SENIOR CIVIL SERVANTS' CRAFTWORK

Erik-Jan van Dorp

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Preface

It was a hot summer day in August 2015, a Thursday, when Paul and I waited on the driver. Paul, my then teacher, intended to write a book based on civil service case studies out of the life of a prominent civil servant, and I was there to help and observe. Today we would meet with our protagonist. The plan was to interview him for almost a full day. When the driver rang the doorbell of the building at one of The Hague's lush roads – we met at the Netherlands School for Public Administration – we got up and followed him to the car. As Paul sat behind the driver, let's call him John, John asked me to ride shotgun. As we drove, John told us he had been driving for the prime minister's office for decades. He went back at least four prime ministers. Even I – maybe still, but surely then, quite green to the everyday life and realities of politics and politicians – knew then that he had seen it all. Of course we asked, and of course John remembered nothing. After a few minutes of traffic, John exited into a neighbourhood close to the dunes. He pulled up in front of a freestanding 1930's house and turned off the engine. That's when I met Wim.

The door flew open, and a large body swung into the backseat, diagonally across from the driver's seat. His sudden presence prompted John to restart the car and cruise to a hidden location in the southern dunes, overseeing the North Sea. Wim's reputation had preceded him. Wim had been permanent secretary in the prime minister's office and two other departments. He was currently a chief executive in the Dutch water approach and had been city manager of The Hague. His CV included a seemingly endless list of chairman positions, and his name popped up endlessly in rankings of 'most influential Dutch people'. Be that as it may, what did he have to say? Did he have some compelling theory-in-use of what his 'craft' entailed? What did he do, and how did he know what to do and how to do it? These were questions that popped into my head, and, interestingly, they never left.

In the privacy of this setting, Wim told us stories about what it means to be a civil servant in the upper echelons of Dutch government. This day in August 2015 was the start of my journey that led to this book. On that day, and during countless observation days, interviews, conversations, through laborious coding, and experiences since, something took root inside of me. For the past

seven years, I have been fuelled by a curiosity into the work and behaviour of people like Wim: senior civil servants who work at the interface of politics and administration.

This book reports my findings and current analysis. It is not biography, although that is certainly part of it. It is not praise either, although I admit to admiration. Also, it is not an evaluation, although my analyses are critical. Nor is it an exhaustive explanation of senior civil servants and their craftwork, yet I bring insights to the table – but any explanation is provisional. Rather, this book is an interpretive account – I have sought to understand senior civil servants through their own words and deeds. I knew one way to do this. I had to get up-close and personal.

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Understanding Senior Civil Servants

> Senior civil servants are responsible for, and direct the realisation of the organisation's goals, in light of societal challenges. They are political-strategic adviser and first point of contact for ministers.[1]

1.1 Introduction

According to statements such as these, coming from official documents, senior civil servants have a clear function, role, and task. If we take this role description as a starting point, it is clear what they do and how they add value. It implies that we can select, train, and develop them so they develop the competencies required to perform their jobs. Civil servants do their work sheltered from the hustle and discord of politics, enveloped in hierarchies, guided and constrained by rules and procedures. The most senior civil servants work hard but get to live in a rarefied world of comfortable offices, personal assistants, and chauffeured cars. Their subordinates vie for their attention, seek their direction, value their judgments, and need their signatures.

That is what it might look like from the outside. For those who dare to look up-close, however, their jobs and their everyday lives are quite different. They may work in comfortable offices, but these offices are hardly safe spaces for those who inhabit them. The demands and idiosyncrasies of their political masters, the demands of running large departments and complex delivery agencies are taxing. The hustle and bustle of media-driven issue management, the contested nature of issues, the brooding presence of an unruly parliament, the vagaries of transparency and hyper scrutiny by

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[1] Dutch government definition of the senior civil servant's role (Rijksoverheid 2022). Translation is mine.

a wide array of watchdogs are nothing less than intricate. The senior civil servants who operate at the intersection of all these forces can be easily forgiven for not thinking of their workplaces as comfortable reserves of elite privilege but rather as modern versions of gladiatorial arenas.

This book is about what senior civil servants do in such arenas. I search for answers to what they do and how they add value. This is fuelled by curiosity into what these actors – permanent secretaries, councillors, public managers, agency managers, chief inspectors – actually do, given the pressures and turbulence surrounding them. My interest is in how they make sense of their professional world, how they navigate it, and how they get things done.

I do this because what senior civil servants do matters a great deal. The ministers they serve depend on them to bring order to the chaos that would otherwise reign in their lives (Rhodes 2011). They provide the foundation upon which responsible politicians do what they are elected to: make decisions about the 'authoritative allocation of values' for society (cf. Easton 1965). They assemble the menu of ideas, numbers and words that politicians choose from to think, calculate and speak. They provide the quiet whisper in a minister's ear when yet another decision about who gets what, when and how needs to be made. Sometimes they are in the driver's seat themselves, supervising the work of translating political decisions into public service delivery. In so doing, they shape what government looks like in everyday citizen-state encounters.

Working in constant interplay with responsible ministers, senior civil servants play pivotal roles in how and how well we are governed. While they may be civil *servants*, they wield considerable influence. Because government elites exercise influence, it is important to understand who they are, how they get at the positions they are in, how they act, and why they do what they do. Obviously, this has been done before (e.g., Kaufman, 1981), but it is essential to update, test and revise earlier insights into the work and behaviour of senior civil servants, as they and the world they work in have changed a lot.

My approach interprets what senior civil servants (SCSs) do and how they make sense of what they do in terms of craft and craftmanship (e.g., Lynn, 1996), or more specifically craftwork (see further 1.3.2 below). This craftwork is constructed, practiced and negotiated in complex webs of beliefs, expertise, norms, routines, practices, skills, sensitivities and relationships that senior civil servants acquire and nurture through their careers (cf. Lynn 1996). I study how these elite actors do what they do, how they talk about it, how they make sense of their work and its effects, and how significant others see this.

Twenty-two years ago, Noordegraaf (2000) published an ethnography of public managers in senior positions in Dutch government during the mid to late 1990s. It uncovered how public managers make sense of their ambiguous world by choosing what they attend to when, and where.

Two decades on, the generation of SCSs I report on in this study continue to do so, but in a societal, political, and technological context that differs markedly from that of the late 20ᵗʰ century (Van der Wal, 2017a, 2017b).

Most notably, cascading technological innovation has erupted old ways of working and imposed new realities for all SCSs. As an illustration, when Noordegraaf (2000) published, the prime minister did not yet have a cell phone. Actually, nobody did. Since then, new technologies, and (social) media have not replaced traditional technologies and media, but they have altered the landscape by generating high-paced communication and media turbulence and fuelling continuous news spread, real-time, 24/7. Their bully pulpits hail a cacophony of (un)truths and news updates, leaving most inhabitants of the political-administrative village occupied with keeping up. Reputational peril may just be one social media post away (Schillemans, 2012; Grube 2019). More recently, big data driven algorithms, and artificial intelligence made their way into public service delivery and regulation. To stay on top of things, SCSs need to be tech-savvy (Van der Wal 2017b).

Another major contextual change concerns the civil service's primary authorising environment: *a* volatile political system. After the assassination of a Dutch prime-minister-in-waiting in 2002, followed by a populists' victory, turbulence became the new normal in Dutch politics (Andeweg, Galen & Louwerse 2020; 't Hart 2014). Electoral volatility has increased, as has the number of parties in parliament (Andeweg et al. 2020). Cabinets now need the support from numerous parties to secure majorities in both houses of parliament. Populist and one-issue parties have become a force to be reckoned with (De Jonge 2021). Citizens, companies, and other stakeholders expect to be involved in policy processes as co-designers, co-deciders, and co-producers. Building fungible policy coalitions in such a complex parliamentary situation demands high levels of political astuteness from public servants.

Moreover, the trend towards monitorial democracy has found expression in beefed-up transparency and accountability regimes that enable citizens as well as a growing array of formal and informal watchdogs to see how the sausages are made (Keane, 2018). And they do not always like what they see. In the Netherlands, for example, members of Parliament have taken to regularly criticising the performance of the public service, its lack of expertise, its institutional blind spots and lack of compassion, and the 'cushioned' employment conditions its leaders allegedly enjoy (e.g., Noordegraaf et al. 2020; Raad van State 2020; Tweede Kamer 2021a; 2021b). In the face of waves of criticism, cabinet ministers have not always kept their part of the bargain, that is to defend the civil service and to wear the responsibility for any and all of its failings. In one dramatic development, one minister even sought to have their own agency prosecuted (Belastingdienst 2021). In such an enervated political environment, SCSs cannot take anything for granted.

Meanwhile, there are wicked societal challenges SCSs must work on. So-called wicked problems (Head and Alford, 2015) and adaptive challenges (Heifetz, 1994) that defy technical solutions and quick political fixes, seemingly accumulate on the agenda. One can think of climate change, air and soil quality, biodiversity, migration, population ageing, and deepening social inequalities. The 2015 migration crisis tested the limits of the Dutch and European multi-level governance system, including its social contract with the electorate (Crawley 2016). Most recently the COVID-19 pandemic, a transboundary crisis par excellence (Boin 2019), has provoked unprecedented government responses that observers, citizens, SCSs and politicians alike had not considered themselves capable of (e.g., Boin et al. 2021).

These fundamental developments add up. In combination, they have begun to alter the rules of the game of public service work ('t Hart, 2014, 2018), rocking the traditions, beliefs and cultural practices sustaining the script that senior civil servants used to work by (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010; Frequin, 2021). They have had to absorb new players, new mores, new expectations, new tools, new constraints. They operate in a 'disjunctive' period, in which there is great demand for transitions, transformations, and regime change in policy, politics and polity alike (Skowronek 1997). There are multiple forces at play, and SCSs are coping by both relying on and reinventing their craftwork. Although it is tempting to define clear competencies and maintain safe working places, the realities of being, acting and performing as senior civil servants are different than a few decades, or even a few years ago.

1.2 Research puzzle

1.2.1 THE QUEST FOR CRAFTSMANSHIP

As times are 'disjunctive' and in flux, people long for stability. Governments have long relied on the *craft* of public administration to guarantee stable governance (Rhodes 2016). Contemplative council, prudent advice, while trying to 'steer the ship of state' has been the modus operandi of generations of senior civil servants. It has provided a measure of stability, predictability, and legitimacy to governments of all colours. Today, the desire for such craftsmanship is as strong as ever.

Internationally, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) stresses that handling contemporary governance challenges relies to a large extent on the quality of management and leadership of civil servants (Gerson 2021). The OECD defined numerous concrete skills and capabilities that facilitate such leadership. In the Netherlands, there is an unrelenting call for improved public service craftsmanship (in Dutch: 'ambtelijk vakmanschap').

The office for the senior civil service issued no less than two new visions for public service leadership within six years (ABD 2016; Frequin 2021). Likewise, the venerable Council of State also emphasised the importance of craftsmanship to restore effective public service performance and accountable government (Raad van State 2020).

However, this is easier said than done. Calls for reinvigorated craftsmanship have been bandied about for more than a decade, perpetuated through innumerable publications, workshops, talks and HR programs. But at the same time, there is no simple script for public leadership in times of turbulence (Van der Wal, 2017; 't Hart & Tummers, 2019). For example, it is unclear what it takes to work on transitions and transformations with long time horizons while your authorising environment demands immediate results (Pot et al. 2021). It is unclear how political masters can be supported, while protecting the values and reputation of their agencies in the face of intense criticism and sometimes outright nasty forms of public scrutiny. It is unclear how, in the face of relentless demands for their attention and interventions, SCSs can maintain their resilience and not burn out.

Understanding how senior civil servants perceive and actually perform their work in this era of political-administrative turbulence requires intimate knowledge that only in-depth studies can provide. This calls for qualitative research, with an emphasis on elite interviews, diaries and, crucially, direct observation of SCSs everyday practices. We do not just need to understand their views or ideas about their work, we need to be present while they practice it, and quiz them about concrete acts, episodes and arguments.

Again and again, academics acknowledge the 'vital need for studies of how things work in organisations and management' (Watson 2011). Bach & Wegrich (2020) call upon scholars to opt for in-depth 'machine room studies': if we want to understand the machinery of government in our day and age, best to look in the engine rooms where the governing is being done. Rhodes (2016: 645) and Peters (2020) agree that an ethnographic approach, using first-hand observations, can advance political-administrative relations scholarship in important ways. Korica et al. (2015) express their hopes of opening the 'black box' of managerial work and behaviour. However, observation-driven stories about senior civil servants are quite rarely told. Studies in this vein are hard to come by (Boswell et al. 2018; Borins 2011; Ospina & Dodge 2005: 145; Rosenthal et al. 2001; Van Maanen 2011), although there are a handful of important exceptions (Rhodes, 2011; Trangbæk, 2021). I follow this approach as it is optimally suited to teasing apart and responding to the central puzzle of this study. This central puzzle is where I now turn.

1.2.2 RESEARCH QUESTION

My ambition is to gain insight into how Dutch senior civil servants conceive of and do their work in the challenging and demanding context of the early 21st century. My central research question is straightforward:

How do senior civil servants practice their craft?

In table 1.1 I break this down into several sub-questions whose answers complement each other, building a comprehensive response to the main puzzle.

The first two sub-questions examine how the craft-in-use of SCS is *situated*. Before I can answer how SCSs practice their craft, I must take a step back and study who these senior civil servants are, and what made them *senior* civil servants in the first place. In other words, I must account for the backgrounds and experiences, and career paths that paved the way for some civil servants to be promoted to top jobs, especially ahead of others. I do this in chapter 2, using the following specific sub-question:

What career experiences have increased senior civil servants' chances of being appointed to a permanent secretary position during 2000-2020?

I must also take the context in which SCSs work into account. As they work in an elaborate institutional, organisational and political 'village' (Peters 1988), I must understand the rules of engagement of that village. In chapter 3, I set the scene for the SCSs' craft-in-use by clarifying recent developments in the core executive, focusing on the centripetal forces that gravitate towards prime ministers and their offices. I answer the following sub-question:

Has the Dutch prime minister become predominant, and if so, how has this impacted the workings of the core executive?

Having situated Dutch SCSs in their institutional and career development contexts, the remaining three sub-questions address core features of their craftwork. First, in chapter 4, I focus on political-administrative relations and discuss the institutional feature of ministerial responsibility. I study how the presence of ministers' shape SCSs' work beliefs and practices, how SCSs 'manage upward' as it is called. I ask:

How do SCSs facilitate ministerial responsibility?

A second aspect of the SCSs' craft is politicisation of their work, or more specifically, the possibility of politicisation. In addition to working for and with political executives (i.e., ministers), the work of SCSs might be 'political' in other ways. Against the background of new ideas on 'functional politicisation', for example, I pose the following sub-question for chapter 5:

How do senior civil servants manage politicisation?

Finally, I attend to organisational contexts and – in addition to 'managing upward' and dealing with political aspects of their work – I study how they manage 'downward' and 'outward'. More specifically, I turn to how SCSs spend their time and what is actively on their agendas to get a more complete understanding of the richness of SCS-work. In chapter 6, I ask:

How do senior civil servants allocate attention and attendance?

Table 1.1 Sub-research questions

Chapter	Sub-questions
2	What career experiences have increased senior civil servants' chances of being appointed to a permanent secretary position during 2000-2020?
3	Has the Dutch prime minister become predominant, and if so, how has this impacted the workings of the core executive?
4	How do senior civil servants facilitate ministerial responsibility?
5	How do senior civil servants manage politicisation?
6	How do senior civil servants allocate attention and attendance?

1.3 Conceptualising craftmanship

I have tried to access, study and observe SCSs' practices as openly as possible. In order to understand how they practice their craft, I have stuck to the 'what do civil servants actually do?' type of research tradition (in line with e.g., Mintzberg 1973; Kaufman 1981; Rhodes 2011). This however does not mean that such research is completely 'open' or otherwise divorced from the literature (Gioia et al. 2012). On the contrary, all researchers, qualitative and ethnographic researchers alike, (need to) use language, concepts and perspectives when they look in order see (also e.g., Noordegraaf, 2000). Such notions and concepts are helpful, they accentuate where to

look, what to look for, and how to interpret what is seen. In this research, I have relied on three types of such helpful concepts that act as search lights. I will briefly discuss them in turn but they will all reappear and be applied in subsequent chapters, which can all be read independently. At the end of this book, I use these concepts to sketch a picture of 'situated craftwork'.

1.3.1 MANAGERIAL ATTENTION, BEHAVIOUR AND WORK

First, this study is grounded in the managerial work and behaviour tradition (Kaufman 1981; Noordegraaf 2000). This tradition goes back more than a century, all the way to Taylor and scientific management (1919), but it has seen many changes throughout its years. Korica et al. (2015) reviewed the literature in search of 'managerial work' as an analytical category. After decades of focus on managerial roles, critical management studies, globalisation of managerial styles, recent studies have begun to focus on managerial work as ordinary activity – to study real time work (2015: 160).

Where there was and is a focus on various POSDCORB activities – i.e., planning, organising, staffing, directing, co-ordinating, reporting and budgeting – this managerial work approach aims to 'bring work back in' (Barley and Kunda 2001; Gulick 1937). In studying work, scholars then focus on interactions, cycles, routine interactions, information streams and organisational rhythms (Cloutier 2016; Noordegraaf 2000; Tengblad 2006), instead of technical and sterile things like planning and budgeting. Most notably, researchers have begun to study managerial work as 'practice' (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011; Nicollini 2012) in which attention for developments, options, money, stances, decisions, people, and the like are much more blended. It might be difficult to see 'a decision' being taken (e.g., Kaufman, 1980), but still, workflows move forward and 'things are getting done'.

Though epistemology may vary across researchers, and range from positivist to interpretivist to critical scholars, this tradition of managerial work and behaviour as practice is not prescriptive in that it does not tell managers what they should do. Instead, it aims to provide more realistic understandings of managerial work, which enable managers to know what they *could* do, and to explain *why* they (could) do what they do. This contrasts with the plethora of managerial studies that provide recipes for 'success'.

1.3.2 CRAFT, CRAFTMANSHIP AND CRAFTWORK

The second helpful heuristic that I use is 'craft'. Sociologist Richard Sennett popularised this term in *The Craftsman* (2008). He details, with an eye for romance, the handiwork, bodily practices and skilful dexterity of craftsmen building violins, blowing glass and laying brick in their workshops. In

his view, 'craftsmanship names an enduring, basic human impulse, the desire to do a job well for its own sake' (p. 9). Any craftsman, irrespective of gender, faces conflicting standards of excellence, contextual constraints and inner theatre (e.g., Kets de Vries 2014). To 'do things well', they must come to be at peace with their selves, their role as 'makers' and the surrounding system they are a part of.

Although it would be an exaggeration to describe the notion of craft as 'mainstream', it has travelled to public administration and public management (Bach and Veit 2018; Davis and Rhodes 2014; Goetz, 1997; Korica et al. 2015; Lynn 1996; O'Connor and Carmichael 2019; Paanakker 2021; Raadschelders 2004; Tiernan 2015; Van Putten 2021; Weller 2018). The notion of craft as a perspective for capturing the work practices of individuals within government has been used by several scholars: 'craft of public administration' (Rhodes 2016; Shearer 2022), 'statecraft' (Bullpit 1986), civil servants who acquire 'political craft' (Goetz 1997), and 'public crafts(wo)manship' (Blijleven 2021; Paanakker 2021; Van Steden 2021). Interestingly, within the Dutch public service system, 'craftsmanship' has become the modern lingua franca in talking about civil servants' work ('t Hart 2014; Pool 2021; Van den Brink and Jansen 2016; Van der Wal 2017).

Administrative craftwork revolves around a carefully developed set of embodied skills and knowledge – beliefs and practices – that have been acquired through experiential training on the job. Much of it is tacit, and for SCS, some is hidden and even secret. In the context of public administration, craftwork blends Weber's distinction between *Fachwissen*, *Dienstwissen*, and *Geheimwissen*. It is distinct from 'science' and 'professionalism', but neither is it (only) an 'art' (compare Lynn 1996; also, Raadschelders 2004; Rhodes 2016). It draws on *practical* wisdom – knowing what to do – and practical activity – knowing how to do (e.g., Wagenaar 2004). Science prescribes one-best-way, craft emphasises situational judgment. The professions are taught in schools, craft is learned on the job (Freidson 2001; Mintzberg, 2004). Craft is teleological; unlike the arts it seeks utility – in this case becoming a good, effective, and role-conscious civil servant (Goodsell 1992; Rhodes 2016).

1.3.3 POLITICS, POLITICAL SYSTEMS AND POLITICAL-ADMINISTRATIVE RELATIONS

Westminster conventions – to which Dutch conventions have borrowed extensively from – hold that ministers and civil servants are indivisible (Haldane 1918). In Dutch parliament, this is cause for MPs to say civil servants 'do not exist'. Ministers and civil servants may be one, but they are not the same.

This indivisibility contrasts with a second convention, the politics-administration dichotomy (Weber 1921; Wilson 1887), which stresses the empirical and normative differences between

politicians and administrators. While the first convention implies a degree of stewardship-like relationships (Schillemans 2012), the political-administrative dichotomy implies principal-agent relationships between ministers and mandarins. As I will expand on in next chapters, the dichotomy discourse has been criticised many times over. Aberbach et al. (1981) viewed political-administrative relationships as 'hybrid', while Alford et al. (2017) identify a 'zone' rather than a line that separates the parties. Svara (2001) calls the dichotomy a 'myth'. Notwithstanding, it remains an important normative ideal – and constitutionally grounded in the rule of ministerial accountability – where ministers have the final say, and civil servants are there to serve (Andeweg et al. 2020; Visser 2009). This book will show that these remain important elements of the political-administrative 'village' and that the 'villagers' who inhabit it play by certain rules which support this. 't Hart and Wille (2006) find that mutual respect, discretionary space, and reciprocity form the normative core of the unwritten rules in the Dutch context.

In conceptualising the political-administrative ecosystem, I will draw on the idea of the core executive and examine how it travels to the Netherlands (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Kolltveit and Shaw 2022). Rhodes (1995) defines the core executive as 'all those organisations and procedures which coordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine.' (p. 12). It refers to the centre of the centre: the heart of the government machinery. I will apply this lens in various chapters, emphasising the Dutch prime minister's office (Dutch: *Ministerie van Algemene Zaken*). Although the Dutch PM has a distinctive profile and position, the way in which SCSs relate to the core executive, including prime ministers, provides a more general background against which we can analyse (changing) administrative work in Western central governments.

1.4 Studying craftmanship: Design and methods

My empirical research focus has been on SCSs. I have observed, interviewed, and mapped individuals at the very top of government – I have been studying 'up'. They include senior civil servants, ministers, ministerial advisers, councillors, city managers, agency managers and chief inspectors. While studying up, I have not done so from a safe distance. Rather, I got 'up-close and personal' (see also: Gains 2011; Rhodes et al. 2007). In this paragraph, I summarise what I have done and why.

Using a mixed-methods approach, I have combined different qualitative and quantitative methods that facilitate an up-close analysis of SCSs' work and behaviour – of what I later call situated agency. I answer the research questions with methods that fit – whether they are

quantitative or ethnographic. Hence, I come to the study of SCSs with a pragmatic epistemology, i.e., planned and thoughtful research activities but responding to what I experienced in the real world. This, I would argue, says something about scholarly craftwork. In addition to implementing well-designed research plans, I would like to stress the value of more responsive research that connects academic, practical and societal considerations. Research, I feel, can remain 'academic' and independent, but start from and work with real-world concerns.

Notwithstanding the combination of methods and a pragmatic application, I lean towards an interpretive approach (Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). While not dominant in public administration and management, it hardly requires introduction (Wagenaar 2012). This approach favours processes of meaning-making and appreciates ordinary, everyday practices of the people I study as valuable data. I see considerable merit in deductive approaches that start with theoretical frameworks. I do this in chapter 2. However, in the next chapters, I start from the meanings that SCS ascribe to their environments which guide their day-to-day practices, their understanding of their everyday lives, the work and behaviour they enact while serving, managing and doing leadership work. From these meaning-making processes, I make conceptual arguments, going back and forth between literature and fieldwork findings, or abductive analysis (Timmers and Tavory 2012). In other words, I seek to see 'small facts speak to large issues' (Geertz 1973).

1.4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This book is a PhD dissertation based on five (published) articles. These articles, chapters 2-6, can be read independently and four have been previously published in peer-reviewed journals (Van Dorp 2018; Van Dorp and 't Hart 2019; Van Dorp 2022) or an academic edited volume (Van Dorp & Rhodes 2022). Each chapter answers an academically relevant and practically meaningful research question, as formulated in paragraph 1.3. Together, they form a unified structure, that allows for an answer to the central research question that combines insights from all chapters. The first two chapters (2 & 3) provide the background and institutional context that situates the craft-in-use that I describe and analyse in chapters 4-6.

Throughout the study I use question-specific research designs which are detailed in each chapter. These range from event history analysis to (multiple) case studies and an interview study. Each chapter presents a take on the general question that has puzzled managerial work and behaviour scholars for decades: 'what do they *actually* do?' (cf. Carlson 1951; Mintzberg 1973). Still, each chapter took shape in different and cumulative and complementary ways. The process of designing and conducting the different studies that form the meat of this book has been – to some

extent – emergent and serendipitous. Rather than executing a pre-planned and pre-designed set of studies, I 'went where I was led' by fieldwork and literature (Rhodes et al. 2007: 230).

Overall, the research design combines empirical breadth and depth. The diversity encompasses national government SCSs, as well as city managers in local government and includes SCSs working in proximity to the minister in policy departments as well as SCSs leading delivery and regulatory agencies. I tried to establish depth by focusing extensively on a key actor (e.g., chapter 4) or by observing individuals for a duration of time (chapters 5-6).

As stated above, these studies are steeped in the managerial work and behaviour tradition (Kaufman 1981; Mintzberg 1973; see Korica et al. 2015 for a review). A consequence of this approach is that it highlights some aspects of senior civil servants' craftwork at the expense of others. In the next chapters, I pay ample attention to political-administrative interactions, political cycles, routine interactions, information streams and organisational rhythms. These elements are fundamental to craftwork. Be that as it may, they are a part, not the whole. Other important tasks and techniques of SCSs', such as their POSDCORB activities – receive less attention. That does not mean they did not occupy part of their time or did not carry significance – on the contrary, they have always been and will remain an essential part of the work of senior civil servants (George, Walker & Monster 2019; Gulick 1937; Heclo and Wildavsky 1981). But in actual managerial practices, they are hard to detect as separate entities – they are blended as public managers go along. Furthermore, (strategic) HRM principles and systems such as pay, tenure, employability and training matter to the craft of SCSs, and are also objects of academic study (Knasmüller & Veit 2016; Steijn & Knies 2021; Van der Wal, 2017b; Van Harten, 2016; Van Wart et al. 2015). Yet, they feature only in passing in this book. Moreover, while using up-close and personal research methods enables researchers to 'humanise' senior civil servants, I refrain from psychological analysis and assessment of SCSs' motives, personalities and styles and focus instead on their work-in-situ and the meanings they attribute to it. In that, I stand in the tradition of the managerial work and behaviour approach which focuses upon in-depth studies of action, interaction and relationships which are missing in more generic or institutional perspectives on management.

Overall, the book can be read as a country case study. Using different methods and thematic angles, I analyse SCS craftwork in The Netherlands in the early 21st century. Some of the findings and conceptualisations may well travel to other contexts, but the chapters were not designed with a view towards empirical generalisation and cross-jurisdictional comparison. However, there is certainly the potential to compare and contrast my findings to those of other researchers studying highly comparable elite civil service groups in other countries (e.g. Trangbæk, 2021).

The research design and methods for this book were assessed and approved by the Law, Economics and Governance Faculty Ethical Commission (FETC) of Utrecht University in December 2019.

1.4.2 MIXED METHODS AND ANALYSIS

In this book, I use four different data gathering methods: 1) interviewing, 2) shadowing, 3) career pattern tracking, and 4) diary study. Firstly, I have interviewed many SCSs, asking about their beliefs, practices and lived experiences of working in the civil service. Government elites– and ministers in particular – are veteran interviewees and slow to tell something they might regret or may spin questions to their favour (Empson 2019). Capable interviewers may overcome such difficulties with interesting results, but that does not solve a second problem. As a truism of anthropology holds: 'What people say, what they do and what they say they do are three entirely different things.' My objective is to study how SCSs practice their craft. To do this, I cannot solely rely on interviews (What they say, or say they do). I must also observe what they do while they do it. As such, I study action-in-action (Noordegraaf 2014).

A big part of this approach falls within the broad family of ethnographic research (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Van Maanen 2011; Ybema, Yanow, Wels and Kamsteeg 2009). Ethnographic research has been deployed in many professional contexts and settings. Scholars observed doctors at war (Lok and De Rond 2016), forest rangers (Kaufman 2006), street-level bureaucrats (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), out-of-sight killers in a slaughterhouse (Pachirat 2011), gamblers around Balinese cockfights (Geertz, 1973) and police officers on patrol (Punch 1979).

In political science, ethnography remains relatively rare (Joseph et al. 2007; Bevir and Rhodes 2016). In an overview study, Cappellarro (2017) finds that ethnographic research is also a minority strategy in public management, a field that is increasingly quantitative (Groeneveld et al. 2015). Within public management, Cappellarro (2017) recognises a stream of ethnographic studies that concentrate on government elites (Crewe 2005; Geuijen et al. 2008; Rhodes et al. 2007; Rhodes 2011; Rhodes & Tiernan 2014; Stevens 2011). In adjacent literatures, scholars shadowed managers in American public and private organisations (Jackall 1988; Mintzberg 1973); Dutch public managers (Noordegraaf 2000); US federal bureau chiefs (Kaufman 1981); permanent secretaries in Denmark (Trangbæk 2021); and cabinet ministers in British government (Rhodes 2011). Together, these studies, and this book, contribute to a modest tradition of 'administrative ethnography' (Boll and Rhodes 2015; Schatz 2009).

Secondly, I engage in shadowing (Cznarniawska 2014). Shadowing is 'a research technique which involves a researcher closely following a member of an organisation over an extended period of time.' (McDonald 2005: 456). As the proverbial 'fly on the wall', I shadowed senior civil servants on their working days, following them from place to place and from meeting to meeting, while I wrote down what I saw, as well as what I wondered as I wandered (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw 2011). This allowed me to observe participants in different circumstances (cf: Trangbæk 2021).

My approach to elite ethnography and shadowing has been referred to as 'hit-and-run-ethnography' (Rhodes 2014). As the moniker suggests, I did not spend consecutive months in the field, but I kept 'yo-yoing' in and out of the field (Geuijen et al. 2007; Wulff 2002). Rather than *deep hanging out*, I kept toing and froing between observation and analysis. With this approach of involvement and detachment, I aim to strike a balance between breadth and depth – observing multiple SCSs for a 'long enough' period of time.

When shadowing, the effects of the researcher's presence are a perennial source of concern. In a classic study, Van Maanen (1990) presents a thick description of a summer in Disneyland. In the following vignette he discusses the emotional labour in this 'smile factory'. Although ride operators may have good and bad days, they are expected to be sunny and helpful regardless (1990: 18). A ride operator's reflections on his role are helpful for discussing researcher presence in ethnography:

> 'I can remember being out on the river looking at the people on the Mark Twain looking down on the people in the Keel Boats who are looking up at them. I'd come by on my raft and they'd all turn and stare at me. If I gave them a little wave and a grin; they'd all wave back and smile; all ten thousand of them. I always wondered what would happen if I gave them the finger?' (Van Maanen 1990: 19).

Just as the ride operator had to exercise self-restraint in how he performed his role, so did I in shadowing these SCSs from one meeting to the next. While it was usually evident that I was an outsider, I tried to present myself as a '*professional* stranger' (Agar 1996). I made efforts to build rapport by being prepared, by being non-intrusive and respectful of their schedules, and by being attentive in asking questions that I felt were helping me to understand their practice better. When possible, I opted for 'social shrinking' in dress, in where I placed my body, by limiting facial expressions, and in what I said (Goffman 2014). My intention was to not interrupt the way things were going, but to follow along. When a civil servant took time for an app-guided meditation, I quietly joined in. When they drove somewhere, I got in the car with them. If they answered email

on their iPad, I was in the room. When they chatted in the hallway, I stood and listened. Still, there were ample opportunities in which I could have actively interfered into the events and behaviours I was there to study – with unknown (ethical) consequences. When I observed a manager fooling the unions, I could have said something that could have turned the tables. When a senior civil servant made a phone call that may have crossed the fine line of the law, I chose to wave, not to give the finger.

Admittedly, mere observer presence can have consequences and induce research participants to keep up appearances. This leads some to wish for a magic invisibility potion for ethnographers (Pachirat 2018). Though my presence at meetings was a recurrent (but always brief) topic of conversation, I never got the impression that my presence affected SCSs stances and actions at meetings. Note-takers like me were very common in many settings and rarely perceived as threatening. When I asked, participants always said they were not bothered by my presence. Occasionally, they ignored or even entirely forgot about me. When an agency manager received an invite to a board meeting by text, he up and left without saying a word, leaving me to follow his trail. In interviews they made it clear – *sine ira et studio* – if they did not want to discuss a topic.

I realise that in 'studying-up', the power balance in researcher-participant relationships does not mirror that of the more common 'street-level' ethnographies in which researchers are more powerful and knowledgeable than their research participants. For instance, in experimental research designs, the researchers *control* and *manipulate* the setting to measure respondents' attitudes or behaviour (James et al. 2017). My experience has been the near opposite of this. To a large degree, the participants were in control. Participants could remove me from their buildings at will, cut an interview short if they felt like it, compel me into non-disclosure agreements, call for vetoes on certain vignettes, and were well equipped to read, understand and challenge my research findings. Prudent navigation of these power realities, including attempts at manipulation, is part of the elite ethnographer's job.

I complement the ethnographic approach with quantitative methods for specific purposes. I use senior civil servants' biographies and diaries. Biographies and electronic diaries, coded and quantified, provide an alternative way of getting up-close and personal (cf. Van Dorp and Van de Donk 2020).

Thirdly, by studying SCS career patterns, I am able to track what professional backgrounds and career experiences are valued when appointing people for high office, including the 'hidden curriculum', the competencies and skills implied but not explicated in job advertisements. I have developed an original database of senior civil servant's careers, based on hard-to-find-but-public data sources. I have drawn from and combined government sources, social media profiles, news

articles and secondary literature to create a new source that can be periodically updated and used for longitudinal research as well as comparative research. In this book, I report on the first wave of this database.

Finally, the diary analysis is yet another way of getting up-close and personal. Though document based and conducted away from the direct presence of the participants, diaries are possibly the most personal documents that I use: I analysed the records of how, where and with whom senior civil servants spent their time. Diary analysis provides a view of how they allocate and prioritise the quantity of their attention and attendance of meetings and events, in the presence of political officeholders, fellow civil servants and external stakeholders.

All in all, the chapters included here draw on multiple research methods and data sources that substantiate my arguments. In total, I have conducted 342 hours of observations, and 113 elite interviews; I have constructed an original senior civil servant careers database comprising 247 senior civil servant's careers; and I have analysed three SCSs' annual diaries. All data were collected between 2015 and 2021 in Dutch government settings. Table 1.2 summarises the data sources per chapter.

Table 1.2 Data sources

Methods	Data sources	Chapter
Elite ethnography	160 hours of shadowing senior civil servants	5
	182 hours of shadowing city managers	6
Elite interviews	22 interviews with ministers and senior civil servants	2
	28 interviews with (prime) ministers, and senior civil servants.	3
	31 hours of interviews with senior civil servants and (prime) ministers	4
	32 interviews with mayors and city managers	6
Biographical analysis	An original database of 247 senior civil servants' careers	2
Diary analysis	Three diaries of city managers for 2015-2016	6

1.4.3 MIXED METHODS: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Deploying mixed methods has allowed me to investigate SCSs' craftwork in a triangulated manner, offering further depth than the customary interviews-only ('t Hart & Wille 2006) and survey studies (Hammerschmid et al. 2017) are able to (Creswell and Creswell 2017; Mele and Belardini 2019). Triangulating different methods also served for more rigorous analyses. For example, in chapter 2, I draw on both career data and interviews about careers. Although the research design is sub-optimal for causal conclusions, the qualitative findings speak to a causal mechanism that is suggested in the preceding quantitative findings part of the study. In this case, sequencing the methods reinforces the chapter's claims (Mele and Belardinelli 2019:336). In a different way, in

chapter 6, I did not sequence the methods (observations, interviews and diary analysis), but integrated them in a single narrative, allowing each method's result to tell its part of the story. For example, the diaries show the 'quantity' of their attention and attendance, while interviews and shadowing show the 'quality' of their attention and attendance. In this way, the methods reaffirm, yet also nuance each other. More than seeking 'validity' and 'reliability', this type of research seeks 'plausibility', 'credibility' and 'recognisability'.

Indeed, with each methodology and method – and their subsurface epistemology – come criteria for the quality of the research (Lincoln 1995; Ospina et al. 2018). Validity and reliability are to some extent relevant criteria for chapter 2, but chapters 3-6 emphasise different criteria, including transparency and transferability (cf. Blijleven 2021; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Discussing the results with SCSs in person, in writing and in group discussions (i.e., *member checks*) served to nuance findings, reassure anonymity of participants, and added to the credibility of the findings (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

1.5 The relevance of this study

This book's contributions benefit students and scholars in the field of public administration, as well as practitioners working the grind of civil service and political practice. This book gives a glimpse of those working at the heart of contemporary government's pinnacle. Each chapter provides a specific relevance statement outlining the respective contributions to academic and wider debates.

1.5.1 ACADEMIC RELEVANCE

Senior civil servants carry significant influence in political decision making, in that their words, behaviours and choices also bear upon 'who gets what, when and how' (cf. Lasswell 1936). Still, the academic literature dedicated to how public sector elites actually work remains remarkably small (Korica et al. 2015; Rhodes 2011; Trangbæk 2021). The combination of a managerial work and behaviour approach and ethnographic methods has equipped me with an in-depth grasp of SCSs' craft-in-use, situated in political-administrative interfaces. This is complementary to other studies of SCS that primarily use institutional data or survey data, or only rely on interview data. Importantly, this book updates findings of earlier administrative behaviour studies, but also contributes to the newly emerging craft perspective on public service work (e.g., Blijleven 2021; Paanakker 2021; Rhodes 2016; Shearer 2022; Van Putten 2020).

The next chapter reports on a study of elite appointments and presents a new research design that examines the web of factors that influence permanent secretary appointments (Bach and Veit 2018). Although studies of politicisation and bureaucratic appointments in The Netherlands have existed for some time (Ennser-Jedenastik 2016), I apply a method that advances the scholarship on elite appointments in The Netherlands, while also creating the possibility of comparative research. This analysis also bridges politicisation literature with the literature on the organisation of the state.

Finally, this book provides a refined understanding of politicisation dynamics in the upper echelons of the civil service, against the background of an increasing awareness of so-called functional politicisation (e.g., Belloir and Van den Berg 2020; Hustedt & Salomonsen 2014; Limbocker et al. 2022). Reimagining politicisation as a verb – politicisation as practice, or 'how is politicisation actually done?' – opens up a fresh way of studying politicisation as something SCSs do themselves, rather than something they are subject to.

1.5.2 PRACTICAL RELEVANCE

There is nothing casual about 'everyday life in government' (Rhodes 2011) in the early 21st century. On the contrary, most contemporary commentators would argue civil service leaders work in complex and turbulent times (Kearns Goodwin 2019; Van der Wal, 2017; Ansell, Trondal and Øgård 2017). Also, there is no shortage of reports that diagnose problems in the culture and machinery of government, both in the Netherlands (ABDTOPConsult 2020; ADR 2019; Raad van State 2020; Tweede Kamer 2021a; 2021b) and beyond (GAP 2021; Gerson 2021). In this book, I take a different approach. Without downplaying these diagnoses, I offer an informed contribution that shows senior civil servants' *situated agency*. My aims are interpretive, not evaluative. There is little need to rear sympathy for senior civil servants, but it is vital to understand their perspective better before one evaluates or makes recommendations. By seeking to flesh out SCSs' behaviour and attempting to understand it as *situated* agency, I complement the rhetoric of craft with the realities of SCSs.

Next, I study top bureaucratic appointments. The procedures involved in this have been analysed and evaluated before (Noordegraaf et al. 2020), but here I provide an analysis of a broader range of variables that factor into SCS appointment decisions, assessing their relative importance. This analysis allows decision makers and appointers of senior civil servants to see the fruits of their labour over the past decades. What have been important qualifying criteria and is there a 'hidden curriculum' that improves the odds of candidates?

Additionally, the insights from this book are helpful in management development programs and other teaching settings. The studies show routine as well as crisis work at the apex of Dutch government. The empirical parts of this book, in particular chapter 4-6, prove to be valuable case method teaching material in professional education settings.

1.5.3 SOCIETAL RELEVANCE

Finally, this book carries significance for the general public and non-elites. People sometimes wonder why such 'smart' people make ostensibly 'stupid' decisions, or why 'well-paid' people seem to 'do nothing' about problems that require urgent action. This book gives insight into the experience and work of SCSs. It does not explain specific policy decisions as such, but it allows a better understanding of the beliefs and practices of SCSs that make them act in the way they do. During the COVID-19 pandemic people received a stark reminder that the government can wield awesome powers. Lockdowns, states of emergency, law and order and restrictions in all walks of life made virtually everyone experience and acknowledge that governments' actions have consequences for all and that there are few options to duck these consequences. As Rhodes (2011: 1) reminds us 'the decisions of the great matter for good or for ill' (Rhodes 2011: 1), and that is why studying SCSs is not just an academic endeavour. It is also essential to allow citizens and their representatives a better understanding of what goes on in the workshops where this power is assembled.

1.6 Outline of the book

I conclude with an outline of the book, summarised in Table 1.3. This chapter has outlined the book's topic and has introduced the research questions. In chapter 2, I map and analyse careers of SCSs to find out which career paths have catapulted managers into high office over the past decades, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. This chapter outlines how the institutions of the civil service system incentivised certain career paths over others.

In chapter 3 I unpack the gravitational pull towards the heart of the core executive using the language of 'court politics.' I present interview data with (prime) ministers, cabinet secretaries and senior civil servants to discuss the relative influence of the prime minister on Dutch executive government. The chapter serves as an introduction to the Dutch core executive context which nurtures deliberate ambiguity. Taken together, chapters 2 and 3 *situate* SCSs' craftwork as civil servants in a centralising and mobile core executive.

Table 1.3 Outline of the book

	Title	Sub Research Question	Methods
1	Understanding senior civil servants		
2	Honing the craft	What career experiences have increased senior civil servants' chances of being appointed to a permanent secretary position during 2000-2020?	Career data, elite interviews
3	Situating the craft	Has the Dutch prime minister become predominant, and if so, how has this impacted the workings of the core executive?	Elite interviews
4	Zoning the craft	How do senior civil servants manage ministerial responsibility?	Elite interview
5	Politicising the craft	How do senior civil servants manage politicisation?	Shadowing
6	Organising the craft	How do senior civil servants allocate attention and attendance?	Shadowing, elite interviews, diaries
7	Grasping craftwork		

Then, I present three independent chapters of senior civil servants' craftwork. Here, I move from *situation* to *agency* and focus on the work and behaviour of SCSs. In Chapter 4, I draw from the biography of a particularly authoritative senior civil servant to analyse the craftwork of managing ministerial responsibility. In more informal language, they straddle being responsive and being astute. The study provides a deep dive into the professionally intimate political-administrative relations that can occur in the prime minister's office.

Chapter 5 presents an ethnographic study of managing politicisation and tells of how senior civil servants handle the minister's prerogative. Here, I make the argument that the civil service politicises itself, also to shed new light on the notion of 'functional politicisation'. SCSs do so by presenting themselves as *proxies* of the minister.

Chapter 6 is about managing attention and attendance, diving into the organisational environments in which SCSs have to 'manage down' and 'out', instead of merely 'managing up'. This is again a mixed methods study, combining ethnography, interviews and diary analysis, detailing how horizontal ambitions succumb to vertical pressures.

In chapter 7, I summarise the findings, theoretical concepts and discussions in order to answer the central research question. Here, I try to grasp how senior civil servants practice their craft as 'craftwork'. I discuss this in light of literature and public sector reforms. I explore the aggregate implications of these studies for theoretical and professional debates. Finally, I suggest ways that may help to advance our understanding of senior civil servants' craftwork.

2

Honing the Craft:
Paths to High Office

2.1 Introduction

In 1994, the Dutch cabinet decided that the upper echelons of the civil service would form a *general* civil service: a pool of 'mobile' civil servants that would rotate across departments. Traditionally, civil servants would rise through the ranks within one department; now senior civil servants were incentivised to move across departments, going from one domain to another in a 'bureaucratic merry-go-round'. One could work in education policy, before transferring to economic policy or move up in home affairs. Modelled after the British civil service, this institutional reform sought to reaffirm political control of departments, prevent policy siloes by stimulating cross-pollination, advance the professionalisation of public management and offer an opportunity for senior civil servants to diversify their career paths (Noordegraaf et al. 2020; Steen & Van der Meer 2009). Today, this *general civil service* (Dutch: *Algemene Bestuursdienst*, hereafter: ABD) has become an institutional fixture within the Dutch core executive.

Positioned to act as a driver of renewal and professionalisation of the senior civil service, the Dutch ABD system is an example of a wider phenomenon. In various countries, senior executive services were developed with similar strategic goals (Kuperus & Rode 2016). Centralised executive services, in for example the UK, the USA and Estonia, are key to senior civil service training and socialisation (Van Wart et al. 2015) and performance appraisal (Van der Wal 2017a). Such institutional reforms can help civil servants to strike a bargain between their partisan and professional leanings, as they bond civil servants in a professional group with a shared esprit de corps (Breed 2007; Ebinger et al. 2019; Hood & Lodge 2006). Moreover, and central to the aim of this chapter, such executive services play a critical role in appointing senior civil servants.

In this chapter, I study the career paths of the senior civil servants that make up the ABD's elite cadre: the Top Management Group. Within this pool, I focus on those individuals who reach the very top and become a permanent secretary, a 'secretary general' in the Dutch system. I map their careers and see if and how they differ from those elite members who do not. More specifically, I ask this research question: what career experiences have increased senior civil servants' chances of being appointed to a permanent secretary position during 2000-2020?

My approach to answer this question is to study SCSs' career paths in close detail and to examine if these paths help to explain who among them gets to be appointed secretary. From those who are appointed from within the ABD pool, is there a 'road much travelled' that sets them apart from those who do not? Needless to say, appointments are a complex and contingent phenomenon and there are multiple factors at play. Hence, this analysis cannot account for all factors – or provide a full explanation of variables that factor into secretary appointments – but it does point to the relative weight of a selection of important factors.

To that end, I draw on an original database and use Cox regression analysis to map and analyse the careers of all Dutch senior civil servants who were potential secretaries in the period 2000-2020. I identify which key 'places' (i.e., working in a certain department) and 'practices' (i.e., doing a certain kind of job) positively or negatively predict the odds of being appointed permanent secretary. This quantitative analysis is complemented by 22 elite interviews with individual current and former secretaries and other senior civil servants to obtain up-close reflections on the senior civil servants' craft, their personal career paths, and their beliefs about the factors that shaped them. In doing so, I build on earlier studies in different contexts. Both Bach and Veit (2018) and Fleischer and Seyfried (2015) used a candidate pool selection technique to study which career paths increase the chances of being promoted to high office (respectively administrative and ministerial positions).

I have applied this research method to the Dutch context and have embedded it into a broader mixed method design that also encompasses a qualitative component, e.g., elite interviews with senior civil servants. The main finding of this chapter is that an explicit affiliation with minister-delivering political parties and having worked in the prime minister's office significantly increase the odds of a candidate's appointment to a PS position from the candidate pool, whereas managerial experience does not.

This study is relevant for three reasons. First, it helps to gain a better understanding of the career paths that lead civil servants into high office. These career paths matter to civil service professionalisation (e.g., Van Wart et al. 2015), What do they bring to high office? Do partisan preferences, professional background, early and midcareer positionality and socialisation matter? What expertise and experience are valued? Is there a particular career-incubating 'cradle of power' (Trangbæk 2022)?

Second, this chapter bridges literature on formal politicisation and the core executive (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Peter and Pierre 2004). I bring tried and tested hypotheses from the politicisation domain (e.g., H1) and combine these with hypotheses concerning central agencies in the core executive (H5-6). Taking the organisation of the state, and in particular central agencies, into consideration provides a novel perspective to the study of government elite appointments.

Third, answering Bach and Wegrich's (2020) call for more studies of senior civil servants' careers, the original database of SCSs' careers compiled for this chapter allows for an analysis of factors associated with secretary-level appointments between 2000-2020. While cross-sectional and descriptive accounts of Dutch secretaries' political membership, age, gender and other variables do exist (e.g., Raadschelders & Van der Meer 2014; Steen and Van der Meer 2011), this study allows for more rigorous and nuanced analyses. In contrast to these existing studies, the analyses in this chapter serve to show the *relative* importance of certain career paths. The database unlocks publicly available data and opens up comparative opportunities as similar studies in other contexts continue to be published (Bach and Veit 2018; Cooper et al. 2020). These comparative studies inform academic debates on civil service appointments, but are also used by practitioners in national, European and OECD contexts (Gerson 2020; Kuperus and Rode 2016).

The chapter is structured as follows. I first introduce the permanent secretary's position and role within the Dutch core executive, before mining the literature and outlining three sets of hypotheses concerning plausibly important predictors of secretary appointments: 1) partisan affiliation, 2) managerial experience and 3) central agency experience. After describing the mixed methods research design, I present the empirical findings, answer the research question and discuss the findings in light of recent academic and public debates.

2.2 Permanent secretaries in the Dutch core executive

The permanent secretary (Dutch: '*Secretaris-Generaal*', hereafter: PS) is the top-ranking official within the 12 Dutch national government ministries (Lemstra, 1993; Raadschelders & Van der Meer 2014). PSs chair the departmental board and are responsible for the management of their departments, though they often explicitly share this responsibility with other members of the departmental board, including Directors-general and the deputy PS. The Board of PSs meets weekly to discuss supra- and interdepartmental issues, current affairs and the upcoming cabinet meeting's agenda. This weekly meeting is chaired by the PS of the ministry of General Affairs (effectively the prime minister's office), who acts as primus inter pares (Weller et al. 2021). While all PSs are hierarchically level, the gravitas of this position varies across office holders and departments. For example, Raadschelders and Van der Meer (2014: 730) note that directors-general at the Ministry of Finance have considerable clout, at the expense of the department's PS.

Secretary-level appointment procedures involves some key steps. First, vacancies are published and advertised by the ABD. The position based civil service system has open vacancies and anyone can apply. Some candidates may be asked to apply though recruiters. Ministers can also suggest

names for the position, but their suggested candidates must always pass the selection procedures. A pre-selection committee consisting of an independent chair, HR professionals and peer PSs draws up a shortlist, based on CVs and experience. Candidates are carefully screened by the ABD office. The prospective candidate is interviewed by the respective minister to see if there is a 'match' between them. If not, a minister can veto a candidate. If all is well, the minister of the Interior and Kingdom relations – who is responsible for the civil service and the ABD – will nominate the candidate for the post, after which the cabinet needs to sign off. The procedure is formalised, but exceptions happen. For example, the procedure can be reversed, so candidates are first interviewed by the minister to see if there is a match before they enter the selection procedure (Noordegraaf et al. 2020).

2.3 Understanding senior civil servants' careers

Longitudinal or comparative studies of secretary-level are rare, yet the broader literature on politicisation of the civil service identifies political alignment and managerial experience as key predictors of PS appointments (Bach and Veit, 2018).

2.3.1 PARTISAN AFFILIATION

First, as the PS is considered the chief bureaucrat in a department, s/he is an important adviser to the minister. This position requires considerable ability as well as loyalty – ministers must be able to trust their PSs in both regards (Hood & Lodge 2006). In order to increase trust in PSs, minister have a say in appointment procedures, opening the angle of politicisation of civil service appointments. Peters and Pierre (2004) assert that politicians' wish to control bureaucracies – often referred to as 'politicisation' – is a powerful force in many governments. They define formal politicisation as 'the substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards, and disciplining of members of the public service' (2004: 2, see also Belloir, Van den Berg and Shaw, forthcoming). Bach and Veit (2018) find that in the appointment of state secretaries in Germany, partisan loyalty outweighs other factors including managerial experience. Bach et al. (2020: 14) map the levels of perceived politicisation of senior-level appointments in 18 European countries. They place Iceland and Denmark on the low end, with Portugal and Spain on the top end, reflecting a broad consensus among civil servants about politicisation of appointments in these respective countries. In this range of European countries, Germany – where partisan loyalty outweighs all other tested variables (Bach and Veit 2018) – takes

a middle position. In Australia, and France, experience in ministerial offices or cabinets has become a sine qua non for departmental secretary positions (Russel 2021).

In Bach et al.'s (2020) study, senior-level appointments in Dutch central government are perceived to be only slightly politicised. This reflects formal policy where ministers have a say in PS appointments as part of a merit-based process (Bourgault 2020). Van der Velde (2021) does not find evidence of party-political considerations in PS appointments in the Netherlands, based on a quantitative analysis of 63 appointments between 1994-2020.

Notwithstanding that, Van der Meer (2004: 216-21) noted that claims about political steering op top civil service appointments continue to be aired. A prominent fact underpinning these claims is the high proportion of often visible party membership among PSs and directors-general (DGs) (Van der Velde, 2021). In a study of Dutch PSs from 1945 until 2013, Ennser-Jedenastik (2016) finds that 70% of PSs have a discernible partisan affiliation, with a strong increase from 1970 on. He concludes: 'party politicization remains a significant feature of the Dutch elite bureaucracy' (2016: 468). Providing cross-sectional descriptive data from 2009, Steen and Van der Meer state: 'it is rare that a secretary-general with a party affiliation divergent from the political colour of the ruling coalition is appointed' (2011: 226). In the 1990s, partisan appointments were less common (Van der Meer 2004), while they were common before the 1990s (Ennser-Jedenastik 2016). So, political control of appointment to PS positions appears to be neither an endemic phenomenon nor a secular trend. However, it is relevant to investigate to what extent partisan affiliations are a factor in PS appointments. Seeking to either support or refute this claim, I therefore hypothesise that:

H1: Candidates who are affiliated with a coalition party are more likely to be appointed permanent secretary than those who are not.

2.3.2 MANAGERIAL EXPERIENCE

Second, PSs are responsible for the management of their departments. This responsibility relies on the managerial experience and practical wisdom they must have acquired in their career. Van Dorp and 't Hart (2019) describe the Dutch PSs as straddling steering and serving their ministers at the same time. This dual craft involves blending political astuteness with administrative and managerial skills (Goetz 1997; Hartley et al. 2015; Rhodes 2016). In merit bureaucracies, skills, craft and managerial experience are key characteristics of civil service competence (Noordegraaf 2015; Van der Wal 2017b). Weber deemed *Dienstwissen* essential to thriving civil servants. Experience, doing time in administrative organisations, is how civil servants gain this practical knowledge. PSs are

responsible for the management of their department. Experience in senior managerial positions in government, for example having experience working as a director-general, is likely an important requirement for a PS position. On the wings of New Public Management, managerial skills and experience have become more valued in many bureaucracies (Hood & Lodge 2006). Cooper (2020) identifies a managerial bargain for deputy ministers in Canada from the 1980s onwards. Therefore, all potential PSs are likely to have extensive managerial experience, either in government or elsewhere. Therefore, I hypothesise:

H2: Candidates with senior managerial experience in a ministry are more likely to be appointed permanent secretary than individuals without this experience.

Second, as PSs are general managers of their departments, they likely benefit from experience in multiple settings, departments and sectors (Lemstra 1993; Van der Wal 2017). Ever since its inception in 1995, the ABD has sought to forge a break with the siloed careers and mindsets of past generations of SCSs (Noordegraaf et al. 2020). In its vision on public leadership, SCS in general and PSs in particular are now expected to be credible as champions of cross-departmental collaboration (ABD 2016). Therefore:

H3: The more ministries an individual has worked in, the larger the chance of appointment as permanent secretary.

PSs are responsible for the full range of the department's functions and organisational entities, often encompassing large service delivery agencies and regulatory agencies. In civil service common parlance, PSs act as the 'owners' of these arms-length agencies. Given this, one would expect that work experience at senior levels in these different functions will be to the credit of candidates for PS appointments (ABDTOPConsult 2020). Hence:

H4: The more government functions an individual has worked in, the larger the chance of appointment as permanent secretary.

2.3.3 CENTRAL AGENCY EXPERIENCE

A third set of factors is derived from the core executive literature, which stresses the growing influence of the centre on government processes, including appointments (Bourgault et al. 2020;

Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Weller et al. 2021). The importance of central agencies for PS appointments in the Netherlands remains unevaluated until now.

Many core executive studies highlight the importance of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance as key actors (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Weller et al. 2021 In a recent study of Danish cabinet government, Rhodes and Salomonsen (2019) assert that the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the Ministry of Finance (MoF) form a 'duopoly' – together they shape the heart of the core executive in Denmark. The impact of these central agencies is profound. Policies, they find, must be cleared by both and a veto from the Ministry of Finance will block any bill (see also Weller et al. 2021). In Canada, Cooper (2020) finds that secretary-level appointments rely on prime ministers' preferences, illustrating the strength of the centre of executive government. Also, although departmental secretaries in Australia may serve their ministers, they are appointed by the prime minister (Podger 2009; Russell 2021).

Civil servants working in these agencies are likely to be formed by these central agencies too (Goetz 1997). They develop a 'view from the centre' rather than a siloed outlook. Given PSs' responsibilities for working interdepartmentally and coordinating across government organisations, the PMO and MoF are plausibly places which stimulate skills and practices that are recognised as being important to PSs, including generating networks across departments.

In the Netherlands, the Prime Minister's Office is responsible for the effectiveness of the Cabinet (Weller et al. 2021). While they work primarily for the PM, it is not the PM's private office (Van Dorp and 't Hart 2019). Councillors in the PMO are likely to develop a good sense of 'political management'; they learn to broker conflicts in cabinet and committees before they escalate and build wide-ranging and high-level networks across departments, which again is likely helpful for becoming PS. The Ministry of Finance also nurtures a view from the centre, but with an eye for budgets rather than political management, and there are few policies which do not involve budgets. Analogous to the pivotal role of their ministers in cabinet (Weller et al. 2021), civil servants from the Ministry of Finance have considerable clout among their peers in other departments. Treasury know-who and know-how is a considerable asset for any secretary. Therefore, I hypothesise that:

H5: Candidates with experience in the Prime Minister's Office are more likely to be appointed as permanent secretary than those without.

H6: Candidates with experience in the Ministry of Finance are more likely to be appointed as permanent secretary than those without.

2.4 Research design: Mapping career paths

In order to map the careers leading up to permanent secretary positions, I use a candidate pool selection design, drawing on biographical data on Dutch SCSs who were active in the past 20 years (cf. Bach and Veit 2018; Fleischer and Seyfried 2015). To analyse the beliefs of PSs and other key actors, I have conducted elite interviews with PSs and relevant key actors in the core executive. Combined into a mixed methods design, these two research methods allow an analysis of the emergent patterns of permanent secretary appointments over the past decades (using career data), as well as an analysis of the beliefs and practices regarding the craft and careers of Dutch PSs (using elite interviews).

2.4.1 CANDIDATE POOL SELECTION DESIGN

The analysis should encompass the careers of people who became permanent secretary and those who had reasonable prospects but were not appointed. A candidate pool selection design (Bach and Veit 2018; Fleischer and Seyfried 2015) requires a predefined pool of candidates who had the potential to become permanent secretary, out of which only a subset was actually appointed. In total, 247 candidates were included in the pool based on the positions they held between 2000 and 2020. The criterion for inclusion into the candidate pool was membership of the Top Management Group, the Dutch senior civil service's top cadre. This group includes all PSs, directors-general and inspector-generals. Interim members were not included. The pool used to consist of roughly 60 candidates. During the observation window (2000-2020), the TMG expanded to include additional positions, including deputy PSs and some directors, totalling just under 100 candidates in the pool. Taking the Top Management Group as candidate pool emulates Dutch senior civil service appointment practice: from 2000 until 2020, 39 PS appointments came from the defined candidate pool (85%). Only 7 from outside it (15%).

Although this design is time-sensitive and encompasses a span of 21 years, it is not longitudinal. It does not offer insight about how the rules of the game of PS appointments have changed over time. It would be possible to divide the observation window in multiple sub-windows, e.g., 2000-2010 and 2011-2020 (which would coincide with a change of prime ministers). However, this would severely limit the number of observations in each window. The shorter timeframe would also increase the limiting effect of 'left-censoring', rendering the result less reliable (Cain et al. 2011). Multiple time windows could work with analyses over a longer time span.

The *Staatsalmanak* (the Dutch government's '*Who's who*') was the key data source for including candidates into the pool. Additional resources – manually searching LinkedIn profiles, government

websites, press releases, newspaper articles, and academic studies – were then used as data sources to retrieve and triangulate each candidate's biographies and career paths.

As Table 2.3 shows, some variables report missing data. As cases were excluded list-wise from the analysis, the final models include 183 cases of which 39 were appointed to PS positions. 48 cases with missing values were excluded, plus an additional 16 cases which were censored before the earliest PS appointment.

2.4.2 MEASURES

The dependent variable for analysing the 'successful' career paths is measured as the time between entering the candidate pool and reaching the 'end station', i.e., becoming permanent secretary (mean= 5.86 years, SD= 3.44) As not everyone in the pool becomes PS during the period of observation, the observation of careers is 'right censored' – that is ended – either by leaving the candidate pool due to e.g. retirement or by the end of the observation period (31 December 2020). Some may become PS later on, but some will not.

Corresponding to the candidate pool selection design, candidates who were appointed from outside the candidate pool were excluded from the analysis (15% of appointments). Those who were appointed as PS were right censored on the day of appointment. Candidates who were appointed twice were duplicated with corresponding right censoring dates and experiences. A variable 'PS Experience' measured the effect of repeating PS appointments. Each candidate's career was reconstructed from its beginning until right-censoring.

Variables that measured the time spent in a certain place (e.g., the PMO) were recoded into binary variables. Such binary variables reflect whether a candidate has a certain experience under their belt or not, rather than reflecting the amount of time they spent in that place.

In addition to the independent variables stipulated in the hypotheses I included common demographic characteristics as control variables: age upon pool entry, gender (male/female), and whether candidates have earned a PhD or not. Having an MA degree is not included in the analysis because there is very little variance in the data – 94% of the pool has earned at least an MA degree. This renders it a plausible precondition for entering the candidate pool, but not for appointment from within the pool.

Table 2.1 Operationalisation of variables

Variable	Operationalisation	Min	Max
Dependent variable			
Time until appointment	Number of years between pool entry and date of PS appointment (or right censoring if not appointed)	0	21

Independent variables			
Partisan alignment	Whether a candidate has partaken in activities of a political party that routinely carried cabinet responsibility, including delivering cabinet ministers during the observation window (VVD, CDA, PvdA, D66, CU).	0	1
PS experience	Whether a candidate has been Permanent secretary	0	1
DG experience	Whether a candidate has been Director-General	0	1
Departmental mobility	The number of departments a candidate has worked in	1	n
Functional mobility	The number of functions (policy, public service delivery, regulation, knowledge) a candidate has worked in	1	4
PMO experience	Whether a candidate has worked in the Prime Minister's Office	0	1
MoF experience	Whether a candidate has worked in the Ministry of Finance	0	1
Controls			
Age upon pool entry (years)	A candidate's age upon entry in the selection pool	n	67
Gender (male=1)	A candidate's gender (male or female)	0	1
PhD	Whether a candidate has earned a PhD	0	1

2.4.3 ANALYSIS

I use cox regression models to analyse the career data (Box-Steffensmeier and Jones 1997). As career data are time-sensitive and right-censored, Cox regression models are preferred over OLS models (Bovens, Brandsma and Thesingh 2014; Golub 2008; Howard Grøn, Opstrup, Salomonsen and Villadsen 2021). All variables meet the proportional hazards assumption necessary for these models. A Cox regression model presents an estimate (hazard ratio) of the increased/decreased odds that a given independent variable adds to the event happening. In other words, whether a variable such as PMO Experience increases or decreases the odds of the appointment to permanent secretary. The models in Table 2.3 allow an analysis of the direct relationships between independent variables and the dependent variable.

2.4.4 ELITE INTERVIEWS

Twenty-two semi-structured elite interviews with long-serving PSs, ministers and SCSs were conducted between 2015 and 2021. Fourteen interviewees were male, four female; thirteen were still in office during the time of the interview, five had recently retired. Most interviews took one hour, some two. Interviewees were designed to discuss the progression of their careers and the craft they had learned and practiced. The interview transcripts were analysed using thematic coding,

guided by the themes that structure this chapter: political affiliation, managerial experience, and central agency experiences (Braun and Clarke 2006).

2.5 Permanent secretary appointments: Career path data

In this paragraph I first report the career path data which suggest multiple explanations of permanent secretary positions, before I complement these with qualitative elite interviews. Table 2.2 present the descriptive data and the Appendix provides a correlations matrix of the same variables.

Table 2.2 Descriptive statistics of the candidate pool

Variable	Valid N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Independent variables					
Partisan alignment	237	0.27	0.45	0	1
PS experience	247	0.08	0.33	0	1
DG experience	247	0.69	0.46	0	1
Departmental mobility	237	2.37	1.23	1	6
Functional mobility	236	1.35	0.55	1	3
PMO experience	236	0.11	0.32	0	1
MoF experience	235	0.24	0.43	0	1
Controls					
Age upon pool entry (years)	195	50.45	5.17	40	65
Gender (male=1)	247	0.75	0.43	0	1
PhD	247	0.15	0.36	0	1

Table 2.3 presents the results of the Cox regression analysis in five successive models. The first model includes only the control variables. Model 1 suggests that candidates with a PhD are significantly less likely to become permanent secretary than those without (Exp(B)=0.17, $p<0.05$). This variable remains stable across all subsequent models (although the p-value varies slightly). A plausible explanation is the inclusion of several (former) researchers and professors in the pool who acted as heads of research institutes, planning agencies and inspectorates. While up until the 1990s, several professors had been appointed straight out of academia, that has not occurred since. The gender variable signals that the odds for men were favourable compared to women, but the variable is not statistically significant.

Model 2 adds the 'partisan activity' variable to the first model. This variable shows a positive exp(B) of 5.16, with p<0.001, meaning explicit partisan activity in the political parties that routinely carry cabinet responsibilities increases the odds of a candidate's appointment to permanent secretary with 516%. This provides clear support for hypothesis H1. In the career paths, partisan activity ranges from being assistant to MPs, being elected city councillor and holding mayoral office to relatively low-profile partisan activity such as chairing a regional committee of a political party. The partisan affiliation hazard ratio is larger than any other in any of the models. Table 1 shows that only 27% of the candidates in the pool are explicitly active in political parties, making it an unlikely necessary precondition for pool entry, but a characteristic that sets potential PSs apart from their fellow candidates in the pool.

Table 2.3 Cox regression results

Independent variables	Model 1: Controls		Model 2: Partisan Affiliation		Model 3: Managerial Experience		Model 4: Central Agencies		Model 5: Full Model	
	Exp(B)	SE	Exp(B)	SE	Exp(B)	SE	Exp(B)	SE	Exp(B)	SE
Partisan affiliation			5.16***	0.34					5.16***	0.36
PS experience					1.72*	0.30			1.00	0.33
DG experience					0.90	0.43			0.96	0.46
Dept. mobility					1.05	0.15			1.10	0.14
Functional mobility					0.53*	0.37			0.59	0.39
PMO experience							2.96***	0.38	2.97**	0.46
MoF experience							0.98	0.40	0.70	0.44
Gender (1=male)	1.79	0.43	1.52	0.43	1.40	0.44	1.77	0.44	1.43	0.43
Age upon entry	0.95	0.04	0.97	0.04	0.97	0.04	0.97	0.04	0.99	0.04
PhD	0.17**	0.73	0.13***	0.74	0.19**	0.77	0.17**	0.73	0.14 **	0.80
-2 Log Likelihood	328.65		305.69		318.23		318.69		292.33	

Dependent variable: time from pool entry to PS appointment

Exp(B) Values 1 and higher indicate an increase of the odds of a PS appointment from the pool. Values below 1 indicate a decrease.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Model 3 includes the variables regarding managerial experience on top of the control variables. Having prior experience as PS (for example before the observation period) has a positive effect (1.72), but the effect is only statistically significant at p<0.1. Unexpectedly, having previous experience as director-general does not seem to increase one's odds of becoming PS. On the contrary, a statistically non-significant hazard ratio of 0.90 indicates a small decrease, challenging

the narrative of 'rising through the ranks.' While DG experience is not necessarily bad for a candidate's prospects, the statistics provide no basis to conclude that it is a necessary (or even a helpful) condition for becoming PS. Together, this provides mixed results, but no support for H2. PSs' career paths often include many senior managerial positions, just not necessarily director-general positions. Departmental mobility reveals a slightly positive effect, but it is not significant. Functional mobility, having worked in multiple functions (policy making, frontline agencies, regulation) rather than in a single function, does not seem to advance PS appointments. The hazard ratio of 0.53 (p<0.1) shows a decreasing effect. Together, the Cox regression provides no support for hypotheses H3 and H4.

Model 4 tests the relative importance of central agencies as critical 'cradles of power' (Trangbæk 2022) where candidates hone their craft and are likely to develop a 'view from the centre'. The PMO Experience variable shows a strong and significant positive impulse for PS appointments (2.96, p<0.01), trumped only by partisan activity (see model 2). This provides clear support for hypothesis 5. As with partisan activity, PMO Experience does not seem a likely precondition for pool entry as only 11% of the candidate pool has spent time in the PMO. Former PMO staff appears to be overrepresented among the highest echelon of the Dutch civil service. Contrary to my expectations, experience in the Ministry of Finance shows a small inverse effect (Exp(B): 0.98, n.s.), leaving no support for H6.

Finally, model 5 includes all variables. Three things stand out. First, partisan affiliation remains the strongest variable in the model, reflecting an important indicator of successful PS appointments (Exp(B): 5.16, p<0.001). Second, PMO Experience also retains a strong positive hazard ratio in the final model (Exp(B): 2.97, p<0.019). The remaining variables (PS Experience, DG Experience, Departmental mobility, Functional mobility, and MoF Experience,) show no significant effects in the model 5. Contrary to the theorised expectations, these variables do not significantly predict advanced PS appointments, while partisan activity and PMO experience do. The control variables gender and age upon entry in the pool do not show significant effects, whereas having a PhD is a clear non-starter for a PS appointment.

2.6 Interpreting secretary appointments: Elite interviews

The qualitative component of the research design comprises of interviews with PSs, ministers and elite HR experts in the Dutch civil service system. It highlights some of the critical experiences in SCSs' career paths that predict an increase in the odds of becoming permanent secretary. These

findings contextualise and nuance the significance of partisan affiliation and central agency experience.

2.6.1 PARTISAN AFFILIATION

The influence of politicians and partisan activity on PS appointments proves a mealy-mouthed subject among Dutch interviewees. Some interviewees defend the neutrality of the system and suggest that political appointments do not happen. Instead, they emphasise the importance of 'chemistry' between minister and PS – the need for '*compatibilité d'humeur'*. For instance: 'There must be a fit with the permanent secretary' (Interview DG, 2020). Also, 'the political complexion [of a PS] does not matter, it is a matter of competence' (Interview Minister, 2020). A permanent secretary stresses the trust that should exist between minister and PS: 'apparently he thought that I was a nice guy and that's not unimportant because it's very much a one-on-one trust relationship' (Interview PS, 2017). In this vein, a government HR executive noted that the current prime minister was keen to say about PS appointments: 'I don't care who it is, as long as they are not from my party' (Interview government HR executive, 2020). At the same time, however, interviewees agree that even if ministers cannot force appointments of their choice, they shape appointment processes by vetoing candidates they do not want. A PS told a story of an appointment in the observation window, in which a minister used his/her veto to bend an appointment to his/her liking:

> There was a vacancy for a PS position. The ABD came up with a shortlist of candidates that met the department's and minister's preferences and requirements. Good candidates with ample experience etc. After the shortlist was presented, the minister asked X [name withheld], who was not on the shortlist whether s/he'd be interested. Explaining his/her request, the minister 'sensed opposition in the department' and, plainly, wanted someone else – a need for a 'breath of fresh air'. By now, the ABD realised their top candidates would be vetoed anyway. In the end X was appointed PS (Interview PS 2020).

This excerpt tells of a minister's influence and ability to ignore shortlists with prospective candidates, not necessarily of blunt party-political colonisation of the departments. Indeed, most interviewees share nuanced experiences. However, this does not rule out partisan appointments or appointments of people who 'think like we do'. In response to the question 'for Ministers, is it a matter of finding a safe pair of hands, or rather introducing fellow partisans on the field?' a PS answered resolutely: 'It's both' (Interview PS, 2021).

While all top management group appointments risk partisan influence, it seems to be more salient in PS appointments. 'There are many checks and balances in the system that prevent political appointments, but political considerations play a bigger role in PS appointments' (Interview PS, 2020). Another PS echoed this: 'At the top level, there's a professional system with checks and balances, but in the end, it is a cabinet decision. [...] There's a fair bit of pressure in the system. You need to have a strong backbone to deal with that' (Interview PS, 2020).

Additionally, a senior ministerial advisor was confident about the weight of ministerial preferences in appointments: 'when a minister wants someone, they will get that person. If they are to have a political complexion, it's going to be theirs (Interview ministerial adviser, 2017). Together, these quotes illustrate that though seasoned PSs may believe in a neutral civil service and appointments, they foster few illusions about the partisan influence on the process: 'Ministers love to be involved in civil service appointments' (Interview PS, 2021).

The importance of partisan influence may likely ebb and flow, contingent on cabinet composition, personal ambitions, and windows of opportunity. One PS believed it became more important over the past twenty years: 'I rose through the ranks: head of a group, deputy director, director, director-general, permanent secretary. Not once was I asked about my political affiliation. Nowadays I would be, I'm sure' (Interview retired PS, 2017). Others look on the bright side of neutral appointments. An incumbent PS confided that the ABD and the PSs collectively had 'prevented a few partisan appointments' in recent years (Interview PS, 2020). Again, PSs showed that they were mindful of partisan influence. However, s/he stressed the resilience of current merit-based procedures in the light of partisan involvement.

A long-serving PS believed that hiring and firing procedures were tweaked 'to repair the underrepresentation of one political party among top civil service positions. That's how anxiety creeps into the system' (Interview retired PS, 2020). This quote suggests that when deciding on appointments, the cabinet has an eye for a level of equity in the distribution of PS positions among the cabinet parties that routinely deliver ministers.

2.6.2 CENTRAL AGENCY EXPERIENCE

The quantitative analysis signals the importance of doing time in the prime minister's office for PS appointments. Interviewees concur but stress the relatively recent nature of that phenomenon. For example, a former DG reflected on the seemingly permanent tenure of PMO councillors: When I was in the Prime Minister's office, you would die there. I nearly died there. I spent 20 years in the Prime Minister's office, but it has changed now and it's now a senior career move. (Interview former DG, 2017). This development of the PMO, from an end-of-career-paradise to a career

catalyst for mid-career civil servant with skill and ambition, did not happen by accident. This make-over was a deliberate move to position the PMO at the centre of the core executive, according to a former PS of the PMO. He reflects: 'I developed the PMO as a place in the Civil Service where you gather talents who then go on to become DG or PS in different departments. […] I strongly emphasised this, and it worked. All councillors were replaced. All of them became DG or PS. They all went on, and half of them were women' (Interview retired PS, 2015).

In this chapter, I theorised that experience in central agencies provides civil servants with a view from the centre. If these civil servants go on to fulfil top positions, chances are they share a common socialisation, including biases: 'the risk of emphasising central agencies as a condition for promotion, is that there's not enough variety in the top. That's why you need people in these agencies from all departments' (Interview retired PS, 2015).

2.7 Discussion: The implicit politics of permanent secretary appointments

The findings provide an answer to the research question: what career experiences have increased senior civil servants' odds of being appointed to a permanent secretary position during 2000-2020? Partisan activity and PMO experience stand out as factors that catalyse PS appointments from the candidate pool. As stated, there are multiple factors at play; this chapter cannot provide a full explanation of PS appointments between 2000-2020 in all their complexity and contingency. The predictors I identify in the empirical analysis do not fully determine appointments, but they show their relative *weight* in PS appointments from the pool. Also, appointments are not purely individual decisions in isolation. In many ways, they are contingent on team dynamics and complementary competence, networks and experience. In other words, a civil servant's career path depends in part on the career paths of her colleagues in the pool. Moreover, PS appointments are not even just a bargain between minister and PS-to-be but are actively mediated and moderated by the ABD.

Reflecting on the findings and hypotheses, I identify three lessons for students of senior civil service appointments. First of all, this analysis underlines the politics of a neutral civil service system. It showed support for the first hypothesis: Candidates who are affiliated with a coalition party are more likely to be appointed as permanent secretary than those who have not. While the Netherlands may score comparatively low on formal politicisation (Bach et al. 2020), partisan influence is not absent and looms large in civil servants' minds.

Still, the analysis suggests there is a premium on explicit partisan affiliation – as expressed in 'doing things' and not just mere party membership – for PS appointments. In the mix of other factors that influence someone's appointment to PS, partisan activity in one of the cabinet parties

predicts an increase in one's odds. It is however not a necessary condition, as there are multiple PSs who do not partake in partisan activities as well as one PS that was active for a non-cabinet party. As more routinely minister-delivering party minded PSs hold office, certain viewpoints may be taken for granted, or doctrinally ignored among the upper echelons. In Schattschneider's (1960) language: some biases are mobilised at the expense of others.

A contextual explanation for partisan overrepresentation may be the low numbers and junior status of partisan ministerial advisers (cf. Van den Berg 2018). While the need for tactical political advice is likely as high in the Dutch system as it is anywhere else, its policy advisory system offers few hands who can deliver. This puts SCSs, and PSs in particular, 'in the zone' where they are expected to fuse policy advice with political advice (Belloir et al. forthcoming; Trangbæk 2021). Having first-hand experience of doing *party* political work may well be perceived to provide SCSs who have a leg up in doing the *functionally* political work that PSs cannot shy away from. In other words, we must distinguish party politics from functional politics.

Second, the hypotheses regarding managerial experiences (H2-H4) were not supported by this analysis. These results are counterintuitive and do only partly correspond with existing findings by Bach and Veit (2018). In the German context, managerial experience was a significant 'determinant of promotion to the highest bureaucratic office.' Yet, similar to the present analysis, they also found that ministers give more weight to partisan loyalty than they do to managerial expertise. At first glance it seems like managerial experience is not important for PS appointments in the Netherlands – as if cabinets do not appreciate able managers. However, the descriptive data shows that all members of the pool have considerable experience, as directors or equivalent, in various departments, working in policy, implementation, regulation and beyond. Those who became PS tended to have focussed on policy making, rather than implementation or regulation, but the differences are not statistically significant. As virtually everyone in the pool is an experienced manager, this makes it a likely precondition for TMG pool entry. However, once candidates are in the pool, their senior managerial experience, e.g., having been a DG, no longer sets them apart from others in the pool.

Third, the analysis suggests the clout of the core executive in an otherwise departmentalised organised civil service system. The quantitative evidence shows that experience in the Prime Minister's Office counts as an advantage in PS appointment procedures in departments elsewhere. The elite interviews corroborate this finding and provide a rationale for it. It has been a deliberate intent to attract talent into the PMO, who would then go on to become DG or PS. The Dutch PMO appears to weigh in on departmental appointments too, through successfully plugging PMO staff into senior executive positions in other departments. Arguably, this catapults people who are

acquainted with a 'view from the centre', an awareness of coalition management and an understanding of the PM as leader of the government into pivotal positions across the civil service. The PMO plausibly mobilises a centre-focused bias among PSs.

However, the equivalent to the Danish duopoly (Rhodes and Salomonsen 2019) or an ascendancy of central agencies as (has been) occurring in other contexts, in terms of its impact on PS appointments, is not yet in sight. While PMO Experience predicts an increase in one's odds of becoming PS (support for H5), MoF Experience shows a (non-significant) negative hazard ratio (no support for H6).

Speculatively, MoF Experience is shared among a larger group in the pool (24% of the members spent time in the MoF, see Table 1). Similarly to Managerial Experience and a having earned a MA degree, it may be a factor contributing to pool entry, but not for appointment to PS from within the pool. Also, while the Dutch PMO holds a few dozen staff, the MoF employs thousands. This makes MoF Experience a less unique experience than PMO experience. So, while experience in the PMO proves a significant predictor of a PS appointment, experience in the Ministry of Finance does not necessarily increase one's odds of being appointed.

2.8 Conclusions

In this study, I fleshed out and tested predictors of successful permanent secretary appointments in Dutch government in order to gain a better understanding of what career experiences improve one's chances of being appointed as PS. Politicisation and core executive literature provided pointers to what places and practices may be helpful in becoming PS. The mixed-methods research design, coupling career path data with elite interviews, provides answers to that question. Combined, these findings allow for three headline conclusions that illustrate the subtle politics of PS appointments. First, having a suitable partisan affiliation helps, notwithstanding the standard image of the Netherlands as a relatively neutral or apolitical civil service system. Second, while managerial experience is a plausible precondition for entering the upper echelons of the civil service, it does not increase one's odds from there on. Third, experience in the prime minister's office serves as a steppingstone on a path into high office.

3

Situating the craft:

Working in the centralising core executive

3.1 The puzzle of weak prime ministers

Throughout Western Europe, Prime Ministers (PMs) come in many shapes and sizes. Some are regarded as 'strong' (for example, UK and Germany) whereas others are said to be 'weak' (for example, Italy and Luxembourg). The Dutch PM has always been considered *weak* in terms of formal powers, with a prime minister serving as *primus inter pares,* not as a proper 'leader' (Van den Berg 1990). Dutch Ministers serve *with* not *under* a prime minister (Daalder 1955, p. 8). In that vein, Andeweg (1991) characterised the prime minister's position as 'not just chairman, not yet chief'. Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende (2002–2010) echoed this sentiment when he observed that 'the expectations about the power of the PM are not matched by his real and by his formal position' (cited in Andeweg et al. 2020, p. 230). However, we suggest that the present-day Dutch PM has become more predominant. Yet this development does not involve an increase in formal competencies (for example, the right to appoint and fire cabinet ministers) or an increased organizational base (for example, a larger Prime Minister's Office with many advisers). We address this puzzle and ask: has the Dutch Prime Minister become predominant, and if so, how has this impacted the workings of the core executive?

In this chapter, we analyse 28 original interviews with key actors in Dutch executive government, including (prime) ministers and senior civil servants, and identify four trends that have stimulated the rise of the Dutch prime minister; Europeanisation, personalisation, crisis management, and the changing party-political landscape. Our findings suggest cabinet ministers and top civil servants see the Dutch PM as pivotal to every important decision: it is nearly impossible to reach a cabinet decision without the PM's support. We describe the influence of a pivotal PM who masters a 'court' of powerful actors and networks. Further, we find that the PM's constitutional and institutional basis hardly matters for their functional role and influence. The everyday-life view of the PM is only loosely coupled to the legal competencies that constitute to the office (cf. Visser 2009, pp. 122-123). We also find that cabinet decision-making is a succession of phases, which end with the weekly Cabinet meeting. This meeting is best understood as a 'closing ceremony', which legitimises the preceding stages. The PM and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO)

are central to understanding this view of 'cabinet-as-process'. In conclusion, we discuss the implications for the craft of PMs.

We make two distinct contributions. First, we provide original empirical evidence that revises the accepted view of Dutch executive government. Interviews with a PM, Deputy prime ministers, cabinet ministers and top-level civil servants provide insightful 'voices from the inside', hitherto missing from many other accounts (for example, Fier and Krouwel 2005). Such research has not been conducted in The Netherlands since Andeweg's (1990) landmark volume. Our study contributes to the much-needed update that considers the impact of the significant changes that have taken place in the last 30 years (see also Timmermans and Breeman 2009). Second, we contribute a novel theoretical perspective by applying core executive theory, most notably the idea of 'court politics', to the Dutch executive (Rhodes 1995; 2013 and Chapter 3 this volume). We explore how well the concept travels to a non-majoritarian context such as The Netherlands and assess how it improves our understanding of 'weak' core executives.

3.2 Weak prime ministers in consensual democracies

The 'weak' status of the Dutch PM has its origins in the oft-repeated observation that the Dutch PM has fewer formal competencies and fewer supporting resources than similar offices in for instance the UK, Denmark or Germany (Bäck et al. 2019; Bovend'eert et al. 2005; De Vries 2012; Van den Berg 1990). The consensus among constitutional scholars is that the PM and the cabinet are central to understanding executive government policy-making, and the cabinet is the most important forum, with the PM as *primus inter pares*. As first among equals, the PM is slightly elevated above the other ministers (Andeweg 1991). Since the introduction of parliamentary government there have been important changes, such as recognising formally the position of 'Prime Minister' in the revised constitution of 1983, but little has changed in its formal powers (Belinfante et al. 2009, p. 63; Bovend'eert et al. 2005; Rehwinkel 1991). The main innovations have been the agenda-setting competency for the PM, formal recognition of the PM as head of government when abroad and the instalment of standing cabinet committees. Timmermans and Breeman (2009) argue that the *primus inter pares* principle normally holds but stress the contingency of the individual characteristics and resources of PMs. Thus, Swinkels et al. (2017) mapped the leadership capital of two Dutch PMs (Kok, 1994-2002 and Balkenende, 2002-2010) over time and underscored the waxing and waning of PM's resources. It is often hard to distinguish between the impact of personal and institutional factors on PMs (Van den Berg (1990).

Dutch PMs work in a relatively strong cabinet government setting. Historically, Maarseveen (1969) contended that the cabinet, not individual ministers or parliament characterised Dutch government. Andeweg (1990; 1991) described the cabinet as a 'dual' institution that combined both party-political differences and contending departmental interests. He introduced a 'gearbox' metaphor for conflict management in cabinets: cabinets can decide to change 'gears' by framing a contested issue as *political* (inter-party conflict) or *departmental* (inter-departmental conflict). This 'gearbox' interpretation has become standard.

Andeweg (1997, p. 80), using empirical data collected in the 1980s, also characterises the Dutch cabinet as mostly collective and partially fragmented. He argued that segmentation (or committee government) in the cabinet was less important than in other parliamentary systems (Andeweg 1997, p. 73). More recently, Andeweg et al. (2020, p. 232) point to the many hours that ministers spend on the weekly cabinet meetings to highlight their importance. Also, compared to, for example, the UK, the Dutch cabinet is relatively small, allowing 'real' discussion and debate (Timmermans and Breeman 2009, p. 77). Andeweg did signal (and deplore) the increased prominence of the weekly coalition management meeting of the governing parties and parliamentary group leaders. He saw them evolving into a 'separate and distinct power centre' (Andeweg 1997, p. 75; see also Andeweg et al. 2020, p. 230-239; Andeweg and Timmermans 2008, p. 272).

Our data suggests that these practices of the core executive have changed. The Dutch PM has gained influence, becoming the fulcrum of cabinet coordination, and the predominant public leader and diplomat-in-chief of the government. We ground our interpretation in two concepts: the core executive and court politics.

3.3 From core executive to court politics

The term 'core executive' refers to all those organisations and procedures, which coordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters of conflict between different parts of the government machine (Dunleavy & Rhodes 1990). In brief, the 'core executive' is the heart of the government machine, covering the complex web of institutions, networks and practices surrounding the prime minister, Cabinet, cabinet committees and their official counterparts, less formalised ministerial meetings, negotiations, and interdepartmental committees. In the Dutch case, the term includes all the central agencies and actors with a coordinating role – chiefly, the PM's Office (PMO) and the Ministry of Finance.

After two decades of core executive studies, Elgie (2011: 71–2) concluded that 'the language of the study of British central government has been transformed' by the approach. and 'the concept

has travelled' well to the study of other countries. In this time, there have been some promising theoretical developments; for example, Burch and Holliday (1996) saw the core executive as a set of interlocking networks. Building on this notion of the core executive as a set of networks, we see the PM is the focal point; the innermost network linking the set of networks that comprise the core executive. Moreover, given shifting patterns of resource dependence, the roles of actors and organisations are contingent, not fixed, and no one pattern of executive politics prevails.

Rhodes (2013; 2017) describes the inner core of the core executive as the 'court' because, by long historical association, that is the term conventionally used to refer to the interactions of a leader and his or her immediate entourage. The court is the central node for the set of interlocking, interdependent networks that make up the core executive. Its role is to coordinate policies; contain and manage conflicts and rude surprises; create and communicate the government's narrative; control access to the core of the core executive; and comfort the core of the core executive (Rhodes 2013: 323). It is a key part of the organisational glue holding the centre together but its clout ebbs and flows with that of the PM. To focus on court politics is to explore the beliefs, practices, dilemmas, and traditions of the networks of actors with the formal authority of political and administrative leadership. We describe the beliefs and practices of individual actors – for example, Ministers, advisers and civil servants. We treat them as 'situated agents'; that is, their webs of belief and actions are located in inherited traditions and practices, which constrain their actions (Bevir and Rhodes 2006).

3.4 Studying executive politics in The Netherlands

The Netherlands is a parliamentary democracy, and here we introduce briefly its key institutions. The monarch fulfils mainly a ceremonial role. The legislative branch is a bicameral parliament with a lower house (150 seats) and a senate (75 seats). Dutch government has been characterised repeatedly as a consociational democracy (Lijphart 1968). To the present-day, cabinets have been multi-party coalition cabinets with usually relatively extensive coalition agreements (Timmermans 2003). The cabinet consists of cabinet ministers and junior ministers (called 'state secretaries'). Only the former have a permanent seat and voting rights in the cabinet meeting. Ministers and junior ministers answer to the parliament, but they are not members of the parliament. The PM chairs the weekly cabinet meeting and is nowadays the national leader of the biggest political party. Ministers are nominated by their respective party leaders and appointed by the crown. They do not need an electoral mandate. While most ministers have experience in politics, not all are career politicians. They come from various backgrounds, including business, academia and diplomacy.

The 'core executive' approach guided our interviews on Dutch executive government in several ways. First, we did not limit our focus to positions such as the PM, PMO and cabinet. We also interviewed ministers in key departments such as the Ministry of Finance, senior civil servants and journalists. Second, we looked for a court, seeking to identify and talk to the key individuals. Literally, we draw a map of the court (see Figure 8.2). Thirdly, we asked about the beliefs and practices of members of the core executive, which, as it transpired, led us to provide an account of the *new* practices of the PM and his court.

The data consist of 28 semi-structured elite interviews with 26 informants including a PM, nine cabinet ministers, two political advisers to the PM and 12 civil servants. The latter include (former) permanent secretaries, directors-general and councillors in the PMO. Though some interviewees were still in political or administrative office, all talked about their experience in a past position. Their experiences spanned five decades, but the interviews focused on trends in the past 30 years. We also interviewed two parliamentary journalists as a way of getting an overall picture (see Empson 2017 for a helpful review of elite interviewing). We interviewed two informants twice. We wrote a formal letter targeted, first, at retired members of cabinet and senior civil servants (8). At these interviews, we asked the interviewee to recommend us to one or more of their colleagues – 'snowballing'. In total, 31 people refused or ignored our request for an interview (response rate 46%). We interviewed 22 men and four women.

Given that two of the three interviewers did not speak Dutch, interviews were conducted in English, although two were in Dutch. They lasted anywhere from one to three hours and the successful interviews resembled conversations. The interviews took place between March-October 2017. We recorded all interviews, and they were transcribed. All transcripts were checked against the recording. As the first step, we subjected all the transcripts to thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006) which provided the first draft of our codebook for use with NVivo software. We made minor corrections to the English of the authorised quotes.

3.5 From cabinet as meeting to cabinet as process

Based on our interviews, we contend that the weekly cabinet as meeting during the Rutte cabinets (2010-2017) is no longer front and centre to decision-making but has largely evolved into a rite of passage for decisions made elsewhere and earlier in the process (Weller 2003). Figure 8.1 shows a schematic and simplified flowchart of core executive decision-making as process, as understood by our informants in 2017 and widely documented in formal papers (e.g. *Rijksoverheid* 2019). The various departments prepare policy proposals. They submit them to an administrative

interdepartmental committee, known as 'entry committees' (Dutch: *Voorportaal*). Here, early interdepartmental conflicts are resolved and/or spelled out. Policy proposals that survive the entry committee move on to the relevant standing cabinet committee (Dutch: *Onderraad*). In addition, proposals that can be resolved are pushed 'up' rather than pushed 'down'. Both ministers and civil servants participate in these standing committees. The PM chairs all cabinet committees. The proposals will be discussed, fine-tuned and a preliminary decision will be formulated. Proposals that survive the standing committee get on the agenda of the cabinet meeting in which only cabinet members have a seat. During this meeting, a formal decision will be made, before it is sent to Parliament. The progress of proposals is watched, steered and oiled carefully by the PM's Office (PMO), which tries to be informed and involved at every stage.

Figure 3.1 The Cabinet Process in Dutch Executive Government
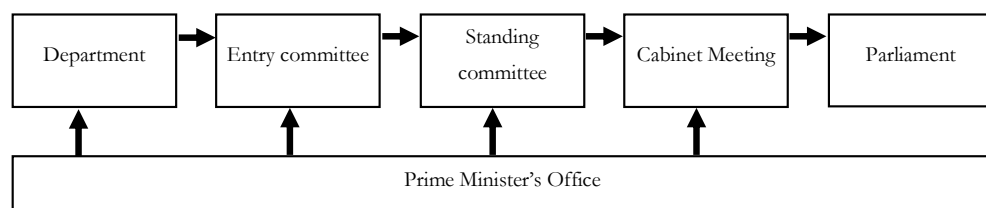
What Figure 3.1 obscures is the constant struggle for power, access, budget and closeness to the centre of participants and policies. Struggle is the substance of court politics. Nor does it show the repetitive nature of the process, something of which our informants were all too well aware. A bill may move back and forth between the different forums. There are also regular meetings that do not have any formal standing. They are not in Figure 3.1, even though their role in the core executive is undoubtedly important.

These informal meetings include a weekly meeting of the PM, the deputy PM(s) and the respective parliamentary leaders of the parties, as well as the party's elite meetings that precede the weekly cabinet meeting on Thursday nights, during which the political parties prepare for the cabinet meeting. Also, many of these 'meetings' are preceded by 'pre-meetings' which in turn may also be prepared by even more private pre-meetings. A Minister of Finance confessed to being 'in session' almost all day (Interview March 2017). These meetings are hybrid, including politicians, civil servants and advisers. Still we simplify. This summary excludes impromptu meetings and the countless phone calls and texts that are exchanged to smooth coordination and resolve conflicts. At times, our informants wondered if PM Mark Rutte (2010-present) is ever off his mobile phone.

Policy-making in The Netherlands is fragmented. Constitutionally, responsibility for policy lies with the individual ministers and their departments. Departments are effectively silos. The effect of this fragmentation on the core executive has been long recognised. It means decision-making is either sucked upwards by the PM or it leaks downwards into various informal forums and meetings of politicians and members of the core executive who broker a consensus (Andeweg 1990, p. 18). The cabinet's role is to legitimate decisions effectively taken elsewhere in the core executive. We found no evidence to suggest any change in the role of the effectively. On the contrary, the effectively as meeting is not the most opportune forum for decision-making, especially when the effectively cannot rely on a solid majority in the parliament or senate. A cabinet secretary reiterated the formal position: 'So, the PM wears two hats: first he is head of a department. Second, the PM has the responsibility for the coordination of cabinet policy' (interview March 2017). He continues to say: 'the ministers are responsible for their domain and the PM is only responsible for the coordination of domains, and only when there is a problem' (interview Cabinet Secretary, March 2017). Still, the informal power of the PM is 'huge: everyone knows in the end the PM can decide' (interview Cabinet Secretary, March 2017; cf. Visser 2009). The legal position of the PM has been strengthened in subtle ways; for example, agenda setting (Andeweg et al. 2020). But to insiders: 'the informal things are much more important. I would say that the key power is the power to persuade' (interview minister, March 2017).

The prime minister, cabinet and the surrounding meetings are the sole focal point of coordination. As a result, there are more inner cabinet and bilateral meetings, such as the 'turret consultation' – a reference to the PM's office located in the *'Torentje'* or turret (Andeweg and Timmermans 2008, p. 272; Fiers and Krouwel 2005, p. 135). More and more matters are for the PM. The point of these informal coffee dates is to prevent rude surprises. A minister assured us: 'I have never been faced with any surprise in the formal cabinet meeting on Friday' (interview March 2017). In fact, experienced ministers know the ritual: if there are no surprises, you have done the work. A Minister of Finance: 'A good minister will always try to get into the cabinet meeting without having a disagreement with a colleague' (interview March 2017). If ministers are to navigate the core executive effectively, they need to make sure that their colleagues and their departments – especially the PM – are on board before the cabinet meeting starts. A PMO councillor added: 'if the PM doesn't know about it, he will certainly push it away' (interview March 2017).

A deputy PM explained the persistence of this practice of overcoming hurdles before and outside the cabinet meeting: 'He [PM Rutte] only wants to have issues on the Friday agenda from those meetings that have been resolved, so that the Friday is available for current affairs, events and sometimes the real big things that cannot be solved immediately' (interview March 2017). A

cabinet secretary echoed this practice and PM Rutte's preferences: 'If he has to interfere, he will. Then we will organise a smaller meeting for him to preside over, with two or three ministers and a few civil servants' (interview July 2017).

The Dutch core executive has become segmented, proliferating committees of all kinds. Coordination no longer happens in the full cabinet. Andeweg's (1990) 'gearbox' metaphor for conflict management is still apt. Yet, given the fragility, volatility and fragmentation of Dutch parliamentary politics, the gearbox now has as many gears as a Formula 1 racing car, and top gear is the court of the prime minister.

3.6 Mapping Dutch court politics

A nodal or core network around the PM – the court – supports the pivotal role of the PM. It links to several other core executive networks, which overlap, but only the core network links to all of them (see Figure 3.2). Of 't Hart's (2014) four types of courts, the PM's court as an arena for bargaining and conflict resolution best captures Dutch practice. We map its 2012-2017 shape.

Figure 3.2 The Prime Minister's Court (2012-2017)
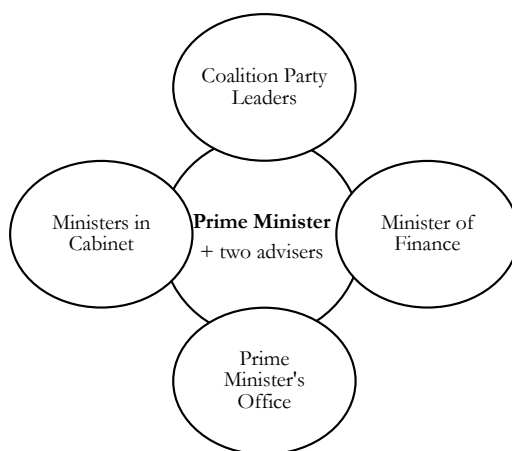
At the heart of it, there is the PM and two advisers. PMs chair the cabinet meeting, cabinet committee meetings and every other meeting they attend. They prioritise or postpone issues on the agenda and give the decisive vote where necessary. The PM is increasingly becoming *more* than '*primus inter pares*' – despite a humble legal basis. The PM is becoming 'more equal than others'.

As councillor-in-chief, the permanent secretary of the PMO is also a respected spokesperson for the PM in internal forums – for example, cabinet committees or a bilateral meeting with a minister (Van Dorp and 't Hart 2019). The prime ministerial adviser is the main partisan adviser and advises on any political matters. Until 2002, this adviser was a relatively low-key actor, performing a liaison function between the PM and his political party – s/he would not interact with the press or the public (Van den Berg 2018). This is still the norm. One prime ministerial adviser commented about the job: 'Advisers are not allowed to talk to the press, but many of them do' (interview July 2017). The prime ministerial adviser has almost complete freedom because s/he 'has a special position'.

The top circle in Figure 3.2 is clearly political and informal. It is a widely recognised network of the PM, the deputy PMs (each coalition party nominates one deputy PM) and the respective delegation leaders of the coalition parties in the parliament (cf. Andeweg and Timmermans 2008). When they all attend, the party leaders of the coalition are in the room. It is where the coalition balance is coordinated, contested and reconciled. Although discussions may be about specific policies, legislation or decision-making, this forum is specifically aiming at consolidating any fragilities of the coalition and keeping it together. The political advisers of the respective members and various digital media, including WhatsApp groups, parallel this forum. A parliamentary journalist identified the importance of this circle during the 2012-2017 government: 'cabinet meeting itself lost its significance in a very big way […] all the big decisions were discussions outside of the cabinet. The PM likes to do it that way' (interview July 2017).

The Minister of Finance is a key player in these networks. S/he will often be a deputy PM and leader of one of the coalition parties. No funding can proceed before it is 'cleared' by the Ministry of Finance and few policies do not cost money: 'nothing was flying if he didn't give his seal of approval' (interview minister, July 2017). In a smoothly functioning coalition, the PM and the Minister of Finance work closely together. A Minister of Finance said: 'The finance minister can only play his role if he is at all times backed by the PM' (interview April 2017).

Fourth is the PMO. There are about 15 '*raadadviseurs*' or councillors, each liaising with a department or a major policy portfolio. Some councillors are assisted by a junior adviser, totalling less than 25 people, excluding support staff. One of its permanent secretaries commented: '[T]hat is its big advantage. It's small. It's quick. The prime minister is quick. So, it's always ahead of the game. That is at least what the PMO tries. It hates surprises' (interview October 2017). The councillors have direct access to the PM and multiple points of entry into their respective departments at all levels. Councillors are typically high-flying non-partisan civil servants with not only expertise but also sensitive political antennae. They borrow authority because working with

the PM confers influence – and everyone knows it – but come without any formal powers. They work in the shadow of the PM's authority. They struck us as energetic, witty and – once you are through security doors – easily accessible.

The final part of the court covers the members of the cabinet. The cabinet is the ultimate formal decision-making forum of the Dutch core executive and it is where decisions need to be approved. It can act as a tiebreaker for deadlocked issues that get pushed upstairs by the committees. Yet, we contend the weekly cabinet meeting is better understood as a closing ceremony that legitimises this process. Of course, it is not merely symbolic because Dutch ministers spend relatively many hours in cabinet meetings (cf. Andeweg et al. 2020, p. 232), and because, like much else in politics, cabinet's role is shaped by the contingencies of the moment. It can weave various disparate strands of decision-making together to make sure they are consistent with the coalition agreement and its narrative.

Although we believe the PM's court captures an essential element of the Dutch executive, it does not mean it is the only existing set of networks. There are other networks – for example, the committee on socio-economic policy commonly known as 'the triangle'. Nor does it mean that people who are situated in less nodal networks have less influence on Dutch executive government. On the contrary, despite institutional settings and power differences, people make the system work for them by showing political nous, deploying smart power and avoiding rude surprises. During our study, the deputy PM and party leaders were part of the same 'court' but given the contingencies of political life, one or more of them could lead a rival 'court'. When we were interviewing (March-October 2017), few would be surprised if that were the fate of the unfolding Rutte-III Cabinet.

3.7 Developments in the core executive

Against this backdrop of the everyday workings of the core executive, our interviewees shared the view that the Dutch prime minister (the office, not just the current incumbent) was on the rise (see also Fiers and Krouwel 2005). Their argument is that the influence of the PM has strengthened incrementally – the PM can interfere with any policy, despite the legal convention of individual Ministerial responsibility. More and more issues and policies become framed as '*chefsache*' – a matter for the boss. A long-serving councillor in the PMO illustrated this point: 'There is no way of keeping the PM out. Today, the PM has to answer for what other ministers said or did' (interview March 2017). The increased involvement and centrality of the PM in cabinet decisions and everyday life of the core executive was widely accepted by interviewees. Most of our interviewees claim the

PM has become more influential. Those who hesitated claimed that PMs have always been more influential than they seemed: 'Nevertheless, it depends on the person. In the 1980s, we already had a very strong PM Ruud Lubbers who really had much more clout than the office would describe' (interview Permanent Secretary, October 2017).

The beliefs about the office of the PM fit into a tradition of Dutch governance that many interviewees subscribe to. A permanent secretary: 'Dutch history is steeped in a tradition of dividing powers – even ambiguity about who is really in power. That was already the case 400 years ago. Every time someone starts to act like a real sovereign – that will be the end of it.' (interview October 2017). To fit this tradition, PMs nourish the idea that they have no real power. They are 'masters the art' of not admitting they are powerful, and there is 'a deliberate ambiguity about who is really in power' (interview March 2017).

Yet, our interviewees consistently pointed to the rise of the PM. They provided four partial and overlapping explanations for the increasing prominence of the office of the PM. They are: (1) summitry and Europeanisation; (2) the personalisation of politics; (3) crisis management; and (4) the changing party-political landscape (see also Andeweg 2008, p. 267-268; De Vries et al. 2012; Van den Berg, 1990).

3.6.1 SUMMITRY AND EUROPEANISATION

Our interviewees suggested that the impact of European Union (EU) leadership summits on domestic policy-making led PMs to become more prominent. Much national legislation is impacted by EU decisions. It is discussed mainly by ministers of the respective departments and the Minister of Foreign Affairs and in meetings of eurocrats (Geuijen et al. 2008). However, at the key summits (e.g. on Brexit and G20) and the European Council, only the PM is invited as 'diplomat-in-chief' (De Vries et al. 2012, p. 161). Here, his prominence is increased at the expense of the ministers. A permanent secretary illustrated this point: 'The EU, and the European Council in particular, have a very important role in that because there's only one guy going to the European Council no matter what the subject is. […] The Dutch PM has to work on the same level as the French president and the German *Bundeskanzler* and so on. And they don't care about the fact that Dutch PMs have a different mandate' (interview October 2017).

A former PM reiterates the same point: 'for example, on international issues or European issues, well the role of prime ministers and political leaders is becoming more and more important because they, […] well they represent their country' (interview April 2017). In his memoir, Bernard Bot reminisces this is 'a reality the Minister of Foreign Affairs needs to learn to live with' (2015, p. 265). Key policies and legislation are discussed and established in European forums in which only

the PM has a seat at the table. Interviewee after interviewee stressed the impact of the EU. A Minister noted that before 1970: 'No prime minister had any international experience' (interview March 2017). Today's PMs increasingly walk on an international stage (see also Fiers and Krouwel 2005, p. 132).

3.6.2 PERSONALISATION OF POLITICS

Second, the interviewees stressed that the growing visibility of the PM and the personalisation of politics have augmented the prominence of the PM in another way (Karvonen 2010; Poguntke and Webb 2005). Media images of EU summits and crises depict the PMs as personifications of their government. The EU is not the only factor. The equivalent of international summitry occurs whenever there is a domestic crisis or a security issue. A ministerial adviser to the PM makes this point: The media are influencing the activities of the PM. This is because – more than ever before – when there is something going on in parliament, members say: ''we want the PM in this debate too'' (interview March 2017). A deputy PM explains:

> 'Well, I think there is a natural tendency that the press and public opinion want to have one person who is symbolising the government' (interview April 2017).

Politics and elections focus on the PM; they too have become personalised. Paradoxically, Boumans et al. (2011) chart the increased media attention on Dutch and British politicians, noting that less senior politicians have received relatively more attention in recent years. Still, the PM is singled out and receives most attention. Mediatisation may be all pervasive, but the PM is the focus (De Vries et al. 2012, p. 160). The current incumbent, Mark Rutte, has 'rock star appeal'. While doing our interviews, we watched his arrival at the 'turret' when he was mobbed by a party of schoolchildren on a visit to parliament. He chatted with them, they took selfies, and the event was surrounded by a hubbub of excitement. It happens wherever he goes, and he carries it off with a smile and aplomb – we saw a political celebrity working an enthused crowd.

3.6.3 CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The PM is increasingly involved in crisis management. The Netherlands faces as many crises as any other country in Western Europe, and they will be a matter for the boss. A permanent secretary in the PMO reflected: 'In crises, and with big things happening in the country, he is – of course – on television. He is the first who has to address it' (interview March 2017). This was illustrated by the COVID-19 crisis. From March 2021 on, the PM was front and centre for the COVID-19 crisis

when The Netherlands introduced measures against the spread of the virus. He gave two solo addresses to the nation on live television with viewings exceeding most football matches, although for most press conferences he was flanked by ministers of health and experts.

Similarly, three years earlier in March 2017, days before general elections and fresh in our interviewee's memories, the PM played a dominant front stage role in a diplomatic crisis. He publicly denied access to The Netherlands to multiple high-level officials from Turkey. Their presence caused unrest and division, culminating in urban riots and elite police units removing the Turkish official. Although diplomacy, local affairs and law and order are not formally the exclusive prerogative of the PM, Rutte was the only visible minister representing the executive branch. There is a sharp contrast with earlier crises in which the Dutch government had to counter an 'invisible' enemy. In 1986, radioactive material spread over Europe as a result of the Chernobyl explosion, resulting in eating restrictions. A former director-general remembers that PM Lubbers: 'felt so, apparently, comfortable, that he did not cancel his trip to Japan, and went. So, he left it to this group of ministers to handle the thing' (interview March 2017). Few would imagine a present-day PM traveling abroad in such a situation. S/he would be front stage.

3.6.4 THE CHANGING PARTY LANDSCAPE

The fourth reason is the growing complexity of the Dutch political landscape. In The Netherlands, there used to be three 'big' parties (Christian-Democrat, Social-Democrat and Conservative-Liberal). After 2002, they were no longer preeminent. There has been an upsurge in right wing populist parties, with Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) the most well-known example. At the time of our interviews, 13 parties were elected to parliament, with the biggest having 22% of the seats. The changes in the party system were summarised by Pennings and Keman (2008, p. 174-176) as 'pendulum consociationalism' – that is, the party system swings between consensual and adversarial styles depending on the electoral climate. If the party landscape has changed, the need for brokering majorities in parliament has increased (Kolltveit 2014). The PM tries to meet this need. The PM has a decisive role as leader of the biggest political party to work across the aisle and broker majorities for the cabinet's program. A deputy PM argued: 'The most effective PMs have always been PMs who have had very flexible personal and political opinions. If you have very strong personal views, then you will not survive as PM in the Netherlands' (interview March 2017). A PM commented on his struggle to balance party interests and lead a coalition government while in office:

It is always hard to find the balance between serving the interests of your country and serving the interests of your party. As PM you have to serve the interests of the country, whether you like it or not. That means that if compromises are necessary – and quite often they are necessary – then you have to be in a position where people take you seriously irrespective of the political party they come from (interview April 2017).

3.8 Discussion: A cautionary tale

Though we report the rise of the PM, our research was not about individuals nor about the 2010-present incumbent Mark Rutte. Rather, we focused on the collective in which multiple actors, including the PM, have a role. We now explore the implications of court politics and the rise of the PM for the craft that its officeholders must master.

The rise of the office of the PM should not be understood as a linear trend towards 'presidentialisation'. As always, the political capital and influence of individual PMs waxes and wanes during their tenures, both in The Netherlands and beyond (Strangio et al. 2016, 2017; Swinkels et al. 2017; 't Hart and Schelfhout 2016; Weller et al. 2021). For example, Ruud Lubbers (1982-1994) was widely recognised as an effective 'operator' who acted as a spider in the web of collective decision-making, although he lost much of his touch and impact during his third term in office. His successor Wim Kok (1994-2002) had to grow into the role, then played it masterfully for several years, only to suffer one of the most acute losses of standing in Dutch political history in the six months between 9/11 and the 2002 elections. Jan-Peter Balkenende (2002-2010) was regarded initially as inexperienced, although he gained influence later, particularly on the international stage. The social skills and political flexibility of the current incumbent, Mark Rutte (2010-present), were universally recognised, but now governing a complex multi-party minority government even his powers of persuasion are being taxed. Individual officeholders differ in the way they take up their role, but the expectations that come with the office have increased.

According to a long-serving parliamentary journalist, the craft of the PM concentrates on: 'the ability to make political deals. That's the only way you can work in this system' (interview July 2017). Our interviews echo the observations of De Vries et al. (2012, p. 162) that the predominance of the position of the Dutch PM is 'rooted in subtle process management rather than blunt realities of a direct and personal political mandate'. Prime ministerial craft steers the court. Influence is found not in monocratic office holding or wielding executive orders, but is a reflection of how the Dutch core executive has intensified its focus on the PM. Whereas the argument used to be 'not

just *chairman*, not yet *chief*' (Andeweg 1991; italics added), we see PMs as diplomat-in-chief (summitry and Europeanisation), communicator-in-chief (personalisation of politics), crisis and issue manager-in-chief (crisis management) and boundary spanner-in-chief (changing party landscape). A former PM stressed the paradox of the increased standing when 'you're not the boss' (interview April 2017). They are not monocratic, not even in crises, but demand for policy coordination steers political actors towards them (cf. Van den Berg 1990, p. 116).

So, PMs are at the centre of information streams, committees and negotiations. To maintain this position, it is vital, as our informants explained, that the PM should be perceived as a 'helper', not as a 'threat'. After all, PMs' standing is not a given – and being PM is a skilful craft (Weller 2018). To cultivate this craft, PMs need a measure (and varieties) of 'leadership capital', including hard and soft skills, reputational capital and relational capital (Bennister et al. 2017). The following metaphor captures our interpretation of our informants' interpretation.

Imagine a complex policy issue as a house of cards. Each card represents an actor, a promise, a grievance or a deadline, all of which are common for a complex policy. While all cards are neatly stacked, little is needed to tip over the entire house. It is very easy to destroy the game, especially in the Dutch system which is built on interdependency and willingness to compromise. The task of PMs is to tiptoe around the house of cards. They protect the game of building houses of cards, rather than a single card or even the whole house. An urge they should probably resist is to add more cards to the house. This would make the house yet more complex and prone to collapse. In other words, they should hesitate to add their own ideology, policy whims or ego – instead, they mediate in conflicts and seek to break deadlocks. There is no fixed set of skills for managing the house of cards. No leadership traits are uniquely suited to the task. However, it is all too obvious when the PM's craft does not fit the circumstances in which they play the cards – the house collapses.

In the early 2020s, the four interconnected trends identified by our interviewees mean that more and more is expected of PMs. Keeping the house together is no longer good enough. Such demands make the 'rise-of-the-PM' narrative a cautionary tale. Though elevated standing may provide some levers to realise a cabinet agenda and to get things done, it is also an increasingly vulnerable position. Where the PM used to be held responsible for keeping the multi-party cabinet together, the current view also makes the PM an 'issue-manager-in-chief' – responsible for volatile issues ministers might be eager to buck-pass on. The question of whether the 'weak' office of the PM will be able to sustain its officeholders to keep doing the impossible remains unanswered. They may have more influence than before, but perhaps not enough to meet party and public expectations.

3.9 Conclusions: Courts, influence and executive government

In this chapter, we have discussed the position of the Dutch PM and its rise to prominence despite marginal increases in legal or organisational resources, in order to understand how this has impacted the workings of the core executive. We provided elite interview data, updating the existing literature and providing a distinctive interpretation of those data. It is not a static picture but a description of 'everyday politics', the way politics and collective decision making are done in Dutch executive government on a day-to-day basis.

Without pretending to resolve fully our initial puzzle, we suggest three conclusions. First, four interconnected trends sustain and drive the increased predominance of the office of the PM. The PM is still 'not yet chief', but the recent officeholders are increasingly momentary chiefs: diplomat-in-chief, communicator-in-chief, crisis manager-in-chief and boundary spanner-in-chief. Second, the increased need for coordination underpins a formal and informal 'court' seeking to prevent 'rude surprises'. We have mapped the PM's court, the key individuals and forums and the circles of influence. Third, predominance and the court place a high premium on prime ministerial craft. If more is expected from the office, while that office provides few legal and organisational resources, courtiers may look to the officeholder to compensate.

This, we believe, provides a novel interpretation of Dutch executive government that is helpful for two reasons. First, it encompasses *multiple* actors involved in decision-making, coordination and conflict resolution, not just the PM and the cabinet. Though we foreground the PM, we follow in the footsteps of our interviewees, who included ministers, civil servants and ministerial advisers. Second, we focus on the stated *beliefs and practices* of members of the core executive, so we can identify changes in those beliefs and practices. Above all, the core executive and court politics approach captures the ebb and flow of influence in the core executive, throughout meandering political and administrative seasons. From their origins in the study of the majoritarian Westminster systems we believe these concepts travel well to consensual multi-party systems as The Netherlands.

4

Zoning the craft:

Managing ministerial responsibility

4.1 Introduction

Much of what public administration researchers know about senior civil servants traditionally comes from institutional analysis (Raadschelders & Van der Meer 2014) and survey research (Hammerschmid et al. 2017) shedding light on constitutional and organizational settings, reward structures, as well as demographic features and attitudes. This however does not reveal much about what it is these elite civil servants *actually do* – how they navigate the institutional contexts (values, norms, roles, rules, relationships) in which they operate. There is a much smaller, but important, trickle of research that focuses on the work practices of top officials, but many key questions about this work still loom large. What do they spend their time on and why (Fleming 2008; Van Dorp 2018)? How do they interpret their open-ended job descriptions and enact their roles and responsibilities (Noordegraaf 2000)? How do they exercise influence whilst at the same time serving political officeholders? How do they deal with professional and ethical dilemmas?

Answering such questions requires more intimate knowledge, e.g., from in-depth thematic or case-study focused interviewing, diaries, and, ideally, observation. We need this type of research if we are to get any grip on the question how generic institutional norms such as the 'politics-administration dichotomy' or container notions such as 'public service bargains' (Hood & Lodge 2006) are understood, applied, and negotiated by the people performing these roles on a day-to-day basis (Kaufman 1981; Rhodes 2011). However, because of prevailing norms of relative invisibility and illegibility, such data is hard to come by (also Boswell et al. 2018).

Our chapter nevertheless stands in this latter tradition. We ask how senior civil servants actually *navigate* the politics-administration dichotomy: how do they combine the 'serving' that it implies with the 'influencing' that is also part of the contemporary civil servants' job descriptions. In other words, we ask how 'administrative *responsiveness'* and 'political *astuteness*' take shape in day-to-day administrative work and behaviour. We investigate these questions in the context of the

Dutch core executive. We use a qualitative approach that allows us to get an in-depth understanding of senior civil servants' everyday lives and practices (informed by an ethnographic sensitivity, e.g., Rhodes et al. 2007; Watson 2011).

Based on our findings, we make two main contributions. First, we provide an all too rare up-close and personal account of what working at the top of government feels like and to the people doing the job. Second we apply a 'craft' perspective on civil service work, moving beyond measuring civil servants' attitudes and instead learning about their beliefs, practices, and dilemmas by observing them at work in particular institutional settings (see also Rhodes 2016).

We begin by reviewing the theory and practice of political-administrative interaction We then describe our methods, followed by three case studies of one of the Netherlands' most senior civil servants being confronted with challenging situations that defy a 'business as usual' approach to navigating the politics-administration dichotomy. We conclude by drawing inferences about how responsiveness and astuteness are understood and performed by civil service elites in times of turbulence.

4.2 Politics and administration in contemporary core executives

Practitioners and scholars alike have long noted and emphasised the distinctions – but also the points of convergence – between politics and administration (Rutgers 1997; Waldo 1948). Inspired by Wilson (1887), Goodnow (1900), and Weber (Gerth & Mills, 2009), many have debated the 'political-administration dichotomy' (PAD). Wilson and Goodnow argued that the political realm needed a neutral and efficient administration as counterpart, whereas Weber was more concerned with securing effective political direction of powerful professional bureaucracies. Over the years, many have debated the ideal-typical, moral, constitutional or empirical nature of the 'dichotomy'. Empirical research across time, space and types of political systems keeps telling us that the *hybrid* models of political-administrative interaction are better generic descriptors of the 'rules of the game' governing the practice of political-administrative relations than the, essentially normative, model of the dichotomy (Aberbach et al. 1981; Alford et al. 2017; Hartley et al. 2015; Peters 1988). Svara (2001: 180) claims the 'dichotomy' is a 'myth', arguing that 'complementarity' of political and administrative work is in fact the salient norm, as expressed in *'ongoing interaction, reciprocal influence, and mutual deference between elected officials and administrators'*. Rhodes (2011) proposes the term 'political-administrators' as a generic descriptor for ministers and top departmental officials alike, reflecting the shared set of beliefs and traditions of these elites operating at the heart of the core executive.

While students of core executive behaviour may be tempted to 'ditch' the politics-administration *dichotomy* altogether and instead assume, propagate and investigate political-administrative *interdependence, complementarity* and *bargaining*, something important, a constitutive element of public administration scholarship (Overeem 2012) and practice, would be lost. In many civil service systems versions of the dichotomy continue to serve, explicitly or implicitly, as frames of reference for their institutional design as well as for the socialization and training of civil servants into an ethic of neutral competence (Heclo 1975; Van der Meer et al. 2015). It forms of the DNA of senior civil servants, and shapes how they navigate 'the political dimensions' of their work.

4.2.1 DUTCH POLITICAL-ADMINISTRATIVE INTERACTION

It is in this spirit – mindful of the realities of hybridity, interdependence and bargaining but equally mindful of the continuing influence of the dichotomy in contemporary core executive practices – that we set out to examine political-administrative interactions at the apex of the Dutch civil service. Dutch political-administrative relations evolve around three rules of the game that are partly based in constitutional law and partly grounded in evolving core executive practices: mutual respect, discretionary space, and reciprocal loyalty (Hupe 2007; Nieuwenkamp 2001; 't Hart & Wille 2006).

Mutual respect between elected officeholders and civil servants for the roles that each have to play within the larger constitutional framework of government is a bedrock norm. Though formally, Dutch doctrine is about the loyalty of civil servants vis-à-vis ministers, empirical research has found that in practice, civil servants also expect a degree of in-role loyalty of ministers vis-à-vis themselves and the value of the institution that they in turn represent.

Discretionary space refers to the idea that both politicians and administrators need to be able to legitimately exercise public leadership in accordance with their respective roles. Ministers are to do so at the front stage, in what is understood to be the political realm: cabinet, parliament, the media, making substantive as well as tactical political calls on general policy directions as well as specific dossiers. Politicians have considerable discretion – limited only by the law, parliamentary support, and increasingly media coverage – to do so. In Dutch constitutional theory, civil servants have little to no such discretion. And yet in practice a norm has evolved that stipulates that ministers should refrain from micro-managing their departments, allowing top level civil servants to lead the 'administrative' processes of policy design, advice-giving, policy implementation, evaluation, and learning. NPM-era reforms such as agencification have further cemented this norm (notwithstanding the fact that various agencies have been brought back firmly into the realm of ministerial oversight over the years, Van Thiel & Yesilkagit 2014).

Reciprocal loyalty is rooted in the idea that the civil service is expected to be loyal first and foremost to the office of minister and the constitutional norm of ministerial responsibility, not to the person of the officeholder per se. In other words, only to the extent that ministers comport themselves responsibly in enacting their roles in cabinet, parliament, the media and at the ministry, they are entitled to expect civil servants to serve them to the hilt. But when ministers adopt a pattern of behaviour that civil servants interpret as either violating the precepts of ministerial responsibility – e.g., lying to parliament – or as violating the expectation of reciprocal ministerial loyalty towards the civil service – for example buck-passing blame to them when publicly accounting for failed policies (Hood 2010; De Ruijter 2019) – the gloves can come off.

Table 4.1 Rules of the game of political-administrative interaction in the Netherlands

Mutual respect	Elected officeholders and civil servants expect mutual respect. From civil servants to the politics of the day, and from the elected officeholders to the institutions they represent.
Discretionary space	Both politicians and civil servants need to be able to legitimately exercise forms of public leadership in accordance with their respective roles and in the interest of the public.
Reciprocal loyalty	Civil servants are loyal to the office of the minister. This loyalty rests on the precepts of ministerial responsibility and the reciprocal loyalty towards the civil service.

Adapted from 't Hart & Wille (2006)

4.2.2 'MANAGING UP': BALANCING RESPONSIVENESS AND ASTUTENESS

We focus on one element that epitomizes the challenges senior civil servants face in navigating the interface between the professional and the political: 'managing up' to their political masters (Hartley et al. 2015; Van Dorp 2018). 'Managing up' can be distinguished from managing 'down' (leading an organization, building organizational capacity), and managing 'out' (engaging in network (meta-)governance, communities, and in the public eye).

Elite administrators are supposed to be loyal to the minister but also deliver 'frank and fearless' advice. They have to perennially assess what works and what is appropriate (March and Olsen 1989; Rhodes 2016). The key challenge is to at the same time be *responsive* to the government of the day (Wilson 2016: 66-71) and serving its officeholders (e.g. catering to their needs, giving advice upon request, providing order and structure to their hectic working days) whilst being *politically astute* (Hartley et al. 2015) in influencing their views and maintaining their support.

Loyalty of the administrative agent to the political principal is a key norm across parliamentary systems (Hustedt & Salomonsen 2014; Christensen & Opstrup 2018). That loyalty is however to be directed towards the office the incumbent politician holds, not to the person. Though on a day-to-day basis these relationships are often intensive and inescapably interpersonal, their essence

remains institutional. The institutional essence is that in return for their loyalty, civil servants operate under the protective umbrella of the ministerial responsibility doctrine.

Astuteness is much less firmly institutionally rooted, and potentially more controversial. It has been defined as 'deploying political skills in situations involving diverse and sometimes competing interests and stakeholders, in order to create sufficient alignment of interests and/or consent in order to achieve outcomes' (Hartley et al. 2015). Hartley et al. (2015: 207) argue that senior civil servants require political – but not partisan– skills in negotiating coalitions that form an authorising environment for the department and its policies. In doing so, top administrators must carefully manage the 'zone' between themselves and the minister.

4.3 Design and methods

To answer our research question, we present three case narratives exemplifying elite administrative work in the Dutch core executive. All are set in the Dutch prime minister's cabinet (in Dutch: *Kabinet Minister-President*). This is a small but pivotal office consisting of the prime minister, one ministerial adviser (partisan), a permanent Secretary (nonpartisan), and 15-20 nonpartisan senior advisers known as 'councillors.'

Our contribution is to highlight the felt realities of managing up when the stakes are high and there are no easy answers. This narrative approach is unique in the literature, which seldom sees 'civil servant stories' published (for a review of narratives in public administration see Borins 2011). The narratives are retrospective interpretations of sequential events, from the viewpoint of a protagonist (Ospina & Dodge 2005: 145; Van Maanen 2011). The aim is not to generalise, or to provide a benchmark for other civil servants, but to show the complexity and interdependency of the job as it unfolds in a 'real life' context permeated by political turbulence.

The narratives are drawn from 31 hours of interviews with a single senior civil servant with 27 years in chief executive roles, including a long stint at the helm of the prime minister's department. This experienced and authoritative civil servant served multiple prime ministers. The interviews focused on the craft of senior civil service leadership, seen through the prism of how the interviewee hard experienced and acted in three 'hard cases' at the interface of politics and administration throughout his career. As interviewers we sought to inductively draw out the senior civil servant's beliefs, dilemmas and practices (Bevir & Rhodes 2006) through semi-structured conversations and 'ethnographic' sensitivity (Boswell et al. 2018: 60).

For corroboration purposes as well as to get alternative perspectives on the same sequence of events, we conducted eight interviews with our main informant's key contemporaries. Interviewees

included a (former) prime minister, a cabinet minister, another political officeholder, a political assistant to the prime minister and four senior civil servants. All interviews were conducted by the authors between 2013 and 2017. They typically took between 75 and 120 minutes and were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. All qualitative data was subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) in a collaborative effort by both authors. The excerpts cited below have been translated to English by the authors. Where appropriate we complement interview data with reference to other sources (e.g., government documents or media reports).

4.4 Three tales of managing up

Through storytelling we draw out the practical implications of doing 'responsiveness' and 'astuteness' amidst turbulence for the permanent Secretary's work, and how this relates to the three rules of the political-administrative game. The first tale is about the gear shifting that needs to be performed when government turnover is at hand. The second is about 'settling' the relationship with a new minister – and their advisor. The third concerns the management of blame.

4.4.1 ABSORBING POLITICAL CHANGE

In 1994, a new Dutch government took office. Three parties – social-democrats, liberals and liberal-democrats – would form a cabinet without any Christian-Democratic parties. A novel situation in Dutch politics. It would be the start of eight years of pacified governance, corroborated by electoral success in 1998. There was little animosity among the coalition parties. The erstwhile prime minister reflects on the 1998 elections:

> 'Oddly – due to lack of alternatives – there was unanimity about the continuation of the cabinet after the elections. Before the elections, there wasn't any debate either, whether that should include the liberal democrats. Yes, during the final televised debate [social democrat) I even said that it would be too ungracious to punish the liberal-democrats too hard, and that they deserved a vote too. It's exemplary of the bygone political climate.' (Interview September 2015).

Its policy paradigm resembled much of what was going on elsewhere in the world. The Dutch government policy closely aligned to Clinton's in the USA and Blair's in the UK, coined as the *'Third Way'*. This was the zenith of *New Public Management* philosophy where government would 'steer', not 'row', resulting in privatisation and market incentives in the public sector (Pollitt and

Bouckaert 2017). With the PM's blessing, the Board of Secretaries started a project called 'Strategic Explorations'. They studied major public policy themes that had dominated the coalition's agenda during the past two terms: healthcare, social policy, education, knowledge economy, and tax reform.

'Our' Secretary was a key advocate of the hands-on approach taken by the Secretaries in performing this rather exceptional joint exercise:

> I still consider it a proved method for realising breakthroughs: Five permanent secretaries in a room and no assistants… I'm not a terribly good writer, but I like to write a few paragraphs every now and then. It gives you a chance to really articulate your own thoughts in a strategic document such as the one we were producing.

Though they had had hopes of political impact with their strategic reconnaissance, the Secretaries took pains to avoid making it seem an 'ideological' exercise. They included multiple scenarios and formulated arrays of options, eschewing a single dominant frame. That said, the timing of the operation coincided with the political cycle of the incumbent coalition government and its veteran PM, who at the time of the initiation of the review were riding high in the polls.

Publishing such documents allows for them to be used in electoral programs and cabinet agreements. They help focus public attention on key issues and underpin societal debates with robust analysis, instead of fleeting issue management and political campaign rhetoric. I was convinced that initiating the Strategic Explorations was an attempt on this PM's part to create a substantial policy agenda for a new cabinet, possibly his own.

It was not to be. In his interview, the former prime minister reflected on on the 'strategic explorations':

> We wanted to shed light on a number of structural long-term developments which the country faced, and the respective policy answers to them. But, in the fall of 2001 and the early months of 2002, the momentum for such an approach simply evaporated. People started to anticipate the collapse of the coalition instead.

In August 2001, less than a year before the next general elections, the prime minister had announced that he would step down as party leader ahead of the next elections and would not seek

further public office. Two weeks later, the 9/11 attacks in New York City rocked the world and brought identity politics (issues such as non-Western immigration) to the fore. In March 2002, the political upstart, the charismatic populist Pim Fortuyn, whose comments about Islam had skirted around the edges of what law and custom would allow, caused a major upset in the municipal elections in Rotterdam, obliterating in one fell swoop the age-old social-democratic hold on power there. A month later, a few months before its term of office would have ended, the government resigned after a damning report on the genesis and management of the Dutch peacekeeping operation in Bosnia that ended in the genocidal killings at Srebrenica in the Summer of 1995. Another month later, days before the general elections, Pim Fortuyn, whose party (*Lijst Pim Fortuyn*) was headed for a spectacular election victory and who might well become the new prime minister on the strength of it, was assassinated by a radicalised left-wing activist.

Dutch politics was in turmoil. Between October 2001 and March 2002, the coalition's polls plummeted, and the events of April and May 2002 instilled a sense of crisis, even chaos. that. Hailed for years as a steady, competent, reforming government, the ruling coalition's reputation was all of a sudden in tatters. It was a shock that reverberated right at the centre of power. The permanent Secretary observes:

> I don't think anyone could have predicted how rapidly the drama would unfold: the PM's status dropped from 75% confidence to a maligned figure of the past in just a few months. That was a major turn. It was unprecedented in Dutch politics. We talked about it at PMC and in the Board of Secretaries. We frantically tried to come to terms with what was happening. I suppose it was no different in the run-up to the 2017 general elections, after Trump's electoral success in the USA. In such a situation, I simply start to prepare for anything that can happen – I began to envisage a situation in which the current PM would be no longer prime minister, and in which his successor might well be a very different kind of politician with a drastically different program and governing style.

The prime minister had become a lame duck almost overnight, facing death at the polls (Shaffir and Kleinknecht 2005). His political capital had shrunk. The PM reflects on the schism between the cabinet's policy and the ubiquitous electoral promises and sentiments about upcoming policies:

> I think it was very difficult for civil servants to fill this gap. That even these 'Strategic Explorations' would collapse, says it all. The universal, implicit, attitude was that after

the 2002, a new government would start with a completely clean slate, most likely one that repudiated what had preceded it. The incumbent government no longer had any influence on the future agenda, despite the civil servants' best efforts with their 'Explorations' exercise (Interview Prime Minister, September 2015).

In the Spring 2002 his coalition's political implosion combined with the moral burden of the Srebrenica drama took a heavy toll on the prime minister. At a low point, he called on his permanent Secretary, who recalls:

> For him, the responsibility was personal (...) We talked for one and a half hours at the prime minister's office. He said: "I have a dilemma. My wife wants me home, but the party wants me to stay on." […] He was very specific. He did not ask for political advice, but for professional advice. Such a question, such a conversation was one-of-a-kind in my career. Shortly afterwards, it was back to normal – distanced and professional.

In this narrative of prime ministerial decline and anticipation of new undefined political regimes, we see a permanent Secretary at work in the prime minister's office. The relationship between the PM and the Secretary suddenly became unusually close. Normally strictly business-like and professional, the PM became personal and emotional. In that political and personal predicament, the PM sought out his permanent Secretary, a civil servant, rather than his partisans, his designated successor or the deputy prime ministers, to contemplate the possibility of resignation.

The dichotomy doctrine offers no script for the senior civil servant called upon to act in these circumstances. What do 'responsiveness' and 'astuteness' mean when the political edifice of the government one serves is crumbling? Rather than maintaining the façade of the dichotomy, the PM and the permanent Secretary act in the spirit of the unwritten rules of Dutch political-administrative interaction. Amidst the turbulence of the era, the PM and the Secretary demonstrate mutual respect for the roles each has to perform. As the permanent Secretary and his colleagues sought to provide stewardship of the long-term policy agenda and the PM gave them ample discretionary space to do so by framing the 'Explorations' an administrative project rather than a political one. In turn, the permanent secretaries were careful – though ultimately unsuccessful when it was met with frosty indifference from the newly emerging political masters – to avoid it becoming unduly politicised.

Meltsner (1988) argues that advisory relationships can be understood in terms of four stages: entry, consolidation, harvesting of results, and pre-exit. The pre-exit stage requires a delicate balancing act, and we see this at work in the story. The permanent Secretary is loyal and dedicated, but inevitably bound by the professional nature of their relationship. When it becomes clear that the incumbent government are on their way out, the Secretary has to gear up the department for serving its successor. Political astuteness in these circumstances demands operating on parallel tracks: staying the course with incumbent but building bridges towards a yet indeterminate future without that incumbent and in possibly – in this instance dramatically so – a radically altered political constellation.

Even experienced senior civil servants can find it hard to switch gears, as the secretaries did when they were taken aback by the vacuum in which their cherished Strategic Exploration exercise landed in the political turbulence of spring and summer 2002. 'Serially monogamous' professionals they may aspire to be, but coming out of a collaboration with a long-serving government even senior civil servants may develop affinities with the actors, policy paradigms and governing styles they have worked with for so long and that they have not only gotten used to but somewhat invested in. They need to overcome their inertia to be flexible enough to adapt responsively to new politicians and their worldviews, priorities, words, capacities, styles and temperaments and establish yet another 'public service bargain with them (Hood & Lodge 2006).

4.4.2 BUILDING NEW RELATIONSHIPS

The turbulent general elections of 2002 proved an unprecedented electoral landslide. The Christian-democratic party won the largest number of seats, rapidly forming a coalition with the late Pim Fortuyn's party, and the liberal party. Enter a backbencher without prior ministerial experience as prime minister. For civil servants, ministers come and go, but change is rarely easy. Building an effective working relationship is key. Civil servants try to 'read' the minister (also: Noordegraaf 2000). How does this minister work? Does s/he read papers or prefers to talk it through? Does s/he prefer structured deliberation or free brainstorming? What is his/her standing in the party, cabinet or media? What's his/her work ethos, integrity, any apparent fallacies? How can we realise policy goals with this minister? This professional working relationship is not a given, so triadic relationships must be built: minister, ministerial adviser, and permanent Secretary. In 2002, there was yet little tradition of ministerial advisers in The Netherlands (Van den Berg 2018). Since 1994, a number of ministers had 'parliamentary assistants' who were liaisons between the cabinet members and their respective parliamentary party, but they were strangers within the department. The Secretary recounts the challenges of the start-up phase:

The puzzle was: how do you support someone in such a crucial office who has no prior executive, ministerial or otherwise, experience, and who is simultaneously expected to show leadership? How do you get him in position? These first months were: being there 24/7, analysis, making lists, identifying key messages, being present, helping, steering.

Following a rocky start, more exploration needed to be done to establish how the department could best meet his needs, and how the minister could carve out a leadership style that befitted him:

We often talked about leadership. What makes someone a leader? I sensed that all media analyses would focus on his leadership, asking: what sort of a leader is our new prime minister? So, we discussed: what are your strengths? How does that fit your leadership? What do we need? We got it down to 'connective and servant leadership'. He said: 'write that down, I'll use it in Parliament'. He was the leader, and he had to grow into that role. He worked very hard – and succeeded.

And:

You must learn to read him – how to get your message across to a new minister. We managed, because the prime minister was very open and approachable.

In this instance, the differences between the former and the current minister were quite considerable. An experienced councillor compares and contrasts:

The former minister was not a fan of modern technology. Along with the new minister came BlackBerrys. He was focussed on image, media performance, 'door stops' and 'oneliners'. It dawned on us that this was an entirely different person. His predecessor read everything and did not mind expansive briefs. The latter wanted everything summarised. He had less time – but he was an avid mobile phone user. Suddenly, we no longer knew who had spoken to the PM (Interview October 2015).

Earning standing with a new minister proved to be a struggle. Having the ear of the PM was not solely the permanent Secretary's privilege. The new PM's ministerial adviser injected himself into the departmental court, shaking its equilibrium (Rhodes 2017; see also Hustedt et al 2017):

> A new development was the political adviser who came along with the prime minister. Our permanent Secretary heavily objected to that. He was a traditionalist. He champions the 'neutral civil service' narrative. He didn't want politics and administration to mix. […] He was very clear: our advice is professional, not political (Interview Councillor, December 2015).

The strongly partisan and 'PR' focus of the new generation of ministerial adviser came as somewhat of a shock to the system:

> In the media, policy successes were sold as victories at the expense of coalition partners. 'Spinning' had reached The Netherlands. In a next cabinet [2007-2010] social-democrats used a similar strategy. There was much spinning, to the detriment of cabinet unity and policy coherence. The first political assistant [2002-2007] still had a grip on that game, he was aware of the consequences. His successors were not. By that time, the Government Press Office had lost control (Interview director-general Government Press Office, September 2015).

The PM had multiple sources of advice: the partisan (here embodied by the ministerial adviser), the civil service (the permanent Secretary and councillors), his personal network (e.g., a befriended professor and senator with expertise in constitutional matters). Realizing his propensity to consult the latter, the department adapted and began to include his advice beforehand. The Secretary: 'when we learned that on all constitutional matters the PM sought out this professor, our councillor started to call him beforehand – we called it "informal coordination on behalf of the prime minister."' And yet the department wanted to remain the pivotal adviser to the PM as it believed that this served him best. The Secretary cast a weary eye on the PM's proclivity to consult widely from his political and social networks: 'I often said to the prime minister: "trust your own department."' The PM's ministerial adviser had his own take on the dynamics:

> Obviously, he [Permanent Secretary] was both literally and metaphorically bigger than this freshman prime minister, but then, all of a sudden, the prime minister was roaming

the halls of the office and meeting with 'his' people, bypassing the permanent Secretary. However, it fitted the modern times, and the councillors loved it (Interview September 2015).

He goes on to say:

I wondered whether the permanent Secretary of the PMC appreciated that, because the prime minister had made a decision and he had not been the chief adviser [in a specific dossier]. I think he was quite sceptical—it confirmed his view of that the PM was inexperienced (Interview September 2015)

The start of this prime minister's tenure followed what is considered the 'normal' script in Anglo-Saxon systems: politics (the prime minister and his political entourage) are on top, the civil service is on tap. In the Dutch system, this had not been so, and therefore the Secretary was sceptical about what he perceived to be a break with tradition. The permanent Secretary has an innate respect for the prime minister and his office, but clearly saw the assertiveness of the ministerial adviser – who had been the PM's campaign leader in the election campaign that had swept him into office – and the symbiotic relationship he had forged with the PM as an anomaly. And yet, as 'responsive' civil servants he and his staff had little choice but to adapt: to learn to 'read' the new minister and to learn how they can work most effectively for and with him. In turn, the PM seemed to initially prefer his political entourage over the department. Over time, new rules of engagement were negotiated between the actors in the triad (Van den Berg 2018).

Responsiveness here meant that the permanent Secretary – possibly against his professional judgment – must accept the presence of an unusually active and powerful ministerial adviser in the departmental court, simply because the PM wanted him there and authorised him to play that role. Astuteness then means being proactive in adapting to the new PM. The story of how the PMC adapted by incorporating the external professor's advice on constitutional matters in their own advice to the PM, shows how the department regains a grip of the advisory system while being attentive to the PM's preference of hearing this professor's view on the matter. Astuteness in this instance also entailed 'training' the PM. The permanent Secretary felt responsible for the coordination of cabinet policy and tried to equip the new PM to perform that role effectively, e.g., through instigating reflective conversations on leadership.

4.4.3 IN THE EYE OF A MEDIA STORM

On Saturday, the 24th of May 2004, the prime minister's residence caught fire. The 17th century building was undergoing refurbishment at the time. A painter and a resident staff member escaped in time, but a second painter got trapped in the fire and died.

Formally political responsibility for the conduct of the government's facility management service which was the legal owner of the building and in charge of the refurbishment, rested with the minister of public housing. However, the public eye was firmly trained on the role of the resident of the building, the prime minister – and his department. A series of investigations ensued, seeking to determine what ignited the fire and what causes the fatality. The Secretary received a brief internal memo on 27 June 2004 suggesting that experts disagreed about the cause of the fire, but that tentative test results suggested that the painters might have used prohibited highly flammable liquids ('thinner') which along with antique gobelins in the room had caused the fire to escalate so quickly. The Secretary of the PMC decided not to inform the prime minister and the Public Prosecutor at this stage. He took a formal view of the lines of accountability that ought to be at play:

> The Housing ministry was responsible, not the prime minister's department. Ministerial responsibility rested with them, not us. Also, these were tentative, disputed research findings, and further research was being conducted. And emails from the Housing ministry that I had received suggested that no rules had been violated by government officials.

In 2006 a judge ruled that the contracting painters company had indeed used unauthorised thinner and that there was no evidence to suggest that government officials had prior knowledge of this use (The Hague Court 2006).

However, opposition Members of Parliament and a number of journalists kept the case in their sights and continued digging. In response to ongoing media reports and political clamour the prime minister asked the public prosecutions office to start a new inquiry. Months later, in November 2008, the Secretary, who had moved to head up a different department in 2007 was called in for a hearing. At this time, he received word that, in addition to the aforementioned memo, there had been a second memo substantiating the research findings and the crucial role of the wall drapes in speeding up the fire. These findings had been corroborated by foreign researchers. The Secretary reflected:

My feeling was that if I had been given that full memo back in 2004, I would have chosen to communicate these research findings — no matter how tentative and disputed — to the PM and the Public Prosecutor.

But that hadn't happened, and in the meantime the story would not die. In June 2009, an internal *non-paper* from the department was leaked to journalists. The *non-paper* included the phrase that the then Secretary had been 'given notice' of the existence of a second memo written a few days after the first - implying that he had known more about the forensics of the incident he had conveyed to the PM. The Secretary emphatically denied this was the case:

Registration of the flow of communications was routinely done very carefully at the PMC. We called it the 'Rob Visser doctrine', named after a very constitutionally prudent councillor: always keep track of and record who has read which papers when. Administrative behaviour must be traceable at all times. That's not just professional good practice, it is essential to buffer ministerial responsibility.

This narrative is one of a cold case becoming a media storm and a political bone of contention. One television news program suggested there had been a '*cover-up*' by departmental staff while simultaneously portraying the name and a picture footage of the then Secretary. Parliament was up in arms and called the prime minister to account for what had happened.

The doctrine of ministerial responsibility prescribes that the minister is responsible for any and all matters in their portfolio (for interpretations of the doctrine in Westminster systems see Woodhouse 1994; Rhodes et al. 2009). Though formally this would mean the housing minister and not the PM should have conducted the debate, the political realties at the time were different. The question now became what the PM would do. In keeping with the rules of the game of the politics-administration interface in the Netherlands, would he step up, defend his department's actions and absorb any blame directed at it by taking responsibility? Or would he throw the civil servants – conspicuously including his erstwhile Secretary – to the wolves in an effort to deflect blame? A turbulent debate ensued on 23 June 2009. A significant proportion of parliament expected acknowledgement of error and some form of contrition; while the Secretary expected his minister to take the heat. During the run-up to the debate, the Secretary felt caught in the crosshairs. He reflects on his internal and professional struggle:

I could not defend myself. As a civil servant you have one hand tied behind your back. I knew this—but now I felt how frustrating this is. I could have chosen to break protocol and argue my case in public, or leak. Given the heated atmosphere, I would have been on prime-time television. But that would undermine the [doctrine of] ministerial responsibility. It would be unthinkable to deny my civil service loyalty.

A fellow permanent Secretary explained that when these things happen, the very core of one's identity is being questioned:

It's a big deal when it is implicitly or explicitly implied that you are (in part) answerable to someone's death. My assumption is that this is not about professionalism, but rather about humanity and integrity. It is not a rational debate, yet feelings are facts. What is the craft without passion? Without values? I would think that this is what preoccupied him the most (Interview September 2015)

The PM tried to steer a middle course. In one breath he defended the integrity of the civil service and that of his own department in particular (rejecting the notion that there had been a cover up). In another breath he criticised the professionalism it had displayed in this instance, using harsh terminology - *'imprudent, incorrect, and insufficient'* – in doing so. He succeeded in placating the opposition but did nothing to counter the media and political assault on the reputation of the civil service.

The Secretary has been dragged into the public spotlight and into the heart of political controversy. Rather than a steady hand in the background helping the minister through parliament, he now has to be helped by the minister to calm the whipped-up furor of the parliament. How does one balance responsiveness and astuteness when the going gets tough? The resolution for the struggle is not self-evident. For civil servants, their currency is their professional reputation and status among their peers. This is what's at stake in the story – for the Secretary the case boils down to the PM's political leadership and role-taking: does he prioritize hoarding his political capital or does he stick to the public service bargain?

There is a larger issue here, however. Early on, the Secretary had made a conscious decision not to inform the PM about the contents of a memo based on his judgment that its status was premature. This decision became a pivotal issue in the ensuing political debate. It was his job to monitor and manage which information reached the PM. Access to the PM is carefully managed by his office. Determining what is, and what is not, is the prerogative of the Secretary. The rules

of the game of political-administrative interaction suggest that the PM should trust the Secretary and allow discretional space to make such decisions.

In this case, the civil servant's discretionary judgment is questioned by public and political scrutiny, and this is exacerbated by the public framing of the issue as one of integrity (the 'cover up' charge). The Secretary could have opted to wage his own public defence, by making a press statement or giving an interview. Had he done so, the Secretary argued, then he would have pre-empted ministerial responsibility from being enacted in the right forum (parliament) at the right time (the designated debating slot) by the right actor (the prime minister). Moreover, Dutch parliamentarians generally have little appreciation for that manifestation of political astuteness on the part of a civil servant. So the Secretary chose to sit still and await his fate. This adherence to the classic rules of the game is interesting in light of recent scholarship about senior civil servants' *public* leadership. Grube (2014, 2019) argues that senior civil servants in Anglo-Saxon democracies use 'voice' and not just 'loyalty' or 'exit' when dealing with issues of major concern to them. In this instance, our Secretary considered speaking up publicly to be in violation of his loyalty to the office of the PM.

4.5 Navigating the dichotomy: What have we learned?

The central puzzle in this chapter was how top-level civil servants navigate the political-administrative dichotomy. We asked how they 'manage up', and 'administrative responsiveness' and 'political astuteness' take shape in day-to-day administrative work and behaviour. Starting from the dichotomy doctrine and its critiques, we have discussed three 'rules of the game' in Dutch political-administrative interaction: mutual respect, discretionary space, and reciprocal loyalty. Our case stories illustrate the everyday complexity of this institutional relationship, before we discussed implications for the craft of top-level civil servants. The first case narrative illustrates how the sudden imminence of an incumbent government's political decline punctuated by a sequence of crises deepened the professional bonds the PM and the Secretary, whereas the second narrative demonstrates how challenging the establishment of such bonds at the outset of a new government's life can be. Responsiveness and astuteness take shape *over time*. As change can be sudden, institutional inertia must be overcome to adapt to new political Zeitgeists and the new types of actors and rules of engagement that accompany them. Civil servant behaviour is related to events and incidents as well political and policy cycles.

Secondly, where the Secretary had been socialised during an era when political-administrative relations were largely dyadic, they are no longer so. The introduction of ministerial advisers – who

arrived on the Dutch scene relatively late, and in modest numbers compared to most other parliamentary democracies (Van den Berg 2018) – has complicated the picture. Particularly when ministers have more of them, accord more weight to their advice, or allow them more expansive views of their roles, core executive relationships change. The civil servant-minister dyad effectively becomes a *triad* (Shaw & Eichbaum 2016), if not a much broader *polycentric* network that includes consultants, lobbyists and media. The craft of top-level civil servants has come to include ensuring that civil service advice continues to occupy a prominent role within these more complex configurations of consultation and influence.

Third, media and political framing of incidents can put the civil service suddenly and squarely into spotlight of ministerial accountability, taxing the traditional rules of engagement between political officeholders and civil servants. Perhaps it is no surprise, therefore, that students of executive politics, political accountability, ministerial careers and civil service leadership have started to look into these dynamics of *blame management* much more intensively (Hood 2010; Brändström 2016; Hinterleitner and Sager 2018; De Ruijter 2019). What they have learned is that more wedges can be driven into the traditional compact between politics and civil service, challenging civil servants' ongoing *balancing act* of combining responsiveness with astuteness. As the third case narrative suggests, this opens up a new dilemma: when their past behaviours, including their advice-giving to ministers, are being scrutinised in the context of blame games, and when ministers are not inclined to take responsibility for the civil service's actions, what are senior civil servants to do? Sit still and await their fates (loyalty), offer themselves up as a scapegoat and resign (exit), or publicly defend themselves (voice)?

Our account highlights the intimate and backstage practices of government elites and suggests that the senior civil servant's craft involves constant calibration and balancing of responsiveness and astuteness. Our contributions to the literature are twofold. First, we complement the institutional, biographical, and (quantitative) survey literatures with rare original qualitative (ethnographic) evidence. We tell 'civil servant stories' which help us understand the world of high politics (and indeed high administration). Our second contribution is that we illustrate the practices of this particular civil servant as a 'craft'. The practices are not just (bounded) rational behaviour, but crafted practices that make sense in the particular 'local' context and probably much less elsewhere. It is this craft that enables civil servant to make sense of the situation and to act when there are no easy answers.

The up-close approach taken in this chapter allows the reader a taste of the felt realities of high stakes, political death and survival, relentless accountability, and parliamentary scrutiny which (in part) instigate the call for political advice, entourages, and blame deflecting to put off pressure.

It is in this world that top level civil servants need to (re)discover and negotiate their role and added public value.

Further research on the political-administrative dichotomy and the work of civil servants should take changing mores into account and examine their implications for civil service professionalism and political-administrative relations. It should focus on the challenges, dilemmas, and coping patterns of civil servants through close-up studies of their efforts to balance 'responsiveness' and 'astuteness' in an increasingly turbulent, incident-prone and unforgiving political environment.

5

Politicising the craft:
'The Minister Wants It'

5.1 Introduction

How senior civil servants interact with their political masters is a returning question in the literature on political-administrative relationships. The job of senior civil servants is usually considered to be a dual craft. SCSs are both responsive to political imperatives, while maintaining a responsibility for neutral competence. So, to do their work well, SCSs must navigate 'responsiveness and astuteness' and maintain a degree of competent neutrality (Hartley et al. 2015; Hustedt & Salomonsen 2018).

In recent times, forces of politicisation – whether in the hiring and firing of SCSs, their access to ministers relative to lobbies and other partisan actors, or the rise of political advisers – have impinged upon this dual or balancing act, to the point that some scholars are weary of its effect on the civil service's capacity to give speak truth to power and remain neutral and nonpartisan (Hustedt & Salomonsen 2014; Peters & Pierre 2004; Rhodes et al. 2009; Shaw & Eichbaum 2020). Even in the absence of blunt moves towards de facto political control of SCS appointments, these more subtle influences on the nature of political-administrative relations have been dubbed 'functional politicisation' and are considered a key factor shaping the beliefs and practices of SCSs (Mayntz and Derlien 1989).

Extant literature mentions broad containers of work and behaviour repertoires which indicate functional politicisation such as 'political-tactical advice vs substantial policy advice' (Christiansen et al. 2016), 'coalition building and conflict reduction (ibid: 1233), 'communicating and planning strategic external communication for pure political purposes' (Salomonsen et al. 2016: 210), 'Thinking politically' (Hustedt & Salomonsen 2018: 79) or the 'incorporation of political considerations into the dispositions and activities of bureaucrats' (Shaw & Eichbaum 2020: 843). Although these labels give plausible insights into what kind of activities SCSs do and what functional politicisation means for their everyday tasks, they stop short of being observed in the

lived realities of SCSs' work practices. Such 'up-close and personal' studies at top levels in government hierarchies remain rare (Rhodes et al., 2007) but are much needed to advance our understanding of political-administrative relations beyond typological approaches, as helpful as they may be (e.g., Hood & Lodge, 2006), survey-based (Hammerschmid et al. 2017), and interview-based (e.g., 't Hart & Wille 2006) 'outside-in' research that continue to dominate it (cf. Bach & Wegrich, 2020; Peters 2020). To me, this is not a dismissal of existing and insightful studies, but an attempt to diversify our methodological reach.

In this study, I aim to dig deeper into the forms and impact of functional politicisation by reporting 160 hours of shadowing among SCSs, i.e., secretaries-general and directors-general in Dutch central government. Based on this observational data, I shed light on the 'craft' of public servants and contribute to a more nuanced everyday life sense of political-administrative relationships than much of the existing literature does (Goetz 1997; Rhodes 2016). By focusing on what SCSs actually do – observing their work in practice – we can better understand how they anticipate and respond to political actors and influences in their everyday practices (cf. Wagenaar 2004). Additionally, this chapter contributes a study of politicisation in a national context which is generally considered non-politicised.

I argue that functional politicisation is in practice not just about command of political skills and the prevalence of political-tactical advice over policy advice (even though that seems the case), but that it also manifests an authority claim allowing some SCSs to represent the minister and her authority *by proxy* vis-à-vis fellow civil servants. I refer to this as 'proxy politics'. While political-administrative relationships are generally understood as interfaces between political principals and civil servants, proxy politics are a practice of anticipating and strategizing about these political-administrative relationships in interactions that occur *among* civil servants.

In the remainder of this chapter, I first discuss current research on functional politicisation, particularly as it applies to SCSs in the Netherlands' national government, the empirical setting for this chapter. I then account for the methodology of ethnographic shadowing. The findings section provides an 'up-close' narrative of how SCSs interact with their principals, how they represent these principals by proxy to their colleagues and how this is shaped by the realities of working 'in public'. Finally, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the findings and suggest ways for future research.

5.2 Functional politicisation in the core executive

Politicisation of the civil service is often understood as a mechanism for politicians to control government bureaucracies – a way for Ministers to get what they want. It makes a difference whether civil servants are recruited based on their professional merit or based on partisan allegiance (Cooper 2020). However, politicisation is not just found in recruitment and selection procedures of civil servants. Politicisation comes in many shapes which carry different implications for the relationships between politicians and civil servants. In their literature review, Hustedt and Salomonsen (2014) present a threefold typology: formal, administrative, and functional politicisation.

Formal politicisation is usually defined as 'the substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards, and disciplining of members of the public service.' (Peters and Pierre 2004: 2). This can take many forms, including the *personalisation* of the bureaucracy, meaning Ministers recruit civil servants whom they connect well personally and *patronage* (Hustedt & Salomonsen 2014: 749). This does not necessarily mean that these politicised or personalised recruits are unprofessional – the German case with politicised executive level appointments proves to result in professionally trained civil servants with a career in government (Bach and Veit 2018). So, although ministers may seek to appoint loyal officials, they require 'some modicum of ability' too (Hood & Lodge 2006: 86).

Second, *administrative* politicisation refers to attempts to control the functioning of the public service in ways other than through targeted recruitment (cf. Shaw & Eichbaum 2020). The most notable form has been the introduction of ministerial advisers or other explicit partisans such as chiefs of staff within the bureaucracy (Shaw & Eichbaum 2008). Specifically, administrative politicisation occurs when political advisers behave towards civil servants in ways that 'offend against the principles and conventions associated with a professional and impartial civil service' (Eichbaum and Shaw 2008: 343). For example, partisan staff in the department can obstruct civil servants' access to Ministers or add a partisan 'spin' to impartial civil service advice before the Minister gets to see it. The emergence of ministerial advisers has sparked concerns about the civil service's ability to deliver 'frank and fearless' advice and 'speak truth to power' (Hustedt et al. 2017).

The third type is the politicisation of work and behaviour of civil servants, rather than actors or recruitment and selection. '*Functional* politicisation represents a mechanism by which the civil service performs politically responsive bureaucratic behaviour' (Hustedt & Salomonsen 2014: 750). 'Political' work is part and parcel of the senior civil servant's craft (Goetz 1997). They balance 'responsiveness' with 'political astuteness' (Hartley et al. 2015; Mulgan 2008) as they anticipate and influence the political nature of context in which they work. The demands placed upon them by

their political principals and the shadow of ministerial responsibility and accountability permeates the policymaking process. This type of politicisation implies that the craft of senior civil servants is more about being strategic and less about being the neutral purveyor of subject matter knowledge and advice about practical feasibility of policy ideas (Belloir and Van den Berg 2020; Christiansen et al. 2016).

Shaw and Eichbaum suggest an important factor that sets functional politicisation apart from the first two types. Rather than responding to exogenous stimuli from Ministers or Ministerial advisers, functional politicisation is more likely, they argue, endogenous: it is 'behaviour that bubbles up from within' the civil service' (2020: 843). Seen in this way, the civil service *self-politicises*, anticipating the Minister's needs and desires, for example through 'mindful self-censorship' or 'anticipatory compliance' ('t Hart 1994). Reading 'what the Minister wants' is considered a sine qua non for SCSs. However, others do find evidence for external stimuli. For example, research in Danish bureaucracies found a positive relation between functional politicisation and media awareness (Salomonsen et al. 2016), reminding us that SCSs believe to work in the public eye (cf. Grube 2019).

Situated nearer to the Westminster and Scandinavian than to the Napoleonic administrative tradition, the Dutch civil service system does not have a tradition of formal politicisation (Van der Meer 2004), nor have its appointment processes been ranked as highly politicised (Bach et al. 2020). Although Van Dorp and 't Hart (2019) provide a case study of intricate 'court politics' (Rhodes, 2013) in the Dutch Prime Minister's Office in the early 2000s, Van den Berg's (2018) overview study finds that ministerial advisers – each minister has one – are by and large working in tandem with the civil service rather than acting as agents of administrative politicisation. Still, in other work he does observe that, 'political considerations in the policy process seem to have become more pronounced through the work of the Minister's direct entourage' (Van den Berg 2017: 78). Elements of functional politicisation may well be slipping into the operating model of the Dutch core executive (Belloir and Van den Berg 2020). Recent governmental audits concluded that 'unwritten rules' incentivise SCSs to shield their Ministers rather than advise them frankly and fearlessly and report the strong sense of duty to deliver on political wishes among SCSs (ABDTOPConsult 2020; ADR 2019).

5.3 Political work in the Dutch civil service

The analysis of functional politicisation and civil service behaviour usually covers two broad categories: 'neutral' policy advice and 'political' advice regarding coalitions, tactics and media spin, including anticipating political implications of decisions, tailoring proposals to the government of the day (e.g., Christiansen et al. 2016). Working towards favourable media perceptions are considered elements of functional politicised behaviour. The neutral competence vs political tactics binary is a convenient trope but cloaks the more subtle realities in SCSs' work contexts and coping styles. Van Dorp and 't Hart (2019) also reject this divide: in their analysis, Dutch SCSs consider their policy advice political-strategic, and their political-strategic advice about policy. So, as long recognised, SCSs' work includes both policy and (nonpartisan) politics (Mayntz and Derlien 1989). To phrase the indivisibility of policy and politics, Putnam (1975) coined the 'political bureaucrat', while Rhodes (2011) prefers 'political-administrators'. An in-depth analysis of functionally politicised work of SCSs cannot do with binaries alone.

Moreover, as Mulgan (2008: 347) points out, being responsive implies that SCSs' *neutral* advice should take account of government priorities, rather than attempting to be *impartial* between competing political viewpoints. In this view, SCSs serve this government (and the next), so they are by no means impartial. In normative terms, he proposes the principle of 'constrained partisanship' arguing that although inevitably political, SCSs should refrain from being too obviously partisan, particularly in party-political matters and the open advocacy of government policy (2008: 348-350). Their command of 'political' skills, however, is crucial to successful policy advice. Aucoin's (2012) rival description of 'promiscuous partisanship' argued that SCSs are (increasingly) expected to be open advocates of government policies, either within or outside the departmental organisation, suggesting an explicit functional politicisation.

Though my purposes are not normative but empirical-interpretive, the containers of functionally politicised work and behaviour provide a bandwidth ranging from 'too much' to 'too little' responsiveness and astuteness. They also highlight three *faces of functional politicisation*. In the empirical part of this chapter, I will study these three faces: the direct inter-personal political-administrative interaction; the representation of the minister's authority *by proxy* to fellow civil servants within the administrative organisation; and the ways SCSs deal with being in the public eye.

5.4 Observing senior civil servants in the field

I set out to shadow among 18 senior executives in the Dutch civil service as they went about their business (Rhodes et al. 2007; Noordegraaf 2000). This qualitative approach gives unique insights into the practice of SCSs and allows us to open up the black box of functional politicisation. These SCSs led ministries, headed up service-delivery agencies or oversaw public regulators. They were either chief executive officers or members of the executive board of their organisations. Their formal titles included 'secretary-general' (SG), 'director-general' (DG) or 'inspector-general' (IG). 18 participants (12 male, 6 female) agreed to my request, four denied my request and six did not respond. All field visits were between February 2018 and March 2020. This period falls within the prime minister Rutte-III cabinet. The SCSs were targeted using pragmatic sampling resulting in an even spread across multiple departments and agencies (common in elite studies, cf. Peters 2020: 218).

The claims of this study are based on notes (84,000 words) that I made during 160 hours of shadowing 18 SCSs. Shadowing each SCS for a day or more has provided a unique opportunity to study their work up-close. For any observational study, duration in the field matters. Between 2018 and 2021, I have been moving in and out of the field. This approach – colloquially called 'hit-and-run ethnography – balances breadth with depth (Rhodes 2014b). Observing a larger number of participants has been tremendously helpful in spotting differences (breadth), whereas observation (even if 'just' for one day) has revealed aspects of civil service politicisation that interviews are unlikely to reveal (depth). Furthermore, the individual participants often interacted during the observation days, meaning I got to observe participants multiple times in different settings (one or two days as protagonist, other days as incoming colleague, antagonist or bystander).

The fieldnotes contain observations, verbatim excerpts of conversations and 'interviews-to-the-double' to capture the beliefs underpinning the observed practices (Theron 2020). Fieldnotes relate to direct political-administrative interactions, policy preparation and various other forms of work. I made sure to include headnotes too, my running commentary on what 'I wondered as I wandered' during the fieldwork days. To me, headnotes make plain that the researcher is 'not inoculated from the effect of what he bore witness to' (De Rond and Lok 2016: 1970).

5.4.1 ACCESS AND POSITIONALITY

During a brief interview, I explained the purpose of the study and got acquainted with the participant. After gaining the participants' consent, access was still to be negotiated. All participants were willing to introduce me to their guests and allowed me into most meetings they attended.

Sometimes I was temporarily denied access, for example if personnel matters were discussed, when the meeting was unusually (politically) charged or when my participant was uncomfortable in bringing a guest to a meeting where s/he him/herself was invited as guest. Participants would usually debrief these meetings afterwards to excluded colleagues and me.

In assuming positionality, I aimed for *'social shrinking'* as Goffman (2014: 235) coins it; I was in the room but tried to blend into a social non-factor by dress, silence unless directly prompted, posture, and chair placement. Still, a degree of 'undesigned relationality' remained, as these understandings were not fixed and sometimes implicit (Bell 2018). When I asked, participants said they were not bothered by my presence.

The up-close and personal approach priors me to try to feel with SCSs and see the politics-administration interface from their perspective(s). That said, I am not speaking for them. I invited all participants to reflect on the manuscript. While they recognised and authorised this chapter's interpretation, three participants wished for more nuance or alternative phrasings. Therefore, this account is mine and not all participants fully agree.

5.4.2 DATA ANALYSIS

The fieldnotes were thematically analysed by means of coding and memoing, aiming for theory refinement based on the qualitative material (Eisenhardt, 1989). Formal coding and discussing the data with colleagues took place parallel to the fieldwork. 'Political-administrative relations' was a sensitising concept throughout the fieldwork and analysis, but the concept of 'functional politicisation' emerged only after the fieldwork was done. The first rounds of coding revealed profound but well-documented findings about the work of SCSs, foregrounding their busy days, the centrality of meetings and department-agency relationships (cf. Noordegraaf 2000; Rhodes 2011). However, in next rounds of coding, a fresh perspective emerged: the practice of proxy politics, see Table 5.1 below.

Table 5.1 Themes and subthemes in data analysis

Theme	Sub-themes	Example
Functional politicisation	Serving (and steering) the principal	Sitting in on negotiations and coming up with fresh ideas that help the Minister's position in a negotiation, without setting a damaging precedent a next Minister would have to deal with
	Proxy politics	Using a pen, he is correcting a departmental brief to the Minister. He erases, highlights, and draws a circle around specific words. Without looking up, he comments: 'look, it says that "it is in the Minister's interest to read this carefully". That line will just annoy her,' as he erases the sentence from the brief.
	Working in public	'I think in headlines'

In the analysis, I argue that civil servants do 'political' work – I rid myself of unhelpful binaries including the politics-administration dichotomy. In making this conceptual leap – in recognising work as 'political' – I was guided by abductive coding, iteratively interpreting fieldnotes with elements from 'functional politicisation' discourse. I began to see work as 'political' when SCSs defended their claims with the approval of the political principal they served, whose legitimacy was generally unquestioned, thereby attempting to load some of that legitimacy upon themselves. How SCSs did this in practice, is subject of analysis below.

5.5 Three faces of functional politicisation

The fieldwork highlights three faces of functional politicisation. First, functional politicisation was visible in the direct interaction between civil servants and ministers. A second face showed when SCSs represented ministers towards their fellow civil servants. The third face appeared when SCSs realised they were working in public.

5.5.1 FACE 1: SERVING MINISTERS RESPONSIVELY AND ASTUTELY

Most senior civil servants I observed worked directly to serve their principals. For all but one, this meant they were personally serving the (junior) Minister responsible for their department or agency. This implied they performed roles as advisers to the Minister, were responsible for executing the Minister's policy directives, warned against harmful policy proposals, and counselled on any and all issues upon request. Even if they would not see the Minister every single day, or not even on a regular basis, 'the Minister' would be prominent in their reasoning, arguments and discussions. 'Serving' the principal meant both enabling the Minister to govern and execute a political program,

but it also meant keeping the Minister out of trouble, for instance by steering him/her away from bad ideas or trying to deflect mistakes from the Minister's reputation. The picture is one of close relationships with frequent and wide-ranging interactions, including:

> A SG, a DG and two junior advisors sit around a conference table for the daily early morning phone call – 'morning prayer' – with their Minister. The latter is *en route* to the department, digesting today's papers and coming up with new ideas. He pitches an idea and wonders out loud if it may be a solution to the employment issues in their sector. The SG compliments the Minister calling it a *'good idea'* and proposes to contact the SG at the Defence department to discuss it tonight in the margins of a planned meeting. The Minister speaks about 80% of the duration of the call, one of the DGs does most of the talking on this end of the call. The two junior advisers remain entirely silent throughout.
>
> The last topic of the call is the Mid Term Review of the department. The coalition parties in Parliament were asked to come up with new ideas for the second half of the government's term, but the yield was low. The Minister wants more ideas. The DG demurs and claims 'we already have a lot of ideas, let's first see what they are worth'. The secretary-general grins quietly and gives a thumbs up. But the Minister insists on more ideas (Fieldwork, July 2019).

This vignette illustrates how SCSs were 'responsive' by partaking in a daily meeting with the Minister where he is free to speak his mind, complimenting the Minister and immediately putting his plans in action by providing follow-up. Yet, they were also 'astute' by pushing back on the generation of all too many new ideas, knowing the department can only do so many 'extras', given upcoming elections and the going concerns of the policy agenda.

The practice of serving the principal was the most prominent feature of the working lives of the departmental SCSs I observed. They 'cocooned' in adjacent offices and had but to cross the hallway to see their Minister(s), sometimes multiple times a day (Fieldwork, June 2018). Their language for these impromptus was 'walking in' or 'tackling the minister', bearing connotations of astuteness and low threshold access. One departmental DG had seven face-to-face interactions with his ministers, accounting for 3.75 hours of this observed day (Fieldwork June 2018). This facetime could include reassuring the Minister they were keeping his interests and credibility in mind, while acknowledging to him that there are other forces (and Ministers) at play too (Fieldwork, July 2019) or sitting in on negotiations and coming up with fresh ideas that help the

Minister's position in a negotiation, without setting a damaging precedent a next Minister would have to deal with (Fieldwork, June 2018).

For SCSs in executive and regulatory agencies, the intensity of direct interaction with Ministers was considerably lower. Some had regular appointments with the Minister, and these would be complemented by ad-hoc meetings and calls, but the imperatives of dealing one-on-one with the principal, catering to their needs were less salient to them. In effect, an agency director lamented his troubles reaching the director-general of the department to me – apparently speaking to the minister was beyond reach for him (Fieldwork, May 2018). Departmental SCSs would be his first point of contact. Still, their commitment to the 'primacy of the principal' was palpable on many field visits. In a meeting, one IG voiced this belief pleading with his fellow IGs: 'We are *the Minister's* inspectors. Our work falls within the Ministerial responsibility' (Fieldwork, March 2020). With Mulgan's (2008) words, they professed neutrality, but not impartiality. An agency head explained that, although she ran an arm's length agency, she would make efforts to 'comfort' the Minister – again a fine line between responsiveness and astuteness:

> 'One of the things I do, is to comfort the minister because he's insecure about not being a lawyer, while I am. I also add comfort to his position by reframing a parliamentary debate about an issue at my agency from ''Misconduct at'' my agency to ''Problems at'' my agency. Furthermore, I cut my vacation short to attend the debate. I didn't think I was needed, but my people were quite tense, so I thought it was better if I'd be there' (Fieldwork May 2019).

Ministers were not the only principals – Parliament was always around the corner. The Dutch dualist context – where Ministers are not MPs – fosters a dichotomy between the executive and the legislative branch. In Dutch parliamentary democracy, Parliament unambiguously has the final word, SCSs believed. Because the executive is not part of the legislative, this suggests a dual loyalty for SCSs: they serve both the legislative and the executive. However, as direct contacts with the legislative were actively discouraged, SCSs perceived it as stepwise: ministers embody parliament's legitimacy. Though they would not necessarily endorse Parliament's majority view, they acknowledged it as legitimate and as an important impetus for their work. SCSs managed up to Parliament directly, through hearings and letters, but usually indirectly by preparing ministers for upcoming debates.

On occasion, a secretary-general briefed MPs in person during a hearing setting. In this instance, he sat in front of a parliamentary committee, reporting on the progress of the

department's organization culture and change management program. Given the discouragement of direct parliamentary-administrative interaction, these 'technical briefings' were considered rather unusual. On a car ride, he confessed he was pleased with how it went: 'we hit a good groove' he said, 'much better than the previous hearing'. His nerve had been tested, but it went well. During the follow day, the SG was repeatedly asked about it by his departmental colleagues, stressing the alien nature of such hearings. (Fieldwork, September 2018).

Interestingly, some SCSs saw Parliament as their primary political master, coming even before their Minister. During a meeting, an IG urged her colleagues to provide her with policy advice, so she could accommodate *'Parliament and Minister,'* stressing the former not the latter (Fieldwork, November 2019). Though, when she voiced this minority view to fellow regulatory chiefs, most disagreed, reaffirming the predominance of the Minister as primary principal for departmental, frontline agency and regulatory agency heads alike (Fieldwork, March 2020).

Regulatory SCSs often had the opportunity to consult MPs or be consulted by them, without a Minister or departmental officials mediating the relationship. They could send letters to Parliament, signing them without a Minister's signature. A regulatory chief was quite confident about her position vis-à-vis Parliament. She counted on Parliament as her main authorising environment. Of course, her respective Minister could give directions, but only through a public letter notifying Parliament. She counted on the publicity side-effects to make sure her minister would ration his/her decrees wisely (Fieldwork, November 2019).

Though SCSs seemed generally responsive to Parliament's wishes, they practiced forms of astuteness too. A brief excerpt from a departmental board meeting highlights how SCSs bought time by writing a trivial letter in response to parliamentary questions:

> Next item on the agenda: incoming parliamentary questions. A DG briefs his colleagues: 'the letter is written, with meaningless answers, because the issue is discussed in Cabinet only later this week'. The discussion of all questions takes two minutes. (Fieldwork, June 2018).

It was not hard to recognise some of the 'functional politicisation' traits in the SCSs' serving and steering of ministers. Though they dealt with personnel, policy and implementation, they practiced 'thinking politically' (Hustedt & Salomonsen 2018: 79) too and made efforts to incorporate 'political considerations into the dispositions and activities of bureaucrats' (Shaw & Eichbaum 2020: 843).

5.5.2 FACE 2: POLITICS IN THE SHADOW OF POLITICIANS

Although I saw SCSs with their ministers, the bulk of the observed days was spent without politicians in sight. This could, of course, be a sampling consequence of my field access (although I do not have any indication that suggests this), but it was also a perennial complaint among SCSs and their staff (Fieldwork March 2018). During observation of a departmental SCS in the summer of 2018, the daily morning meeting with the minister was cancelled – 'again' – and the weekly staff meeting shortened to a mere 30 minutes. As they sighed under their breath, a DG concluded the minister 'apparently does not consider it important enough' (Fieldnotes June 2018). Likewise, a SG lamented that his weekly bilateral with the minister was the first thing that would be cancelled when the minister was busy (Fieldwork July 2019).

Even if politicians were absent, politics was all around. SCSs practices a distinct form of politics, I call 'proxy politics.' Proxy politics refers to the practice of SCSs claiming the authority of their principal for their own while thinking and/or acting on his/her behalf. A reoccurring experience throughout my fieldwork was that SCSs would encounter a fellow civil servant who would back up an argument with the phrase 'The Minister wants this', assuming that would be the end of it (e.g., Fieldwork, June 2018). This was particularly observable in interactions between departmental SCSs and agency SCSs, but not exclusively. In a similar vein, departmental civil servants would encounter fellow departmental civil servants, who claimed a still more significant authority – usually the Prime Minister's or the Minister of Finance's.

A simple example illustrates what *'proxy politics'* looked like in practice. A secretary-general made a site visit to a frontline agency of her department. In a meeting she was asked to respond to case studies by saying how the Minister would decide in this situation (Fieldwork, May 2019). In this example, the SG was perceived as a proxy of the Minister, providing up-close insights into the Minister's brain – something the frontline agency employees lacked. In such cases, SGs were perceived to speak for the Minister beyond rebuttal.

A lot of SCSs' work is paper driven, as can proxy politics. Consider when a departmental DG was correcting departmental notes to the Minister one early afternoon:

> Using a pen, he is correcting a departmental brief to the Minister. He erases, highlights, and draws a circle around specific words. Without looking up, he comments: 'look, it says that "it is in the Minister's interest to read this carefully". That line will just annoy her,' as he erases the sentence from the brief. 'She is swamped with briefs and has no idea what this is about.' He goes on to explain that the Minister cancelled her daily

morning meeting due to other urgent business and a trip to Sweden this afternoon (Fieldwork, June 2018).

Simply put, some SCSs thought and spoke for their Minister. They committed proxy politics while judging what their Minister would (not) like to hear or should hear or would time incoming issues to a more opportune moment. In doing so they blended gatekeeping with substantial directives by proxy.

How SCSs dealt with the proxy politics of their colleagues was shared by a yet another SCS telling of his experience as Inspector-General. Every now and then, there is a suspicion that specific products malfunction or otherwise deviate from the appropriate regulations, he explained the context. When that is the case, products can be recalled, often at great expense of businesses and plausibly the Minister's political capital. Clearly an incendiary decision:

> 'I was informed that the situation was quite serious, so I decided to recall all products. When I informed the Director-General of my intention, he was shocked and argued that I could not do that. Referencing legislation, he claimed he had the authority to make that decision – to him it was a policy matter. I thought, based on different legislation, that the mandate to recall products was mine. We had to argue before the Minister to find out who was right' (Fieldwork, February 2020).

As the interview excerpt illustrates, SCSs were involved in proxy politics. Both acknowledged that the Principal is always right. However, many civil servants had little access to the Minister, contrary to the IG above, meaning they could not easily appeal and will need to cope with the Minister's proxy in front of them.

In May 2018, a manager of a large arm's length urged his staff to provide him with more information and a convincing letter he could send to the Minister, which would suggest '*please sign here*' to the Minister, warding off further dispute (FNWB). This agency manager made use of both careful preparation of staff and statutory standing (after all, the agency sits at arm's length) to pre-emptively overcome proxies of authority, a strategy also endorsed by other SCSs (e.g., Fieldwork, March 2020).

Departmental SCSs thus acted as authority proxies but encountered them too. Like all members of the core executive, they are bosses and being bossed. That may look like this:

On March 19th, 2018, a secretary-general discussed upcoming budget negotiations with his departmental CFO and a financial adviser before he would go to the Ministry of Finance. 'What's the minimum we need?' is his simple question to present staff. The department faces urgent challenges which require staff and budgets. As they present the figures to him, the SG does the maths on his notepad, in millions of Euro's. They conclude it is 50 million Euro's. The CFO urges the secretary to open negotiations with €60M, as this raises their chances of getting what they want. It sounds like negotiations 101, but the SG is not inclined and counters the CFO: 'If we need 50, we'll ask the Ministry of Finance for 50. She knows me. If that's what we need, we will get it. If not, we'll make it political', meaning he would ask the Minister to take it to Cabinet (Fieldwork, March 2018).

This vignette illustrates that inter-departmental relations can be a source for zero-sum competition. However, like the preceding vignette of the IG recalling products, the SCS's approach was aimed at undoing the proxy politics of the Ministry of Finance negotiator, not at bargaining for a bigger part of the pie. In this instance, a civil servant's relationship with the minister can fuel proxy politics, but also a way to overcome it: calling the interdepartmental bluff and taking the matter to Cabinet. The practice of proxy politics is more than shadow boxing by and among civil servants; it has real import that SCSs could not undo even if they wanted to. 't Hart and Kuijken (2018: 56) describe the predicament of a SG in the Prime Minister's Office who brings word to a Minister saying the Cabinet cannot likely sustain his position any longer, upon which the Minister draws his conclusions. A clear example of a civil servant acting on behalf of unquestioned authority in the core executive which leads to compliance, not undoing. In my own fieldwork, a manager of a frontline agency explained how departmental civil servants would pressure him into compliance and how he had difficulty of countering this. The frontline agency's manager spoke of 'Implementation tests' [Dutch: *Uitvoeringstoets* or *HUF-toets*]. These tests are designed to quickly evaluate whether proposed legislation can actually be implemented. Some legislation cannot. Sometimes because it is unlawful, not supported by current ICT infrastructure, or the respective agency does not have the necessary skills, specialised staff or resources. If the outcome is 'no', the test provides a quick feedback loop for departmental policy makers. However, the manager explained, 'the department does not accept a 'no'. If they want X, we need to give them X. Especially when the proposal is already published in the Cabinet Agreement.' (Fieldwork, May 2018).

The frontline agency, their manager explained, has a strong 'sense of duty' to comply with political requests – the SCSs did not always want to undo the proxy politics, as they had internalised the proxy's authority. Later that day, when the agency's Board discussed a proposal which was not practically feasible, this was epitomised by the chairperson's words 'I want us to be able to do this':

> The chairman reads that the implementation test labelled the proposal as 'not feasible. It means the agency would not be able to deliver on the Minister's request. His voice sounds dismissive. 'I want us to be able to do this anyway', he adds. The attendants quickly come up with ideas of how they could work around the agency's shortcomings; using the institutional, legal and financial know-how of other agencies, such as the Tax Office. One civil servant protests and stresses the unfeasibility of the proposal that was underlined by the implementation test. When colleagues appear prone to the chairman's voice, the civil servant acquiesces (Fieldwork, May 2018).

This subparagraph illustrates how 'the minister wants it' was both a rhetorical trope that civil servants used to subtly whip their colleagues in line, but also a dominant force among Dutch civil servants to deliver for the government of the day. Although proxy politics were countered, the final example illustrates that in the end some SCSs and their subordinates would acquiesce.

5.5.3 FACE 3: COPING WITH VISIBILITY

The pervasiveness of being in the public eye was ingrained in the SCSs I observed (see also Grube 2019). This publicness has a distinct effect on being responsive and astute, both directly and by proxy. I saw them come to terms with the fishbowl realities of working in the public eye in two ways; they tried to save face by anticipating the potential fallout of unpopular decisions of policies gone awry and, secondly, they tried to seek privacy in public. For saving face, consider the following vignette from the fieldnotes:

> An agency executive makes sure that his other board members will not accidentally sign an invoice for new furniture in the executive rooms, totalling €130,000. Apparently, the invoice had turned out much higher than expected. 'We're not going to sign that invoice', he stresses, seeking active confirmation from his fellow board members. They nod. In response, a present non-board member points to the threadbare furniture in the room and reminds the board members that they do need new furniture. The director concurs, but points to the publicity it may arouse: *'we're*

really careful with this'. Though possibly unaware, his caution is not far-fetched. Some 15 years ago, a similar invoice for office furniture (admittedly a much higher sum) in a neighbouring agency led to the immediate removal of its director, heated debate in Parliament about alleged 'golden faucets', and a dint in the department-agency relationships (Fieldwork, May 2019).

SCSs imagined what something on their table would look and feel like to the general public. This form of political nous was considered essential to the SCS' craft (Rhodes 2016). So, it made sense SCSs were not worried about public expenditure as such, but about the reputational effects of 'bureaucrats touching up their offices'. Similarly, an agency manager was approached to finance a theatre production that dramatized the agency's work. When she voiced her concern to the aspiring theatre producer, she did not worry much about donating €100K to the production but about the possibility of being depicted as buying influence over the production's content (Fieldwork, May 2019).

Keen on upholding the reputation of their organisations, most SCSs were careful on what they would voice in public – often limiting themselves to things they would not regret (Schillemans 2012). Consider this example from the fieldwork:

> In a departmental board meeting, a director points to the notes that have just been distributed around the table. A line about the department's relationship with the sector it serviced reads that 'no consensus has to be reached with the sector'. He draws attention to the line and points out that while it may be legally correct, they would have trouble justifying it in public when it would be made public through a FOIA request (Fieldwork, March 2018).

In yet another case, an agency head was asked to comment on the slogan for the agency's annual staff party. She wondered out loud what it would look like on the papers' frontpages. She justified her hesitation to her staff member with: 'I think in headlines' (Fieldwork, May 2019).

In contrast, good news was made public swiftly and gregariously. Some SCSs enjoyed a policy victory with the minister signing an agreement in a carefully staged, well photographed setting (Fieldwork, June 2018). In a different setting, a departmental SCS urged his staff to send a letter containing reports of considerable policy progress to Parliament *before* the upcoming May holidays (Fieldwork, April 2018). Simply put, the Minister could always use some good news – and SCSs

made sure everyone was well attuned to it. This was very apparent in meetings I observed. For instance:

> A departmental DG opens an interdepartmental meeting about a new policy plan. Due to the ill-fated history of the policy plan's predecessors, he stresses that the Minister considers *visible* progress on this policy plan very important. He adds to the six colleagues around the table that he wants to 'underline her concern, before they would start off.' Later, but in response, an executive agency DG proposes to cut up the new policy plan into ten policy plans, explaining this would allow both their Ministers to '*display*' quick wins and better compete for attention. […] When the departmental DG closes the meeting, he thanks everyone and says he's glad they had sent a few 'shots across the bow' (Fieldwork, June 2018).

Though SCSs worked hard to save face for their organisations and principals, they could not always control their agency's behaviour and reputation. 'Unauthorised' information leaks from anonymous sources were a source of professional embarrassment. A discussion in a departmental board meeting is exemplary:

> At the meeting's close, they discuss the recent coverage in *De Telegraaf* about the newly refurbished government building *Rijnstraat 8*. The newspaper item mentioned the cramped office facilities, including staff complaints about the building and the public servant's wellbeing. One remarks: 'It includes a picture of public servants queuing for coffee', stressing existing stereotypes. 'Nice pictures', is the sarcastic reply. Though they do not deny the problem, they regret that this was leaked through the largest national newspaper. They collectively suspect the employee's representatives as the source but concede they cannot prove a thing. The chairperson gives the board members an update of how the Government's Real Estate Agency (the building's legal owner) has acted since the coverage broke. Now they regret that they could not get them to the cooperate, while now it is in the papers they are eager to help. 'We're living in a mediacracy'*,* a DG murmurs (Fieldwork, June 2018).

Similarly, when an agency manager gave her colleagues an update on upcoming reports, she regretfully anticipated plausible leaks referring to icy relations with a well-read Dutch broadsheet paper. 'The [name of broadsheet paper] is not our friend at the moment' (Fieldwork, May 2019).

In this light, my presence as observer sometimes prompted questions about the confidentiality of the meetings I attended. Some attendants wanted reassurances that they could '*speak freely'*, meaning their words would not leak (Fieldwork, July 2019). For instance, a departmental spokesman warned me to keep quiet about what I heard, while making a gesture zipping up his lip. Still, it took less than an hour, before he proposed to '*share'* something '*on background'* – which was code for anonymously leaking the departmental position on a policy issue (Fieldwork, June 2018). This marks the ambivalence SCSs felt about working in *public*: it was considered inevitable, but in practice they also sought *privacy* to '*speak freely'* (Fieldwork July 2019). So, paradoxically, when working in public, SCS preferred to remain invisible. If possible, they were one step removed from shows of publicness and let their Ministers champion them in public:

> I'm sitting in on a nine o'clock breakfast meeting with corporate CEOs, and a direct question about the SCS's directorate is asked. Rather than answering the question, the SCS's political principal rises from his breakfast table and answers the question, smoothly cued by the SCS who sat next to him. Both principal and SCS '*know the rules'* of this public setting (Fieldwork, February 2018; cf. Wagenaar 2004).

Similarly, in Parliament and during public events, they would sit in the audience, deferring to their Principal who was doing the performing on that public stage, even though they were providing them with suggested 'lines' all the time from the civil service box (Fieldwork, February 2018; April 2018). They knew to spotlight their ministers and step aside. A possible exception was social media. About half of SCSs were active on Twitter and thus assumed some public presence in their own right,

5.6 Self-politicisation and proxy politics

The observations of SCSs at work show three faces of functional politicisation. One, many of them have frequent, ongoing, intimate interactions with ministers, easily blurring the 'zone' between politically responsive behaviour and neutral policy advice. Second, when ministers were absent, SCSs act as their stand-in, again blurring lines between hierarchical roles as manager of a ministerial organisation and being an unquestionable representant of the minister. Third, functional politicisation had a very public face. All SCS were keenly aware that any detail that came across their desk might soon end up in media headlines. These faces originate in the literature on functional politicisation, which emphasises behavioural repertoires for SCSs, including political

nous in advising ministers and media awareness, rather than formal controls of the bureaucracy or its colonisation by partisan staff.

As a way to control bureaucracies, functional politicisation starts with ministers. The fieldwork provides many clues that support this. For example, a minister who instructed her DG that she needed 'visible' policy progress, directing this DG to make that his main message in meetings with colleagues. While, of course, open to interpretation, such instructions arguably steer SCSs to 'think along' with their principal and strive for the minister's increased standing in parliament and media. It makes an explicit case of 'incorporation of political considerations into the dispositions and activities of bureaucrats' (cf. Shaw & Eichbaum 2020: 843). However, the main thrust of the empirical paragraph is not that SCSs thought *along* with their ministers, but that they thought *for* their minister. While ministers were always on their mind, SCSs seemed prone to *self-politicisation*. Or, in Shaw and Eichbaum's (2020) phrase: it bubbled up inside of them.

If functional politicisation is a *mechanism*, as Hustedt and Salomonsen (2014) hold, this study stresses the *practice* of SCSs to anticipate and strategize about political-administrative relationships within the bureaucratic organisation. To unpack this, I used the phrase *proxy politics*. Some SCSs, most notably departmental managers, were so attuned to the principal's preferences that they would easily substitute for the Minister by evoking their wishes – which was met by few objections in the department. They – my fieldwork suggests – acted and thought on behalf of the principal, with or without them knowing. More importantly, bystanders and colleagues were often in the dark about the principal's actual needs and desires. This makes 'The Minister wants it' both an *in vivo* trope that was used by SCSs, but also a metaphor for politicisation. Though never partisan, and always with a keen eye for professional distancing from the rubble of politics, this comes close to what Aucoin (2012) coined 'promiscuous partisanship' but within their organisations.

When observing SCSs this practice was hard to pinpoint – when siding with their perspective it was the rational, if not, only thing to do. Translating the Minister's latest ideas was their prerogative, as they were often the only ones who knew about them. Likewise, working towards the minister's future wishes was simply the professional thing to do, and self-censorship could save them a pointless row (cf. Kershaw 2010). Only after observing civil servants in executive and regulatory agencies, I saw how seemingly coherent perspectives, professional pride and – at face value – reasonable requests were met with an alienated and awkward response from departmental ventriloquists condensed in 'The Minister wants it'.

The interesting thing about proxy politics is that it describes political work being performed without politicians present to perform it. It is the realm of the 'political bureaucrat' (Putnam 1975), 'Political-administrators' (Rhodes 2011) and 'stand-ins' (Askim et al. 2017). Though ministers, MPs

and the public loomed large in the conversations, considerations, negotiations and practices of the SCSs, they were – to the civil service's dismay – often not around. However, the wellbeing and success of the Minister shadowed over conversations. Civil servants spoke for their principal, considered what they needed (or not), they interpreted parliamentary debates and anticipated media headlines and public opinion.

5.7 Conclusions

Starting from functional politicisation literature, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork among senior civil servants in Dutch government. I attempted to open the black box of functional politicisation behaviour, in particular when working in the public eye. The analysis shifts the perspective from political skills to authority claims by SCSs. In closing, I recap the argument and suggest ways for further research.

While functional politicisation usually regards political skills and nous, gearing policy and advice processes towards the wellbeing and survival of the principal, proxy politics transcend skills. Its rationale seems to have been internalised in the hearts and minds of Dutch SCSs. It is not just an exogenous mechanism with behavioural consequences; it has become an endogenous practice of the senior civil service's *habitus* by means of self-politicisation (cf. Shaw & Eichbaum 2020).

Strikingly, the most noticeable element of functional politicisation among the Dutch SCSs is not their command of political skills (although craft skills matter). It is their inclination to act and think *for* their principals with or without them knowing. Enacted through seemingly mundane practices, which I show in this chapter, proxy politics resemble an authority claim civil servants make vis-à-vis their fellow civil servants. All professed competent neutrality, yet a number of them synthesised civil service neutrality with an ambassador role representing the Minister to their colleagues. As Dutch Ministers are not members of Parliament, the parliamentary-administrative relationships deserve more serious attention. The varying degrees of loyalty to Parliament that SCSs experience and how that shapes their behaviour remains an understudied dynamic.

This study is not a systematic comparison of different contexts (departments and/or agencies). However, it did seem that where SCS stand depends on where they sit. This then, nuances the claim that the Dutch core executive is increasingly functionally politicised (Belloir and Van den Berg 2020). Instead, my fieldwork indicates a differentiated picture of a contested civil service. Though some civil servants may have resembled 'promiscuous partisans' who practiced proxy politics (usually departmental managers, but variations existed), most seemed more likely to be 'constrained partisans' and others even tried to undo these functional authority claims altogether

or were relatively unbothered by these dynamics. If these dynamics are found in other contexts too, it is important to study why SCSs turn to proxy politics rather than to a different set of practices in order to better understand expressions of functional politicisation.

Also, the practice of proxy politics prompts questions regarding the balance (or imbalance) of clout among and between departments and agencies and the opportunities for effectively 'speaking truth to power' by those without proximity to the principal. If such opportunities are impaired by functional politicisation, policy results may be hampered as critical voices are suppressed. New research could look into this relationship further. Hustedt and Salomonsen (2014: 761) called for parliamentary opposition and the broader public as sensitive observers in this, but – despite fishbowl experiences – whether these are equipped to do this remains in question.

On balance, the fieldwork stresses SCSs' propensity to serve their principal, rather than their relative autonomy as stewards, executives and/or regulators of a public policy domain. As their craft entails serving both this government and the next, a degree of autonomy remains a critical feature of a neutral bureaucracy. If SCSs would want to increase their autonomy, simple solutions are elusive. Inevitably, it includes recalibrating the balance between responsiveness and responsibility, while maintaining both, at a pace all can stand. It may be necessary, but who knows if that is what the minister wants.

6

Organising the craft:

Managing attention

6.1 Introduction

How do public sector CEOs, in this instance city managers in The Netherlands manage their attention? City managers are the pivots connecting the city's executive politicians and its civil service. As public sector CEOs they navigate between political and administrative realities, serving and leading, advising and deciding, boundary spanning and getting things done. Yet, we hardly know what their everyday work entails. How do they operate in a role for which no script exists, in a strategic environment that is unfailingly political, ambiguous and fluid?

Public organisations provide an ambiguous context for SCSs (March and Olsen, 1979; Noordegraaf, 2000). On top of that, public organisations are repeatedly subject to reform (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). The popular scholarly refrain about the rise of the network society (*governance*) that is suggested to replace former hierarchical structures (*government*), necessitates a reinterpretation of the craft of public managers, as public managers enact public sector reform when new rules of the game are introduced (Agranoff, 2006; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Cloutier et al., 2016; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). After all, they lead organisations that design and/or implement such reforms. Different roles, contexts and epochs require different skills and expertise (Frederickson and Matkin, 2007). At the same time, the craft of public managers by its nature implies responsiveness to democratic political officeholders and a degree of astuteness in reading and operating within the broader political context of public sector organisations (Hartley, Alford, Hughes and Yates, 2015). This presents a puzzle: the burst of literature on *governance* suggests that public managers are most likely involved in (meta-)governance work, but is this the case, and to what extent?

Management within the public sector has received abundant attention in the past decades (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017; Rainey, 2014). Less attention has been paid to the work of managers — what it is they *actually* do. What they do on a daily basis, what activities they prioritize over others

is largely unknown. How they act, or for what — explicit or tacit — reasons they do so, remains a mystery. Public managers received even less scholarly attention, compared to either politicians or managers in the private sector, despite the evident influence of these managers and their organisations on public service delivery (Korica et al., 2015). This chapter studies city managers — public managers who act as CEOs of municipal organisations. They have been studied before in various cities (e.g. Allan, 1981; Sancino and Turrini, 2009), but the managerial work of Dutch city managers has not yet been covered in international journals. Their work is, however, interesting for international readers as it provides a contextual picture of how non-elected administrators work at the intersection of political, administrative, and societal contexts.

Several scholars stress the contribution that ethnographic studies of managerial work can make in opening up this 'black box' (Korica et al., 2015, p. 19; Noordegraaf, 2000, pp. 110-3; Rhodes, 2016, p. 645; Watson, 2011, p. 215). These approaches study managerial work up close, 'as it happens'. In this vein, the present chapter addresses the following research question: How do city managers, in their everyday behaviour, allocate their attention and attendance?

The next section conceptualizes the managerial work in a changing public sector. The following section describes the design and methods of the study. In the remainder of the chapter I present the Dutch case: an analysis of the attention allocation practices of four city managers, after which I end with concluding remarks.

6.2 Capturing the craft: Managing up, down, and out

'Craft' is a well-established lens to interpret the work of public managers that has recently been revived in the literature (Korica et al., 2015; Rhodes, 2016; Tiernan, 2015). By 'craft' I mean a carefully developed set of skills and knowledge — beliefs and practices — that has been acquired through a process of experiential training. A large part of this is tacit, some is secret. Craft is distinct from a 'science', 'profession' or an 'art' by its focus on practical wisdom and activity (Lynn, 1996; Raadschelders, 2004). It does not suggest a one-best-way, like science does, but unlike the arts it has utility (Rhodes, 2016). Originally crafts were sustained in formal communities of practice known as 'guilds' that set standards for practice. In these communities, apprentices were matured in a process of *Bildung* as journeymen and finally masters of the craft.

Today, public managers also apply a set of developed beliefs and practices in their everyday work. Their craft entails many practices, including serving public office holders (POHs), leading an organisation, active partaking in networks, as well as providing comfort and relief to POHs and tackling budding problems before they become political (cf. Demir and Reddick, 2012; Rhodes,

2016). In his account of administrative leadership, 't Hart (2014) distinguishes three key sets of activities for administrative leaders. These activities are aimed in three respective directions.

Senior public managers manage *up* when they engage with political officeholders — their *authorizing environment*. The relations between top administrators and their democratically elected masters are likely to be complex and interdependent. Many scholars have argued that these relations are more differentiated than the classic Weberian/Wilsonian notion of strict separation suggests ('t Hart & Wille, 2006; Nieuwenkamp, 2001). Others refer to these relations as a 'bargain' (Hood & Lodge, 2006) or use a fivefold typology (Peters 1988). In turn, Svara (2001) claims that the dichotomy of politics and administration is a myth and stresses the complementarity of politicians and administrators. Management of public organisations includes responsiveness to the government of the day — the 'owners' of government — as well as keeping long term well-being attended to (Wilson Jr, 2016, pp. 66-71). Managing up means advising politicians and negotiating democratic legitimacy for the organisation's output and fostering a productive collaboration with political officeholders.

Managing *down* is about building and preserving organisational capacity in order to deliver public services ('t Hart & Tummers 2019; Rainey, 2014). CEOs of government organisations are responsible for managing large bureaucracies that advise political officeholders and execute policy and legislation. Organizational leadership includes transforming, reimagining and developing this organisation. Public managers attend to both the strategy of the organisations and its long-term goals, as well as to ad hoc events that affect the 'going concerns'.

Managing *out* is about interactions with stakeholders, societal partners and competitors outside the leader's organisation ('t Hart & Tummers 2019). Public organisations ascribe increasing importance to governance in networks (Provan & Kenis, 2008). Using networks of valuable partners is an important lever for administrative leaders to create public value beyond the walls of their own organisations (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Government managers have a role as meta-governors of these governance networks (Torfing et al., 2012). Managers are expected to be boundary spanners who connect their organisation to societal actors and vice versa (Guarnos-Meza and Martin, 2016).

I will use the distinction between managing up, down, and out as a structuring device for exploring the craft of city managers (summarised in Table 1 below). I examine how city managers allocate their time across these three domains and relationships, as well as how they give meaning to these three components of their craft.

Table 6.1 Summarising management practices

Direction	Practices
Up	Advising political officeholders
	Negotiating democratic legitimacy for the organisation's output
	Fostering a productive collaboration with political officeholders.
Down	Building organisational capacity
	Transforming the organisation
	Managing strategy vs. going concerns
Out	Interact with societal partners outside the administration
	Meta-governance

6.3 Managers at work: studying elites

A particular strand of the literature has focused on the question of what managers do (Mintzberg, 1971, 1973; Martinko and Gardner, 1985; Noordegraaf, 2000). Using observational methodology scholars studied public managers up close (Kaufman, 1981; Rhodes et al., 2007; Rhodes, 2011). A landmark study on managerial behaviour is Mintzberg's (1973) *The Nature of Managerial Work*. He studied five managers of both public and private organisations up close and observed what they did. Contrary to classic managerial insights such as POSDCORB[2] activities, Mintzberg associated managerial work with 'brevity, variety and fragmentation' (1990). Managers were not depicted as rational planners, but as people who emphasised action over reflection (Rainey, 2014, p. 348). Their working days were filled with impromptu activities and ad hoc meetings. They would interact with others, rather than lock their doors and think great thoughts (Mintzberg, 1973, p. 37).

Notwithstanding the influence of Mintzberg's study on the literature on managerial work, his study was neither the first nor the last. Multiple literature reviews indicate that scholars have since followed in Mintzberg's footsteps and replicated (parts of) his study (Bartelings et al., 2017; Martinko and Gardner, 1985; Tengblad, 2006), mimicking his observations and shadowing methodology (see also Czarniawska, 2014; Noordegraaf, 2000), and conducting diary studies (Fleming, 2008).

Korica et al. (2015) present 96 studies of managerial work in public and private managers on low, middle and executive level in European, Anglo-Saxon and Asian contexts, covering classic studies from the 1950s and '60s (e.g., Carlson, 1951) up to recent studies by Cloutier et al. (2016).

[2] Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Co-ordinating, Reporting, and Budgeting

They discern four research approaches to the study of managerial work. The first studies of managerial work tried to grasp how management affected organisations. Scholars aimed to develop normative ideal types for management in various settings. The second approach, epitomised by Mintzberg's classic, focused on categorization of managers' roles. The third approach gained currency in the 1980's and 1990's when scholars noted that managerial work was not a neutral set of skills and behaviour, but a set of political skills and situated moralities that reinforced societal structures and power (im)balances (e.g. Knights and Wilmott, 1986). Finally, in the first decade of the 2000s managerial work was being studied as 'ordinary meaningful activity' (Korica et al., 2015). The analytical focus is on how the everyday lives of public managers 'really' unfold (Rhodes, 2011). Managerial work is conceptualised as a 'practiced craft'. This craft is increasingly analysed using qualitative research methods.

In contrast to the abundance of literature on what management should be about and what it should entail, relatively few scholars discuss what management actually is — or what managers really do. Managerial work, especially in the public sector, has received relatively little scholarly attention, despite the evident importance of knowing what managers do. Korica et al. (2015, p. 4) covered only three studies that focussed on managers in government, three studies on healthcare managers and five on managers in education. Also, of the studies that analyse multiple sectors, few include public sector managers, and even fewer discussed managers at the executive level. The present chapter mitigates this lacuna by presenting an analysis of the work of pivotal executive managers in local government.

The few existing studies present managerial work in separate categories, such as desk work, travel, meetings, phone calls, etc. (see e.g., Tengblad, 2006). Fewer scholars pay attention to who public managers interact with, a relational perspective. This chapter fills this gap by deploying the logic of 'up, down, and out' to study how public managers allocate their time and attention over the vertical axis of internal matters relating to political officeholders and the organisation, and the horizontal axis of connecting to actors outside to the organisation.

In sum, the recent literature on managerial work has turned to a focus on managerial work as 'ordinary meaningful activity'. Authors argue that public managers practice their craft through everyday behaviour and the tacit and explicit knowledge they exert. I contend in concert with others, that despite decades of interests in managerial work, the body of knowledge is remarkably small (Cloutier et al., 2016; Dargie, 1998). The subset literature that has empirically studied managers in the public sector is even more limited.

6.4 Design and methods: Being there

This study employs a nested multi case study design (Stewart, 2012). Each case is a city manager (CM) nested in the context of Dutch local governance. Four CMs have been studied in-depth in order to compare and contrast the findings in each case, borrowing from previous studies of managerial work (Mintzberg, 1973), senior public managers (Noordegraaf, 2000); local government executives (Dargie, 1998) and Whitehall senior civil servants (Rhodes, 2011). Table 2 profiles the four cities/city managers in middle-sized to large cities in the Netherlands who agreed to be observed and have their diaries analysed. Access to cases 1-3 was negotiated with assistance from the Dutch Association for City Managers; CM 4 was contacted independently by the author.

Table 6.2 Case selection

City Manager	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
City size	150,000+	150,000+	80,000+	600,000+
Age category	50-59	60-69	40-49	60-69
Education	Law, Public Administration	Law, Public Administration	Law	Law
Years as city manager	5-9	10-19	0-4	10-19
In studied city	0-4	10-19	0-4	0-4
Tenure in studied city	0-4	10-19	10-19	0-4
Organization FTE	1,500-2,000	1,000-1,500	500-1,000	10,000-15,000

6.4.1 DATA COLLECTION: DIARY ANALYSIS, SHADOWING AND INTERVIEWS

Three methods have been used to collect data: diary analysis, shadowing and (elite) interviews. These serve to include the experience of 'being there' — to capture the 'sensation' of the context in which city managers work. Participant observations are regarded as a well-suited method for answering questions about the practiced craft of public managers (Rhodes, 2016), while interviews are suitable for learning about the beliefs of the public managers. While the diary analysis presents helicopter view data, the observations produced up-close and personal data. The combination of these methods together allows for triangulation, by analysing the patterns of practice, speech and written words in parallel (Davies, 2001; Gains, 2015; Lilleker, 2003). Data was collected in March-July 2016.

6.4.2 DIARY ANALYSIS

The CMs' 2015 diaries were analysed using a coding scheme inspired by similar previous studies (e.g. Dargie, 1998; Fleming, 2008). The diary of CM 4 was not made available and was thus omitted from the analysis[3]. All diary records were coded using the (pre-tested) coding scheme in Table 3 below. It uses the logic of 'up' (political super-ordinates); 'down' (subordinates); and 'out' — activities in networks outside the municipal organisation ('t Hart, 2014, pp. 26-33). In addition to these three relational categories (who managers interact with)[4], the latter three codes (social, travel, and other) are content based. Given that the codes are not fully mutually exclusive, reflexive judgment, grounded in observations, was required.

Table 6.3 Coding scheme agenda analysis

Code	Sub code	Description
Up	Collective	Meetings with two or more political officeholders, i.e. mayor, aldermen
	Individual	Meetings with an individual political officeholder
Down	Direct Report	Meetings with employees who directly report to the city manager, i.e. directors, unit heads
	Executive Assistant	Meetings with executive assistants or entourage
	Other	Meetings with other employees, tours, and desk work
Out	Local	Activities in/for local networks
	Regional	Activities in/for regional networks
	National	Activities in/for national networks
Social		Attending social events such as diners or drinks, in a professional capacity
Travel		Time reserved for traveling
Other		Miscellaneous activities (e.g. giving a guest lecture at a university)

6.4.3 SHADOWING

Four CMs were shadowed for five days each[5]. The observed time totals 182 hours. I have been in and out of the field multiple times, reflecting yo-yo fieldwork (Rhodes, 2011). With city halls,

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[3] Triangulation in Case 4 was limited accordingly.
[4] Whether a given diary entry is perceived as up/down/out by city managers, is not solely determined by relational categories, but is also contingent on e.g. practices and the content of the recorded diary items. The applied method cannot easily capture practices and the content of the diary entries, resulting in a limited interpretation.
[5] City manager 4 was shadowed for four days. On the fifth day, the deputy city manager was shadowed in the same organisational context.

medieval chambers, meeting rooms, backseats of chauffeured limousines, cross-city bike rides, offices of city agencies, and permeated by ICT, the field was multi-sited (cf. Huby et al. 2011). I have observed executive board meetings, city council meetings, many bilateral conversations, and CMs answering emails at their iPads. Elaborate note-taking resulted in a corpus of notes (40,000+ words) in multiple fieldwork notebooks[6] (Emerson et al. 2011).

During the observations I adopted a *fly on the wall* approach (cf. Czarniawska 2014): I shadowed the CM, was present but overwhelmingly silent at all meetings and conversations I attended. Being a fly on the wall implied maintaining a fragile balance between unobtrusively observing the city manager and his various colleagues and associates (so as to minimize any observer effects), and actively managing my presence among them (so as to legitimize my presence and establish rapport in view of future access for interviews). In practice this boiled down to acting the part of a professional stranger — who does not interrupt the ongoing activities (Agar, 1980). When asked, the CMs indicated that they had not been affected by my presence.

6.4.4 INTERVIEWS

The observations and diary analysis were complemented by 33 semi-structured interviews with 25 CMs and other stakeholders who operate close to CMs (some were interviewed more than once). The goal of these interviews was to enrich the observations with the CMs' own sense making and to include additional reflections from their counterparts on site. The interviewees were selected using the same logic of 'up, down and out'. The selection includes — besides (deputy) CMs — mayors, aldermen, directors, unit heads and executive assistants. Most of these interviews would qualify as elite interviews (Lilleker, 2003; Littig, 2009). Interviews usually took place in the offices of the interviewees. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interviewees were promised anonymity. The interviews were semi-structured, partially based on a general topic list, but also on case-specific information or triggered by the observed events and conversations.

6.4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

Field research resulted in four notebooks with field notes, written documents (policy papers, meeting agendas, local newspapers) and photographs. Not all data is reported in the present chapter. Interpreting actions and implicit 'theories-in-use' is an elaborate process (Mintzberg,

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[6] When referring to notes in my field work notebooks, I use (Fieldwork, case X) as a reference.

1973). Understanding 'what was done by what was said, and what was said by what was done' is not an easy task for ethnographers, and requires social skills and reflexivity (Van Hulst et al., 2012, p. 440). 'How is such an unruly experience transformed into an authoritative written account?' (cited in Van Maanen, 2011, p. 1). Data was analysed by thematic coding, complemented by extensive reading and lexical searches (Braun and Clarke, 2006). A first phase of open and axial coding resulted in a list of potential themes for analysis. A second phase of selective coding resulted in the interweaving of empirical results and the existing literature. Empirical generalization was not the aim of the exercise. Rather, the aim was to present complex specificity in context (Rhodes, 2011, pp. 298-302). The resultant account of the four managers' working lives can best be interpreted as provisional unfolding stories about possible realities in the world of top public managers (see also: Rhodes et al., 2007, p. 225).

6.5 Findings: city managers at work

6.5.1 CITY MANAGERS IN DUTCH LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) describe The Netherlands as a consensual polity with a history of consociational democracy. Institutionally, the Dutch state can be characterised as a 'decentralised unitary' state (Toonen, 1990). Dutch municipal government evolves around three institutions: the 'city council', the 'Board of Mayor and Aldermen' and the 'mayor'. The directly elected city council is regarded as the highest-ranking body, because it decides on the appointment and dissolution of the board of mayor and aldermen and holds the board to account (Andeweg et al. 2020). The board of mayor and aldermen drives the executive of the municipality. The mayor is appointed by the crown, the aldermen by the city council — neither has to have a local electoral mandate. The mayor chairs both the board of mayor and aldermen and the city council. Depending on the size of the municipality, two to eight aldermen have a seat in the board.

Although 'city manager' is most common in the international public administration literature, in Dutch local government practice another vocabulary is used. The Dutch term for 'city manager' (CM) is 'gemeentesecretaris', which literally translates as 'municipal secretary'. In common parlance, they are referred to as: *'secretary general'; 'the secretary'; 'the sec';* or *'madame/mister secretary'*. Most city managers have 'general director' (chief executive officer) as part of their formal job title. In The Netherlands, the CM is appointed and fired by the board of mayor and aldermen. S/he acts as the secretary of the board. S/he attends the board's weekly meetings and along with the mayor signs the decision papers of the board. Unlike the other board members, the CM does not have voting powers. Every municipality is legally obliged to have a CM. The city manager traditionally also acts

as the civil servant-in-chief. S/he is the CEO of the municipal organisation which advises the board of mayor and aldermen and executes the administration's policies.

6.5.2 THE CITY MANAGERS AND THEIR WORKING WEEK

The observed CMs were mid- to end-of career. They are rooted in legal university training and have spent most of their career within public administration organisations. All witnessed CMs were Caucasian. They wore a two-piece suit and tie (male) or a blazer (female). Their operating gear included an access pass, a thin folder with papers, and invariably an iPad.

The analysed aggregated diaries reflect a mean of 30.7 hours of planned activities per week. Adding up daily ad hoc meetings, an occasional crisis situation and mundane activities such as waiting for people that do not show up on time, walking through the building and fine-tuning diaries, the result is a full schedule. These recorded hours preclude a lot of the work done by city managers; reading papers, writing proposals (if they write any), making phone calls and reading emails and replying to them. A lot of these activities are postponed until the evenings or weekends (cf. Dargie, 1998). *'Friday is the moment when I look out to the next week and decide what I ought to do the upcoming weekend. I spend about 4 to 8 hours a weekend on preparations for the week and reading. A lot of reading happens during the weekend. I have less time for that on weekdays. I also answer emails, when I'm lagging behind.'* (Interview 8 March 2016). A sample of a CM's evening is given below (Fieldwork, case 1).

> A city manager's Monday evening
>
> 18:00 - 19:00h   Groceries at supermarket, cooking and having dinner at his pied-à-terre
>
> 19:00 - 20:00h   Emails and phone calls
>
> 20:00 - 21:00h   Working on a proposal about organisational leadership
>
> 21:00 - 22:00h   Private phone call with family member
>
> 22:00 - 23:00h   Writing letter to Works Council
>
> 23:00 - 23:30h   Reading papers for executive board meeting

The aggregate diaries show that the week of a CM is structured around multiple cyclical events and practices that establish a weekly rhythm, much like the rituals that Rhodes (2011) observed among Westminster elites, e.g., the minister's red box. CMs tended to get in at 08:45 and remained at the office until 18:00 (fieldwork). Mondays were dominated by bilateral meetings, starting with the mayor and direct reports. The weekly meeting of the board of mayor and aldermen and possible follow-ups or joint site visits are regular fixtures on Tuesdays. This board meeting sets the pace of

the municipal organisation. It was perceived by civil servants as the pivotal locus of political decision making affecting the organisation; this is where policy proposals submitted by the administration survive or get killed. Wednesdays started with the city's management team meeting of all senior civil servants, another key reference point in the week. The remainder of the Wednesday is often spent on visits to city agencies or in regional networks. Thursdays are mostly devoted to managerial work inside the organisation, often with time reserved for the Works Council, bilateral meetings with staff and internal socials, often followed by a meeting of the city council or a council committee. Fridays are days for contemplation, and various activities. Friday is often cut short till no later than 14:30, after which the weekend comes with ample readings that feed into yet another week.

6.6 Interpreting the city manager's craft

Figure 6.1 below pictures how three CMs allocated their time during the year immediately preceding the observation. How did they distribute their attention between managing up, down and out? I discuss the observed practices and the influences they employ to get things done. This is summarised in Table 6.4 below.

Figure 6.1 Allocation of time in city manager's diaries
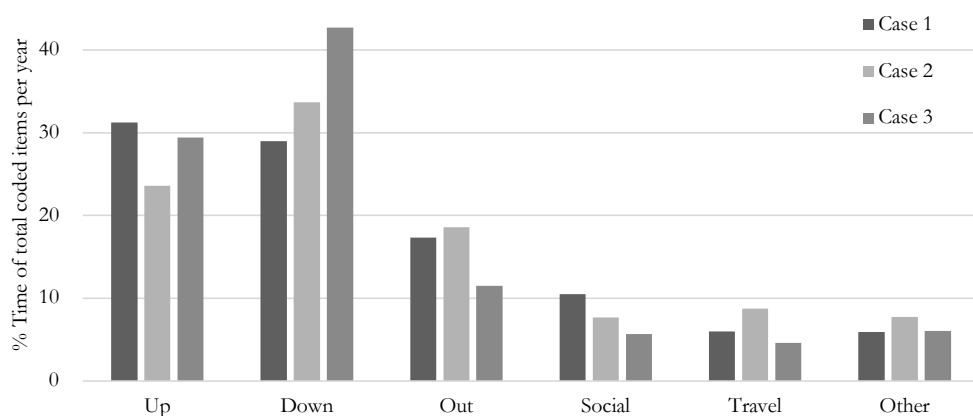
6.6.1 MANAGING UP: ADVISER-IN-CHIEF TO POLITICAL OFFICEHOLDERS

As Figure 6.1 pictures, all three managers clearly prioritised their role as adviser-in-chief by their attendance in settings with political officeholders (POHs). The majority of this time was passed in collective settings, with multiple POHs present such as at the weekly executive board meeting, or a (bi)weekly meeting with the mayor and the council clerk. Despite the fact that city managers spent relatively many hours in the company of POHs, these hours were largely represented by meetings that take a long time: executive board meetings and city council meetings. The remainder of the week was spent apart from POHs.

The city manager is adviser-in-chief to the mayor and aldermen. This position however is not a given and must be earned: 'It is not the case that when someone is a city manager and gives his opinion, that all board members will take a bow and say: "Thank you, mister Secretary. That's the way forward". It is a position that needs to be earned and, to some extent, needs to be fought for' (Mayor, 3 June 2016). CMs need to acquire 'standing' among POHs to fully fulfil this role, in a field also populated by political advisers or executive directors who are content experts on a certain dossier. The CMs I observed all gave both content-based and procedural advice. Much of the latter related to tactical matters of political feasibility and reputational concerns. Some would ask questions such as 'is alderman [name] on board with this?' or give them guidance, such as 'communicate solely about what you are doing, not about what you intend to do'. In doing so they draw on their experience and past performance of the city manager (Fieldwork, Case 2), rooted in what Weber (Lassman and Speirs, 1994, p. 178) coined Dienstwissen – a deep understanding of procedural and legal know-how – as well as in the political astuteness built up through years of direct exposure to the politics of executive government (Alford et al., 2014). Advice is delivered in real-time during both formal meetings, little asides and impromptu interactions, and is more often than not verbal (hence not FOI-able) or via private digital media such as WhatsApp.

Giving counsel to POHs includes the element of *speaking truth to power*. For instance, after a series of budget cuts imposed by the board, CM3 believed that new efficiency cuts were no longer acceptable — stating 'I don't intend to return with new budget cuts' to his/her colleagues before an executive board meeting (Fieldwork). This implies that CMs are involved in politics — the art of the possible — but not necessarily *party* politics. The city managers had their private political views but showed little interest in local party statements or positions. They were more involved in 'small-p' politics — managing the interests of their organisations vis-à-vis political officeholders. Their involvement in politics effectively makes them 'political administrators' (Rhodes, 2016, p. 639).

All except CM4 resided in offices right next to the mayor and aldermen — providing them with an 'open door' to the powers that be at all times (Fieldwork, Case 1, 2 and 3). They work with and for the political executive; the legislature is kept at arm's length – its needs are looked after by the City Clerk. CMs do attend council meetings, even though they play no part in them. Their reasons for doing so are opportunistic: 'knowing first-hand what is going on in the council'; 'earning bonus credits for being present'; and 'to quickly prompt aldermen on issues' (Interview 8 March 2016; Fieldwork, case 3). This allows CMs to understand POHs more astutely because they share 'big-P' political experiences.

6.6.2 MANAGING DOWN: ORGANISATIONAL STEWARDSHIP

Figure 6.1 shows that the observed CMs spent most time on the management of their organisations. The majority of this time was spent attending to direct reports, other managers and staff. Explicit dealings with executive assistants reflect but a mere fraction of the time, though they may be heavily underrepresented in the official diary. CM3 spent almost half of his/her time (42.7%) on management, especially dealing with direct reports. The diary of CM2 too reveals a priority of management. CM1 is an exception, as s/he spent most time in dealings with political office holders (31.2%), although closely followed by management (29.0%). All CMs spent most time with direct reports, reflected in less time spent with other people in the organisation. The absence of desk work (e.g., writing, reading) in the diary is confirmed by the observations — it has little place in the diary nor in everyday life. CMs 1 and 4 did not even have a desk. The absence of desk work is consistent with findings from managers in other sectors (Tengblad, 2006).

CMs actively reform the organisations in which they and their co-workers work. They do not intend to leave the organisation as they found it. It is part of their job-perception to monitor and steward the organisation's current performance as well as (re)imagine its future in light of evolving public and political demands as well as financial, technological and other contextual changes. This reflects an attitude of 'stewardship' vis-à-vis POHs rather than classic principal-agent relations (Schillemans, 2013). 'I think it is very important that there is the will to do better in the organisation' (Interview 12 April 2016).

All four city managers were involved in some form of a program aiming to improve the organisation and reshape its behaviour. CM1, for example, employed a mantra of four core principles guiding the changes that s/he imagines: '*one organisation*'; '*the challenges are central*'; '*efficient operations*'; and '*entrepreneurial employees*' (Interview 8 March 2016). S/he used these four principles regularly as beacons to guide his/her way in managing the organisation, constantly articulating the principles during his meetings. S/he believed that disciplined repetition of the same story was

essential, as a new managerial narrative trickles down only slowly. And s/he often told stories about his/her interventions:

> This story is about a certain policy unit. An additional two million Euros had already been spent on improving their processes. This unit was not located in the municipal office, but off site. I hadn't been there before, because every time we spoke, we met in my office. After a while I thought to visit them, because I had trouble explaining their budget exceeding without any tangible results — I was worried. So, I went there. When I entered the premises, there was an office space with a terrarium and carpets on the floor. It looked like a living room. I immediately understood the problem; this was not a professional outfit; it had become a proxy family unit. Within the month we had cancelled the lease, and they were in my sight at the municipal offices (Interview 17 March 2016).

The most important lever to create organisational capacity for city managers is the board of directors, the 'management team' of the city administration (cf. Steyvers, Reynaert and Block, 2010). CM2 spoke for all four when s/he observed that: 'The quality of the organisation starts with the quality of the board of directors' (Interview 22 April 2016). CMs were keen on having the right people in this board: CM1 let go of two directors on his board and hired a new director in his/her first months in office.

In board meetings, CMs lead discussions, seek consensus, and, if need be, make unilateral decisions on organisational matters. To be effective in this role requires effective chairmanship: bringing people with diverse outlooks and interests on board. One director commented on how his fellow director developed after he was appointed city manager:

> Director: I have always perceived him as very critical, almost as an outsider
> Van Dorp: As a devil's advocate, you mean?
> Director: Yes. That's one of the reasons why he grew so fast. Also the reason why I stimulated him to go in senior management. [….] By now, he has let go of that role. He currently is a connector. I think it's impressive when someone develops like that (Interview 2 June 2016).

In all cities, the management team monitored the state of the organisation based on a dashboard of parameters and structured information streams. They analyse organisational performance by both 'hard' and 'soft' indicators. 'Hard' indicator parameters include absenteeism (absolute and compared to national average); annual employees' appreciation survey; exhaustion of budgets; external hiring; and FTE formation (Fieldwork). 'Soft' indicators are gossip and hearsay about how well pivotal actors or units perform. This information reaches the CM through (informal) talk with civil servants, POHs, and members of his/her entourage. When certain units under-perform, or certain dossiers are regarded as politically explosive, a CM may declare them '*Chefsache*' and place them under his/her direct supervision. At the same time, CMs acknowledge that control of their large organisations is an illusion. They 'steer' and 'adjust' the meta strategy of the organisation, but the execution of these directions is in the hands of others (Fieldwork).

6.6.3 MANAGING OUT: BOUNDARY SPANNING

'Out' — activities in networks — tended to come third in the attention hierarchy. Van der Steen et al. (2012) note that regional cooperation is highly contingent on the CM and his/her personal priorities. CMs1 and 2 spent 17.3% and 18.6% of their time in networking activities. CM1 divided his/her time across local, regional and national networks, while CM2 focussed on regional and national networks. CM3 spent comparatively little time on external management (11.5%). That 11.5% was predominantly spent on large national events that virtually all Dutch CMs or local government managers attend, as well as on a monthly regional network meeting with colleagues (Fieldwork, case 3). Thus, networking activities thus were less prominent in his diary and were fairly isolated rather than habitual.

As administrator in chief of their respective organisations, boundary spanning is part of their craft. The pivotal position of CMs — linking POHs with the organisation — inherently implies connecting different actors and rationalities. Boundary spanners are loosely defined as 'individuals who work across different organisational cultures and exercise influence through formal and informal channels in order to strengthen the connections between actors' (Guarneros-Meza and Martin, 2016, p. 240).

CMs connect and lobby with colleagues in neighbouring cities and governance levels in regional cooperation and lobby. They come in various guises, but none of them work in splendid isolation — beautifully expressed by the prominence of the meeting table in their offices (Fieldwork). Of course, they are by and large preoccupied with the POH-organisation nexus. Given their pivotal position in the organisation and role as secretary of the board of mayor and aldermen this is hardly surprising. Still, spanning boundaries in networks is part of their craft.

All observed CMs engage in regional networks and intra-city alliances. Jokingly referred to as 'playing outside' (Fieldwork), these networks include in particular fellow city managers and other administrators, and sometimes POHs. These networks range from collaborative governance networks in which municipalities co-produce public services (Fieldwork, Case 2, 3) to informal deliberation fora (Fieldwork, Case 1, 4). This requires CMs to be diplomats on behalf of their administration (cf. Rhodes, 2016). The instrumental function of permanent diplomacy is believed to be important to CMs. A CM explained: 'you first need to have a network in order to get things organised' (Interview, 18 March 2016).

Bartelings et al. (2016) use the language of 'orchestrational' work when referring to public managers that manage collaborative networks/chains. In a similar vein, CM4 stressed the importance of 'being able to make arrangements' in a public address to fellow city managers (Fieldwork). Three CMs indicated that they would engage in lobby among administrators and/or politicians in ministerial departments in The Hague (Fieldwork, Cases 1,2,4). One CM explained that s/he would go to lunch with a director-general, to 'put my city on the map' (Fieldwork, case 1). Another CM joined committees of the Dutch Association of Municipalities (VNG) to engage with other municipal administrators.

The boundary spanning work of the CM should not be exaggerated. They all agree that collaborative governance is important, but the demands of managing up and managing down can and often do take over. The 'rules of the game' in local government seem to favour internal affairs over external activities. CM1 started his/her position by actively investing in regional involvement, but paused some of these efforts when his/her vertical managerial tasks seemed more pressing. CM3 too started in his/her current position and prioritised vertical managerial work over horizontal networking activities. In contrast, CM2, who had been in office since 2004, made ample time for regional and national networks. This may hint at a 'life-time-cycle'-effect suggesting that upon taking office, city managers first attend internal matters and try to get their organisations in shape, before they get involved in external networks.

6.6.4 OTHER ACTIVITIES: SOCIAL, TRAVEL, OTHER

The final categories, 'social' (average 8.0%); 'travel' (average 6.4%); and 'other' (average 6.5%) consumed only a relatively modest part of the diary. Within these categories, there are relatively large differences. E.g., CM1 was more prominently engaged in 'social' activities than others (10.5%) while CMs 2 and 3 devoted 7.7% and 5.7% of their appointments to social events. These activities usually include receptions, dinners and lunches. CM2 spends more time (8.7% versus 6.0% and 4.6% respectively) on the road than others do, which is largely explained by his/her prioritization

of networking activities. Coherently, the diary of CM3, who spends less time on activities in/for networks, reflects 4.6% time spent on traveling. Traveling is of course no idle time. The city managers in the three largest cities (1,2 and 4) have access to chauffeured cars which permits working while traveling. It is used for reading, phone calls and answering emails (Fieldwork, case 2,4).

Table 6.4 below summarises the craft of city managers, the influences they employ, the allies they have to gather to do their work, and the competencies this requires.

Table 6.4 Craft of city managers

Direction	Core of craft	Influences	Allies	Competencies
Up	Adviser-in-chief	Experience Standing	Executive board advisers	Political antennae ('t Hart & Wille, 2006) Political astuteness (Hartley et al., 2015) Empathy (Fieldwork) Dienstwissen (Lassman and Speirs, 1994)
Down	Organisational stewardship	Position	Directors Entourage	Analytical skills (Fieldwork) Public performance (Fieldwork) Discipline (Fieldwork)
Out	Boundary spanning	Membership Social capital	Colleague city managers	Diplomacy (Rhodes, 2016) Orchestration (Barteling et al., 2017)

6.7 Discussion: The pull of hierarchy in an age of networks

All three city managers' diaries reflect a dual focus on both managing the political officeholders and management of the organisation. The activities coded as 'up' and 'down' and the combination of the two are recognised as the most important. A CM remarks in conclusion: 'The core of my craft as city manager is to be a bridge between the board of mayor and aldermen and the organisation' (Interview 31 March 2016). Using Noordegraaf's (2000, pp. 243-246) typology, all four city managers best fit the public *organisation* manager profile, rather than *political* or *policy* managers. Public *organisation* managers are focused on the organisations they lead; involvement in political arenas and processes is markedly less time-consuming. Though 'managing up' is expected of such managers, and political nous/astuteness a key part of the skill set, their strategic focus is first and foremost 'downwards' – let alone outwards.

The core of their craft materializes *within* the organisations they manage. Managing 'down' is therefore what the three city managers spend most of their time on (up to 42.7%). They have an

organisational 'mental agenda' and prioritize organisational change over external networking activities. CMs 1 and 3 were both relatively new in their positions, and each had reorganisation ambitions, aimed at 'getting the organisation into shape', either mentally or both mentally and structurally. Implementing their view of a 'good municipal organisation' formed a *raison d'être* for the managers. For the longer-serving CM2 this was less of a priority. His/her focus in managing down was on 'continual strengthening' and preserving the existing qualities of the organisation; his/her prime mental focus was in managing 'out' aimed at shoring up and shaping regional cooperation processes. Yet his/her actual pattern of attention and attendance (18.6% in networks) did not differ all that drastically from CMs 1 and 3 (respectively 17.3% and 11.5%).

I have described the work and behaviour of public managers as a shared craft; something all four CMs relate to. As follows from the analysis above, public managers are individuals who each show unique expressions of beliefs and behaviour in their respective social and institutional contexts. Though they are not dissimilar, they are not one and the same. Ultimately, this typology is not about a hierarchy of tasks, roles and competencies. The point is that senior public managers such as CMs deploy a repertoire of skills, tricks of the trade and rules of thumb. Mastering the craft means that public managers can *in situ* judge to apply the right mix of skills and interpretations at a given moment in a local context. My fieldwork however suggests that the central tension Dutch CMs experience in doing so is that between a 'greedy' vertical axis of managing up and down, and a strategically important but always somewhat less pressing horizontal axis of managing out.

6.8 Conclusions

This chapter set out to address a less than fully developed aspect of public management research: examining close up how senior public managers – in this instance Dutch local government CEOs - give meaning to their craft in their everyday behaviour. Using diary analysis and ethnographic methodology, four city managers in Dutch middle-large and large cities were analysed. The findings show that these CMs consistently allocate most of their time to management of their organisations (down) and advising political officeholders (up). Taking part in networks (out) is believed to be important, but the diary analysis shows that less time is spent on networking activities than is spent on the former levers. The bulk of their work takes place within the hierarchy of *government*, notwithstanding the felt relevance of *governance* and the outward-facing networks in which it takes place (Agranoff, 2006; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). I do not argue that boundary spanning does not happen, but rather that the observed CMs themselves engaged much less in boundary spanning work than expected. To date, their craft continues to be mainly organised

along the vertical up-down axis — emphasizing traditional elements of the bureaucratic craft (see also: Olsen, 2006; Rhodes, 2016).

At the same time, we know from a great deal of research that network governance and collaborative problem-solving has become common place in many government jurisdictions and policy sectors. This raises the question who gives strategic direction to this work and undertakes the meta-governance work associated with it — if not the CEO of the municipal organisation (Torfing et al., 2012). CMs may for example deliberately recruit and empower designated boundary spanners or delegate responsibility for network management down the hierarchy, but in the current study there was not much evidence to suggest that this was indeed the case. In the four cases studied here, city managers in effect were largely 'missing in action' when it came to managing out. They did realize its strategic importance and paid lip service to it, but in their day-to-day routines they are largely trapped in the demands of their hierarchy-related roles as chief adviser and CEO of the municipal organisation.

7

Grasping craftwork:

Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

Although they are referred to as 'civil servants', there can be no doubt that senior civil servants are also senior 'executives', exercising leadership, managing internal and external processes (managing up, down and out), having influence and wielding power. They influence public policy and political decision making by having the ear of decision makers or by being in the driver's seat themselves. They run large organizations or agencies that implement policies and deliver services, or make sure that oversight activities are performed well. It is therefore essential that we study who they are, what they do, and how they do it. This is as relevant as ever: contexts have become turbulent, chaotic and demanding. How do senior civil servants constitute stable and legitimate public administration? At the outset of this book, I chose to study their practices up-close and personal, deploying a series of thematic angles and using a range of research methods.

In this chapter I reap the harvest of that intent. I begin by summarising the different studies that were designed to investigate the sub-questions formulated in chapter 1, indicating how their findings contribute to the overall narrative of the book. Taken together, they allow for an answer to the central research question: How do senior civil servants practice their craft? In answering the research question, detailing the actual craft-in-use of today's senior civil servants, I emphasize a *craftwork* perspective. There is no such thing as 'the' craft of 'the' civil servant. Their craftmanship is dynamic, differentiated *and* situated. It is enacted on an everyday basis, in specific contexts, full of people, processes and issues. Still, there are some reoccurring 'balancing acts' they perform, running through these various contexts. I trace work-related patterns, and I discuss these findings aiming to contribute to the literature. I close with implications for the future of research on senior civil servants.

7.2 Answering the sub-questions

Coming to the end of this study it is time to 'grasp the craft' by looking back and adding up the results of the various partial 'takes' on it in the preceding chapters. I do so by returning to and answering the main research question that have guided this book. Before I answer the central research question, I begin by answering the sub-questions that were central to chapters 2-6.

7.2.1 HONING THE CRAFT: PATHS TO MOVING UP IN THE SYSTEM

In the first empirical chapter I introduced the 'senior civil servants' who became the protagonists of this book. This chapter analysed the careers of these SCSs that have led them to high office. By studying their careers, I provided a novel perspective on SCSs by showing how they rose through the ranks in order to become a 'senior' civil servant, focusing on permanent secretaries. Its research question was: what career experiences have increased senior civil servants' chances of being appointed to a permanent secretary position during 2000-2020? To answer this question, I have compiled an original database of the careers of all SCSs that were part of the elite pool in the 2000-2020 years. I have also conducted interviews with permanent secretaries and other key informants. Although there is not a determined or 'one-best-way' route, the findings show that a few career experiences significantly increase one's odds of being appointed PS from the elite pool over the past twenty years. First is political alignment with the political parties that took up cabinet responsibility during the observation window. Many PSs, not all, used to be mayors, or (assistant to) members of Parliament. A second finding is that having worked in the Prime Minister's Office also increased one's chances. This provides evidence for the PMO as a career catalyst.

The findings of this chapter give reason to reflect upon the make-up, desired competencies, and valued behaviours within the Dutch 'core executive'. Interestingly, having senior managerial experience did *not* improve the odds of appointment from the pool. Together, the findings show that SCSs with party-political experience and those who have worked at the heart of the core executive are more successful in securing PS positions.

7.2.2 SITUATING CRAFTWORK: CORE EXECUTIVE PROCESSES

In chapter 3 I moved from 'who' these SCSs are to 'where' they work. This chapter situated the senior civil servant's craftwork in the rules of the game that shape Dutch national government. I asked whether and how the Dutch prime minister has become more dominant in the core executive, and if so, how has this impacted the workings of the core executive?

To answer this question, I drew on interviews with (prime) ministers, ministerial advisers, senior civil servants and journalists. The interviews reflected on the change and stability in the workings of the core executive in the decades leading up to 2017. I used the literature on the core executive and court politics to interpret the findings. The findings clearly zoom in on the role of the prime minister. Four developments in the core executive, i.e., Europeanisation, personalisation, crisis management, and the changing party-political landscape, drive and sustain the relative ascendancy of prime ministers in Dutch governance.

In everyday practice, cabinet ministers and civil servants see the PM as pivotal in any meaningful decision, despite limited formal competencies. The core executive largely evolves around both formal and informal processes and relationships between 'key people'. While the cabinet meeting has not ceased to matter, it mostly acts as closing ceremony to a preceding process of collective decision making in a wide variety of forums, including informal forums, in which both politicians and civil servants have a seat at the table. For SCSs, this provides a clear directive: while one serves their minister, they cannot afford to ignore the prime minister.

7.2.3 MANAGING MINISTERIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The preceding chapters set the stage for an analysis of SCSs' craft, emphasising the centre of the centre: the prime minister and his/her office. In chapter 4 I built on this by providing three case studies of a senior civil servant working as permanent secretary of the PMO. In line with the overall research aims of this book, I asked this research question: How in their day-to-day practices do senior civil servants straddle the politics-administration dichotomy?

To answer this question, I applied classic and modern studies of the politics-administration dichotomy to the Dutch case. I analysed how these 'rules of the game' (mutual respect, discretionary space and reciprocal loyalty) shape the actions of a SCS working with a prime minister in challenging situations.

The empirical contribution consisted of three tales of managing up. These stories answer the research question by showing that SCSs practice both responsiveness and astuteness simultaneously. The first tale was about absorbing political change. This reflected on how a SCSs switched gears from a working with a long-time prime minister with whom he had a good working relationship (and got somewhat invested in) to preparing for an incoming successor. The other case stories reflected on this SCS' actions in building new relationships with a new prime minister and his entourage, as well as dealing with being in the eye of a media storm.

This chapter contributed an up-close and personal perspective to the study of SCSs, unlocking rarely told 'civil servant stories'. This gave a sense of the lived realities of high stakes, relentless

accountability and parliamentary scrutiny. SCSs' craftwork includes handling this hot zone. To do this, the study reports, requires being sensitive to timing and cycles, gaining the minister's ear, being prepared for the unpredictable, and coping with media scrutiny.

7.2.4 MANAGING POLITICISATION BY PROXY

In chapter 5, I expanded the up-close and personal approach by shadowing multiple SCSs as they went on their working days. Again, it added detailed thick descriptions of how SCSs practice their responsiveness to political principals. It answered this research question: How do senior civil servants manage politicisation? Theoretically, this chapter was inspired by the debate about civil service politicisation.

I investigated what functional politicisation looks like in everyday practice. The fieldwork reimagined functional politicisation, not as 'political skills' and 'political sensitivity' – although that is undoubtedly important – but as a practice of authority use. In the absence of ministers, SCSs took on some of the authority of ministers to 'whip' their fellow civil servants and adjacent agencies in line. In short, civil servants de facto politicised one another, notably by using the phrase 'the minister wants it' to end discussions.

In sum, the SCSs' craftwork includes political work, without a capital 'P', which is subject to functional politicisation. In this chapter, I found that SCSs resisted functional politicisation attempts by politicians but practiced bottom-up politicisation too.

7.2.5 ORGANISING THE CRAFT: MANAGING ATTENTION

In the final empirical study, I shifted the locus to city managers working in Dutch municipal organisations. Much like national SCSs, city managers work in the hot zone between political executives and the city council and the administration. I asked how they allocated their attention and attendance. I shadowed four city managers for a week each and interviewed many of the key actors in their professional environment, as well as analysed their diaries. In this chapter I used a model of SCSs working up (advising political officeholders), down (building organizational capacity, change management and going concerns), and out (interact with societal partners outside the administration).

The literature on SCSs has increasingly emphasised their role in governance networks, i.e., operating in the 'horizontal' space of interorganizational relations and 'boundary-spanning'. However, my fieldwork, interviews and analysis of their diaries suggest a different picture. The quality and quantity of their attention was allocated to managing up and down. Just like most SCSs in central governments they prioritised cocooning with their political executives and fellow

directors. While they paid lip service to managing 'out', the pulling forces of political executives and the immediate requests from the organisation they were supposed to lead were usually stronger than the pushing drive to go out. This reaffirmed the 'rhetoric-reality split' that managerial work and behaviour scholars found across time and place (Mintzberg 1973; Noordegraaf 2000).

Although senior civil servants felt their environments, pushing and pulling, and were aware of the strategic purposes of engaging with stakeholders outside their organisations, SCSs allocated their attendance and attention predominantly inside their organisations.

7.2.6 THE RESEARCH FINDINGS TAKEN TOGETHER: CRAFTWORK

The research findings are summarised in Table 7.1. below. Together, the findings do not suggest a concrete 'craft' but point to ongoing 'craftwork'. Instead of relying on a single more or less understood set of beliefs and practices to do good work, senior civil servants have to apply and adapt beliefs and practices to the situation at hand. Because SCSs work in different contexts and face different situations, craftwork is both differentiated and situated. Table 7.1. summarizes the main elements of how SCSs practice their craft.

Table 7.1 Summary of research findings

#	Title	Research Question	Key findings
2	Honing the craft: Paths to High Office	What career experiences have increased senior civil servants' chances of being appointed to a permanent secretary position during 2000-2020?	Political and organisational factors Political alignment with cabinet parties and PMO experience significantly increased SCSs' chances of being appointed to a permanent secretary position.
3	Situating the craft: Working in the centralising core executive	Have the Dutch prime ministers become predominant, and if so, how has this impacted the workings of the core executive?	The Dutch governance system has gravitated towards the prime minister. The core executive works processual and relational. SCSs have adjusted accordingly: their craftwork is relational and processual.
4	Zoning the craft: Managing ministerial responsibility	How do senior civil servants facilitate ministerial responsibility?	The SCSs' craftwork includes straddling the political-administrative hot zone. Balancing *responsiveness* as well as *astuteness* simultaneously through winds of change, in gaining standing amidst court politics, and when working in the public eye.
5	Politicising the craft: 'The minister wants it'	How do senior civil service manage politicisation?	SCSs practice proxy politics: they functionally politicise their fellow civil servants. I found a strong propensity in SCSs' craft-in-use to serve their principal rather than to assume their role as steward of a public policy domain.
6	Organizing the craft: Managing attention	How do city managers allocate their attention and attendance?	The quality and quantity of their attention was allocated to managing up and down, at the expense of managing out. They prioritised cocooning with their executives and fellow directors. The internal pulling forces of

## 7.3 Interpreting senior civil servants' craftwork

In the previous chapters, I discussed various elements of the senior civil servant's craft. Craftwork is honed throughout a career (chapter 2). It is not an abstract set of skills or competencies, but a more or less coherent set of beliefs and practices that makes sense within the setting of the Dutch core executive (chapter 3). It is not a single practice, but craftwork encompasses multiple practices that ought to come to terms with the ambiguity of serving and steering, leading and following, being responsive and being astute (chapter 4). Craftwork is being functionally politicised, but it also includes functionally politicising colleagues by proxy (chapter 5). Finally, practicing craftwork is contested – SCS need to synergise their environment's tensions lest they are torn apart by it (chapter 6).

To some readers, analysing the craftwork of senior civil servants may imply that there is a single craft to be learned and performed. Yet, the different participants in the studies *vary* in their beliefs and actions and were *situated* in different temporal, political, media and organisational settings. Moreover, the positions they held within these settings did not come with a fixed script for how to perform the role they had been assigned. Senior civil servants *shape* their highly varied roles by writing the script as they go. My research approach favours context, nuance and differentiation over uniform interpretations of the craft – however inclusive and ambiguous it may be. In that sense, 'the' craft does not exist, but all SCSs nevertheless performed ongoing *craftwork*. My fieldwork among SCSs suggests that they share some congruent beliefs and traditions, such as the convention of ministerial responsibility and 'no surprises' and draw from this repertoire of practices in order to survive and even thrive in Dutch government, wherever they found their position. Each in their own way, placing their person in their position.

My studies, set in Dutch government (2016-2020), suggests that SCSs practiced their craftwork in differentiated and situated ways, performing three distinct but interdependent 'balancing acts': 1) they *serve and shape,* 2) they *tame chaos,* and 3) they *perform backstage.* These balancing acts are visualised in Figure 7.1. below. Doing well requires being fluent in these balancing acts, which is far from easy. The risks of making a fall are high and few SCSs never fall. This makes the craftwork both practical and personal: situated craftwork is practiced by people. Although I stayed away from applying psychological perspectives, I did feel the pressures of performing high wire acts in

demanding environments. SCSs might be working in safe and well-guarded places, such as large buildings, big conference halls, well-equipped rooms, chauffeured cars, as I mentioned at the beginning of this book, but these are not always safe spaces. On a day-to-day basis, they have to be alert, weigh options and/or choose lesser evils. I will briefly describe each of the high wire acts in order to illustrate what they practice.

Figure 7.1 How senior civil servants practice craftwork
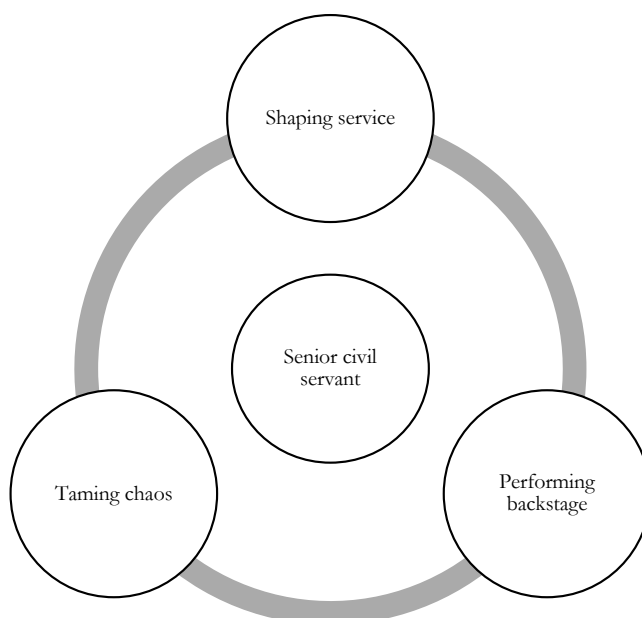
7.3.1 SHAPING SERVICE

First, the craftwork of SCSs refers to serving and shaping. SCSs went to great lengths to serve their (deputy) ministers, the prime minister and parliament, as they loomed large in SCSs' authorising environments. SCSs shape their service by attuning it to the person they served, while remembering that they will also serve the next. In doing so, they facilitated proper political decision making, enabled ministerial responsibility, and advanced policy agendas. They also made sure to shape the work and setting they were responsible for. Serving and shape imply both a responsive and a strategic attitude.

The SCSs I observed *served*: they sought to alleviate the minister's troubles, made him or her shine in as many forums as possible, provided solid council and came up with prudent suggestions,

and provided a 'safe space' before and after they had been in the arenas of executive politics. They served by delivering bad news if they had to and made sure the minister did not need to face rude surprises.

An important prerequisite to effective serving was to be around the principal. Departmental SCSs chose to cocoon with their ministers on the same floor in adjacent offices that allowed quick ad-hoc walk-ins, impromptu hallway conversations and keeping an eye out for who were going in and out the minister's chambers. If a minister walked in unannounced, conversations muted. If s/he had a question, the SCS walked out with them or cleared the room. Not everyone had this opportunity, because their offices were located elsewhere. Those who worked in more remote offices tried to 'be seen to be around' nonetheless. They scheduled appointments at the department and made sure they saw others and were seen themselves. Ministerial phone calls and texts were attended to immediately and answering parliamentary questions was considered a non-negotiable priority; other business just had to wait.

An important belief that underpinned this practice is that many SCSs believed that their political principals were best served by their department and its agencies, rather than by political advisers, lobbyists, journalists or other voices that clamour for the minster's attention. SCSs believed that if ministers want to be served, they needed to put civil servants at the heart of their courts. This did not happen automatically. Earning a spot in the minister's inner court therefore lent a certain standing to the SCSs that had managed to achieve it. SCSs sought to earn this standing through their expertise – i.e., know-what, know-how, know-when, know-who – as well as by being around much of time and by their continued loyalty to the minister when the political going got tough.

A practice that makes up part of serving and shaping balancing act, detailed in chapter 5, was the practice of 'proxy politics'. This practice was prevalent among departmental SCSs, but visible in the work and behaviour of agency managers and inspector chiefs too. By assuming a measure of the authority of the minister towards their colleagues, SCSs sought to align different views and arguments with the minister's preference, creating a shared goal – shaping the department to serve the minister's preferences. In departmental settings only few found ways to speak truth to the power of *'the minister wants it.'* Those who spoke these words often received – but not always – compliance. This practice is illustrative of how functional politicisation has crept into the Dutch civil service and has become a familiar trait. The craft has been functionally politicised, but the craft also includes functionally politicising others.

By pacing issues, SCSs managed the heat of controversies by managing the framing and timing of political debates and decision-making. An example about placating parliament from chapter 5 is

helpful. When a departmental board had to answer parliamentary questions on an issue they had not (or not yet) answers to, they bought time by sending empty answers, while awaiting cabinet approval for the issue.

7.3.2 TAMING CHAOS

Second, their craftwork included taming the chaos that reigns in the lives of political officeholders and the organisations that support them (Rhodes 2011). Operating amidst ambiguity (Noordegraaf 2000) and turbulence (Ansell et al. 2017), SCSs had to keep cool heads in advising ministers, reducing complexity, adapting their organisations and managing incidents. In doing so, they relied on their instincts and on networks they had crafted throughout their careers.

In chapter 3, I conjured up the image of a house of cards, illustrating how prime ministers try to keep this house in place, rather than adding extra cards to it. In a similar vein, many SCSs saw themselves as 'stewards' of their department or agency, rather than 'reinventors' of their policy domain. That is why they took pains to push back when they felt they were asked to do something they could not deliver. Over-ambitious ministers were reminded of the department's confined capacities, agency managers explained that they wanted to say 'yes and amen' to implementing new policies but simply could not perform every request. SCSs were mindful not to set their department or agencies up for reputational fiascos in the future.

A concrete practice that contributes to the senior civil servant's craft is cutting through complexity by discerning and naming the essence of things quickly. In the ocean of papers that came across their iPads, the cacophony of voices that competed for their ear and the limited time available for decisions, SCSs tried to identify the 'strategic details' that mattered most. The way they did this was by trying to understand the issue or dossier in front of them, sometimes by playing a naïve outsider who needed to be educated. For instance, a departmental DG would open a meeting with a blunt statement such as 'I know nothing about this, so tell me what I need to know.' As the meeting progressed, SCSs then called out the issues, and identified dilemmas, or questions they had, or the decisions they felt needed to be made by political principals. The fieldwork for chapter 5 provides an example of reducing complexity in a setting where a departmental DG and an agency DG discussed the progress of an ongoing policy issue:

> As the DGs' words fill most of the meeting, a female policy adviser who also sits at the table frowns and looks concerned. Her director gives her the floor. 'you make it sound much simpler than it is', she says. 'That's what we DGs do', the departmental DG counters. Roaring laughter fill the room. Subsequent banter about SCSs' craftwork

follows in my direction [they did not forget why I was attending]. The policy adviser smiles but insists that the DGs are underestimating the issue. She has substantial concerns about the course of action and foresees trouble ahead. As she continues, the departmental DG interrupts. 'I want to move this up a level', indicating it is time for strategic choices. This ends this discussion (Fieldwork June 2018).

As Jackall (1988) found in his study of corporate managers, in the Dutch civil service system too, credits go up, details go down. Accordingly, SCSs sought to reduce the complexity that the civil service lands in the lap of its political superiors. For better or worse, SCSs acted as the ultimate filter for what information and advice from the departments and its agencies went up to the minister. This enabled cabinet decision making, but also pushed details – that may or may not be vitally important – down the departmental hierarchy with a clear message to 'just make it work'. SCSs tried to stay on top of things but did not get to the bottom of things. Based on the observations, my sense is that SCSs in policy departments considered this a given and were not too bothered by the weight of such small decisions. If they were, they hid such concerns well.

The strategies used to get to the essence of things varied across SCSs. Some were triggered by potential Parliamentary consequences; others were keenly aware of potential implementation issues. Some cited laws and regulation as their primary reference for identifying what mattered most, or their experience in previous careers. In their efforts to foresee troubles and opportunity ahead, SCSs were teaching reality to their colleagues. They used their nodal position in information streams, such as membership of the permanent secretary board, private talks with the minister, snippets from cabinet decisions that were yet to be made, sneak peaks into reports that are not published yet, to forecast the upcoming realities for the department or agency in the near future.

SCSs spent ample time honing and adapting their organisations. All city managers in chapter 6 had set in motion organisational change programs. Agency managers in chapter 5 believed they needed to modernise their agencies, regulators were reorganising and departmental SCSs also tried to improve their organisation's capabilities. Equally in chapter 2 and 4, keeping the organisation fit for the future, even an organisation as small as the Dutch prime minister's office, was seen as a key imperative by the Secretary. In engaging the organisation with change, these SCSs generally aimed for evolution not revolution, preferring incremental adaptation and 'future-proofing' over blanket institutional reinvention.

Reforming organisations faced SCSs with employee representation. SCSs had to handle works councils. A number of SCSs had antagonistic relations with their employee representations. They were prepared to the teeth for strenuous meetings and rehearsed their words carefully. When their

business was done and dealt with, or their attention was running low, SCSs found the meeting with the councils a chore. If ever they got bored, they turned to their inbox, or they made clear they wanted to speed it up and were upset afterwards about just having wasted an hour of their precious time.

Finally, SCSs tamed chaos by managing incidents. While belief holds that civil servants consider the long term, and politicians the short term, my observations show that SCS live in the present. Their days were filled with incidents that were brought to their attention. Some got calls in the middle of the night others were kept up to date all day. Incidents, ranging from strikes, unexpected voting outcomes, regulatees' misconduct, fraud to fiascos, were perceived as mini crises. During my observation days, diaries were not swept clean to manage incidents, but they crept in the diaries as they were. In between meetings, SCSs would be updated, or check their phones. Such incidents were discussed when meetings were opened. Today's incidents were contrasted with long term strategy. Often times, incidents were beyond the reach of the SCSs that I observed – they felt responsible but could not do much to abate it. They wanted to be informed regardless, so they could inform the minister or other key stakeholders who might call.

7.3.3 VISIBLY PERFORMING BACKSTAGE

SCSs craftwork mainly occurs at the backstage of the government's day-to-day performances. Or to be more precise, SCSs were backstage actors in principle, but nevertheless were highly visible behind the stage and could feel forced to occasionally get on stage and perform frontstage tasks. While the ministry, and by extension its leaders, have become increasingly mediatised and accessible to the public eye, SCSs prefer to remain private. When ministers met with stakeholders, they visibly remained silent. When prompted by interlocutors at such meetings, they re-directed attention back to their principals with subtle but clear cues. When their department or agency found itself in the media, they might occasionally step forward, but with gritted teeth. Remaining invisible was an acceptable ambition, and when forced on to the front stage, their performance should be as unmemorable as possible. For example, during my fieldwork a departmental DG had to stand in for the minister in delivering a speech at a conference. His course of action was to walk up the stage, tell the audience the minister could not make it and he would substitute for her. He then continued to read the minister's speech verbatim, as if the minister and not he was delivering the speech. It is illustrative of how SCSs worked in public only when they had to and in such a way as to 'shrink' (rather than display) their own person.

The case study in chapter 4 detailing a media storm after a fire in the prime minister's residence illustrates how SCSs are inclined to – or feel forced to by constitutional proprieties – sit still and

rely on their ministers to publicly explain and defend their actions. Although it might be tempting to react to media outrage, especially when it involves you personally, SCSs generally chose to sit still and wait it out. SCSs saw media as an arena in which they had little to gain and much to lose. For instance, an agency manager shrugged her shoulders when she was notified about an upcoming news story casting her agency in a bad light. Her response was to stay informed, do nothing and see what happened. The Secretary featured in chapter 4 believed that stepping into the fray would not only lead him into a reputational minefield, but would be tantamount to violating the public service bargain he had committed himself to, as it would pre-empt the norm of ministerial responsibility that he believed to be the cornerstone of the system he worked in. He detested being enveloped in a media blaze and believed his minister was duty bound to defend him in parliament and in the public eye, precisely because as a senior civil servant he was duty bound not to defend himself.

7.4 Political craftwork: a further interpretation

Having answered the research question and having presented a craftwork perspective on them, I now turn to a second round of interpretation of my findings, relating them to ongoing discussions about the politics of bureaucracy, stewardship, mobility and monitory democracy. These discussions appear to be relevant for further interpreting the high wire acts I identified, and my understanding of these acts might contribute to these discussions.

7.4.1 REVISITING WEBER AND WILSON, ONCE AGAIN

Senior civil servants must do more than just serve the government of the day. They also need to serve the next government, and the one after that, as well as to ensure that governments and public bureaucracies operates in accordance with the values of good governance. On balance, my interpretation that many SCSs habitually struggle with keeping a balance between these imperative, and that their craft-in-use tilts towards responsiveness. In chapter 5, I used the phrase 'the minister wants it' as shorthand for this tilt. For many departmental SCSs in particular, doing what the minister wants, or what they anticipate the minister will want, routinely takes priority. My fieldwork is not conclusive on this issue. More systematic comparative research among different categories of SCSs is needed to ascertain this more firmly. For the time being, however, my findings do not suggest that there is reason to worry about an insidious 'fourth estate' that pursues its own interests, hollowing out democratically elected politicians' abilities (Bovens 2000; Crince le Roy 1969). In

that sense, the ranks of contemporary senior civil servants have been thoroughly 'de-Sir Humphreyfied' (Hood 1991).

Debates on the politics of bureaucracy, and by extension SCSs' craftwork, invariably go back to Max Weber's (1922) and Woodrow Wilson's (1887) contrasting rationales for wanting to have Chinese walls between the worlds of politics and administration. Wilson argued that the inevitable 'hurry and strife' of the political realm needed to be offset by a dispassionate, professional, business-like execution of political decision by the administration. Across the Atlantic, Max Weber pleaded for assertive political leadership that would keep the ever-increasing size, power and autonomy of the bureaucratic *Leviathan* (that he had seen emerge in his native Prussia) in check. This dichotomy has repeatedly been questioned or characterised as a working myth that cloaks more than it reveals. Aberbach et al. (1981) suggested that the dichotomy is 'hybrid'. Svara (2001) rendered the dichotomy a fiction. My observations and interviews suggest that the political-administrative practice indeed shows overlapping repertoires, with civil servants doing 'political' work, while ministers had trouble keeping their nose out of administrative affairs, while the normative ideal of a recognisable politics-administration divide persists in the minds of ministers and civil servants (cf. Van Dorp 2021).

Chapter 3 illustrated how Dutch politics is fragmenting with more and more parties in parliament vying for attention – and polarisation has come with it. Since 2002, as chapter 4 reminisced, new and different types of politicians, populist or otherwise, are repeatedly close to holding executive office, and civil servants mentally prepare for such turbulent changes in office (cf. Bækgaard et al. 2020). These are but examples that show that, again after some 20 years, political-administrative relationships are 'in motion' ('t Hart & Wille 2002). Since the mid 1990's, institutional reforms such as the introduction of the ABD-system have sought to restore the 'primacy of politics' over bureaucracy. The studies in this book consider that functional politicisation is a part of the current operating model of the civil service. In that sense, the bureaucratic Leviathan is held in check (Dahlström and LaPuente 2017).

7.4.2 SERVANTSHIP AND STEWARDSHIP: AN UNEQUAL TWO-WAY STREET

A main challenge to senior civil servants' craftwork is to work within and with different worlds. Senior civil servants cannot choose to practice service (to the government of the day) *or* stewardship (for stewardship of broader values and longer time horizons). Both come with the offices they hold, regardless whether departmental, public service delivery or regulation. In the literature, the orthodox frame of seeing this dual craftwork is expressed as being both 'responsive and

responsible' (Belloir et al. forthcoming). Straddling both aspects of the SCSs' job sits at the core of effective and accountable government (Du Gay 2002; Mulgan 2007; 2008).

The two sides of the street are not equally endowed, however. There are ample forces conducing towards responsiveness to political masters. The sheer frequency and weight of Parliamentary debates, the relentlessness of media scrutiny of ministerial and departmental performances and of front-line incidents, the time spent preparing for and having meetings with ministers and key stakeholders: this all took big chunks out of SCSs' working weeks. This was particularly the case for SCSs working in departmental policy cores. By comparison, the incentives for being proactive in setting agendas, building strategic capacity, guarding institutional legitimacy, and working the broader authorising and operational environments – as prominent students of public management would have them do (e.g. Moore, 1995) – take a back seat. No one I interviewed denied the importance of the latter, but their everyday practice points to the felt realities of their surroundings.

7.4.3 WORKING IN A MOBILE CIVIL SERVICE

A contemporary complexity is that SCSs in Dutch government work in a *mobile* civil service, known as the ABD-system (Den Boer and Noordegraaf 2006; Van der Meer 2021). This reform incentivised and/or pushed civil servants to rotate between different departments, agencies, and policy domains – hence becoming 'mobile' – in order to prevent siloes. At the outset, an assumption was that SCSs could lean into managerial skills and manage a department or agency, (almost) regardless of its particular tasks and responsibilities, in a similar way. Among other things, this has resulted in a host of interdepartmental management development programs for all SCSs, irrespective of their home department. This cultivates a joint socialisation process and offers opportunities for cross-pollination of skills, insights and reflections. It served to cultivate a shared craft.

However, working in a mobile civil service affects the socialisation and *Bildung* of craftwork. The ABD-system has plausibly eroded ties between senior civil servants and an experience of a 'home' department or agency. This matters for the role of SCSs as guardians of public value and stewards of institutional values. How are they to defend long time departmental interests that are only briefly theirs? How are SCSs to sow and cultivate institutional values they are not to reap, because they are moving between jobs and departments every few years?

This throws light on budding notions that SCSs are currently *too* 'politically-sensitive' or that SCSs' role perception is to 'keep their minister out of trouble' (Bekker 2021; Stokmans and De Witt Wijnen 2020). A mobile civil service still seeks 'loyalty that argues back' (Heclo 1975: 82), but

it has undone the long-lasting embeddedness of SCSs in a home turf which empowers SCSs to do so. In contrast, the loyalty to the minister remains unchanged in a mobile civil service – ministers would always come and go. A speculative hypothesis would be that the ABD-system reforms left the imperatives of managing up unchanged, while the rules of engagement of managing down have been impacted more significantly. Or, even more speculatively, 'merry-go-round' mobility reforms such as the Dutch ABD may leave the loyalty of SCSs to their ministers intact, while it erodes their loyalty to their departments, rendering SCSs upwards-focused.

7.4.4 NAVIGATING MONITORY DEMOCRACY

Further complexity originates in the dawn of what has been labelled the 'monitory democracy' (Keane 2009). In the age of the monitory democracy, citizens, publics, social media users and interest groups have unlimited options to call politicians to account. What may be democratic progress to some can be the 'arming of the mob' to others (Russel 2021). Authority turbulence is a result (Van der Wal 2017b). While elections and seats (hallmark of the representative democracy) still matter to politicians' realities, their authority, capacities or choices are liable to perennial questioning and congruent blame dispensing through unlimited channels of communications by unelected representatives in bully pulpits (Keane 2009). Monitory democracy coincides with, but is also heavily dependent on, social media and the abundance of ways to communicate many-to-many in real time.

These dynamics seep into the upper echelons of the civil service (Grube 2019; Schillemans 2012). The SCSs I observed and interviewed were acutely aware that, regardless of their traditional backstage position, their work now took place in a fishbowl. Everyone on the outside can potentially look into administrative processes. In turn, SCSs make efforts to continuously screen what is going on 'outside': they read the papers, they scan social media accounts, they are given curated reports on current affairs and receive phone calls from people in their network who keep them up to date. While (social) mediatisation looms large in the monitory democracy, social accountability practices also play a role, as SCSs dealt with client councils, had periodic citizen encounters or were preparing for Parliamentary hearings (cf. Brummel 2021).

SCSs are media-aware in large part because their principals are. This stepwise awareness is simply part of being responsive: if the minister's context changes, SCSs adapt accordingly. But it is not the only reason. Accountability requirements have thickened (Hood 2010; Brändström 2016; Hinterleitner and Sager 2018; De Ruijter 2019). The findings suggested that many SCSs subscribe to a role of backstage performance. Generally, their preference goes out to the reactive side of Grube's continuum of civil servants' work in the public eye (2019: 196). Whether that preference

keeps up with an intensifying monitory democracy remains to be seen. Alternatively, monitory democracy dynamics may provide SCSs with new opportunities to manifest their role as public leaders.

7.5 Implications for the study of senior civil servants

I have detailed the senior civil servant's craftwork and have discussed it. As an attempt to advance the study of SCSs' craftwork, I discuss the scholarly implications of the findings, zooming in on the use of elite ethnography for studying SCSs, reconceptualising functional politicisation in future research, and diversifying the locus of SCS research from departmental cores to public service delivery and regulatory agencies.

7.5.1 STUDYING CIVIL SERVANTS' CRAFTWORK AS SITUATED PRACTICES

I have tried to get as close as possible to day-to-day practices of senior civil servants. While I did not shy away from content analysis and statistical analyses, I used ethnographic methods, in particular shadowing, observation, and in-depth interviewing. Ethnography, like most social science methods, is riddled with challenges. It is by no means a panacea. Still, I want to plea for ethnography in SCS research. Our research culture is increasingly privileging quantitative at-a-distance (like surveys) and/or high-control (survey and lab experiments) methods. This can bring important progress in many areas of interest to government elite researchers. But broadly speaking that methodological toolkit can only take us so far when it comes to understanding the craftwork that senior civil servants perform, which takes shape at the intersection of the persons performing it, the positions they hold, the systems in which they are embedded, and the ways in which they understand their roles and the challenges before them (cf. Bevir and Rhodes 2003). Researchers aspiring to understand how civil servants make sense and perform can benefit from employing a plethora of research methods associated with interpretive social science approaches including participant observations and other ways of 'being there' (Bevir and Rhodes 2016).

Ethnographic studies may be relatively rare, but they continue to be published in the field's most prestigious journals, including *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Michel 2012), the *Academy of Management Journal* (Lok and De Rond 2016) and the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (Møller 2021), because they bring an edge to the literature. 'Public administration needs more ethnography' (cf. Therrien 2018: 627), because it helps to make the familiar strange (again). It may even make us reconsider or discard theories. Elite ethnography complements *explanatory* research on government elites by trying to *understand* the elites who do the governing. I see elite ethnography

as a means for researchers to penetrate the complex world of senior civil servants, rather than trying to squeeze that world into our parsimonious academic models. The latter has merit and is tempting – as noted in chapter 2 – but a mere reproduction of the worlds and behaviour that we try to understand, in this case the prudent and pressured processes of appointing the right people for specific jobs. This does not make ethnography superior to any other method, or interpretive epistemology better than any other, but does suggest that there are horses for courses.

7.5.2 REIMAGINING FUNCTIONAL POLITICISATION

A theme that runs through the chapters is the political dimension that fuels into the work that civil servants do. This ranges from work SCSs did prior to their appointment (chapter 2) to being 'serially monogamous' (chapter 4, see also: Hood & Lodge 2006) or being especially attuned to what political officeholders have to say (chapter 6). This political work was the core of the in-depth study in chapter 5. Functional politicisation has been defined as a 'mechanism by which the civil service performs politically responsive bureaucratic behaviour' (Hustedt & Salomonsen 2014: 750; see also Mayntz and Derlien 1989). Its effect is usually considered fusing policy advice with tactical advice, partaking in 'selling' policy to stakeholders (Belloir et al. forthcoming).

Recently, scholarship suggests we need to revise that initial conceptualisation. In her study of Danish departmental secretaries, Trangbæk (2021) seeks to refine the concept by adding two subcategories: *uncritical* and *reflexive* functional politicisation. Uncritical functional politicisation is about routine responsiveness: 'anticipating and integrating politically relevant aspects in their daily work' (2021: 344). In contrast reflexive politicisation also includes self-conscious political astuteness: 'civil servants anticipate and integrate politically relevant aspects in their daily work but also provide alternative solutions and/or flesh out consequences (pros and cons) and/or challenge the minister's position on the matter.' (2021: 344). Both types of functional politicisation leave room for SCSs to deliver frank and fearless advice. However, while the first mechanism is prone to generate yes-men and yes-women, a posture of *reflexive* functional politicisation holds out hopes for bridging responsive and responsible conceptions of senior civil service work.

Trangbæk's (2021) distinction is useful, because she refines functional politicisation and shows that functional politicisations can be a productive force in political-administrative interaction that manifests neutral competence. Based on my fieldwork, I propose a further reconceptualization of functional politicisation: not as a mechanism, but as practice.

A practice is generally considered a set of activities that fit a belief in order to achieve a goal (Blijleven and Van Hulst 2021; Feldman and Orlikowski 2011; Sandberg and Tsoukas 2011; Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). Reimagining functional politicisation as a practice that they can co-constitute

rather than as a mechanism that they are subjected to, opens up for civil servants what Kegan (1994) has called a 'self-authoring mindset'. Shaw and Eichbaum (2020) were right to ask whether functional politicisation cascades down from political principals, or whether it bubbles up inside of SCSs. Their question should not deceive anyone: they realise that both are happening at the same time, and often influence one another. A mechanistic perspective allows little room for such 'bottom-up', or even sideways or any other direction, politicisation. However, I argued that while politicisation may originate in political preferences, civil servants play a part in functionally politicising the civil service too. Proxy politics reinforce functional politicisation from within the civil service: civil servants try to align their fellow civil servants in performing politically responsive bureaucratic behaviour. Analysing functional politicisation as practice opens up new research opportunities and questions that would be easily missed when only seeing it as a top-down mechanism: politicisation is a verb (Limbocker et al. 2022).

7.5.3 MOVING BEYOND DEPARTMENTAL CORES

While the scholarly literature on the craft of SCSs acknowledges both stability and change, it has kept a dominant locus: *departmental* civil servants. Rhodes (2011), Noordegraaf (2000) and Trangbæk (2021) observed *departmental* managers and tell their stories. Likewise, Van Putten (2020) imagined administrative craftsmen as *policy makers,* not frontline service delivery staff, public regulators, or 'back office' professionals. Admittedly, most studies in this book are situated departmental settings, too. Within that departmental, policy making view, the dyadic understanding of politicians versus administrators has been opened up into a triangular perspective, including ministerial advisers (see chapter 4, but also Christiansen & Salomonsen 2018; De Visscher & Salomonsen 2013). This is conceptual progress. However, moving beyond the departmental (policy making) bias would serve the academic debate.

Echoing Hood (1991), public administration scholars must further *de-*Sir Humphreyfy their perspectives on the craftwork of senior civil servants and on political-administrative relations. One way of doing so is to cast the analytical spotlight less exclusively on senior policy bureaucrats and focus more senior executives of public service delivery and regulatory agencies. In my studies, I gained from such diversification. For instance, the practice of 'proxy politics,' as described in chapter 5, only surfaced after shadowing regulatory managers. When I noticed that their – otherwise reasonable – arguments met a stiff 'the minister wants it' from their departmental colleagues. Similarly, many public service delivery agency SCSs are responsible for entities many times the size of a policy department, whose performance can 'make or break' ministerial reputations. Even so, one of them confessed he had the greatest trouble of even reaching the DG

of the policy department, let alone the minister. His primary concern seemed to be to keep his organisation up and running while a slew of new policies designed and negotiated in the closed shop of the minister's court or cabinet processes in which considerations of practical feasibility and impacts on target populations are not necessarily top of mind. Although studies of public service delivery agency SCSs' beliefs and attitudes and of senor public regulators exist (e.g., Dargie 1998; Howard 2021), up-close studies of their craftwork remain extremely rare (Korica et al. 2015).

Regardless, including the perspective of SCSs who do not work in close proximity to the minister, are one (or many) steps removed from the inner circles, or those who see it as their responsibility to primarily challenge their minister provides valuable insights into the variety and differentiation of the craft of public administration. For example, up-close and personal studies of the role perceptions of departmental, public service delivery and regulatory managers in comparative perspective (see Boswell et al. 2020 on interpretive comparative research). How do they gain the minister's ear? How do they use their institutional position to shape policy agendas while being aware of the different perspectives they come from? What does the literature stand to gain from studying SCSs leading large public sector organisations, for whom tangible big-P politics remain at a distance? The dynamics of managing and leading public service delivery agencies or regulatory agencies are crucial, against the backdrop of their relationships with political superiors and their departmental courts, are essential to improving our understanding of SCSs' craftwork.

7.5.4 A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR STUDYING SENIOR CIVIL SERVANTS' CRAFTWORK

One can do only so much in one book. In the next or someone else's, more can be done to advance the understanding of senior civil servants' craftwork. In chapter 2 I called for comparative studies using SCSs' careers. Chapter 3 served as a reminder to repeatedly study cabinet government, both formally and cabinet-as-process (see also Weller et al. 2021). Chapter 4 made three recommendations for future studies on (practicing) politics-administration relationships: include temporal dimensions in analyses, use a court politics perspective to interpret the inner workings of the core executive, and advance studying blame dynamics that spill over from the political realm into the civil service (cf. Hinterleitner & Sager 2019). In this chapter, drawing on lessons learned in chapter 5 and 6, I want to highlight two specific opportunities that cut across the studies. In my view, they remain underdeveloped but are useful to advancing scholarship – and practice – on the senior civil servant's craft.

First, I touched upon the *public* dimension of SCSs' work. They are keenly aware of the fishbowl realities of the department. The fieldwork in chapter 5 shows excerpts of SCS who wanted to stay private in public. Similarly, chapter 6 revealed that SCSs preferred the insides of their offices

to going out the doors. New research could focus on 'public civil servants'. I do not mean to ignore the scholarship on the accountability and mediatisation of administrative organisations and their leaders (Dekker, Jacobs & Korthagen 2020; Djerf-Pierre & Pierre 2016; Schillemans 2012; Schillemans et al. 2019). Again, my fieldwork too suggests that SCSs see working in the public eye as an accountability dilemma (see chapters 4 and 5). With that in mind, I suggest asking questions pertaining to their public leadership *work*. What do they do in public? How do they deal with media and interviews? What is the social media behaviour, including their shared etiquette and rules of thumb of senior civil servants? How do SCSs bend or break these rules? What dilemmas do SCSs face when their media presence outside generates envy among stakeholders inside, or raises questions in parliament? What do they hope to gain by working the public eye, when it too often seems a losing game for civil servants?

Grube's (2019: 196) continuum of public behaviour of SCSs may be a conceptual starting point. Such questions could be studied in multiple ways. Up-close and personal studies could work well. As working in the public eye is a challenge for many SCSs, regardless of their individual role, department or responsibility, elite focus groups could work well to flesh out the craftwork challenges and insider perspectives that SCSs face (Rhodes & Tiernan 2015).

A second opportunity to advance scholarship on SCSs' craftwork is developing an 'Administrative Leadership Capital Index' or ALCI (cf. Bennister et al. 2017). In this book I have studied the work of senior civil servants up-close and personal. It has generated insights into their craftwork and leadership work. The downside of such studies is that they do not easily travel to different contexts. Moreover, my studies have been interpretive, not evaluative. A tool that intelligently captures the various forms of 'capital' that senior civil servants can employ for leadership work can add a comparative and evaluative dimension. This would also be useful for practitioners, and teaching. Such a tool exists for political leadership, i.e., the leadership capital of political leaders such as prime ministers, or the LCI (Bennister et al. 2017). A similar tool for administrative leaders is, at least to my knowledge, not yet available.

In this book, I have studied several elements of SCSs' (leadership) work that could form the basis of such an ALCI, including *skills* (hard and soft), *relationships* and *reputations* (cf. Bennister et al. 2015). Chapter 2 pointed to the importance of demographic and career characteristics. Longevity in office or having certain experiences under their belt can add to the leadership skills that SCSs can wield. Also, holding some offices give more positional power than other offices do. Chapter 4 highlighted the dual craftwork of straddling responsiveness and astuteness. Both can add to the leadership capital of SCSs. Chapter 5 drew attention to the authority that SCSs carry in relationship to their peers. Again, this could be an element in the ALCI. Finally, chapter 6 focussed on how

SCSs allocated their attention and attendance. The freedom to do so, is likely a critical indicator of leadership capital.

I imagine such an ALCI to look something like this. First, *Skills capital* includes criteria such as: longevity on the job, hierarchical position, authoritative expertise on subject matter, communicative performance. Second, *Relationship capital* includes memberships of prestigious networks, and experience in multiple departments and/or sectors. Third, *Reputational capital* includes employee satisfaction survey results, public service awards, and media visibility. This would not only have academic value. It would support practical searches for contemporary administrative leadership too.

CODA

In this book I have studied how senior civil servants practice their craft. The study originated with inspiring encounters but turned into an academic quest. The opening citation by the Dutch government renders it crystal clear: the expectations of senior civil servants are explicit and identifiable. In my book, I needed more pages to do justice to the complexity and situatedness of their work and behaviour. The result is a picture of differentiated craftwork under pressure. In the 21st century, governments are being challenged far beyond the modernist world view that gave birth to the bureaucratic organisations they inhabit. What senior civil servants do has always been significant, but with the institutional orders from which they emerged struggling to adapt, their behaviours and their leadership are even more important.

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Appendix

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender (male=1)	Pearson's R	--									
	P-value										
2. PhD	Pearson's R	.135*	--								
	P-value	.034	--								
3. Age upon entry	Pearson's R	.147*	-.054	--							
	P-value	.036	.445	--							
4. Appointed from pool	Pearson's R	.068	-.120	-.214**	--						
	P-value	.289	.061	.002	--						
5. Political alignment	Pearson's R	.086	.000	-.061	.294**	--					
	P-value	.185	.997	.384	<.001	--					
6. PS Experience	Pearson's R	.113	-.069	-.051	.368**	.188**	--				
	P-value	.076	.278	.472	<.001	.004	--				
7. DG Experience	Pearson's R	-.036	-.138*	-.164*	.072	-.103	-.130*	--			
	P-value	.573	.030	.019	.259	.114	.041	--			
8. Departmental mobility	Pearson's R	-.097	-.192**	-.197**	.245**	.010	.187**	.069	--		
	P-value	.136	.003	.005	<.001	.875	.004	.289	--		
9. Functional mobility	Pearson's R	-.004	-.065	.074	-.078	-.056	-.141*	-.084	.159*	--	
	P-value	.945	.323	.291	.233	.395	.031	.201	.015	--	
10. PMO Experience	Pearson's R	.053	-.044	-.129	.199**	.081	.268**	-1.02	.158*	-.159*	--
	P-value	.418	.496	.067	.002	.214	<.001	.116	.015	.014	--
11. MoF Experience	Pearson's R	.007	.001	-.315**	.041	.093	.020	.011	.387**	.019	-.010
	P-value	.914	.992	<.001	.531	.153	.757	.871	<.001	.775	.882

*p<0.05, ** p<0.01

Declarations of co-authorships

Chapter 3 was co-authored by R.A.W. Rhodes (University of Southampton). Conceptualisation, Research design, data analysis, data curation, and writing of the original draft were done by me. Data collection and writing (reviewing and editing) were done by R.A.W. Rhodes and myself. Patrick Weller (Griffith University), not credited as author, contributed to data collection. My contribution was 67% or more. This chapter was previously published as Van Dorp, G.H., & Rhodes, R.A.W. (2022). *The Netherlands: How Weak Prime Ministers Gain Influence*. In Kolltveit, K. & Shaw, R. (Eds.) *Core Executives in a Comparative Perspective*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Chapter 4 was co-authored by Paul 't Hart (Utrecht University). Conceptualisation, Research design, data curation, writing of the original draft were done by me. Data collection, data analysis, and writing (reviewing and editing) were done by Paul 't Hart and myself. My contribution was 67% or more. This chapter was previously published as: Van Dorp, G.H., & 't Hart, P. (2019). Navigating the Dichotomy: The Top Public Servant's Craft. *Public Administration*, *97*(4), 877-891. (Chapter 4)

Samenvatting in het Nederlands

Inleiding

Dit boek gaat over het vakmanschap van topambtenaren. In deze beknopte samenvatting geef ik de belangrijkste bevindingen weer. Een deel van de onderzoeksbevindingen heb ik ook elders in het Nederlands toegelicht (zie Van Dorp 2021). Topambtenaren doen ertoe. Als fluisteraar van de macht stellen zij het menu van ideeën, taal en getallen samen, waar politici hun keuzes op bepalen. Soms staan zij zelf aan het roer bij het implementeren van beleid in concrete situaties. Zo vormen zij – hoewel ze vooral onzichtbaar blijven – een belangrijk deel van het gezicht van de overheid.

Probleemstelling

Hoewel topambtenaren ontegenzeggelijk veel invloed (kunnen) hebben, is hun rol en gedrag niet vaak onderwerp van gedegen en diepgaand onderzoek. Hoewel er de afgelopen jaren veel constant is gebleven en we de uitkomsten van eerdere studies kunnen gebruiken, is er ook veel veranderd in en rond topambtelijke werelden, in politiek-ambtelijke verhoudingen, in politiek-bestuurlijke omgevingen van Den Haag en grote gemeenten, in issues en opgaven. In dit boek stel ik een eenvoudige onderzoeksvraag waarmee ik modern topambtelijk vakmanschap onderzoek. De onderzoeksvraag is: *Hoe oefenen topambtenaren hun vak uit?* In de opeenvolgende hoofdstukken van dit boek beantwoord ik deelvragen die samen een antwoord op deze hoofdvraag mogelijk maken.

Aanpak

Om deze brede onderzoeksvraag op een betekenisvolle wijze te kunnen beantwoorden beperk ik mij door het gebruik van een aantal conceptuele zoeklichten. Allereerst plaats ik mijn onderzoek in de 'managerial work and behaviour' traditie, in navolging van onder andere Henry Mintzberg en andere organisatiewetenschappers. In deze traditie kijkt men holistisch naar het werk van managers in hun context. Daarnaast maak ik gebruik van de term 'vakmanschap' om het werk van topambtenaren te duiden en te begrijpen. Dat zet de bevindingen in het licht van vakwerk en alledaagse praktijken ('practices') en niet in algemene generalisaties. Tot slot komen mijn

bevindingen steeds terug op politici en 'het politieke' en de (vermeende) politisering van topambtenaren en ambtelijke organisaties.

Om de onderzoeksvraag te beantwoorden heb ik meerjarig onderzoek gedaan om 'dicht-op-de-huid' van topambtenaren te komen. Ik heb in een mixed-methods onderzoeksontwerp vier methoden gebruikt: observaties (schaduwen), elite-interviews, loopbaananalyse en agenda-analyse. Dat geeft een beeld van hoe zij op hun positie terechtkwamen (loopbaananalyse), hoe ze hun tijd besteden (agenda-analyse), wat ze doen (observaties) en wat ze daarover zeggen (elite-interviews). In onderstaande tabel geef ik een overzicht van de onderzoeksvragen, de methoden en de bevindingen. Daarna vat ik elk hoofdstuk kort samen.

#	Onderzoeksvraag	Data en methoden	Bevindingen
2	Welke loopbaanervaringen van topambtenaren hebben hun kans vergroot om tot secretaris-generaal benoemd te worden in de periode 2000-2020?	Loopbaananalyse van 257 topambtenaren tussen 2000-2020 en 22 elite-interviews met ministers en topambtenaren	Partijpolitieke activiteiten binnen regeringspartijen en op het ministerie van Algemene Zaken gewerkt hebben verhoogden de kans voor topambtenaren om tot secretaris-generaal benoemd te worden.
3	Zijn de Nederlandse premiers invloedrijker geworden, en zo ja, hoe heeft dit de werking van de 'core executive' veranderd?	28 elite-interviews met premier, ministers en topambtenaren	Het Haagse bestel is meer gericht op de minister-president. De core executive werkt processueel en relationeel. Topambtenaren hebben zich daaraan aangepast: ook zij richten zich op processen en relaties.
4	Hoe faciliteren topambtenaren de ministeriele verantwoordelijkheid?	31 uur aan elite-interviews met ministers en topambtenaren	Het vakmanschap van topambtenaren omvat dienen én beïnvloeden. Zij borgen politiek-ambtelijke verhoudingen in tijden van verandering, in ontvankelijk verklaard worden in bontkragen en tijdens het werken in het openbaar.
5	Hoe managen topambtenaren politisering?	160 uur observaties van 18 topambtenaren	Topambtenaren beoefenen plaatsvervangende politiek. Zij politiseren hun collega's functioneel. Ik vond een sterke neiging onder topambtenaren om te doen 'wat de minister wil', in plaats van het benadrukken van hun rol als hoeder van het beleidsdomein.
6	Hoe verdelen topambtenaren hun aandacht en aanwezigheid?	182 uur observaties van vier gemeentesecretarissen, 32 elite-interviews met topambtenaren en bestuurders en drie jaaragenda's	De kwaliteit en kwantiteit van hun aandacht en aanwezigheid werd besteed aan het werken in de politiek-ambtelijke cocon. De interne trekkrachten die hen bezighielden met 'binnen' waren vaak beter dan hun verlangen om 'buiten' te werken.

Hoofdstuk 2: Paden naar de top

In dit empirische hoofdstuk introduceer ik de hoofdpersonen van dit boek: topambtenaren. Ik heb daartoe de loopbanen van deze topambtenaren geanalyseerd die hen leidden naar ambtelijke topfuncties. Door die loopbanen te bestuderen breng ik een nieuw perspectief op topambtenaren, door nauwkeurig na te gaan hoe zij omhoogklommen in de ambtelijke wereld en/of daarbuiten. De nadruk lag hierbij op hen die de hoogste ambtelijke functie behaalden: de secretaris-generaal (SG). De deelvraag is: Welke loopbaanervaringen van topambtenaren hebben hun kans vergroot om tot secretaris-generaal benoemd te worden in de periode 2000-2020? Om deze vraag te beantwoorden heb ik een nieuwe database ontwikkeld met daarin de loopbanen van alle topambtenaren die lid waren van de topmanagementgroep van de Algemene Bestuursdienst in de periode 2000-2020. Daarnaast maak ik gebruik van 22 elite-interviews met secretarissen-generaal, ministers en andere topambtenaren.

De bevindingen laten zien, hoewel er niet één weg naar de top is, of dat die patronen in beton gegoten zijn, dat er een aantal loopbaanervaringen zijn die de kans op een SG-benoeming significant vergroten. De eerste is partijpolitieke activiteiten binnen regeringspartijen (VVD, CDA, D66, PvdA, CU). Veel SG's, maar niet allemaal, waren eerder burgemeester, Kamerlid of vervulden andere partijpolitieke functies. Hoewel geen onomstotelijk bewijs voor de politisering van benoemingen suggereren de loopbanenanalyse en de elite-interviews wél impliciete politiek en flinke druk op het stelsel. Een tweede bevinding is dat het gewerkt hebben op het Ministerie van Algemene Zaken ook iemands kansen vergrootte, zoals ook door AZ bedoeld. Dit is bewijs voor dit ministerie als loopbaanversneller.

Dit hoofdstuk roept daarmee op tot reflectie over de rol van de 'core executive' in Den Haag. Het hebben van senior managerial ervaring (directeur-generaal) verhoogt de kansen op een SG-benoeming niet significant. Samengevat, de bevindingen laten zien dat topambtenaren met partijpolitieke ervaringen en ervaring in het hart van het Binnenhof meer succesvol zijn in het tot SG benoemd worden.

Hoofdstuk 3: Het vakmanschap gesitueerd

In hoofdstuk 3 ging ik van 'wie' de topambtenaren zijn, naar 'waar' zij werken. Dit hoofdstuk situeerde het topambtelijk vakmanschap in de spelregels die gelden op en rond het Binnenhof en

de departementen. Ik stelde deze deelvraag: zijn de Nederlandse premiers invloedrijker geworden, en zo ja, hoe heeft dat de werking van de 'core executive' veranderd?

Om deze deelvraag te beantwoorden maak ik gebruik van interviews met (ex-)ministers en (ex-)minister-presidenten, politieke assistenten, (ex-)topambtenaren en journalisten. De interviews reflecteren op verandering en stabiliteit in de werking van de core executive in de recente decennia tot aan 2017. Ik heb de literatuur over core executive en 'court politics' gebruikt om de bevindingen te duiden. De bevindingen benadrukken de rol van de premier. Vier ontwikkelingen in de core executive (Europeanisering, personificatie van de politiek, crisismanagement en het veranderende partijlandschap) voeden en onderhouden het groeiende soortelijke gewicht van de minister-president in het Nederlandse bestel.

In het dagelijkse verkeer zien ministers en topambtenaren de premier als een sleutelfiguur in betekenisvolle besluiten, ondanks dat de premier maar beperkte bevoegdheden heeft. De core executive draait goeddeels op zowel formele als informele processen en relaties tussen sleutelfiguren. De ministerraad is nog steeds belangrijk, maar functioneert met name als een slotceremonie die legitimiteit verschaft aan de besluitvormingsprocessen die voorafgingen in andere gremia waarin zowel politici en topambtenaren zitting hebben. Voor topambtenaren bevat dit een duidelijk signaal: hoewel zij hun minister dienen, kunnen zij het zich niet veroorloven om de premier te negeren.

Hoofdstuk 4: Dienen en beïnvloeden rond het Torentje

De voorafgaande hoofdstukken ensceneerden het vakmanschap, met nadruk op het centrum van het centrum: Algemene Zaken. In hoofdstuk 4 bouw ik hier op voort door drie gevalstudies te presenteren van een topambtenaar als secretaris-generaal op AZ. In lijn met de onderzoeksvraag van dit boek stelde ik de volgende deelvraag: hoe faciliteren topambtenaren de ministeriële verantwoordelijkheid?

Om deze vraag te beantwoorden heb ik klassieke literatuur over politiek-ambtelijke verhoudingen vertaald naar de Nederlandse context. Ik analyseerde hoe de politiek-ambtelijke spelregels (respect, ruimte en reciprociteit) het gedrag van een topambtenaar vormen, terwijl die met een premier in zwaar weer werkt.

Mijn empirische bijdrage bestond uit drie verhalen over het werk rond het Torentje. Deze gevalstudies beantwoorden de deelvraag door te laten zien dat zij simultaan dienen én beïnvloeden. Het eerste verhaal ging over het opvangen van verandering. Het is een reflectie op hoe een topambtenaar moest overschakelen van het werken met een ervaren premier met wie hij een goede

verstandhouding en werkrelatie had opgebouwd, en ook aan gehecht was geraakt, naar een nieuwe relatie met de opvolger. De twee andere verhalen gaan over hoe deze topambtenaar zijn plek moest veroveren in het adviessysteem van de nieuwe premier en daarin 'ontvankelijk' worden verklaard. Tot slot ging het derde verhaal over het werken in het oog van een mediastorm en over welke rolconflicten dat kan opleveren.

Dit hoofdstuk geeft een dicht-op-de-huid perspectief op het werk van een topambtenaar op het departement van de premier en vertelt zodoende zeldzame 'ambtelijke vertellingen'. Dit gaf een indruk van de realiteit van hoge inzetten, niet aflatende verantwoordingsdruk en parlementair toezicht. Het vakmanschap van topambtenaren ligt in het omgaan met dergelijke 'hot zones'. Om dat te doen, blijkt uit dit hoofdstuk, vereist gevoeligheid voor timing en cycli, het oor hebben van de premier, het onvoorspelbare verwachten, en mediadruk kunnen weerstaan.

Hoofdstuk 5: 'De minister wil het'

In hoofdstuk 5 heb ik de dicht-op-de-huid-aanpak verder gebracht door verschillende topambtenaren te schaduwen tijdens hun werk. Opnieuw brengt dit *'thick descriptions'* van hoe topambtenaren hun dienen en beïnvloeden beoefenen. Deze deelvraag stond centraal: hoe managen topambtenaren politisering? Deze greep van de politiek op de gedachten van topambtenaren lijkt door te dringen in het vak van de Nederlandse ambtelijke top.

Ik heb onderzocht hoe functionele politisering eruitziet in de dagelijkse praktijk. Dat leverde drie gezichten van functionele politisering op: in het directe advies aan de bewindspersoon, in de omgang met ambtelijke collega's, en tijdens het werk in het openbaar. Door het veldwerk kon ik functionele politisering op een nieuwe manier zien: niet als 'politieke vaardigheden' en/of 'politiek-bestuurlijke sensitiviteit', hoewel dat natuurlijk belangrijk blijft, maar als praktisch gebruik van autoriteit. In de afwezigheid van bewindspersonen namen topambtenaren namelijk een deel van de politieke autoriteit over om hun collega's, uitvoerende diensten en toezichthouders de koers van de minister te laten varen. De kortst samenvatting was de zin 'de minister wil het', wat vaak het einde van een discussie bleek.

Het vakmanschap van topambtenaren omvat politiek werk dat gevoelig is voor functionele politisering. In dit hoofdstuk vond ik zowel top-down politisering, maar net zo goed wat ik bottom-up politisering noem.

Hoofdstuk 6: Het managen van aandacht en aanwezigheid

In de laatste empirische studie verschuif ik het zoekveld naar gemeentesecretarissen in grote Nederlandse gemeenten. Net als topambtenaren bij de Rijksoverheid werken zij in de 'hot zone' tussen bestuurders, gemeenteraad en ambtelijke organisatie. De deelvraag was: hoe verdelen topambtenaren hun aandacht en aanwezigheid? Ik heb vier gemeentesecretarissen een week lang geschaduwd en daarnaast interviews met hun mede- en tegenspelers gehouden. Daarnaast heb ik hun jaaragenda's geanalyseerd. In dit hoofdstuk gebruikte ik een model van drie richtingen: gemeentesecretarissen managen naar 'boven' (College van B&W, gemeenteraad), 'beneden' (ambtelijke organisatie) en naar 'buiten' (netwerken en partners buiten de organisatie).

De literatuur over topambtenaren heeft vooral de horizontale of 'naar buiten' dimensies van hun werk benadrukt. Echter, mijn veldwerk, interviews en agenda-analyse suggereren een ander beeld. De kwantiteit en kwaliteit van hun aandacht ging op aan het managen naar boven en beneden. Net als veel topambtenaren binnen de Rijksoverheid gaven zij prioriteit aan het 'coconnen' met bestuurders en mededirecteuren. Hoewel zij het belang van 'managing out' benadrukten, waren de trekkrachten van bestuurders en de altijd acute organisatievraagstukken waarvoor zij verantwoordelijk waren meestal sterker dan de wil om 'buiten' te werken. Dit bevestigt het verschil tussen de retoriek en de realiteit dat managementonderzoekers keer op keer vinden (zie bijvoorbeeld Mintzberg 1973; Noordegraaf 2000).

Het onderworpen zijn aan trek- en duwkrachten is een sine qua non voor topambtenaren. Het werken in die spanning bleek de realiteit van topambtenaren. Zij verdeelden hun aandacht en aanwezigheid vooral binnenin hun organisaties, terwijl ze het strategisch belang van horizontale netwerken buiten hun organisaties zich terdege realiseerden.

Conclusies

In dit boek stond de volgende onderzoeksvraag centraal: hoe beoefenen topambtenaren hun vak? Samengevat wijzen de bevindingen erop dat er niet één type vakmanschap is dat topambtenaren beoefenen. Integendeel, de bevindingen wijzen juist op situationeel en gedifferentieerd handelen. In plaats van een gedeelde set van overtuigingen en praktijken, passen topambtenaren zich steeds aan de situatie aan, of beter, situaties, waarvoor zij zich gesteld zien. Dat maakt topambtelijk vakmanschap een kwestie van *vakwerk*, dat gedifferentieerd en gesitueerd in praktijk gebracht wordt.

Binnen dat vakwerk zie ik drie balanceeroefeningen terug, die het werk en handelen van topambtenaren voortdurend kleuren. Ondanks de verschillen tussen topambtenaren, situaties en settings, zag ik duidelijk vakmatige patronen in hoe ze dagdagelijks vakwerk kunnen afleveren. Allereerst doen zij aan dienen én beïnvloeden (*shaping service*). Ze moeten volgen en reageren, maar tevens de toon zetten en sturen. Daarnaast moeten zij omgaan met orde én chaos (*taming chaos*). Ze moeten inspelen op incidenten en dealen met gedoe, maar ze moeten ook de grotere lijnen en koers bewaken. Tot slot balanceren zij tussen het werk in het openbaar én het achter de schermen blijven (*backstage performance*). Ze moeten onzichtbaar zijn en stil processen gaande houden, maar ze moeten tevens opvallen en optreden, indien nodig.

About the author

Curriculum Vitae

Erik-Jan van Dorp (Zoetermeer, 22 November 1990) obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Administration and Organisational Science at the Utrecht University School of Governance (2014). Subsequently, he completed the joint Master of Science program Research in Public Administration and Organizational Science of Utrecht University, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Tilburg University and VU University Amsterdam (*cum laude*) in 2016.

After his studies, Erik-Jan started working as a research assistant for an international comparative research program on cabinet government in five countries, hosted by Griffith University Australia.

After a brief consultancy intermezzo at USBO Advies, Erik-Jan began working on his PhD in December 2017, again at the Utrecht University School of Governance. Throughout the next four years, he honed his own craft of research and teaching. In 2019, Erik-Jan became a lecturer at the Nederlandse School for Openbaar Bestuur (NSOB) in The Hague, teaching in the executive Master of Public Administration Program. He was recognized as an affiliated PhD at the Centre for Political Ethnography at the University of Southampton in that same year.

He was seconded as strategic adviser to the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relationships (BZK, KIEM) of the Netherlands in the first year of the pandemic. Additionally, he served as an academic consultant on the team that evaluated the Dutch senior civil service system (*Algemene Bestuursdienst*), also in 2020.

He was invited to present at international conferences and workshops, including NIG, EGPA, ECPR, PSA, and PMRC, both in Europe and the United States. Erik-Jan's work has been published and discussed in peer reviewed journals as well as in Dutch national media. From March 2022 on, Erik-Jan works as an assistant professor at the Utrecht University School of Governance.

Outside of work, he is a musician and a weekend wood worker. Erik-Jan is married to Christine. Together they are raising a family.

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