A



**Figure A1.** Categorisation of WPL from Finnish police supervisors.

Sustainable learning perspectives / Categories of workplace learning	Widespread use of previous knowledge	Rapid application of new knowledge	Individual well-being +	Individual well-being -	Collective
Experiential learning	<b>Reflection and resilience</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflection of experiences, life, information, work &amp; opinions</li> <li>Resilience</li> </ul>	<b>Courage to renew</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Courage, self-driven, new ideas to learn</li> <li>Stories, solutions, beating difficulties &amp; renewal</li> </ul>	<b>Meaningfulness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Purpose, value, appreciation &amp; possibilities of work</li> <li>Self-actualization</li> <li>Interdependency</li> </ul>	<b>Frustration of restricted possibilities to influence</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Frustration about the possibilities to influence</li> <li>Lack of agility in structures</li> </ul>	<b>Making common purpose</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Common decision making, planning and purpose</li> <li>Team fit</li> </ul>
Collaborative learning	<b>Social knowledge</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding of knowledge capital &amp; people</li> <li>To know customers/ stakeholders</li> </ul>	<b>New Information through network and collaboration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Discussion, dialogue, trust-building &amp; ideas</li> <li>Agility in learning</li> </ul>	<b>People and work as a resource</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good colleagues, different kind of people &amp; dialogue as a resource</li> <li>Mission to do good work</li> </ul>	<b>Uncertainty in role to act</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Uncertainties in role to act</li> </ul>	<b>Shared knowledge</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structured, developed, shared, executed together</li> <li>Common culture &amp; way of working</li> <li>Shared understanding</li> </ul>
Learning through work	<b>Strong expertise foundation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge from previous roles and responsibilities</li> <li>Learn from mistakes</li> <li>Leading based on own example</li> </ul>	<b>Ability to build up new information</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Find solutions</li> <li>New challenges, tasks and work duties</li> <li>Ability to interpret</li> </ul>	<b>Support and appreciation of expertise</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Line manager and work community support</li> <li>Balance in work issues</li> <li>Appreciation of expertise</li> </ul>	<b>No support, uncertainty of roles</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Line manager not interested in</li> <li>Workload &amp; pressure</li> <li>Uncertainties of roles</li> </ul>	<b>Shared support in working together</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collegial sparring &amp; discussions</li> <li>Peer support in group</li> <li>Experts working together</li> </ul>

Sustainable learning perspectives / Categories of workplace learning	Widespread use of previous knowledge	Rapid application of new knowledge	Individual well-being +	Individual well-being -	Collective
Learning through processes	<b>Complex problem-solving abilities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Problem-solving based on intuition and facts</li> <li>Cultural knowledge</li> </ul>	<b>Constant information seeking</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active, self-driven &amp; continuous new information seeking</li> <li>Excitement to find &amp; learn new information</li> <li>Benchmark &amp; follow-up</li> </ul>	<b>Successful problem solving</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Successful problem solving</li> </ul>	<b>Unsolved problems</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Unsolved problems</li> </ul>	<b>Shared resilience</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group resilience</li> </ul>
Motivation and self-studying	<b>Motivation in developing high expertise</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High interest in function expertise</li> </ul>	<b>Self-driven learning of new information</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning in different ways</li> <li>Finding innovative ways &amp; solutions</li> </ul>	<b>Good personal resources and success stories</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drive to do things right &amp; success stories</li> <li>Interesting work context &amp; job content</li> </ul>	<b>Lack of personal resources and doubt</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Public doubt for the function</li> <li>Lack of resources for self-study materials</li> </ul>	<b>Shared understanding</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People with same kind of motivation and profile</li> </ul>
Education and formal trainings	<b>Basic knowledge and skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal competence</li> </ul>	<b>Opportunity to improve knowledge and skills</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Formal, professional trainings</li> <li>Formal competence</li> <li>New possibilities</li> </ul>		<b>Frustration in unsuccessful learning situations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Web-based trainings</li> </ul>	

**Figure A2.** Categorisation of the conceptions of sustainable learning perspectives in WPL from Finnish police supervisors.

**Table A1.** Authentic examples of WPL from six main learning categories.

Six Main Categories of WPL	Authentic Examples of WPL
Experiential learning	... it has been a kind of excellent work field that really has been needed; we have always succeeded in getting it. We have received attention and feedback that have partly impacted the commitment of employees, their motivation and how the work has been done. But, at the same time, there has, of course, been a lot of expectations, so what should we really be able to achieve [in this unit]?
Collaborative learning	... so, collaboration with different stakeholders is a truly significant way of working [for us].

Table A1. Cont.

Six Main Categories of WPL	Authentic Examples of WPL
Learning through work	It is a big part of this work that you will grow and understand how important the work that you are really doing is . . .
Learning through processes	. . . but many times, we need to think about and discuss with a little bit bigger team how we should really take care of some issues, and what would be those good starting points. Should we be in contact directly, or should we search some kind of foreknowledge and . . . ? We just need to discuss these things through so many perspectives [in this work].
Motivation and self-studying	So, I feel that this work is, from its subject and content point of view, what really interests me as a police officer most. And then, you could say that this is a pretty good situation in which you can do what you are really interested in . . . So, this really kind of motivates me.
Education and formal trainings	So, there has not been any kind of training package for us, just for example, that people could, through their formal education, be qualified police officers in preventive action. We have not had full-time preventive action police officers, similar roles, groups or units in the other parts of this state so far . . .

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