



MASTER THESIS

EXPERIENCING AND MANAGING NESTED TENSIONS

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DOCUMENT NUMBER
CORPORATE COMMUNICATION – S1487973

17-09-2019

UNIVERSITY OF TWENTE.

Abstract

Background: In organizations people are faced with difficult choices which creates tensions. Tension may arise as a dispute between two or more people or be more intrinsic in nature. Tensions are often latent and do not cause problems. However, added stress may cause latent tensions to become salient, in which case action is required. A distinction can be made between two type of tensions: nested and singular. Singular tensions can be considered to exist on themselves. In contrast nested tensions are interconnected and may affect each other. While singular tensions have been widely studied little is still known about nested tensions. **Objective:** The purpose of this study is to explain how tensions become nested and it aims to explain how this affects the way tensions are experienced and individually managed. **Method:** This is a case study at a Dutch government organization. Data was gathered over the course of four months through interviews and observations. The researcher also attended two dilemma sessions and a framing workshop, both organized by the organization. In this study an open-minded approach was employed. This means that no hypotheses were posed up-front and everything was considered possible data. The data was analysed iteratively by going back and forth between data and literature. **Findings:** Results show how three nested tensions are first experienced through a vicious cycle, where one starts with trying to solve a singular tension and ends up giving up solving anything altogether. Then people go through a virtuous cycle, where they accept the nested tensions and solve it through emotional equanimity, cognitive complexity and differentiation techniques. Three organizational dynamics are identified: a gap to higher management, no room for error, and discouraging change. Tensions are not only nested with one another, but also with organizational dynamics. As a result, organizational dynamics impede rather than foster people's ability to manage nested tension. **Conclusion:** Experiencing nested tensions is different from singular tensions. Singular tension are experienced through a vicious or a virtuous cycle. Instead, nested tension are experienced as a process in which both cycles are used in conjunction. Due to organizational dynamics adding to the nested characteristics of tensions it can be difficult and dangerous to manage nested tensions individually. Attempting to do so may cause stress to the individual and harm to the organization. Instead a holistic approach to nested tensions should be used in which the whole organization is included to avoid further anxiety and problems.

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1. Introduction

Conflicting demands are unavoidable in organizations (Keegan, Brandl & Aust, 2019). When people feel the need to satisfy two different needs it creates tension (Gaim, Wahlin, Cunha & Clegg, 2018). These conflicting needs can happen in different areas (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Examples are having to use new technology, a disagreement with a colleague, or creating a good work-life balance. In the 60s scholars established contingency theory as a response to tensions. Corresponding studies focused on how to fix tension in the most effective and efficient way (Gaim, Wahlin, Cunha & Clegg, 2018). In the past 20 years researchers have been looking at tensions in a different way, adopting the view that contesting demands do not necessarily exclude one another, but rather can coexist simultaneously (Smith & Lewis, 2011). The complexity of tensions often leads to no palpable protocols or rules to discuss and attend these tensions, both in literature and in practice (Gaim et al., 2018). This in turn can lead to paralyses of projects where no decisions are made (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008). While solving strategies have been widely studied, there is still a limited understanding of how individuals experience tensions in an organization (Gaim, 2018) and even less about how tensions exist next to each other (Keegan, Brandl & Aust, 2019). Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) discuss this idea of multiple tensions coexisting in nested tensions. However, no further research has been done on the matter. This paper aims to explain how one latent tension creates several nested tensions and explain what this means for the way individuals experience and manage them, in the context of a government organization. To do so this study poses the research question: *“How do tensions become nested and how are they individually experienced and managed”*.

This study is inspired by Gaim's (2018) study on how tensions are managed in creative settings but differs on three important points. First of all, Gaim (2018) studies each tension as a separate subject. Instead this study will consider three nested tensions derived from one underlying tension. Second, this study has been conducted in the context of government organization and focuses on the political aspects that such organizations have to handle. Considering the context is vital in conducting a case study about studying tensions (Farjoun, 2010). Not all contexts lend themselves to empirical study because environments inherently possess different amounts of competing demands. A government organization is well suited to use in a case study because Te Molder (1999) showed governments often deal with many tensions. The content and purpose of government messages are flexible and open to discussion, creating possible strain. While it was not her main focus, she identified several factors such as politics, balancing audiences and competing feelings that are different from what Gaim (2018) found in a creative and inventive context. Third, unlike Gaim (2018) the researcher in this study gathered data from group sessions, along with interviews and observations. The group sessions provided a more thorough idea about actual behaviour of the participants when facing tension. Due to the nature of the study and the organization the details of the participants and organization will not be disclosed. It is important to know it concerns a Dutch government organization that executes legislation. Data was gathered at the communication department which carries out varied tasks such as internal communication, external communication, reputation and campaigns.

This study has both theoretical and practical relevance. It will contribute to existing literature on tensions by focusing on the individual and coexisting tensions. Furthermore, the study is conducted in the unique context of government organizations, which has not been seen before in the field of tension studies. Practically, this study helps organizations gain a better understanding of current or future

tensions they may encounter. While this study does not give ready solutions for specific tensions, it aids in explaining how tensions behave and how this may affect their personnel.

This paper starts with a brief overview of theory concerning tensions. This theory section first explains how normal tensions work and in what way they are managed. Then nested tensions and in which way they are similar or differ from singular tensions are discussed. Finally, it is explored what effect the context of government organizations has that needs to be considered. The third chapter further expands on the research design. Chapter four displays the data which will be discussed in the following chapter five. This paper will close with practical implications, limitations and a conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework

Tensions arise through the act of organizing (Sundaramurthy & Lewis). Clegg, Cuhna and Cuhna (2002) consider the modern organizing climate to be increasingly central and dynamic which magnifies the perception of possible tensions. The presence of tensions in organizational settings are considered natural and inherent phenomena and there will never be corporate environment completely without tensions (Keegan, Brandl & Aust, 2019). These tensions slumber in the background as latent tensions and only become salient through additional stress. Examples of triggers that render latent tension salient are diffuse of power, plurality, change and scarcity (Keegan, Brandl & Aust, 2019; Fairhurst et al., 2016). What constitutes specific salient tensions and triggers should always follow from the way people in a specific context experience them (Keegan, Brandl and Aust, 2019). These triggers in turn can lead to unpredictable processes, conflicting objectives (Smith & Lewis, 2011), contradictions in perception, provoking confusion and anxiety (Luscher & Lewis, 2008). According to Smith and Lewis (2011) additional environmental factors progressively converge with each other creating a definitive strain on ability to handle stress and rational decision making. In an attempt to manage such a degradation, people attempt to simplify processes, often leading to bad decision making. A distinction can be made between experiencing and managing tensions. Experiencing tensions happens when people are first faced with the tensions. This often happens unconsciously and includes people's thoughts, initial immediate responses and emotions. In contrast, managing tensions means that people consciously consider the tension and actively try to solve it (Luscher & Lewis, 2008). Lüscher and Lewis (2008) consider studies regarding sense making in an organizational setting a rarity in itself. In contrast different solving strategies have been widely studied (Gaim, Wahlin, Cunha & Clegg, 2018).

2.1 Managing tensions

Latent tensions often slumber and do not always require action. It is when a latent tension becomes salient and is actually experienced that tensions prompt people to respond. In general it can be said a response can either be proactive or defensive (Keegan, Brandl & Aust, 2019). Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) argue the typical initial response tends to be defensive. People try to defend their own perceptions and tensions endangers them (Lewis, 2000). This provides short term relief of anxiety and stress but often has unforeseen consequences that escalate underlying tensions (Lewis, 2000). Smith and Lewis (2008) distinguish two cycles through which salient tensions are managed: virtuous and vicious cycles.

A virtuous cycle is depicted as a positive upward spiral towards positively managing tension. At the root of the cycle is an awareness and acceptance of tension. Through understanding that tensions do not always require an either/or decision, one can instead consider other possibilities such as both/and decisions. They focus on long term success and consider choices as temporary. In virtuous cycles both individual and organizational factors are considered. At the individual level one needs to adopt cognitive complexity and emotional equanimity. Cognitive complexity means that the individual needs to be able to understand and accept that tensions are often interrelated. By identifying possible differences as well as where they can meet it becomes easier to accept the tensions. Emotional equanimity refers to a calm state of mind without anxiety or fear. This helps with handling the heightened emotions that tension may evoke. At the organizational level dynamic capabilities plays a part. This refers to the way organizational processes allow people to find ways to manage changes. These together allow people to

form responses to tensions like continually shifting between which one to attend or by attempting synergy to be able to attend to both at the same time.

In contrast there are vicious cycles, which is a negative response to tension. In vicious cycles people adopt defensive strategies to maintain consistency. This is expressed through denial, ignorance or humour. Denial is a strategy that rejects the tension. Lewis (2000) also considers denial to be perceiving discrepancies but not acting on them. When someone uses the strategy ignorance they purposely consider only one side or aspect of the dilemma (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith and Lewis (2019) explain humour is used to express frustration. It is used to make the tension appear less threatening. Negative emotions like distrust overshadow positive ones. Similar to virtuous cycles dynamic capabilities can have an effect in vicious cycles as well, only in a more negative way (Fairhurst et al. 2016). Here former events and practices keep current ones in place to accomplish consistency, resulting in too much reliance on control, heightened engagement and groupthink. These practices are sustained through interactions (Keegan, Brandl & Aust, 2019; Fairhurst et al. 2016). In contrast with virtuous responses that are formed in a vicious cycle are characterized by choosing one or the other. It is important to note that similar factors could lead towards a virtuous or a vicious cycle. Because people tend to base their response on their actions in other situations, previous actions might sustain a virtuous or a vicious cycle depending on the situation (Gaim, 2018). A summary of the different aspects of virtuous and vicious cycles can be seen in table 1.

Table 1. *Comparing virtuous and vicious cycles*

Virtuous Cycle	Vicious Cycle
Positive response	Negative response
Acceptance of tension	Desire to maintain old protocols
Cognitive complexity and Emotional equanimity	Defensive strategies
Organization allows changes	Overreliance on control
Leads to shifting between demands	Leads to choosing one or the other
Sustained through previous behaviour	Sustained through previous behaviour

2.2 Managing nested tensions

Research often focuses on tensions independently (Lewis, 2001; Raza-Ullah, Bengtsson & Kock, 2014). While this has aided in gaining a better understanding of what types of tensions exist, there is still little knowledge about how they exist next to each other (Keegan, Brandl & Aust, 2019). Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) suggest sometimes demands can overarch resulting in what they call “nested tensions”. This means that one type of latent tension might cause several dilemmas to become salient. It may be difficult to separate these dilemmas from one another causing additional stress and anxiety. These are dangerous tensions as they have a high risk of inducing a negative response (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009).

There is not a lot known about how managing nested tensions differ from singular tensions, simply because little research has been done regarding nested tensions in general. However, Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) suggest three aspects of managing nested tensions are important. First, because salient nested tensions can exist across the organization, attempts to manage them should also use a multilevel approach. Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) show how one tension is experienced at the firm level, within projects and individually. Attempting to solve each tension separately could lead to one tension

escalating in an effort to solve another one. Rather a holistic approach that considers all aspects is necessary to build a virtuous cycle. This asks from the organization that people from all levels are trusted to take responsibility to do their part in managing the tension (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). Second, while integration is considered the main goal to manage singular tensions properly, using it in congruence with differentiation could be necessary in handling nested tensions. Integration is a tool that should be used to recognize in what way the experienced salient tensions are interdependent (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010). Similarly to singular tensions, it helps people to adopt cognitive complexity (Smith & Lewis, 2011). However, in nested tensions recognizing all connected factettes of tension can cause uncertainty. Differentiation works to constrain and guide actions to reduce anxiety that integration could cause by allowing people to compartmentalize all aspects of the tension (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010). This corresponds with the need for emotional equanimity (Smith & Lewis, 2010). Together integration and differentiation allow actors to handle opposing needs (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). Finally, Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) explain the urgency to observe, comprehend and use new knowledge in an organization. Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) consider this to be important in both singular and nested tensions. However, the negative consequences can be more profound in nested tensions. Examples Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) give are developing innovative projects or investigating new technologies. Without actively exploring and adopting new insights an organization risks getting stuck in current practices. Table 2 provides an overview of the discussed differences between singular and nested tensions.

Table 2. *Comparing singular tensions and nested tensions*

Singular Tensions	Nested Tensions
Emerge from different latent tensions	Emerge from one latent tension
Experienced on one organizational level	Experienced across organizational levels
Managed through integration	Managed through integration and differentiation
Need for new knowledge	Need for new knowledge

2.3 Organizational dynamics

Tensions are sustained through organizational dynamics which are often rooted in culture (Gaim, 2018). The dynamics Gaim (2018) found in his study were the freedom to err, purposely bringing different competencies together and introducing a third perspective. When considering organizational dynamics, the context is leading (Farjoun, 2010; Keegan, Brandl and Aust, 2019) and therefore the context of government organizations should be considered for this study. Governmental organizations differ from the private sector in terms of culture and workflow. Public employees tend to feel a strong sense of duty, passion and obligation in their work (Breaugh, Ritz & Alfes, 2018). Public employees more often than people working in the private sector choose to do so because of intrinsic motivation (Breaugh, Ritz & Alfes, 2018; Bakker, 2015). This leads to a strong organizational commitment and work performance (Bakker, 2015). This can create a strong conviction of current work practices, leading to a preference of avoiding change. They emphasize the legitimacy and appropriateness of both old and new practices. Therefore new policies may be met with resistance (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). Furthermore, strong conviction might foster anxiety and negative thoughts. This could mean that there is a smaller freedom to err which would differ from Gaim's (2018) findings. Even though studies show public employees as highly engaged, the communication departments are often seen as a passive intermediaries between the public and the government (Te Molder, 2018). However, Te Molder (2018) argues they are active thinkers that have to operate in a challenging environment in which they continually have to balance

competing demands within fields of tension. While Te Molder (2018) did not focus on different tension areas, her research does suggest they include politics, different target groups and public welfare.

3. Method

3.1 Data source

In this case study the researcher chose to study the communication department as a whole rather than focus on one project. This had the benefit to be able to analyse dilemmas amid other tensions (Fairhurst et al., 2016). Tellis (1997) considers a case study to be a good method to study a part of an organization. It allows the researcher to gain a holistic view of events and situations (Tellis, 1997). The collected material for this case study consists of dilemma sessions, a framing workshop, interviews and observations made by the researcher. Data from varied sourced allow for data triangulation to ensure credibility in case studies (Smith, 2018). In a similar method to Gaim (2018) data was collected in two waves. The first wave comprised of interviews, a dilemma session and a framing workshop. This was used to gain a first impression of what salient tensions and latent tensions exist in the organization. The second wave consisted of a second dilemma session and in-depth interviews. Data was collected over the course of four months. The structure of these different data collection moments is shown below in figure 1. Hypotheses were not composed up front, but an open-minded grounded approach was chosen similar to Gaim (2018) where literature was used to make sense of the data. Simon (2016) explains one can never be a complete master of all literature involved when conducting a case study. Instead it is better to not limit yourself beforehand by thinking you have a thorough understanding of the situation (Simon, 2016). That way everything can be treated as possible data.

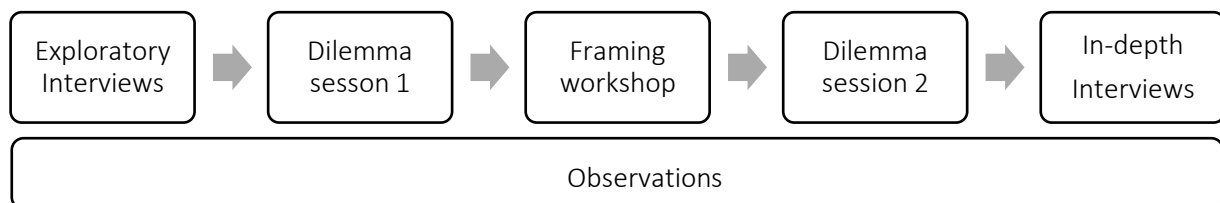


Figure 1. Structure of data collection

3.1.1 Dilemma sessions

The organization arranged a dilemma session in which two subjects would be discussed. This was done on their own volition and was already planned before the start of this study. The researcher was invited to join and observe what transpired during the session. By not actively participating the researcher could stay detached and objective (Junghagen, 2018). The session was scheduled to last about three hours and was led by an external member experienced in leading dilemma sessions. There were nineteen participants. All employees of the communication department could sign up if they were interested. There was also one internal member present that observed and recorded the session. The first dilemma session was used to identify recurring themes and latent tensions. It also showed individual's initial behaviour when confronted with tension. This was used to analyse how people experience tensions. During the session it became clear the analysis of the first subject would take longer than planned and it was decided that only one subject could be suitably discussed during the session. It was then decided to plan a second session to discuss the second subject. The second session took place several weeks later and was led by an internal member of the communication department that also observed the first dilemma session. The second dilemma session was approximately three hours long and was comprised

of a smaller group of nine participants. This session was used to further narrow down what salient tensions the participants experienced and what managing a dilemma does to their behaviour.

3.1.2 Framing workshop

In between the weeks of the first and the second dilemma session the organization planned a framing workshop in which someone was invited to speak about the concept of framing and how it could be used by the communication department. Whereas the dilemma sessions focused on experiencing tensions, the framing workshop showed what happened in practice when people actively tried to solve difficult situations. This workshop was secluded to one cluster of the communication department, accommodated fifteen people and lasted three hours. During the first half of the session the person leading the session was presenting theory, but the participants were not passive and continuously asked question and engaged in debates. In the second half the participants were asked to use the presented theory in practice in smaller groups. The researcher joined one group to observe their discussion about the subject. Again, similar to the dilemma sessions the researcher took an observer as participant role (Junghagen, 2018).

3.1.3 Interviews

Conducting the interviews was done in two stages. First the researcher conducted three interviews to gain a better understanding of the culture and structure of the organization. The participants of these interviews worked in different parts of the communication department and provided a first idea about possible tension areas that exist in the organization. The second stage was done after the dilemma sessions and the framing workshop. Seven more interviews were conducted which were used to identify specific underlying dilemmas and how these are individually managed. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted about thirty to forty minutes each. Semi-structured interviews are often used in qualitative studies because it allows for an interactive interview where the researcher can still address important focus points (Voss, Rushforth & Powell, 2018).

3.1.4 Observations

For four months the researcher walked around the workspace, spoke to members and joined meetings. Notes were taken when possible, but the content of meetings was often classified and confidential. Observations are often used in combination with other research methods because while it allows to view actual behaviour it is time consuming and there is a high change a researcher might miss something (Tellis, 1997).

3.2 Data collection

3.2.1 Participants

Due to the structure and nature of the organization the researcher made the decision to not focus on one single project but to study the communication department as a whole. The participants of the dilemma sessions were selected by the organization. In practice this meant that in the dilemma session people from different clusters were present allowing for a broad perspective on the discussed salient tensions. For the interviews people who attended both dilemma sessions were emailed and invited for a separate interview about the topic dilemmas.

3.2.2 Procedure

People at the communication department were made aware of the presence of a researcher. The researcher was personally introduced to the people the researcher was most likely to encounter during

the course of this study. Furthermore, the researcher joined a meeting of the board in which she explained the purpose and course of this study.

The beginning of the dilemma sessions and interviews the researcher was formally introduced and the purpose of this study was explained in case a participant was not yet aware of the study being conducted. The participants were asked permission to record the sessions before starting. The dilemma sessions were both recorded by the organization. Both the audio and a transcription were provided to the researcher to analyse. The interviews were recorded and partly transcribed by the researcher with the exception of one interview during which notes were taken. Observations were not recorded but written down whenever the secluded content allowed it.

3.3 Analysis

The data was analysed iteratively where the researcher went back and forth between data and literature similar to Gaim (2018). The first wave of data, comprised of the first interviews, first dilemma session and framing workshop were analysed by identifying recurring themes and recurring underlying tensions. This was done by reading through the transcripts and marking themes, groups of words, or subjects that stood out because they were encountered repeatedly in the data. When all the transcripts were analysed, the process was started again from the top. This was needed because as the analysis proceeded more themes could be identified. Going through the data a second time ensured the first transcripts could be analysed as thoroughly as the last transcripts. This resulted in a first idea of what the latent political tension was and what salient dilemmas it caused. The first analysis also indicated that the tensions in this study were in fact nested and not singular. The second wave of data, the second dilemma session and in-depth interviews, aimed to further expand on these and to gain a better understanding on the specific encountered dilemmas and how they are managed. The same analysis process was applied. These findings were compared to the findings of Gaim (2018) to examine the difference between contexts and types of tension. This solidified the idea that the tensions were nested and not singular, as in Gaim's (2018) study. Further literature on tensions was then used to understand what that meant for the process of experiencing and managing tensions. Finally, the results were discussed with an inside member of the organization by comparing interpretations (Arango & Miller, 1984).

4. Results

This section will first focus on a latent political tension and show how three salient tensions emerge from it. Second it is discussed how the salient tensions are experienced through two cycles. Thirdly practical individual responses to salient tensions in daily work processes are shown. Finally, it is explained how organizational dynamics contribute to sustaining the three identified salient tensions.

4.1 Political tension

The studied organization is considered an administrative organization. That is to say, they execute and implement the law. However, they do have to explain their actions on how they choose to do so to parliament. This dynamic is where tension occurs. While this tension is explicitly felt, it is difficult for actors to explain the dilemmas that stem from the tension. While attempting to explain one thing, they are often touching on something else as well, getting confused along the way. As a way to explain they then use the word hassle. However, hassle refers to several dilemmas on different levels. The word hassle illustrates the difficulty of distinguishing between all salient dilemmas. To make it even more difficult, one situation can lead back to more than one dilemma. This study identified three main salient dilemmas that emerge from the underlying latent political tension: organizational versus political needs, short term versus long term and risk versus opportunities. Each dilemma is explained and a short overview is provided in a table concluding the dilemma.

4.1.1 *Organizational needs versus political needs*

The first dilemma are the different needs that demand attention. One important need is the organization itself. This means the organization should function correctly and accomplish what it is meant to do. In this case this is executing and implementing the law, as well as monitoring compliance. However, because the organization is part of a ministry its actions reflect on its boss, the state secretary. The state secretary is responsible for more than just this one organization and has a political agenda, to raise his own profile, and that of his political party. Therefore, the communication department is confronted with the choice to protect the state secretary from possible harm, or to do what is best for the organization. These two needs do not always need to contend. If the organization is not able to do its job, the state secretary is held responsible which hurts his reputation. In turn, the more positive an image the state secretary has in parliament, the more he can do for the benefit of the organization. Sometimes however these two needs do not comply with one another as shown in the citation below. In this case what is best for the organization might not be what the state secretary wants.

“If you work at the ministry then the fate of the state secretary is the most important thing. Whether the organization can actually handle what is asked of them or not, is not that important. When the state secretary takes a certain measure, the organization needs to find a way to make it happen. That is okay, it is his role. But the dominant factor is logically politics and the political parties that provide further detailing.”

As a result, the organization is very careful with its communication. They attempt to pre-determine everything that could cause possible harm to the state secretary and act accordingly. The framing session shows their way of doing this it that all messages should be as politically neutral as possible. Certain content or subjects are avoided altogether. Sometimes this goes so far that they purposely do not disclose the full truth as becomes clear from the following quote.

“The reason for not telling the true story is fear. A director is just a human being who wants to do things right. He is afraid of being told down, for political consequences.”

This tactic is used for both internal and external communication. An interviewee explains there is almost no difference between internal or external communication. Both are treated as dangerous parties. The

organization does not tell its own story, allowing outside parties to create their own narrative. Different departments do not confer with one another, each doing their own thing. Meanwhile the communication department feels like at the moment they are unable to tell that story.

Table 3. *Dilemma organizational needs versus political needs*

	Organization	Politics
Needs	Being able to do their jobs	Creating positive image in parliament
Goals	Good functioning organization	State secretary helping organization
Choices	Protect the interests of the organization	Protect state secretary from possible harm
Communication	1. Open communication 2. Active communication 3. Collaboration between departments	1. Politically neutral messages 2. Restricted content 3. Not creating own narrative 4. Each department working separately

4.1.2 Short term versus long term

At the ministry people are focused and often swayed by issues of the day. In the organization itself though people feel like they should focus on long term goals to survive as an organization. The organization as well as the state secretary have a clear idea about what the future of the organization should be. There is a layer right underneath the shifting political environment that have determine long term policies. Political parties determine which of those are considered to be the most important ones. However, as the quote below illustrates, what happens is that at the first signs of trouble, or “hassle”, political parties impose on current practices to suddenly incorporate new issues that are picked up by the media or parliament.

“When an issue is pickup by political parties, they quickly start deciding what we should be doing. That affects other processes negatively.”

To accommodate these new subjects added by political parties, they terminate non-essential practices or put them on hold. Where this dilemma really manifests is several levels below higher management. At the communication department they feel an imposed need to prove their successes. To survive, new projects need to show that they are working correctly. In order to do so these projects need to show positive results quickly. This means the way projects are organized are to meet those requirements. An interviewee explains how in doing so they lose sight of the long-term focus on why they started the project in the first place or are unable to serve their original purpose or terminate the project all together.

“Every time a new project starts we do not go through with it, because a crisis in parliament forces us to show results.”

Table 4. *Dilemma short term versus long term*

	Short term	Long term
Needs	Carrying out sudden new plans	Carrying out current plans
Goals	Surviving today	Survival of organization
Choices	Allocating resources to meet new demands	Keep focus on in-progress projects
Communication	1. Terminating projects 2. Put projects on hold 3. Show quick successes	1. Show results of running projects 2. Avoid hassle

4.1.3. *Risk versus opportunities*

Every decision comes with possible negative and possible positive outcomes. While both sides are always considered, it is the risks they focus on the most. In several attended meetings it became clear this organization tends to problematise everything. They approach decisions from all possible sides considering every perspective they can think of. Often, they ask colleagues to consider angles they have not thought of yet. In practice this means they conclude possible risks almost always outweigh opportunities. As a result, they either keep on discussing things or decide not to take any kind of action at all. While all type of risks are discussed, what they are most concerned about is negative backlash in media or parliament. One of the interviewees explains this in the following quote.

“It is simple. If it is in the paper parliament can ask questions. And the other way around. They keep each other in place.”

Attention, either in parliament or in media, could lead to “hassle”. This stands in the way of people being able to do their jobs, because they are busy with containing the hassle rather than current important tasks. What remains is a culture of fear where responses tend to be reactive rather than proactive. This is noticed in three ways, not responding to negative attention, positive attention, or previous negative attention. First, the communication department believes responding to negative attention causes an even bigger focus on the subject. They feel that not responding means eventually the media and parliament will move on to another topic. Second, they shy away from positive attention. Celebrating a win now, could mean that a future negative mistake is highlighted. Therefore, they make the decision to not talk about the success at all. In interviews they consider this a strategy of being reactive rather than proactive. Third, reacting to previous negative attention proves difficult as becomes clear from an interview with someone at the ministry side of the organization. She explains that not everything can be celebrated as a victory. People could respond that fixing something that went wrong years ago is only further proof of their failing. Following this line of thought she concludes that maybe nothing is good enough to present. As a result, these three ways of reactive responses together create a common course of action in which they completely stay away from issues, even if it is picked up by the media. This is not limited to communication messages in the media. They act in the same manner in internal communication practices. Issues that are subject of public debate are not discussed within the organization, meaning that employees are unable to respond when asked directly. While this seems slightly better at the communication department, several meetings showed that not everybody possesses the same amount of information and it is unclear to people who knows what exactly.

Table 5. *Dilemma opportunities versus risk*

	Opportunities	Risk
Needs	Make their jobs easier	Being able to do their jobs
Goals	Create a better organization	Avoid damage to the organization
Choices	Execute innovative projects and ideas	Do not change and keep current practices in place
Communication	1. Celebrate successes 2. Inform internal and external parties 3. Share information	1. Intensively discussing and debating every decision 2. Not responding to negative or positive attention 3. Limited space for discussion

4.2 Experiencing and responding to tension

The two dilemma sessions show how people actually behave when confronted with a nested tension. The first dilemma session is characterized by negativity resulting in a vicious cycle as depicted in figure 2. The second dilemma session was more positive and showed signs of a virtuous cycle as shown in figure 3. First both cycles are separately described, then practical individual responses to the dilemmas are discussed.

4.2.1 Vicious cycle

The first session was a voluntary event. All people from the communication department that were interested in the subject of dilemmas could sign themselves up. There was a positive atmosphere in the room. People looked energized and motivated to begin. This turned quickly when the session started. While it was a subject everybody was familiar with and they received a document illustrating the case beforehand, it became clear the problem was more complicated than they thought. While they started out expecting one singular dilemma, the discussion started with identifying more tension areas. This is shown at the top of the downward spiral in figure 2. Several tension areas were noted such as the need to prove successes or the fear to admit failure, but they did not succeed in putting into words what that meant in terms of specific dilemmas. This was shown by people not being able to finish their sentences, the discussion leader asking follow up questions that could not be answered and someone wondering out loud how she could put everything into words. They strayed from the subject, because the tension encompassed more than just the offered case. More and more tension areas piled up integrating every perspective and aspect they could think of. This was helped by the big size of the group, which meant someone else could always offer yet another angle. This was also noticed by the participants of the session. One said the following in an interview in response to the first dilemma session.

“That is something we are very good in. To throw one problem onto the other one and say things like did you think of this or this is another perspective that we did not take into account yet.”

They ended up with one big nested dilemma of which they could no oversee all its factettes. In figure 2 this is depicted in the third step. The earlier acceptance turned to frustration and hopelessness. That in turn led to three defensive strategies being used, which corresponds with the fourth step in figure 2. First, humour was used several times throughout the session. It functioned as a way to illustrate their inability to make any kind of headway with the case. An attempt at humour often immediately preceded or followed frustration. This included jabs at the organization, their jobs and the session itself. Second, ignorance was used to neglect one side of the dilemma. In doing so people often dismissed points made by someone else. Finally, a strategy in which the whole tension is denied could be found once in this session. The person employing this strategy admitted near the end of the session in doing so. Table 6 shows each strategy with accompanying citations.

Table 6. *Defensive strategies*

	Example 1	Example 2
Humour	"This is no longer a dilemma but a drama"	"I am walking out of that door completely depressed."
Ignorance	"What I am feeling right now is why is this not working? How is that possible? The story sounds so logical to me."	"Nice theory but that is something we have been doing for years now and there is still no proof."
Repression	"Maybe I consciously knew this tension was part of it, but I did not give it attention."	-

In addition, personal emotion and experiences seemed to play a role as well. They referred to feeling responsible about having made mistakes in the past and they related to the discussion with personal anecdotes. This caused the discussion to become emotional and it caused a further increase in anxiety.

One thing everyone seemed to agree on was that current behaviour and attitude towards the problem needed to change. They spoke about how this is a problem that exists for over fifteen years and is expected to continue for at least another five. They all agreed continuing on the same route would only bring them further trouble. What these changes should entail created yet another point of debate. They attempted to come up with solutions but struggled. Below is a small part of a discussion taking place in which six people are responding to a possible solution that was provided by another participant.

"I do not think higher management has enough courage to say this to be honest."

"It does suit the new project"

"But that project already was the new story. This is the same thing again. "

"I am walking out of that door completely depressed."

"This is actually the next step already."

"There is so much to do"

As shown above the considered solution is shot down immediately. The rest of the discussion was similar. Everything that was considered, was met with possible risks and a new set of problems that the suggested action would cause. They then proceeded to abandon the offered solution, starting the same process with a new suggestion. In the end they effectively gave up trying to manage the tension, which is the fifth and final step of the downward spiral shown in figure 2.

In the weeks afterwards it became clear expectations played an important role in the change of emotions. Participants explained there was an underlying assumption that the session would give answers and solutions. The realization that they could not even figure out what the actual underlying dilemma was sparked negative behaviour and feelings, such as anxiety. Furthermore, the person whose case this was, afterwards explained he thought the content of the case was common knowledge. He was surprised that people were not aware of what was going on. In turn, some of the others confessed to be shocked about how much of a mess the discussed project was.

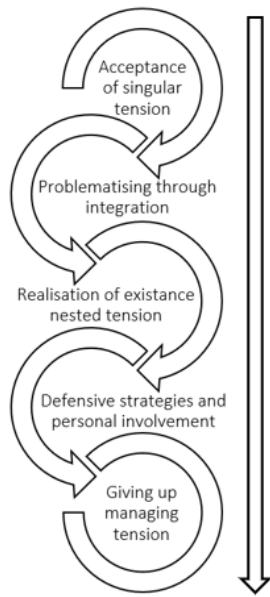


Figure 2. Vicious Cycle

4.2.2 Virtuous cycle

The weeks after the first session were used to thoroughly reflect on the first session. They also spoke about how this would be an even more complex session because emotions played a bigger part in the case they would discuss. This is sign of cognitive complexity. As a response to this they approached it in a different way. To avoid a similar negative session they made several changes. First, they choose to invite a smaller group of people to lessen the amount of different perspectives that people could offer. Second the purpose of the session was explicitly expressed to the group. It was not the idea to find a solution, simply to get more familiar with the logic of dilemmas. With this change they hoped to reduce expectations and reduce anxiety. A third change was made in analysing the case. Instead of everybody freely adding to the discussion, it was more structured and limited. This shows they attempt to build in differentiation. People were allowed to write down what they thought were possible emotions, needs and tensions involved. Then they were allowed to share two with the group. What followed was a calm and organized session. The previous session taught the participants they were dealing with a nested tension which was accepted by all participants indicating further emotional complexity. Figure 3 shows how both acceptance and emotional complexity served as the first two steps of a virtuous cycle at the bottom of the upward spiral. They identified a latent tension that created all kinds of salient dilemmas and problems. They considered the subject of the first dilemma session to be one expression of this underlying tension as well. They then proceeded to largely let go of the original subject of the session as seen in the quote below. Instead they focused on describing and understanding this latent tension.

“I think that if you take away this specific context, the underlying tension would become visible.”

After this quote they were able to consider how to approach this underlying tension, coming up with possible solutions. This time they were able to accept solutions without shooting everything down instantly. They started the discussion about solutions about why the tension prompted a response in the first place. Therefore, even though at the start of the session they explained the purpose of this session was not to look for solutions, they naturally ended up discussing it anyway. Furthermore instead of trying to solve the whole tension at once, they split it up into what every group involved could do to make it a little better, using differentiation instead of integration. This can be seen as the third step as shown in figure 3.

Halfway through the session there was a more negative part, where they started discussing personal experiences.

“I do not think it is good at all. In our own department someone had to leave and was allowed to come back because of this, while we all say we are happy with her work. But that is a personal issue.”

This was quickly shut down as people simply did not respond and instead picked up another part of the discussion. Afterwards people responded positively towards the session. Someone claimed to leave the room considerably happier than last time. Discussions afterwards and the calm behaviour during the session showed that this time people were able to stay emotionally equanimous. Plans were made to organize a third session to focus completely on the underlying tension. This portrays the final two steps in the realization of the virtuous cycle in figure 3.

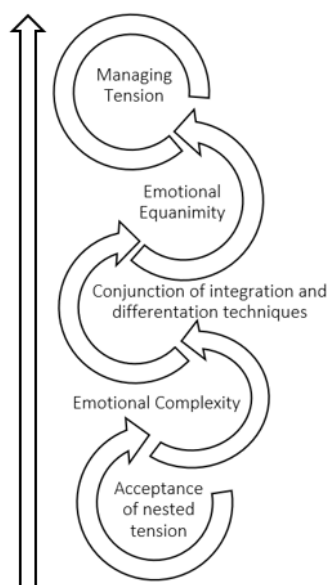


Figure 3. Virtuous Cycle

4.2.3 Individual responses

The section above described the behaviour of people when experiencing tension. Next it is explained what practical steps individuals take in their work in an attempt to manage the experienced tension.

As the citation below shows, a tension does not always evoke a response. Action is taken when a dilemma challenges personal norms and values.

“That is part of our job, sometimes we have to do things. That is not a bad thing, most times I agree with the things we have to do. It only becomes a dilemma when you do not believe in what you have to do.”

This not believing in what you have to do came back in other interviews as well. The interviews identify three things that can impose on one's beliefs. The first is not warranting the quality of work. Matters like limited time can cause people to deliver products that they feel are lacking. Secondly, not receiving the space to work autonomously. Not receiving enough space can cause people to feel like they cannot reach their full potential. Additionally, they experience it as a lack of confidence in their professionalism. Finally, being involved in the process too late. While current newly approved policy considers communication to be at the heart of the organization, the communication department feels like often

they still have to fight to be allowed into processes. The data shows two negative ways people attempt to manage situations like this and three positive responses. The first negative way is to simply stop thinking and perform as told. One interviewee explains as follows.

“You hear people start complaining. It becomes a negative current where people express they tried but got nothing in return again. We no longer consider different courses of action. It is sad but there is a sort of acceptance of not being able to make a difference.”

This lack of action approach as illustrated above is considered to be an approach that is used when the same dilemma is encountered several times and consistently not solved in a positive way.

The second negative approach is to circumvent the dilemma altogether. It is considered part of the organizations culture that people rigorously follow rules, that are extremely strict. When these rules oppose beliefs, suddenly they dismiss those rules completely. In an interview it is explained this is not considered to be limited to the communication department, but it is a more widely spread feeling that is part of the organizations culture. A citation of that interview is shown below.

“We tend to follow rules for six hundred percent. It is like we completely stop thinking. We apply the rules too strictly. On the other hand, because we apply those rules so rigidly we decide they do not work at all. Then in no time we think of a work around that does not even adhere to the spirit of the rules in any way, but rather oppose them directly. Thus, then we ignore the rules completely.”

While these two citations show negative responses, there are also a more positive ways they try to work around problems. The first is attempting to openly talk about the dilemma. Explain what happened and how it made you feel. This approach is only used when people feel safe enough to do so. They express a need for trust in organization and most importantly their immediate superior. A second way is to busy yourself with what you can do instead of what goes wrong. An example of this is to ignore the people who are not enthusiastic and only drain energy. Instead they focus on people around key figures so that can influence them in turn. A final example of a positive strategy is delivering products that are not what they want them to be, but that are constructed in such a way that they can keep on building and adding to them so that in the future they still can be. In interviews this was called the “growth model”. People who gave examples of more positive responses tended to keep a distance and not take things personally. The group who was more negative pointed out the repeated nature of their response.

Table 7. *Practical responses to salient tensions*

Positive response	Negative response
1. Openly talk about experienced dilemma	1. Perform as told without thinking
2. Ignore negativity and instead focus on possibilities	2. Circumvent dilemma
3. Grow towards goals instead of reaching them immediately	

4.3 Organizational dynamics

While the previous section explained how individuals attempt to manage salient tensions, this next section shows the three organizational arrangements that are in place that sustain these salient political tensions.

4.3.1 Gap to higher management

The structure of this government organizations is quite difficult. Higher management mainly operates from The Hague. The organization itself has offices all throughout the country, sometimes hours away. In addition, special authorization is needed to gain access to the building. This shows the gap between workspace and higher management is big in a literal sense. However, in modern times they should be able to bridge this gap by the use of technology. They also hit a wall here though. Someone who used to work at the ministry side explains the ministry is like a black box.

"I never thought I would say this, but I think the ministry is like a black box. The distance between the ministry and the implementation is relatively big and we say that we do it together, but the party on the ministry that can effect policy are more focused on their role in political needs."

There exists a distance between the top and workspace of the organization. Employees are given restricted information that is sometimes not entirely truthful. They are unfamiliar with the challenges the organization is dealing with. The one tool they have to explain their own challenges to the higher management is through an internal website where they can comment on articles. This often leads to angry reactions on online threads. The higher management does appear to realise this gap exists. One way they attempt to close it is to have the director visit various workspaces which is then written about by the communication department in a blog. In an interview someone explains the communication department is used to relay policy towards the rest of the organization. They try to express when this is not in line with what the workforce wants, but it is very rare for the higher management to actually listen. What follows is, as shown earlier in the results, that it imposes on their beliefs. This results in people experiencing tension like the interviewee below explains.

"We are often his master's voice. We have to sell policy, so we attempt to tie everything together with core messages. In doing so we ignore underlying tensions. The workforce just has to do as told. That is the obvious thing to do. It is difficult to go to the top to say what they want is not what the organization needs. Most times higher management holds on to their decision because the others need to listen. That is often what happens."

This gap as explained in the quote below is also visible in other aspects of communication work. As an implementation organization they apply the law. Devising implementation is up to higher management and politics. However, the implementation can only be as good as the content of the law. In addition, the policy making department does not sufficiently communicate why a certain law is necessary. This means sometimes decisions are made in the implementation side of things that come across as clumsy. The following citation further explains this problem.

"Sometimes you have to make awkward choices in you communication as an organization. It could be that something is too complex to explain or to explain you need the broader story underneath a law that is no longer known to us."

4.3.2 No room for error

The pressure to do everything right emerges from two sources. Firstly, they put the pressure on themselves. They are dedicated to their work and do not want to make any mistakes. In addition, they are afraid mistakes will lead to hassle which they then have to deal with.

“That is the culture in this organization. People often say things are not right, but we work hard anyway.”

The interviewee explains that even if people feel things should be organized or handled differently, people feel like they have to do it that way because they owe it to the public to make it happen.

Secondly, they feel an external pressure. The organizations political connection means that everything they do is watched closely by political parties and the media. To avoid future hassle they keep their story really thin. Then when they are asked questions, they have to stay within the small margins they created for themselves. This sometimes leads to people covering up their mistakes or backing up earlier made decisions they know to be wrong.

“You make your story short and powerful. Then people react. You are then forced to respond within the small world you created. The underlying reasons are not widely known and you cannot use them to parry negative attention. Then it becomes a human process. Directors feel ashamed. Wrong choices are made and people are too afraid to turn back in time. It is too difficult to do so. In attempting to avoid hassle, they create it.”

This fear of making mistakes, as described in the quote above, is enforced by media coverage and political attention. Even though everything is employed to avoid mistakes, they keep on gaining negative attention. During this study several mistakes of the organization were shown in the media. The next morning it is always mentioned in casual talk. This in turn ensures they work even harder to avoid mistakes.

4.3.3 Discouraging change

In the interviews people showed they had many ideas how to improve their ability to manage the different salient tensions they experience. These include being allowed into the work process earlier, creating meetings with all branches of the organization, more communication about the goals and successes of the organization. Especially people who are new to the organization attempt to change things. Their colleague’s reaction is often a form of dismissal, because they feel nothing is going to change anyway. They refer to earlier attempts that have led to nothing. There appears to be a wall that people hit when they attempt to innovate. They keep on attempting to change things, but they keep on being shot down. Eventually they stop trying altogether. Moreover, the time and energy it would take, is not in relation to the amount of change that it would accomplish. Instead, they choose to focus their time on other endeavours.

“The energy you have to put in to get a connection to colleagues with people at the ministry side of things is disproportional to what you get out of it. If there is no shared interest, it is very difficult. Eventually after attempting three times, you stop bothering. I continue with another dossier. It does not work any longer.”

From the quote above it becomes clear one of the walls they hit is all of the different departments of the organization that work individually and protect their own interests. By attempting to innovate, one also risks potential hassle. Another wall is the limited support they get from co-workers, who have no interest in putting effort into something they know is going to fail.

Table 8. *Sustaining tensions*

	Gap higher management	No room for error	Discouraging change
Organization	Different branches focus on own needs	Does everything to keep politics from getting involved	1. No collaboration because Individual departments want to protect their own needs 2. Past negative practices are reflected on new actions
Politics	Limited sharing of information about foundation of laws	Closely watches work for mistakes	
Communication department	Attempts to act as a bridge between workspace and higher management	Creates short and thin stories, opening the door for new problems	Are afraid to innovate or implement new ideas

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of results

This study aimed to explain how tensions become nested and how they are experienced and consecutively managed. To answer these questions first it is discussed how three latent tensions and organizational dynamics are interconnected and entwined. Secondly, it is explained how nested tensions are experienced through a two-step process that includes both vicious and virtuous cycles. Thirdly it is posed that a nested tension cannot and should not be managed individually. Finally, this study is concluded with practical implications and direction for future research.

5.1.1 *Nested characteristics*

During the course of this case study it became clear that the latent and salient tensions experienced in the organization were not comparable to those described in most literature. Gaim (2018) for instance found three latent tensions that are rendered salient through different triggers, resulting in three salient dilemmas. In this study however, data shows evidence that one political latent tension created three nested salient tensions. It was suggested that this was possible by Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) but it has not been accurately described before (Smith & Lewis, 2018). As will be discussed below the analysis suggests nested tensions go further than simply being dilemmas stemming from the same tension as has been understood in literature so far (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). Instead, this study argues that organizational dynamics are also heavily intertwined with tension causing one confusing mix in which actors have a difficult time navigating.

The analysis identified three salient tensions. While the data presents them as separate, at times it is difficult to distinguish between the three. Short versus long term focus, and risk versus opportunities are both dilemmas that are used to support the dilemma organizational versus political need. To serve the interest of the organization, the communication department understands they need to appease the needs of politics as well. The deliberation to target short term goals help them to build a positive image in parliament. In their eyes avoiding risks ensures they are not setback in this endeavour by gaining negative attention. Additionally, these two tensions affect each other as well. Long term projects come with more possible risks. However, while short term focus can lead to temporary relief and quick successes, they cannot last without collapsing (Seijts & Latham, 2005). Perceiving a pressure in time is often considered as one of the triggers that make latent tensions salient (Lewis, 2000). It limits one's ability to attend several demands and puts more significance on not managing the tension (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith & Lewis, 2018).

All three tensions are also heavily intertwined with organizational arrangements. Change and innovation can prove to be failures, which can impose on the purpose of serving organizational and political needs. Similarly, errors counteract all efforts to create a more positive image. They interact with each other as well. They do not encourage change because there is no room for error. This suggests that when a tension is nested it is not just sustained by organizational dynamics as found by Gaim (2018) but different salient dilemmas can also sustain each other. While the salient tension is then also sustained by organizational dynamics, the tensions in turn appear to preserve organizational culture and dynamics.

To make it even more complicated, tensions also exists across levels. This further diverges from Gaim's (2018) findings, where each tension he identified manifests on a separate level: the organizational level, the firm level, and the individual level. In this study however, not only latent tensions exist across levels. The consequent salient tensions show this as well. Everything combined creates a mangled field of tension in which actors feel there is no way out. Especially because it concerns a government

organization whose main practices cannot simply stop or radically change, because the country depends on them keeping operations running.

5.1.2 Processing nested tensions

In literature it is proposed tensions in organization are experienced through either a vicious or a virtuous cycle (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Going through a virtuous cycle is seen as the best way to manage tension. In this case emotional equanimity and emotional complexity work together to create a positive way of handling tension (Lewis, 2000). A vicious cycle, opposed to a virtuous cycle, is considered a bad course of action in which defensive strategies hinder an effective handling of the experienced tension (Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith and Lewis, 2019). While in previous studies both cycles have only been discussed separately (Gaim, 2018; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Lewis, 2011;) this study shows both can be used at the same time. In fact, when managing nested tensions a two-step approach can be adopted in which both cycles are used.

The first step in managing nested tensions is for people to realize they are dealing with a nested tension and not a singular tension. As this study shows this realization could be accompanied with a vicious cycle. Defensive tactics like humour and ignorance (Smith & Lewis, 2011) are used to express anxiety and an inability to deal with the nested tension using a singular tension approach. Attempts at integration (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009) lead to problematizing. In fact, incorporating different perspectives and factors opens the door to further factors that lead to anxiety such as introducing personal experiences, which is especially dangerous for government employees who are often already passionate and involved (Breaugh, Ritz and Alfes, 2018). By continuing to treat the nested tension as a singular tension by solely using integration techniques the search for solutions becomes chaotic. Instead of discussing people start debating, leading to a further increase in anxiety (Lewis, 2000). When attempting to solve salient dilemmas one possible solution will often have an effect on another salient dilemma. However, when people consider themselves to be managing a singular dilemma and each proposed solution is continuously met with a whole new set of problems, it causes the complete abandonment of each proposed solution. In this study they group was attempting to solve all salient dilemmas at once, trying to come up with one big solution. While Miron-Spektor, Ingram, Keller, Smith and Lewis (2018) consider this broad way of searching for a solution that engages all perspectives to be a positive development that should be sign of a virtuous cycle, this study shows when dealing with nested tensions the opposite could very well be the case. The weeks after the first session allowed people to gain a sense of calmness about the complexity of tensions. Time in combination with reflection on the experienced vicious cycle resulted in their ability to adopt cognitive complexity (Smith & Lewis, 2011) in which they were able to accept the interrelatedness and nested characteristics of the dilemma (Smith & Lewis, 2011; Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). The second step in the process is to accept the nested tension and consider the salient dilemmas again. This time with fresh eyes and the knowledge that one is in fact dealing with a nested tension which asks for a different approach (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). This second step combines both integration and differentiation. One should be on their guard to recognize and deflect potential stressors that can impose on emotional equanimity such as an emotional discussion (Lewis, 2000), personal involvement (Breaugh, Ritz and Alfes, 2018), or too much integration (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). Differentiation is especially useful to finding solutions by splitting it up into smaller actions.

5.1.3 Implementing innovation

Dilemmas do not take place in a void. Instead when reacting to tension people in an organization are either helped or hindered by organizational dynamics (Gaim, 2018). The organizational dynamics are often determined by the type of organization. This becomes clear when Gaim's (2018) results are compared to this study. Gaim (2018) presents organizational dynamics as helpful tools that can aid

people in managing tensions and he suggests that they can be changed. However, as discussed earlier, the three organizational dynamics identified in this study are deeply rooted in the political tension. This means that people feel that organizational dynamics are constrictive rather than supportive. It is not easy to simply change an organizational dynamics, because it affects all other facets of the nested tensions too. A reason for this difference of perspective could be because of the type of organization. Gaim (2018) focused on smaller organizations, each based in one location. In contrast, this government organization has many big offices across the country, that mostly work independently. It is not surprising that a more complicated structure of the organization results in more complicated organizational dynamics. One would assume the context also plays a role. Gaim (2018) focused on creative based organizations, where there is an emphasis on innovation and the creative process. In contrast, several studies show that government employees are more reluctant to change (Bakker, 2015; Fernandez & Rainey, 2006; Bolman & Deal, 1984). These studies argue that due to the strong conviction in current work practices and commitment, they over rely on old routines. However, this study shows the opposite to be true. The communication department tries to innovate by implementing communication more into regular processes but are struggling to succeed because the nested tension along with the nested organizational dynamics keeps everything in place. This stalls people's ability to manage salient tensions (Lewis, 2000). Therefore, it is true that this government organization does not change. However, it is not due to their reluctance to innovate, but an inability to succeed. In literature about tension, innovation is also discussed. Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) underline the urgency of an organization's capacity to explore and exploit new knowledge when managing tensions. They consider the ability to change and respond to new needs vital to long term success. This study however shows that it is exactly the nested nature of a tension that complicates the ability to learn and innovate. Even if the two-step process of experiencing nested tensions as discussed above is completed, people will struggle to implement those new ideas because doing so would upset the whole structure of the organization. Thus, this study proposes it is critical that salient nested tensions cannot always be managed individually but instead must be given attention by the organization as a whole where changes are made on each organizational level. The analysis on individual responses shows that positive attempts at managing tensions are not actually ways of dealing with the tension at all, but rather ways to avoid the tension. Sometimes, by managing tension in a negative way, it can even result in a reinforcement of the tension. This is in agreement with Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) who suggest nested tensions are experienced on multiple levels and focusing on one level can cause damage to the tension on other levels.

5.2 Practical implications

There are three main practical implications that are discussed. First, government organizations can take from this study that the political dimension they have to deal with may encompass more than they initially realise. Both non-government organizations and government organizations are encouraged to carefully consider what kind of tensions exist in their organization and how they are dealt with. At first glance a nested tension can be perceived and managed as a singular tension, which can result in stress, anxiety and vicious cycles. However, these experiences can be used or might even be necessary to gain a proper understanding of the nested tension. Therefore, it is important to start the two-step process and recognize that you could be dealing with a nested tension. In this process one has to beware that a previous negative experience does not act as a deterrent. Instead, it should be seen as a stepping stone. Secondly, when attempting to incorporate changes in an attempt to manage the nested salient tension it is important to realise this is not a simple process. It should be handled deliberately with thought and care where the organization as a whole is considered and attention is given to each organizational level where the nested tension is experienced. Finally, this study helps individuals to recognize and identify negative cues and strategies which can help in creating virtuous cycles and prevent future vicious cycles.

5.3 Limitations and future research

In this study four limitations can be identified. First, this study has been conducted in a specific context. The latent or salient tensions can vary across organizations. It is important to always consider the distinctness of the context one operates in (Keegan, Brandl & Aust, 2019). However, as it is known that nested tensions are not only found in public institutions (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009), it is expected that other organizations may also encounter nested tensions that behave in similar ways to the tensions found in this study. Secondly, due to the structure and size of the organization the researcher was aided by inside members to decide who to select for the in-depth interviews. It was impossible for the researcher to make a proper selection based on the available information. As a result there was one participant whose interview was eventually not used. It is a possibility that other valuable candidates have been missed. While this could have provided a more in-depth exploration of some subjects, it is not expected that any relevant information has been completely missed. The final interviews provided no new information, but mostly served to enrich topics that were already included. Thirdly, like in many case studies, the participants were aware of the presence of the researcher. This could have affected their behaviour. To ensure the collected data was valid, the researcher compared people's behaviour in each session with the other sessions and what was said in the interviews. No discrepancies were found. Furthermore, the results were discussed with an inside member to appraise if they matched their perception of the situation. Fourthly, this case study showed the situation during the four months of data collection. Shortly prior to the start of this study an adjustment was made towards the way the communication department is structured. This could have caused some additional confusion as people were still getting used to the new situation. Indications were given that they felt the organization is very slowly starting to change, though it could take years before actual progress would be made or it could not go through at all. Therefore, a first recommendation is to repeat a similar study in the future to re-evaluate. Secondly, this study focused on one nested tension. During the study there were signs of more tensions in the organization. It could be interesting to go a step further and explore how nested tensions exist next to each other. Thirdly, a slightly different method was used in comparison to Gaim (2018). Instead of only using observations and interviews, this study incorporated two dilemma sessions and a framing workshop. These additional sessions were especially helpful as they showed direct responses to tension. This gave data that was complementary to the interviews. Future studies are encouraged to incorporate similar sessions to gather richer data. Finally, there is still a limited understanding about dilemmas encountered by higher management and the people located in the Hague. This study identified a strong presence and influence of these parties and it would benefit literature to further study what their role is in the process of organizational dynamics and sustaining nested tensions.

5.4. Conclusion

This study showed the way a latent tension can support several salient tensions resulting in nesting. It explains how both vicious and virtuous cycles are used in conjunction when experiencing nested tension. A vicious cycle might sometimes be necessary to understand the complexity and interrelatedness of the tensions. This allows people to gain emotional equanimity and cognitive complexity over time, to foster a virtuous cycle in a later stage of experiencing nested tensions. While tensions are individually accepted, the organization needs to allow for them to be managed as well. However, organizational dynamics could be part of the nested tension resulting in possible problems. Attempts to solve such nested tensions separately or individually are dangerous because this can provoke more problems such as anxiety or reinforcing the tension. Instead an approach is suggested in which different levels of the organization are considered as well as the organization as a whole.

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