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ARTICLE

Weaknesses of wickedness: a critical perspective on wickedness theory

Mirko Noordegraaf[a,@], Scott Douglas[a], Karin Geuijen[a,@] and Martijn Van Der Steen[b,#]

[@]Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Netherlands; [#]Erasmus University Rotterdam / Netherlands School for Public Administration, Netherlands; [a]Utrecht School of Governance, Utrecht University, Netherlands; [b]Erasmus University Rotterdam / Netherlands School for Public Administration, Netherlands

ABSTRACT
It is attractive to frame societal challenges such as climate change, terrorism and migration as 'wicked issues'. Wickedness theory in its various guises has become popular as it connects the uncertain and political nature of issues with hopeful strategies for strengthening networks, trust and learning. In this paper we take a critical approach towards wickedness, advancing three criticisms: (1) the daily experiences of people and their practices are missing from the grand narratives about wickedness, (2) the potential of collaborations and learning to address these problems is romanticized, (3) the implications for managerial and professional perspectives are unclear. We argue that the wickedness literature can be strengthened by further emphasizing situated relations, routines and rituals, adopting the perspective of *situated wickedness*. This would link insight into grand wickedness to insights into daily ambiguity. We illustrate this argument with two specific cases, (counter)terrorism and forced migration/refugees.

KEYWORDS
Wicked issues; wickedness theory; experimentalist governance; networks; acts; professionals

Introduction

It is attractive to analyze and tackle issues like climate change and forced migration (refugees) in terms of 'wicked issues'. Research spanning the decades, from Rittel and Weber (1973) to Turnbull and Hoppe (2018) in this journal, has given rise to multiple conceptualizations of wicked problems. There are important differences between the various scholarly treatments of wickedness, but the common theme is stressing the intangibility of grand societal challenges issues while offering creative avenues for dealing with them. Wickedness theory as a whole so connects an appreciation of the highly uncertain and political nature of societal issues with hopeful strategies for strengthening networks, trust and learning. We here critically examine these key propositions.

Although we understand the need for encompassing understandings of grand issues in theory, we feel that wickedness theory in its current shape and form does not contribute enough to the ability to tackle wicked issues in practice. First, many elaborations of wickedness theory favor overarching, holistic or systemic approach over more street-level observations of governance practices of people and places. The current view makes the

CONTACT Mirko Noordegraaf M.Noordegraaf@uu.nl

problems bigger instead of smaller. Second, there is a playful, positive and optimistic overtone in wickedness theory – with emphases on networks, trust and learning –, which seems unrelated to the roughness of wicked issues experienced by the managers and professionals on the ground. Third, much wickedness theorization remains rather abstract in terms of implications: it clarifies what needs to be done, but not how and by whom. This creates problems for the people who have to take action in the face of wickedness.

In our introduction we explore these criticism in more detail. Before we discuss our three clusters of criticism, we briefly introduce our understanding of wickedness literature. After we have developed our criticisms, we seek a way out and propose the notion of *situated wickedness*, which maintains the advantages of wickedness theory but has more grounded conceptualizations and implications. We use the case of terrorism and forced migration to illustrate our propositions.

The three tenets of wickedness theory

We have ourselves explicitly and gratefully used wickedness terminology to study phenomena such as terrorism (Noordegraaf, Douglas, Bos, & Klem, 2016) and forced migration by refugees (Geuijen, Moore, Cederquist, Ronning, & Van Twist, 2017). We here followed a wider development where many scholars of public administration and governance take an interest in 'wicked issues'. This literature is based upon classic contributions, such as the seminal work by Rittel and Weber (1973), but has been extended and refined in subsequent decades and recent years. Various definitions and conceptualizations of wicked issues/problems have been developed, and they do share-some common traits. According to Weber and Khademian (2008), wicked problems are 'unstructured', 'comprise multiple, overlapping, interconnected subsets of problems that cut across multiple policy domains and levels of government', and are 'relentless'. According to Head and Alford (2015), 'are generally seen as associated with social pluralism (multiple interests and values of stakeholders), institutional complexity (the context of interorganizational cooperation and multilevel governance), and scientific uncertainty (fragmentation and gaps in reliable knowledge).' Turnbull & Hoppe's (2018) important contribution to our understanding of 'wicked issues' is that they criticize the essentialist perspective which focuses the problem itself and instead clarify that the wickedness is in the distance on ideas, interests and institutional complexity between the policy workers dealing with such a problem: 'a policy problem might be termed "wicked" by a policy worker because achieving even incremental progress in its normative and factual questions is difficult, frequently because distances between the relative parties remain large and conflictual' (Turnbull & Hoppe, 2018, p. 10).

The notion of 'wickedness' has several advantages. It enables scholars to revitalize age-old insights into contestation, related to notions such as multiple actors, interests, values, mutual dependencies, networks, and uncertainty (see e.g. Van Bueren, Klijn, & Koppenjan, 2003; Klijn & Koppenjan, 2004; Ansell & Gash, 2008). In addition, scholars are enabled to tie scholarly debates to contemporary societal issues, such as unemployment (Baum & Mitchell, 2010), health care (e.g. Ferlie, Fitzgerald, McGivern, Dopson, & Bennet, 2011), mental health (Hannigan & Coffey, 2011), education (Bore & Wright, 2009), environment, energy and health (Turnpenny, Lorenzoni, & Jones, 2009).

Wickedness theory enables scholars to bring together academic *and* organizational *and* societal concerns.

Next to providing insights in the problem, the various strands of wickedness literature also generate insights potentially helpful in addressing these challenges. Understanding the elements of wickedness offers starting points for governing and managing wickedness, which in turn renews governance and management theories. Weber and Khademian (2008) stress the importance of collaboration. They focus on managers as 'collaborative capacity builders', aimed at 'building long-term collaborative problem-solving capacity' (p. 334). Head and Alford (2015) also link wicked issues to the need for strong governance and management capabilities. including frame reflection and reframing, collaboration, communication, trust, adaptive leadership. They argue that 'tackling key challenges through nonstandard processes of adaptive management and networked governance becomes more important' (2015, 717). Ferlie et al. (2011) discuss governance implications in health care, including cross-organizational ICTs, inter-organizational learning and lateral leadership.

Other scholars, such as Termeer, Dewulf, Breeman, and Stiller (2015) explore experimentalist governance as a response to wickedness: '[a] recursive process of provisional goal-setting and revision based on learning from the comparison of alternative approaches to advancing them in different contexts.' (e.g. Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012) According to Sabel & Zeitlin experimentalist governance is based on the 'reciprocal redefinition of ends and means through an iterated, multi-level cycle of provision goal-setting and revision, thereby giving structure to apparently fluid practices of "network governance".' (cf. Zeitlin 2011, p. 9) Experimentalist governance is mostly executed and researched in the domain of sustainability (a.o. Dryzek, 2016) as well as in urban development (e.g. Bulkeley & Castan Broto, 2012). Important features of experiments are social learning, co-creation with (end)users and other citizens, and combinations of design thinking and systems thinking, often in 'living labs' (Bason, 2010).

Across the decades, we argue that three key tenets of wickedness literature can be distinguished which make up the core of 'wickedness theory'. Specific scholars will have slightly differing views on the exact nature of specific problems (e.g. distinguishing between wicked and super-wicked problems) and favor different mixes of governance responses. But on the whole, the various strands of wickedness theory all emphasize (1) the value disagreements, cognitive uncertainty and institutional complexity between the parties dealing with the issue, (2) the need to formulate playful response to wickedness focusing on networks, trust and learning, and (3) connecting scholarly debates to practical challenges.

Weaknesses of wickedness theory

Our critique is directed at examining and revising these three core tenets. We understand the rise of wickedness theory and we see its relevance. In that sense we argue in favor of *elaborating* the current strands of wickedness theory, moving along on the debates already opened (see for example our own contribution to the debate about wicked versus super-wicked problems, advancing the notion of 'transboundary wickedness' (Noordegraaf, Douglas, Bos, & Klem, 2017). At the same time, we argue that some more fundamental rethinking is also warranted also. These structural weakness require *revising* and *enriching* wickedness theory, in order to develop more grounded understandings of highly complex issues.

This critical approach to wickedness is fundamentally driven by our appreciation of its roots (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wickedness was formulated on the 1960s campus of UC Berkeley as a playful and intentionally abstract answer to the attempt of the government in Washington to slice and dice, structure and rationalize world problems. The fundamental strength of wickedness theory is that is replaces this technocratic approach with a more holistic overview of the divisive mechanisms at play, such as value disagreements, institutional complexity and cognitive uncertainty. From their position on the sidelines, scholars and intellectuals can see how societal challenges are fragmented yet connected, leading them to urge the different parties to cooperate and experiment. However, this abstract view also means wickedness can remain removed from daily practices, people, and places. The view from the government building was replaced with the view from the university campus, still ignoring street-level realities.

Such criticisms have been expressed before. Recently, for example, Boezeman (2015) stresses the fact that wickedness theory put too little emphasis on 'claim making' – on how knowledge claims are made and transformed in localized, day-to-day practices. Boezeman analyzes how Dutch programs and projects framed and reframed knowledge on climate change. In order to analyze 'micro processes', he examined 'how understandings about climate effects are made. This means [the author] will reconstruct the ways in which meaning about climate change is made in different contexts and what elements make this particular understanding possible' (p. 25). Our criticisms of and suggestions for wickedness theory go even further. They are rooted in a closer appreciation of what dealing with wicked issues actually means for people dealing with them.

We champion a daily, situated, people-centered perspective on wickedness, continuing the ideas pursued by Rein and Schön (examining the work of professionals), Glidewell and Hargrove (studying impossible jobs) and other studies of how people attempt to tame wicked problems (Turnbull & Hoppe, 2018). We particularly focus on the rituals doctors, police officers, teachers and other professionals have devised to process seemingly wicked choices. We look beyond the 'romantic' view of institutional cooperation or networking and examine what relations between people are like and what is desirable. We examine the more prosaic work of managers who have to schedule, budget, and plan in the face of seemingly unpredictable issues, identifying some of the rules they have drafted to make it work or highlighting the tools they need to move beyond merely gaining an overview of the problem. This is about taking the debate of wicked problems such as terrorism or forced migration from the halls of universities or the front page of the New York Times to the Monday morning team meeting at the local police station.

Examining the three key tenets of wickedness theory outline above, we argue that: (1) the wickedness literature does indeed highlight to political nature of problems, but has a blind spot for the experiences practices of the people dealing with these problems on a daily basis. (2) The wickedness literature's emphasis on collaboration and learning in the response to wickedness over-romanticizes these notions, ignoring these pitfalls and downsides of these responses. (3) That wickedness literature is indeed relevant in the conceptual debate about today's societal challenges, but remains unclear about the managerial and professional implications of its insights.

1. Ignoring the daily experiences and practices of people amid wickedness?

Firstly, we feel that attention for the microlevel of people in organizations and network practices is often missing in analytical and prescriptive dimensions of wickedness theory. There is little emphasis on how people experience issues and if they see and/or feel these as 'wicked'. Which meanings do they attach to the complexity of issues and how do they experience which kind(s) of complexity? People in organizations can experience highly distinctive forms of complexity, which in itself can be a source for new complexity. They may think they know what is happening or how it works; they may have strong images and ideas of complexity; they might feel confused. In fact, many people work and live in or around specific practices, which are not connected to other practices as far as their experiences and ideas are concerned. Stressing that these connections and interdependencies 'exist' does not mean that these connections 'exist'. Merely stressing the need for building networks and 'trusting each other' (see beneath) will be insufficient from a governance perspective.

Further questions relate to the matter of the different types of people working on or in wicked issues. There are many types of officials as well as non-officials working on complex problems, varying from politicians and policy-makers, via administrators and experts to professionals in public organizations as well as in NGOs, grassroots organizations and enterprises, representing the 'daily' world of economic and social life. When public administration scholars explain that the issues that these people are involved in are 'wicked', they will not automatically *see* or *feel* wickedness. In case of counter terrorism governance, for example, many security experts are active. Although they are able to deal with technical complexities, it is difficult to go beyond their respective disciplines and seek overarching meta-positions. Wickedness theory presupposes that such *meta-positioning* is possible (Head & Alford, 2015). Whether and how this is possible, is an empirical matter.

Finally, it is often unclear how people and practices actually deal with complexity. Obviously, there are many insights in how public executives and managers deal with problems and organizations, but there is less insight in how public officials, experts, professionals, as well as citizens, civil society organizations, and (social) enterprises actually tackle wicked issues. There is a growing body of literature on *coping* (Daviter, 2017; Tummers, Bekkers, Vink, & Musheno, 2015), including professional coping (Noordegraaf et al., 2016). More empirical knowledge and more emphasis on coping behaviors of officials could add a lot to the governance of wicked issues. In case of counterterrorism (see also beneath), for instance, many kinds of experts and professionals are working, at different levels. Safety and terrorism experts work strategically at national levels, together with policy makers and managers of police and safety agencies. Policemen and experts from other agencies, such as financial experts, work together at regional levels, as well as internationally. Police professionals, social workers, school teachers, and the like, work together in municipalities and in and around neighborhoods, in order to signal and tackle radicalization. Parents, coaches in sports clubs, friends, imams in mosques, and so on, become involved in this. The effectiveness and legitimacy of counterterrorism actions depends upon their activities, which will never be integral but *partial*.

2. Too romantic about collaboration and learning?

Secondly, we question the relevance of focusing on building trust and learning. Not in principle, but in the practical working of such concepts under the specific condition of wickedness. The conditions of wicked issues are at odds with 'nice' solutions such as

trust and learning. Wicked issues have lots of ingredients that are not so nice and which provoke strong emotions, anger, secrecy, competition, resistance and distrust. Although it is tempting to stress the importance of networks and trust, the difficulties of building networks and trust will have to be seen as part of wickedness, instead of a way out. Had trust and networks been a viable practical solution, most wicked problems would already have been resolved. The fact that it is difficult and sometimes impossible to build networks and trust is what makes certain issues wicked. In the case of refugees and (counter)terrorism, for example, there are many actors who explicitly *evade* networks and trust, especially terrorists and human traffickers. This spills over to geopolitical relations, when countries are not willing to collaborate if they feel their geopolitical interests are harmed. This, in turn, might have consequences, for instance for (not) sharing information.

More specifically, there are two problems here. Firstly, notions like networks and trust are often quite *romantic*. They represent forward-looking, seductive aspirations which embody strong and smooth solutions. Although this issue seems to be recognized in recent literature (e.g. Huxham & Vangen 2013), time and again networks are in the end often presented as part of the solution (Daviter, 2017; Head & Alford, 2015). This is problematic as it generates strong expectations, which – if not met – will weaken ways out (cf. Ansell & Gash, 2008). When trust and learning are promised, but this is made impossible due to anxieties or competitive (geopolitical) relations, the parties involved do not get closer to a solution, but rather further removed from effectively dealing with complex issues.

Secondly, trust and learning are no end-results of social action, but might be *by-products* (Elster, 1983). Focusing on the realization of trust and learning will in itself not result in trust and learning (cf. Ansell & Gash, 2008). Performing activities, together, on a daily basis, might produce some trust and learning. However, performing activities together in any meaningful way might require a minimal level of trust to start with (Termeer et al., 2015, p. 688). Even in case of distrust in the goodwill of other parties, there might be cooperation and information sharing and trust in the competences of the other parties involved (c.f. Das & Teng, 1998). Critical incidents might jeopardize this, or they might stimulate joint action and create temporary trust. This is what happened in the cases we will discuss in this paper: the refugee issue and (counter) terrorism. The 'deal' between the European Union and Turkey which aimed at reducing the number of refugees entering Europe was not born out of strong networks and high levels of trust. It was a perfect illustration of what in international relations theory is labeled *Realpolitik*. It involves negotiations instead of consensus building, power play instead of collaboration, and there is no single leader who facilitates or vetoes developments. It does, however, request sharing information and building alliances in the light of interdependency in goal attainment.

3. Managerial and professional practices?

Thirdly, we feel that wickedness theory has unclear managerial and professional implications. It is easy to stress the importance of networks, experiments and learning, in terms of what should be done, but *how* should this be organized, managed and realized, and *who* should do *what when*? Theoretically, this calls for clear conceptualizations on how issue-ingredients, institutional contexts and actual practices are interrelated. How are actions 'on the ground' linked to more overarching institutional and

societal contexts. Practically, it calls for insights into how people perform in contexts that might be bewildering and impossible to 'oversee'. For managers this is problematic as they are expected to 'oversee' things and be 'in control'.

More specifically, we doubt whether relations between governance/management and professionalism are conceptualized effectively. Many of those involved in dealing with wicked issues are *experts* and *professionals*. They are part of the solution, as they make sense, interpret issues, are knowledgeable, and so on. But they are also part of the problem, as expert and professional fields tend to protect their knowledge and jurisdictions, they have difficulty in crossing expert boundaries (in addition to organizational and policy boundaries). So, in addition to how processes are organized and managed, we must analyze how experts and professionals act in processes and manufacture cross-boundary and trans-boundary 'solutions' to wicked issues, inside and outside of formal public and/or professional organizations (e.g. Noordegraaf, Boin & Kuipers, *unpublished paper*). This is difficult as individual experts and groups of professionals are often far *removed* from broader debates and from broader systems, even though they are part of these systems.

Weaknesses of wickedness in practice

Below we discuss these three clusters of criticism, which we illustrate through recent studies we conducted in the fields of terrorism and forced migration of refugees (see Table 1). Both of these cases were researched by the authors of this article. The terrorism case was examined in 2016 as part of a national evaluation of the Dutch counterterrorism strategy, fed by a policy document review, interviews with 60 of the national and local actors involved, and mapping of the key processes and routines the various organizations used to deal with terrorism. The forced migration case was examined in three phases: in 1997/8, 2001/2 and 2017/18. Policy documents were analyzed, observations of daily practices were done, and 164 interviews were conducted with local and national actors, including professionals, managers and asylum seekers.

For both these studies we were able to put the analytical frame of wickedness to good use, but at the same time, the studies revealed some of limitations of wickedness as a concept. We use the two highly transnational cases to illustrate our concerns, both containing security and social concerns, but in different ways, to illustrate how even the seemingly most complex cases can be rooted in a daily world perspective. The cases are here used to illustrate our criticisms of the

Table 1. Criticism of wickedness theory.

Criticism	Explanation of the criticism
Wickedness theory ignores people and their practices	• Lack of attention for the microlevel experiences of wickedness by people • Lack of appreciation for the difficulties for people such as experts to see meta-positions • Unclear how people deal with complexity in practice
Wickedness theory overvalues trust and collaboration	• Too romantic and optimistic understanding of trust and learning • Trust and learning may be by-products of collaborations instead of necessary outcomes
Wickedness theory has unclear managerial implications	• Unclear how to connect wickedness to managers and professionals which are part of both the problem and the solution

Table 2. Criticism of wickedness theory and illustration in two cases.

Principal criticism	Explanation of the criticism	Manifestation in terrorism case	Manifestation in forced migration case
Wickedness theory ignores people and their practices	There is a lack of attention and appreciation for the microlevel experience of wicked issue by people, including their ability to deal with complexity	Street-level practitioners usually did not face the stark choices as portrayed by wickedness theory. They have time and scope to improvise solutions or can integrate multiple perspectives	Professionals working with asylum seekers dealt with the limited scope for success in their work by settling for suboptimal solutions which would deliver solutions for one part of the political controversy but not for the other side
Wickedness theory overvalues trust and collaboration	Trust and collaboration are viewed to romantically and optimistically, as the cure-all for all problems, even when they are in fact not desirable or mere by-products for the solution of wicked issues	Various organizations and partners involved in counterterrorism should remain relatively distrusting and distant of each other in order to secure a free and open society in the long term	Competing parties involved in the issue see zero-sum games. The issue is tamed by creating parallel worlds where both can claim victory, rather than building open, trusting and collaborative systems
Wickedness theory has unclear managerial implications	Unclear how an appreciation of wickedness should inform the actions of managers	Managers of organizations involved did not need only abstract insights but also practical tools and resources	Although managers can appreciate the political sensitivities prevent action, they still had to – and indeed did – develop pragmatic solutions for refugees and local communities

current wickedness theory and to generate new insights which could help to enrich the current literature. Table 2 summarizes the implications of these cases for wickedness theory.

The value of wickedness theory for understanding terrorism

Terrorism as a wicked issue

The concept of terrorism fits the classic definition of wickedness (Noordegraaf et al., 2017). The problem is a manifestation of the social and political nature of large societal challenges. The different opinions on the justification of violence (the IRA, PLO and ISIS have been variously branded as terrorists or freedom-fighters) and the response of the state (protecting rule of law versus safeguarding liberty) reflect the social pluralism around this issue much discussed in wickedness theory. Terrorism cuts through societies, geopolitical locations and policy fields (from the highly educated to the disenfranchised poor, from Mali to Molenbeek, from the police to psychologists).

Scientists can offer only little certainty or consensus on what works against terrorism (Schmid, 2014). A meta-review of the large body of literature on counterterrorism

measures found that metal detectors at airports are one of a select few counterterrorism measures which have a scientifically validated effect on security. However, even for this measure, other studies document that placing detectors in airports will shift the threat of bomb attacks towards other unguarded places such as train stations (START, 2015). However, beyond these tactical uncertainties, there is a fundamental tension within counterterrorism. The ultimate wickedness of terrorism is that it is actually the response of the state which can cause most harm – introducing high security costs, sacrificing civil liberties, creating societal divisions – making the solution also the problem (De Graaf, 2011). As a consequence, a wide range of public, private, and community partners have to be involved in the response to terrorism (Schmid, 2014).

Therefore, terrorism is presented as one of the key wicked issues of our time (Noordegraaf et al., 2017). However, we here explore how wickedness theory arguably fails to deliver intellectually rewarding or practically useful insights. By ignoring the experience of people, romanticizing networking, and neglecting the practical work of managers and professionals, wickedness arguably offers little fresh insights.

The street-level experiences of wickedness

We examined the experiences of the people involved in counterterrorism by looking at two groups: security operatives facing immediate trade-offs in dangerous situations, and the street-level practitioners dealing with the extremism and radicalization leading up to terrorism. There are many romanticized versions of the 'real people' in counterterrorism who have to make snap-decisions between life and death, upholding civil rights or protecting the people, kill one to save many, et cetera. Endless Hollywood plots explore these moral dilemmas. These scenarios are rooted in reality to some extent; certain security operatives working in Iraq, Afghanistan, London or Paris have faced impossible choices from time to time. However, their particular and time-bound wicked choices cannot be automatically generalized towards terrorism as a whole. Wickedness should not be expanded to the policy as a whole but constrained to specific people facing specific dilemmas in specific circumstances.

For example, the Netherlands has dealt with different forms of violent extremism over the last decades, from Ambonese freedom fighters and left-wing campaigners to animal right activists and right-wing groups (NCTV, 2011). The Islamic extremist threat garners a lot of attention at the moment, but the group of people involved is small. As the Dutch intelligence agency detailed, amongst the Dutch population of 16 million people there are about 5.000 citizens susceptible to the Islamic-extremist message, with only a 1.000 or so actively engaging in the radical discourse, only a couple of hundred actively working together in networks, with only a handful of operatives posing a substantial threat (AIVD, 2014). This means that the great majority of counterterrorism work is focused on a couple of thousand people who are still in the very early stages of extremism and radicalization. The professionals involved in their cases do not face the immediate trade-offs faced by their fictional Hollywood counterparts. Instead, they have the breathing space to combine different approaches and see the effect over time, creating rituals to deal with the uncertainty.

For example, in Dutch cities different types of professionals work together on anti-radicalization through so-called 'multidisciplinary tables', with local police officers,

social counselors, and welfare officers discussing specific individuals who might be radicalizing. Their choices are not about life-or-death and provide scope for intertwining different options. For example, the police and welfare officers would communicate on when someone would be brought in for questioning, making sure that a suspect would not miss a day of work and so adversely affect their standing in society, while guaranteeing access of the security forces to information. Taping these multidisciplinary (table) meetings might not make for a good Hollywood plot, but they show that security and social cohesion concerns are combined.

Naturally, these decisions are not easy. Professionals, even at the local level, lack information on what citizens are doing exactly and different types of professionals will argue about the right course of action. But that is what police officers, youth workers, and social workers do every day anyway. The very essence of their job is interacting with other parties and making difficult decisions such as acting on limited information, dealing with multiple parties and balancing different values. They have devised rituals such as shared briefings and shared language to deal with the wickedness of everyday. What may seem scary and unreal in the government centers and university campuses, is just another working day to them.

The wickedness of the issue at large does not disappear but is made small and concrete when different security organizations or professional services discuss a particular person threatening to radicalize. The small core of wickedness will resurface through uncertainty and conflict at the negotiation table but is dispersed across fragmented conflicts and choices in between more steady flows of 'regular' work. These real experiences of people actually working on the issues should not be ignored, nor should the moral dilemmas of a few cases be generalized to the problem as a whole. Wickedness is not just a problem on the abstract plane, but experienced by real people and often sliced and diced in small doses.

The limits of collaboration and trust

The daily job of collaboration facing these local professionals should not be confused with an over-romanticized view of as collaboration and trust. Although it seems that people moving towards radicalization can best be addressed through a combination of security- and socially oriented measures, cooperation is not without risks and dangers. Too much trust and collaboration could actually be part of the problem.

For example, health professionals such as family doctors and psychiatrists are increasingly summoned to contribute to the so-called early detection of potentially dangerous individuals, putting pressure on patient confidentiality. In extreme cases, with clear and apparent danger to society, a physician can indeed act while staying true to their creed, but the shift towards close cooperation with security services in early preventative schemes overstretches this concept in the name of collaboration and trust. The actual relations between these people should therefore be monitored closely, where the police officers should not be able to bully others into submission in the name of security. Or, for that matter, medical professionals can begin to doubt their policing counterparts and become evasive or reluctant in sharing information. Collaboration can easily lead to distrust or develop into quasi-collaboration where professionals do the

minimum required. It is not enough to make organizations and professionals 'equal partners' on the drawing board, the inter-human relations need to work as well.

Even collaboration within the same type of professionals creates challenges. For example, police services in supposedly human right respecting countries gladly use information gathered through torture and privacy violations in less observant states, even going as far as dispatching their own suspects abroad for some tougher interrogations. The moral dilemmas are here amplified because of close cooperation, rather than resolved. To address the wickedness here, requires the creation of proper relations within and between professional organizations. In sum, the medical profession has to find a way to work with the police, without merging with them. The police forces need new forms of relationships to deal with information potentially produced by torture. These are dilemmas *of* collaboration and trust that cannot simply be resolved by prescribing ways to develop *more* collaboration and trust.

The practical needs of management and professionals

Finally, the concept of wickedness poorly serves the managerial and professional questions raised by counterterrorism. Managers and professionals such as doctors and teachers have very practical questions about building and maintaining human and financial resources in the face of wicked threats. They have to train their people, schedule shifts, and budget resources across departments and years. Ideally, these tasks and decisions are aligned with an overarching idea of what their organizations should do and achieve, emphasizing the role of managers in shaping the direction of their organizations. And although a purely technocratic response to these challenges, emphasizing efficiency or lean responsiveness is not entirely helpful either, neither is an abstract notion of wickedness centered on continuous change and complexity making management impossible.

For example, while wickedness stresses the many different ways counterterrorism could affect society, local neighborhood police officers wonder how to simply start a conversation with radical individuals in their neighborhood. In our evaluation of the Dutch counterterrorist strategies, the police officers were not asking for more legal tools. They simply asked for training to recognize new forms of extremism and make the first contact. Wickedness has preciously little to say about the training of front-line workers on the issues it pertains to address. This could mean that it is simply not 'present' in everyday work in the frontline. However, it could also point at a detachment between frontline professionals and the supposed grand wickedness of terrorism.

From a managerial perspective, the current frames of wickedness do not address the limited resources question facing public managers. Managers have to make choices about when and where they invest their finances and people, a decision that is complicated by the fact that the security apparatus might be overpriced in relation to the actually limited danger or that the spending may actually fail to address newly emerging of threats. Again, managers find ways of coping with these challenging, devising new rules to deal with the ambiguity. From a financial perspective, for example, managers reshape the old rules emphasizing ex ante budget planning and

move towards maintaining more flexible budgets which can be employed when a new threat emerges.

The value of wickedness theory for understanding forced migration

Forced migration as a wicked issue

Forced migration is a problem that can be characterized *simultaneously* as: a humanitarian crisis for all individuals and families who were forced to leave their home (refugees); a geopolitical conflict involving many countries on all continents; a security threat for both transit as well as receiving countries; a heavy financial burden on host states; and a political crisis that nearly lead to the breakdown of the collaboration between EU member states. The issue of forced migration is characterized by multiple, potentially conflicting values; strong political passions on different sides of the issue; and substantive uncertainty on how best to solve the problem. Furthermore, there is no single political arena in which all those with stakes and capacities could together devise a solution. There are multiple independent arenas for social deliberation and action. There is no institution, structure or process that provides a natural or political location in which the problem can be nominated for attention, sized up in a process of deliberation and design on how to invest their common assets to deal with the issue effectively and fairly, and used as the platform for directing coordinated action across the many independent organizations. There are only different polities, government jurisdictions, and private organizations, who exercised only lose control over the assets that could help solve the problem. In that sense, forced migration is a 'wicked problem' (Geuijen et al., 2017).

The street-level experience of wickedness

In the case of forced migration scholars have observed two narratives each with particular values with regards to refugees (a.o. Gibney, 2004; Joppke, 1998). The first would be the discourse that focuses on human rights and the protection of the safety and welfare of individual refugees. The second focuses on protecting (national or supranational) community interests, consisting of firstly economic interests and protecting the welfare state, secondly socio-cultural issues focusing on community identity, and thirdly security interests (Geuijen, 2004). These play out in organizations, with professionals having to answer basic questions like: who gets help, what type of help, who provides it, and for how long? We will go into one example to illustrate this: the reception of asylum seekers in the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands the reception of asylum seekers is done in reception centers (ASCs). The mission of ASCs is: manage 'austere but humane' reception facilities. This mission itself already expresses conflicting values. On the one hand it is aimed at protecting refugee rights by being humane in giving them shelter during the asylum procedure. On the other hand, it is meant to protect community interests by being austere. The assumption of austere housing is that this will lead many asylum seekers not to decide to head to the Netherlands. Another assumption in austere housing is that it would prevent asylum seekers from integrating into Dutch society as long as they

would not have obtained a staying permit (which could take months or even years). Integration in Dutch society is expected to lead to getting connected to Dutch society and citizens. These might protest if asylum seekers are being deported from the country in case their asylum application gets rejected, which makes deportation more complicated.

Asylum seekers' daily lives take place within the reception center ASC. They eat there, they sleep, they wait, and some raise their children. Asylum seekers share rooms, as well as kitchen and sanitary facilities. They are obliged to report weekly (and sometimes daily) at the ASC. They do receive some allowance for daily expenses and they are allowed to do voluntary work. They can also do some paid work, but only after 6 months after their asylum application was filed, for a maximum of 24 weeks a year; they are allowed to keep 25% of their income with a maximum of 183 euros per month, and the employer needs to apply for a working permit for each asylum seeker separately.

Boredom, feelings of uselessness, and loneliness are mayor problems for asylum seekers (ACVZ, 2013; Engbersen et al., 2015). Within the ASCs we encountered three coping strategies of asylum seekers who had been living there for years (Geuijen, 1998, 2018). The first strategy is to employ some activities within the reception center: to participate in (semi)voluntary work like cleaning the premises, help organizing some sports or cultural activities for women or children and so on. After some time in waiting, and especially after the first rejection of their asylum application, asylum seekers would either become passive and depressed or angry and aggressive, expressing feelings of being unable to take control of their own lives anymore.

Professionals working at the ASCs have to deal with the Janus-faced mission 'austere but humane'. We distinguished four coping strategies which are similar to coping strategies of professionals in humanitarian organizations (Geuijen, 1998, 2018). These might also be perceived as different phases. First, some professionals work very hard to try and improve the situation in the ASC as much as possible. However, after some time some of them feel that hard work will not change the situation for the better. Some professionals tend to shut themselves off from their 'clients'. For example, by setting limited office hours in which clients can contact them. For some this helps to limit their involvement. Other professionals seem to almost 'shift the blame on the clients'. They express frustration if asylum seekers don't participate in the activities that are being organized, if they complain about the situation in the ASC, or if they don't take individual responsibility for maintaining the kitchen and sanitary facilities. In the fourth phase of coping some professionals seem to reframe the situation. They would seem to interpret the situation in a new way: 'keeping in mind the general situation and our mission we don't do that bad at all' (Geuijen, 1998, 2018).

It seems that the more asylum seekers become depressed or angry, the more professionals shut themselves off or shift the blame on them. In this way wickedness in the forced migration issue is expressed within the organization of reception in ASCs.

The limits of collaboration and trust

However, we encounter wickedness not only within the organization itself, but also in its context. An ASC is not an island on itself; organizations and actors outside of the ASCs are

willing to work with and provide for asylum seekers as well. They will not deliver housing, but they do provide education, sports and cultural activities, volunteering work, as well as legal and psychological support. Churches, civil society organizations, volunteers, and (social) entrepreneurs try to improve the physical and social conditions in ASCs. Some of these also assist refugees with their integration after receiving a staying permit.

However, these proposals are met with reluctance by some politicians, citizens, organizations, and professionals, within and outside of the ASCs. It is assumed that facilitating connections between asylum seekers, entrepreneurs, civil society organizations and ASCs might create risks. If asylum seekers connect to Dutch society during the assessment process their deportation after rejection might become hindered as friends, class mates, colleagues, and even mayors might protest in the media. It is also perceived as a conflict with other valid purposes of the reception system, such as security and cost containment. It is even assumed that these collaborative forms of service provision which facilitate integration might give the appearance to the public of government losing control over border control, which is an inherently governmental function.

The national (and European) controversy on asylum prevents these actors and organizations from co-operating in networks. They have opposing views on what would define the problem, let alone which solution would be best suited to deal with it: a political, ideological, normative controversy. Both sides perceive actions as trade-offs. Any success on one side of the controversy implies a loss on the other side. The political controversy which characterized its context prevents any romantic perspective on collaboration, learning and trust; instead, the wicked issue is 'tamed' by excluding actors with different perspectives: *parallel worlds* are created.

The practical needs of management and professionals

Even though the wickedness of handling forced migration cannot be solved, managers and professionals still need to deal with it on a daily basis. That is why sometimes pragmatic innovative solutions get developed at the local level, while conflicting value debates would inhibit this happening at the national level. A crisis might help. In 2015 and 2016 Europe experienced a so-called 'refugee crisis'. The national governments had great difficulty finding adequate answers to handling the mass influx of migrants and therefore allowed experimental ideas and initiatives to be carried out at the local level. One example came about in the city of Utrecht, one of the mayor cities in the Netherlands. During Fall 2016 the local government received EU funding to start an experiment with innovative reception facilities; the Utrecht Refugee Launch Pad (U-RLP). This is a co-housing and co-learning experiment. All facilities are open to locals as well as asylum seekers. For example, entrepreneurship courses (in English) are provided in mixed classes for asylum seekers and for people who have been living in the neighborhood for longer. The aim being that this will allow all of them to acquire 'future proof' skills which they will benefit from, no matter whether they will continue to live in Dutch society, or if they will have to leave the Netherlands in case their asylum application would be rejected. Housing is facilitated for asylum seekers as well as for local youngsters. Local government, civil society organizations, knowledge institutes, and social entrepreneurs developed this local experiment together with asylum seekers as well as with grassroots initiatives by (young) citizens (Oliver, Dekker, & Geuijen, 2018).

Table 3. Heterogeneous characteristics of wicked problems in terrorism and forced migration.

Suggested contributions	Terrorism	Forced migration
Social pluralism: multiple interests and values	Actors have partly opposing values, however ultimately all agree on the goal of fighting terrorism	Actors have fundamentally contradictory values: protecting national interests versus protecting individual human rights for refugees. These are perceived as trade offs.
Institutional complexity: inter-organizational co-operation and multi-level governance	Main challenge is managing unequal power relations within the collaboration of professionals working within the security domain with those working within the social domain	Organizations collaborate within parallel worlds: governmental organizations on reception work in a world characterized by austerity and security, ngo's focus on well-being, skills and neighborhood relations in another world.
Scientific insecurity: fragmentation and gaps in reliable knowledge	Fundamentally fragmented knowledge on *what works in preventing terrorism and *how to prevent policies from deteriorating the situation by enlarging feelings of fear	Fragmented knowledge on *what works to deter refugees from applying for asylum in Europe, *what works in facilitating integration *what works in stimulating positive neighborhood relations.

Involving new actors seems crucial in being able to develop this local innovation aimed at tackling this wicked problem. Aiming to get away from the deadlock at the national level implied having to develop innovative practices at another level (local) and together with other actors (entrepreneurs, knowledge institutes). Being away from the spotlights removed some of the public and political attention and allowed professionals to become more open to exploring each other's perspectives, to experiment and to learn from mistakes (Geuijen, Oliver, Dekker in press). In this way professionals try to 'tame' the dominance of the political controversy in the context which had led to a deadlock. Table 3 summarizes the implications of both the cases.

Revising and enriching wickedness theory

We think that the wickedness of many of the issues facing society today cannot be ignored. They represent the 'grand challenges' of our time and their grand narratives are reproduced through the media, platforms and transnational settings. But merely analyzing them in grand ways is too far removed from the ways in which these challenges are seen, experienced and tackled in day-to-day practices, at various levels, and how joint action develops, through shared rules, routines and rituals. It belies the fundamental ambition of the wickedness literature to offer alternatives to technocratic approaches to real-world problems. We plead for revising and enriching wickedness theory to add a more people, practice and situationally focused perspective.

We need more practice-informed theory and practice-orientation in wicked issues which takes the experienced forms of wickedness as a starting point, including its potential massiveness, as well as the ways in which people pay attention to wicked issues. This calls for an analytical focus on the social mechanisms and rules, on how people develop joint action, despite the obstacles and barriers faced. It might be local action, but connected local action, connected partly to systems, but more importantly to other local actions. In case of counterterrorism, in The Netherlands at least, this is

realized by multidisciplinary teams and interventions. In the case of refugees this proves a lot more difficult, as there is fundamental contestation, especially normatively. Experiments can be developed only in 'crisis' situations.

Therefore, we also plead to perceive these local practices as being heterogeneous. In our case studies we found big differences in what professionals and managers (can) do. When analyzing our cases by Head & Alford's (2015) three aspects of wicked problems – social pluralism, institutional complexity and scientific insecurity – we saw that these differences could best be explained by the issue's level of normative contestation. In the case on forced migration this leads to working in parallel worlds which could only be breached by experimenting on a different governance level (urban) and with different actors (social enterprises, knowledge institutes etc). In the counter-terrorism case we found that the wickedness at first sight seemed to be located in its scientific insecurity on what works to prevent radicalization, as well as by the fragmentation of the knowledge needed. However, looking closer we found that also in this wicked issue professionals' attitudes were affected by contradictory values. Professionals in the security domain dominated social and medical professionals and sometimes tried to force them into sharing confidential information. It seems that how professionals and managers deal with wicked issues depends not only on people being willing to deal with these issues, but also on the institutional setting in which the experiments take place: dominant values being expressed by unequal power relations between professionals in different domains. Our empirical research into counterterrorism and forced migration issues stimulated us to try and understand the intricacies and messiness of the day-to-day governance of wicked problems, from a perspective that we would label *situated wickedness*.

Situated wickedness

Situated wickedness offers a street-level perspective which is aimed at complementing the high-level understanding of wicked issues (see Table 4). This perspective helps to shift the focus from 'wicked problems' or 'issues' to wicked *situations*, i.e. situations that might 'feel' wicked for the people involved. But even situations that might seem wicked from the outside or at a distance, do not necessarily feel wicked all the time for the people involved. They might know of relevant debates and systems, but their experiences might be *removed* from these. In the counterterrorism case, for example, we saw that professionals handle day to day issues which they see as just another part of their

Table 4. The premise of situated wickedness.

Situated wickedness
• People involved at the street-level of wicked issues may have a different *experience* of the complexity of the issue as they are *removed* from the high-level debate and challenge • This experiences of wickedness may be *augmented* through facing stark choices, but also be *alleviated* by considering these difficulties as part of daily routines • Experiencing a situation as wicked makes it next to impossible to attain an overview of the different streams and competing perspectives, these voices are manifested to people as equivocal, creating continually ambiguous situations • People within situated wickedness cannot find meta-positions overlooking or unifying perspectives, but merely can give attention to actions and solutions they feel appropriate

daily work. And in the case of the ASC's we see professionals working in their own 'worlds'. Only in crises we see professionals, managers and urban authorities experimenting with small scale innovations in order to breach the national (and European) deadlock.

The ingredients of wickedness turn the situation into a potentially *ambiguous* experience – things are equivocal and fuzzy, and facts, interpretations and emotions are contested. Although people involved might be convinced of certain interpretations, such as *their* definition or approach to forced migration, they face alternative interpretations, embraced by others. This means that they have to deal with such equivocality without overseeing the whole debate or system.

Furthermore, there is no substantive way out, neither in terms of meta-positioning, nor in terms of learning, due to sometimes intense contestation. This means we not only have to understand how people *actually experience* and cope with wicked situations, but also how they pay *attention* to these situations, what rules they follow and which routines they develop to deal with the enormity of the challenges put forward. When issues are highly ambiguous, a substantive way out is impossible – there is no 'logic of consequence' as March & Olsen argue (1989). People are able to react and cope, especially when they seek relations, rules, routines and rituals to connect with others, and when they experience these relations, rules, and the like as *appropriate*; they follow a 'logic of appropriateness'. When professionals and other people, in network practices develop joint ways to frame problems and craft interventions, wickedness might actually be tackled; appropriateness may 'settle' the every-day wickedness for those most involved in it. So instead of seeking meta-positions or a more overarching understanding of the problem, we should focus on the *social mechanisms* to deal with complexity, that is, relations, routines and rituals for bringing people together.

In both cases we studied we found experimental governance at the local level in which these relations and routines became developed. However, this seems to play out very differently in these cases. In the counterterrorism case, local security and social affairs professionals get together regularly to review the progress of individual cases in their respective towns, because the routines for discussing cases and devising tactics have been reset, e.g. by way of multidisciplinary tables. At these tables, which are held at frequent and fixed moments in time, with clear rules for attendance, cases are treated. In this way they develop social mechanisms which seem to enable them to cope with power imbalances between the security discourse and the privacy protection discourse, without being overwhelmed by the wickedness at the systems level.

In the case on forced migration the issue used to be 'tamed' by excluding part of the actors and in this way developing into a 'parallel world'. We showed that in one local experiment alternative local relations, routines and rituals were developed involving new actors and framing. With these social mechanisms professionals aim to create a new reality alongside formal existing procedures. In a low profile manner, they experiment to produce results that might become publicly and politically temporarily acceptable: 'future proof' courses which would give meaning to the waiting time during the asylum procedure as well as help deprived locals to prepare better for the labor market. These experimental steps might help to get to a next level of settlements in the political controversy without, however, being dissolved.

Discussion

As it stands now, wickedness theory suffers from a big paradox. The more we frame problems in terms of wickedness, both academically, politically, or publicly, the more we generate obstacles for identifying insights for addressing with wicked issues. Problems get so grand and removed from daily practice that actors are stimulated to restrict actions instead of enlarging them. This is understandable, as human capacities for paying attention to overarching challenges are limited.

This means that we need to redirect our analysis of grand challenges, as well as re-set the ways in which we analyze and strengthen these *capabilities* for paying attention, while at the same time remain realistic about the partiality of capacities, as well as about the institutional setting which might stimulate or hinder the development of these capacities. At the end of the day we also need to be realistic and modest. How much people try and however important and fruitful local experiments might become, these can only be partial solutions to wicked problems like terrorism and forced migration. They cannot solve the fundamental geopolitical conflicts which cause wicked problems, but they can help tackling their local consequences.

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Notes on contributors

Mirko Noordegraaf is Professor of Public Management at the Utrecht School of Governance, research professional organisations, professional practices, and wicked problems.

Scott Douglas is Assistant Professor of Public Management at the Utrecht School of Governance, specializing in collaborations successfully addressing wicked problems such as radicalization and illiteracy.

Karin Geuijen is Assistant Professor of Public Administration at the Utrecht School of Governance, specializing in the study of cross-border, international issues such as migration.

Martijn van der Steen is Professor of Public Administration at Erasmus University Rotterdam, focusing on the study of public policies and organizations dealing with change and uncertainty.

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