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**'Damned if you do and damned if you don't': A framework
for examining double binds in public service organizations**

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'Damned if you do and damned if you don't': A framework for examining double binds in public service organizations

Abstract

A key challenge for contemporary public service organizations is the requirement to incorporate different, at times conflicting, demands into their operations. Such demands and the organizational challenges they impose have been described in theories of institutional complexity, organizational paradox(es) and conflicting public values. In this paper, we complement these existing theories by developing an analytical framework based on the 'double bind' theory. The framework enables understandings of conflicting demands stemming from double communication and elusive mixed messages. We demonstrate the usefulness of the double bind framework by examining the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration.

Keywords: Double binds, organizational paradoxes, institutional complexity, public value conflicts, Labour and welfare services

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Introduction

A key trait of public service organizations is the requirement to incorporate different, and at times conflicting, demands into their operations (Brunsson 1986; Christensen and Lægreid 2011; Torfing and Triantafillou 2013). Various theories offer different lenses or perspectives on these conflicts and how they are handled. Scholarship drawing on neo-institutional theory has highlighted the institutional complexity arising from the requirement to incorporate demands from field-level institutional logics (Greenwood et al. 2011; Lubell 2013), such as involving new public management (NPM) or post-NPM (Christensen and Lægreid 2011; Fossestøl et al. 2015). Scholarship on paradox theory has highlighted the inherent incompatibilities within organizations (Poole and Van de Ven 1989; Smith and Lewis 2011), such as between bureaucratic demands of standardization and professional demands of autonomy and case-by-case discretion (Tummers et al. 2012; Zhang et al. 2020). The public management literature has drawn on the theory of competing public values (De Graaf and Van Der Wal 2010; Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007; van der Wal, de Graaf, and Lawton 2011) and explored the different strategies used to deal with value conflicts in public service organizations (de Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016; Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters 2014; Stewart 2009; Thacher and Rein 2004).

In this paper, we aim to complement these existing theoretical frameworks by adding a new framework based on the double bind theory (Bateson 1972; Bateson et al. 1956). We adapt insights from the original theory, which highlights the potential schizophrenia of children resulting from incoherent messages (double binds) from their parents, to a public service context involving potentially 'schizophrenic', sub-optimal or inconsistent organizational practices arising from such incoherent messages (Berti and Simpson 2019; Hennestad 1990; Lüscher and Lewis 2008; Wagner 1978). In other words, double binds render public service organizations in challenging situations, as they will be wrong and/or met with negative sanctions regardless of which demand they adhere to. Our adapted framework highlights the distinction between 'first' and 'second' order messages – that is, between explicit and openly communicated demands and more subtle, implicit and unspoken demands – and the potentially resolving role of meta-communication. We illustrate the usefulness of this framework by applying it to the services of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV).

We argue that the double binds framework adds to the literature on public service organizations in several ways. First, it adds to existing theoretical frameworks by providing an approach specifically designed to analyse and understand the communication of contradictions, appearing as mixed messages that may render public service organizations 'trapped' in the incoherence. Previous

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research has acknowledged and identified the widespread prevalence of paradoxes, inconsistencies and conflicting demands in public service organizations and analysed a range of response strategies (see, for instance, Brunsson 1986; Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters 2014; Stewart 2009; Thacher and Rein 2004). However, the mechanisms of how mixed messages reach organizational members and the different means of communication through which such messages appear are not well-understood.

Second, our study contributes to the empirical knowledge of conflicting demands and values in public service organizations by conveying a case narrative of challenging reform dynamics in NAV. Third, it provides a practical analytical tool that can promote learning and dialogue among researchers, managers, professionals and policy makers around the existence and handling of conflicting demands on public service organizations.

In the remainder of the article, we proceed as follows. We first outline the theoretical backdrop for our framework before we introduce it in relation to existing theories. We then account for the methodology and research context, followed by the case narrative and final discussion of the introduced framework.

Theories on conflicting demands and values

Institutional complexity

Institutional complexity has been defined as incompatible prescriptions from multiple institutional logics (Greenwood et al. 2011). Institutional logics are underlying assumptions, or belief systems, which shape and define the 'rules of the game' and subsequently give directions to valid and invalid reasoning and practices in a given context (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton, Lounsbury, and Ocasio 2012). Examples of logics in public service organizations are NPM emphasizing the specialization of tasks and outsourcing of services and post-NPM (or governance) emphasizing holism and collaboration within and between services (Christensen, Fimreite, and Lægreid 2007; Fossestøl et al. 2015).

Institutional theory depicts how the competing demands emerge from a plurality of institutional logics existing at the societal level, or organizational field level. As society becomes increasingly complex, resulting from the number of coexisting institutional logics, so does the level of complexity faced by the organizations (Greenwood et al. 2011). Scholarship on the public sector has emphasized how this complexity stems not merely from the coexistence of logics but because the logics are layered or overlapping, as societies cannot easily depart from 'old' to 'new' logics (Capano 2019; Streeck and Thelen 2009; Van der Heijden 2011). Research has shown that different logics may

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coexist over time, as the logics are associated with various actors, interests or types of organization (Goodrick and Reay 2011; Reay and Hinings 2009). Capano (2019) argues that such 'institutional layering' is a central strategy for institutional design to ensure political support.

The literature emphasizes that institutional complexity may only be resolved by changing societal- and field-level structures. At the level of organizations, it can only be handled through the use of different response strategies (Oliver 1991; Pache and Santos 2010). For example, one response can be found in Brunsson's (1986) concept of organizational hypocrisy, which captures the pragmatic ways that organizations deal with conflicting values, ideas and demands. This, among others, involves decoupling reflections of inconsistencies from organizational action. Another type of response is balancing or integrating the demands in organizational operations. The concept of organizational ambidexterity is an example of this (Gieske, Duijn, and van Buuren 2019; March 1991; Raisch and Birkinshaw 2008). In the public sector, many have also used the term 'hybridity' (Denis, Ferlie, and Van Gestel 2015; Jay 2013) to describe such integration of demands. This integration may be achieved not only materially but also by reconstructing the logics in more meaningful ways (Smets and Jarzabkowski 2013).

Organizational paradoxes

Paradox theory also deals with contradictions and incompatible demands but considers such inconsistencies as ingrained aspects of organizations (Smith and Lewis 2011). Paradoxes have been defined as 'persistent contradictions between interdependent elements' (Smith and Tracey 2016, 2). According to paradox theory, contradictory demands may be both complementary and conflictual, where their (lack of) complementarity is rooted in inherent dualities. Such dualities have been described as between stability and change, individuals and organizations, internal and external legitimacy, and exploration and exploitation. Paradox theory typically focuses on relations between two opposing forces, but there may be several paradoxical relations in organizations.

A key assumption in the literature is that paradoxes cannot be resolved but must be accepted and accommodated (Smith and Tracey 2016, 6). Hence, paradox theory assumes organizations cannot respond to either of the institutional demands but must work to overcome the inherent tensions and dilemmas in the relationship between them. This also provides a different take on the response strategies since the aim is not to resolve paradoxes but to find ways to 'live with' them – for example, by accepting them, clarifying the relations between them or developing new concepts that incorporate them (Hargrave and Van de Ven 2017; Poole and Van de Ven 1989). Relatedly, Beech et al (2004) have drawn on Gergen's notion of 'serious play' and argue that paradoxes are constructions and conceptions that can be 'played with' in different ways, such as between different meanings and

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boundaries in organizations. Clegg, da Cunha, and e Cunha (2002) argue for a 'holding', rather than a 'solving', approach to paradoxes, arguing that paradoxes cannot and should not be avoided but rather operate as a basis for dialogue and reflexivity on a situated and local scale (instead of being designed on a broader scale. The theoretical and methodological challenge, therefore, lies not in developing the 'best solution' to the handling of paradox but in understanding the ways in which paradoxes are (re)constructed and how such (re)constructions can be accomplished in practice.

Competing public values

The public values literature deals with the specific value conflicts encountered in the context of public sector organizations (van der Wal, de Graaf, and Lawton 2011). Public services are seen as guided by an underlying 'public service ethos' (Rayner et al. 2010), which is not confined to specific organizations or sectors yet is particularly prevalent in public service contexts (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014). A broad range of public values have been identified (Bozeman 2007; Jørgensen and Bozeman 2007), including equity and efficiency (Le Grand 1990), care and control (Lipsky 2010), outputs and lawfulness, and efficiency and accountability (de Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016). Hence, value conflicts are seen to form a pervasive and unavoidable feature of public service organizations (de Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016; De Graaf and Van Der Wal 2010; Kernaghan 2003; van der Wal, de Graaf, and Lawton 2011), and the literature discusses various coping and response strategies used to deal with value conflicts. Such strategies are perceived as necessary to counteract psychological stress and prevent 'a state of paralysis' among those facing such conflicts (de Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016; Thacher and Rein 2004).

Value conflicts are typically considered as handled through balancing and trade-offs (Bozeman 2008; Charles et al. 2008), but researchers have also documented a broader repertoire of strategies. Thacher and Rein (2004) have identified 'cycling', 'firewalls' and 'casuistry' as three strategies used for handling multiple, conflicting values. 'Cycling' refers to strategies involving different values being attended to in sequence, while 'firewalls' imply a distribution of responsibilities for different sets of values to separate institutions. Finally, 'casuistry' involves making judgements on how to handle conflicting values case by case. Stewart (2009) elaborates on this repertoire and adds another three strategies: 'bias', in which the development of a dominating value discourse excludes or minimizes the relevance of competing values; 'hybridization', which entails the layering of policies with different value bases; and 'incrementalism', which involves step changes aimed at resolving value conflicts from a long-term perspective. These responses may be enacted at institutional or individual levels (de Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016).

Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters (2014) distinguish between strategies that involve the decoupling and separation of competing values (cycling, firewalls and bias) and efforts to deal with them simultaneously (hybridization, incrementalism and casuistry). Whereas decoupling strategies tend to be temporal solutions, strategies seeking to incorporate multiple competing values simultaneously are described as more viable in the long run. Drawing on convention theory (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2006), such multivalue responses are described as anchored in different 'orders of worth' and hence require 'justification work' targeted at different audiences (Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters 2014).

Towards new frameworks

As shown in TABLE 1, there are some basic differences between the three outlined approaches to tensions and contradictions in organizations.

--- Table 1 ---

Although we have highlighted the main differences among the approaches, they are also complementary. Earlier studies have, for example, sought to combine paradox theory and institutional complexity theory (Jay 2013; Schad et al. 2016; Smith et al. 2017). Moreover, research on competing public values intersects and overlaps with institutional complexity and paradox theories, even though the research dialogues seem to have evolved in parallel, with limited cross-references. For example, while the concept of institutional complexity is anchored in institutional (logics) theory (Friedland and Alford 1991), the public value conflicts discourse draws more on insights from French pragmatist sociology (Boltanski and Thévenot 1999, 2006; de Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016; Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters 2014; Thacher and Rein 2004). Cloutier and Langley (2013) discuss how these theories can be brought together to address blind spots in the respective theories.

Bringing these frameworks together and highlighting their differences and complementary features shows that existing theories have thoroughly addressed the issue of internal tensions and conflicting demands in organizations. However, the existing frameworks still have their shortcomings. First, they tend to assume that conflicts are visible and comprehendible to the actors within these organizational contexts (de Graaf, Huberts, and Smulders 2016), thus downplaying more implicit experiences with and responses to such conflicts (Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters 2014; Steenhuisen, Dicke, and de Bruijn 2009). Second, the frameworks tend to downplay the role of communication – especially 'mixed messages' or 'mixed signals', in which an actor may say something but imply or mean otherwise – as a factor leading to complexity and confusion for organizations. While all concepts acknowledge the role of language in making sense of and giving sense to complexities, the

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role of different logical levels in such messaging (including nonverbal signals) seems to have been less acknowledged. Third, the existing frameworks have largely focused on the constructive ways in which inconsistencies are – or should be – dealt with, leaving limited space for occurrences of more destructive trajectories. Berti and Simpson (2019), for example, call for attention to the 'dark sides' of organizational paradoxes – which are found in situations where there are no legitimate courses of actions, leaving organizations and organizational members in bewildering deadlocks.

With this background in mind, we next describe more details of the double bind theory, followed by an outline of how the theory can be developed as a framework for analysing conflicting demands in public service organizations.

A double bind approach

Double binds involve double communication, in which two inherently contradictory messages are given at the same time (Bateson 1972; Bateson et al. 1956). This double communication creates situations in which a successful response to one message results in a failed response to the other so that the responder will automatically be wrong regardless of response. In other words, the double bind creates a 'situation in which no matter what a person does, he can't win' (Bateson et al. 1956, 256). Researchers have also expanded on the metaphor and highlighted 'triple binds' (Nieuwenhuis and Maldonado 2018), which imply a broader and more complex set of mixed messaging.

The double bind theory originally developed within psychotherapy at the individual and group levels but has also been used to shed light on implications of paradoxical communication in organizational contexts (Berti and Simpson 2019; Hennestad 1990; Wagner 1978). Sheep, Fairhurst, and Khazanchi (2016) analyse how firms experience innovation as entrenched in 'tensional knots' and use double binds as a label for the nonambidextrous managerial responses to knotted organizational tensions. Bartels (2017) points to the double binds of social innovation, which is seen as captured in the pressure to both transform and preserve existing institutions in efforts to meet social needs and improve service provisions. There are parallels to research on the double binds of nonprofit and voluntary organizations, in which tensions and contradictions of purposes are found to be plentiful and problematic (Venter, Currie, and McCracken 2017). The literature on double binds in organizations also analyses how employees experience working in a 'schizophrenic' environment with repeated double communication (Dopson and Neumann 1998; Tracy 2004; Venter, Currie, and McCracken 2017; Visser and van der Heijden Beatrice 2015).

At its core, double binds imply that two or more inconsistent messages appear on different logical levels: the *primary* and the *secondary* level. The primary level consists of relatively clear messages

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which entail injunctions or prohibitions. The second level is more abstract and may be conveyed more implicitly or through nonverbal means, and this contradicts the primary level. Double binds occur when such contradictory messaging appears repeatedly and patterned.

Since the theory was developed in relation to family therapy, differences between primary and secondary messages are often exemplified with communication between parents and children. The different messages may also be conveyed by different persons (mother and father) that are supposed to appear as one unit. The double bind for the child occurs as responding to either of the messages will be wrong and met with negative sanctions. For example, parents may, for various reasons, have mixed feelings in relations with their children and engage in double communication in terms of primary and secondary messages. A parent may withdraw when the child wants to be close and affectionate, but since this hostility is at the same time understood as inappropriate, the parent may also express affection verbally, which is disharmonious with the body language or the initial response. It is a demanding task for the child to interpret and respond to these mixed signals, and either response may be deemed inappropriate. Moving towards the parent as a response to the affectionate body language might be met with rejection, and moving away from the parent as a response to the hostile body language may create further distress for the parent.

In the context of public service organizations, the primary and secondary messages provide useful metaphors for disentangling possible mixed signals on different logical levels – for example, messages embedded in different layered government paradigms. Primary messages are the more formal objectives, rationales and justifications for developing public services in a certain direction, prescribed at policy levels in formally stated strategies. Secondary messages may appear in the ways organizational adherence to the primary messages is controlled and managed – for example, through digital quality systems, performance management or accountability regimes. Communication, thus, happens through different channels or means. It may be disharmonious similarly to the ways individuals or organizations may communicate one thing verbally (e.g. 'Develop more integrated services') and another thing nonverbally, such as through their body language, or ways in which the organization is structured and developed ('But integrated services don't really fit with our existing platforms or ways of thinking').

Thus, the identification of primary and secondary messages constitutes a basic element of our double binds approach. As part of this identification, it is necessary to also identify the logical levels on which the primary and secondary messages appear – that is, the underlying assumptions, rationales and justifications employed in articulating the messages and the means of communication. Next, the

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analysis should cover the examination of implications of the double binds for the organizational environment and how the predicaments caused by the contradictory messages are handled.

Furthermore, according to the theory, a third person – the therapist – is needed to observe, decipher and articulate the patterns of double communication and propose constructive ways of handling it. The therapist has the role of identifying and detangling the double binds as well as developing the meta-communication through which they may be understood and handled. The position of the therapist is thus both as a professional (i.e. with specific competence on the patterns of double communication) and by being an outsider (i.e. not being trapped within the 'paradox of embedded agency'; Battilana and D'aunno 2009) that the directly involved actors may be operating within. In other words, dealing with double binds requires the ability to reflect and communicate about communication at a meta level. This is hard to accomplish for those subjected to double binds because parts of the communication process are hidden and elusive. Thus, identification of avenues for meta-communication to address the double binds constitutes the final element of the model.

Taken together, these five elements – primary messages, secondary messages, contradictions between the messages, responses to the inconsistencies, and meta-communication – constitute the core elements in our double binds framework (figure 1). The framework is a relatively simple analytical tool to help understand and analyse underlying tensions and dynamics of conflicting demands in public services organizations, which we believe complements other theoretical approaches as described above.

--- Figure 1 ---

Methodology and context

We adopt a case methodology, specifically the principles of an exploratory holistic single case design (Yin 2009), to demonstrate the soundness and applicability of our theoretical framework. Although single case designs are sometimes criticized for being idiosyncratic and providing weak foundations for (statistical) generalizations, they are highly useful for analytical generalizations, which is important in theory development. Flyvbjerg (2006, 235) argues that the advantage of a case study is that it 'can "close-in" on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice'. Eisenhardt (1989) argues that single cases are useful, especially in new research contexts or when the existing theory seems inadequate.

We draw here on a case selection logic of 'information-oriented selection' and, in particular, on the selection of a 'paradigmatic case' (Flyvbjerg 2006). Paradigmatic cases serve metaphorical and exemplifying purposes, and they are used to explore and elucidate given phenomena. Exploring

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phenomena through paradigmatic cases follows neither clear principles of deduction nor induction; rather, the relationship between theory and data is better described as sideways, as the case is used as an exemplar alongside the phenomenon to make it more intelligible (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2009). The typical paradigmatic case is Foucault's (1977) use of Bentham's blueprint of the panopticon prison, which is used to explore and theorize the mechanisms of power, discipline and self-governance. Paradigmatic cases can thus be used to reveal key elements of a phenomenon and illustrate theoretical arguments.

Our illustrative case is based on occurrences of double binds in NAV efforts to create user-centred employment assistance for citizens outside or on the margins of the labour market. NAV is the result of an organizational reform in the period 2005–2010, and subsequent reform efforts which are still ongoing, seeking to realize political aims of increasing labour market participation by creating a more holistic and user-centred labour and welfare service. The reform involved a merger between the public employment and social security agencies and the establishment of a partnership between this new state agency and municipal social services (Askim et al. 2009; Fimreite and Lægreid 2009). NAV is to provide user-centred employment and social services to a broad, heterogeneous assembly of users – ranging from people being relatively close to the labour market (e.g. in between jobs) and long-term unemployed people, including people with various health or social challenges preventing them from (re-)entering the labour market.

These services are provided in a contentious and highly politicized public service sector characterized by several conflicting interests. In addition, NAV is itself characterized by inherent oppositional tasks – examples are being both a gatekeeper for citizens' eligibility for benefits and providing services to the citizens, including 'equal' (standard) services to all citizens, but to a highly heterogeneous group with different needs. Like many other public service organizations, NAV is also the result of ongoing reforms, which have contributed to the 'layering' of different modes of government, technologies and professionalism (Capano 2019; Christensen, Fimreite, and Lægreid 2007; Fossestøl et al. 2015). Key events in the trajectory of NAV are provided in TABLE 2.

--- Table 2 ---

The evolvement of NAV, with shifts and overlaps between logics and contradictory demands, makes it an interesting case for exploring and illustrating double binds. We introduce the double bind theory as an alternative analytical framework in this article because we find that the organization seems to struggle with persistent deep-rooted tensions and contradictions that previous theoretical models have not been fully able to capture and make sense of. We also believe such tensions and contradictions are not isolated to NAV and can be generalized to many other public services.

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Our case example draws from findings and insights derived from various studies of NAV conducted over several years. First, some of these studies have been important for gaining a broad overview of the organizational context in terms of the objectives of NAV, the central trajectories of the reform and the development of the new organization (Breit, Fossestøl, and Andreassen 2017; Fossestøl et al. 2015; Fossestøl, Breit, and Borg 2014, 2016). Especially, issues of digitalization of the frontline service work – in particular, related to dynamics between standardization of work procedures and the professional autonomy of the frontline workers – provided challenging predicaments for NAV (Fossestøl, Breit, and Borg 2014, 2016). These studies have also been followed up in a recent evaluation of NAV's frontline services (Fossestøl, Breit, and Borg, in press).

Hence, our case analysis in this article draws primarily on studies addressing tensions and predicaments around digitalization. This includes extensive ethnographic field research involving participant observation and the 'shadowing' of work practices in a NAV office carried out over a period of six months (Røhnebæk 2012, 2014). This study focused particularly on digitalization and standardization of internal work practices in NAV, which was later followed up by studies examining experiences with new digital solutions, organizational visions and new strategies for managing frontline work (Breit et al. 2020; Breit, Egeland, and Løberg 2019). Our case example draws together findings from these studies on digitalization, standardization and local autonomy in a synthesizing analysis of double binds in the context of NAV. To convey the case narrative, we include quotes from the data material that clearly illustrate how the double binds are manifested in the organization. As such, we use the case example to illustrate the applicability to our outlined double binds framework. We visualize the applied version of the framework in figure 2 below, which we elaborate in the more descriptive case narrative in the following section.

--- Figure 2 ---

Case example: Double binds in NAV

Primary message: 'Provide user-centred and tailored services'

The primary message has, first and foremost, been evident in the formal objectives of NAV and policy documents and organizational planning documents. NAV's objectives, as prescribed in the initial government white paper prescribing the NAV reform (Arbeids- og sosialdepartementet 2005), were (a) more people in work and activity and fewer on benefits and social assistance, (b) easier for clients and adapted to the clients' needs and (c) a holistic and effective labour and welfare administration. Moreover, a central explicit aim was to develop more user-centred services, which was defined as 'letting the needs of individual users and user groups more actively guide which services that are

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provided and how they are provided' (Arbeids- og sosialdepartementet 2005, 34). By better adjusting services to individual needs, it was argued that the services would be more capable of reaching political targets of labour market inclusion of vulnerable citizens. It was further specified that user-centrism implies 'measures are adjusted to fit individual needs, and the experiences and opinions of users will be integrated in case processing' (Arbeids- og sosialdepartementet 2005, 34).

When these aims were further concretized in more detailed planning documents, frontline work practices were expected to change from a predominant focus on bureaucratic rules and assessment of eligibility criteria towards more focus on a means-end rationality. For example, instead of mainly assessing whether clients were entitled to participate in vocational training and granting access accordingly, frontline employees would focus more on whether different kinds of measures were suitable for the individual clients' situation and long-term plans. These shifts in expectations of the role of frontline employees are reflected in the following quote in one of the internal planning documents:

> In NAV, the client is to be placed at the centre: Not as a 'victim' – which we, first and foremost, are to pity, comfort and care for, but as a project leader in charge of the planning of the rest of his or her life. The NAV employees are to guide, support and inspire the client to realize his or her goals. ('New Roles in the NAV Office', NAV Interim 2006, 6)[1]

This meant that the focus should be on the consequences of granting a benefit in relation to a given objective (employment or activation), rather than a narrow focus on the client's formal rights. Consequently, the frontline employees had to be granted more autonomy and discretion to tailor services, in contrast to more rule-bound and standardized case processing.

Secondary message: 'Standardize to ensure quality and accountability of services'

The secondary message involved the need for increased structure, control and standardization to ensure citizens were provided with adequate services irrespective of their geographical location. In this way, when the primary message of user-centrism was to be operationalized in practice, it was complemented by another more implicit message of standardizing the services.

This secondary message was primarily communicated through the actions taken by the Labour and Welfare Directorate. This is the central administrative unit in NAV, which is responsible for

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[1] NAV Interim was a temporary organization (formally a directorate) set up in 2005 with the mandate of planning and implementing the new state agency based on the merger between the national insurance agency and the employment agency.

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implementing the reform (together with the municipalities) and thus operationalizing the decisions from the Parliament. In contrast with the primary message of user-centred services, the secondary message was intertwined with the 'harsh reality' of implementing these services in practice. Over time, the reform has involved a range of different organizational and technological changes to structure the frontline work. For example, the frontline NAV offices were, at the beginning of the reform (about 2006 to 2010), given considerable autonomy to experiment with developing user-centred work practices that were compatible with the local contexts (i.e. size of the office, traits of local labour market and demography). This autonomy was eventually replaced with new work forms enforced by the directorate (about 2008 to 2014) – for example, standardized protocols such as work capability assessments, detailed monitoring of work practices through performance indicators and monthly scorecards, and converting the benefit case processing function from the NAV offices to centralized units.

The mechanisms of standardization can be especially linked to the role of the information system *Arena*. Arena is a 'knowledge support and workflow system' originally developed for the employment agency existing prior to NAV. During the implementation of the reform, Arena was redeveloped as the tool to be used by all frontline employees in NAV – that is, in the follow-up of not only the clients closest to the labour market but also the new and vulnerable client groups needing more extensive and person-centred services. Arena involved a high level of detailed and structured work procedures, limiting the frontline workers' room for manoeuvring and prioritizing. In Arena, the frontline employees were guided through a range of 'work steps', 'tasks' and 'work processes'. These were hierarchically related, meaning that a series of work steps had to be undertaken to complete a task, and a series of tasks had to be completed to complete a full work process. Some 'work steps' were marked with a blue dot, which meant that the step was obligatory, and the frontline workers would not be able to complete a task or a work process unless this step was dealt with. For example, the procedure work capacity assessment was programmed as an obligatory procedure with blue dots that had to be completed to process applications for work assessment allowance (Røhnebæk 2012, 2014).

Furthermore, registrations in Arena were also linked to reporting on performance indicators in monthly scorecards. For instance, one central Arena-based performance indicator was formulated as follows: 'The number of people with a reduced capacity to work with follow-up within the last six months', and the goal for this indicator was set at 75%. Thus, it was given a relatively high priority. Other indicators concerned the time spent on processing applications for benefits, how many clients had returned to work, the number of clients who had received an 'activity plan' and the number of clients who had received a formally written statement on their level of needs in terms of assistance.

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Put together, these various indicators gave clear directions on how frontline employees should prioritize and spend their time.

Hence, in contrast with the primary message highlighting user-centred services, the secondary – and more elusive – message insisted that in order to provide such user-oriented services, the frontline work needed to be standardized and structured in accordance with the centrally set guidelines. Importantly, this message was conveyed nonverbally through, among others, digital technology and the interlinked system for measuring and reporting on work performance. There were no politicians, managers or professionals in NAV clearly stating the follow-up needed to be structured this way; rather, it was elusively shaping the frontline work through different means of communication.

Double binds: Inconsistences between user-centred and standardized services

These contrasts between the primary message of user-centrism and the secondary message of standardized services created double binds for the frontline workers. While the enforcements by the directorate were designed to improve the quality and accountability of the services, for the frontline workers, they resulted in double binds that were manifested as incomprehensible mixes between attending to the needs of the clients and the 'needs' of NAV's internal system. On the one hand, they were told to provide user-oriented services. On the other hand, there were crucial designs in the system promoting standardization and hence effectively preventing user-oriented services from the perspective of the frontline workers. The following quote shows how the centralization of the benefit case processing, with the overall idea of standardizing decisions, created crucial service challenges for the frontline workers:

> The centralized case-processing units [*forvaltningsenhetene]* are very distant [...]. Basically, there is no contact. There are many decisions that are made without our knowledge; we are first informed about the decision by the user. The user comes to us and asks for an explanation for the refusal of disability benefits, then we have to look up and check that the decision is a fact. We are not told, but still have to answer for it. We are trying to have collaborative meetings [with the units], but we do not have time for it. (Fossestøl, Breit, and Borg 2016, 13)

The information system Arena also involved double binds. The frontline workers found the detailed and standardized work processes in Arena difficult to use in their service work when adhering to the complexity of the vulnerable citizens' service needs. The standardization was at odds with the frontline need for autonomy and discretion and the vast variety of different clients that needed to be serviced through the standard templates. Another reason was that the standardized prescriptions did not take into account that the advisers struggled with limited resources, time constraints and high

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work pressure, which required prioritizing (Lipsky 1980). The sum of expectations to perform procedural administrative tasks in Arena and related programmes, as well as pressure to meet the monthly activity targets, prompted frontline employees to feel it was more important to 'satisfy the system' rather than attend to clients. Similarly, reaching set deadlines for when the advisers had to return phone calls from clients was 'nonverbally' communicated as more important than the content and outcome of the interaction.

> I think there is way too much computer work to put it that way – computer work and, in a way, the administration of the job we should be doing. So the time left for actual follow-up of the clients – yes, face-to-face interaction with the client – that is soon equal to nothing. So that is tragic. (Røhnebæk 2014, 147)

Further, the measurement of the frontline work performance through Arena and pressure to meet the monthly targets gave the advisers and the local managers the feeling that what they reported in the system was more important than the content of their interactions with and assessments of the clients. A frontline employee explained,

> You have to focus on what is being measured [...]. That is the most important; the most important [element] is not the people. It's the system. To satisfy the system – indeed. (Røhnebæk 2014, 148)

Furthermore, many of the vulnerable clients also had social benefits, which is the responsibility of the municipalities. However, the municipalities used different digital systems, and these systems were not integrated with Arena. This meant the frontline workers needed to work in parallel in both systems. Among the challenges were a lack of options for 'cutting and pasting' information between the two systems and, as in the following example by a manager, double registration:

> We spend an enormous amount of time on double registration in the municipal ICT systems and the state (system), as we have personnel responsibility for both groups. It involves different routines, reporting systems, deviation systems, etc. We have to know double of everything! (Fossestøl, Breit, and Borg 2014, 16).

Overall, the double bind in this case example is evident but subtle because the messages appear on different logical levels. Taken separately, the message on each level makes sense: to provide frontline workers increased autonomy to handle complex service cases and implement standardized digital tools to structure and ensure quality in the frontline services. However, when taken together, the two logical levels are inconsistent, as the secondary message is nonverbal and merely embedded in the system. Hence, the double bind occurred as the message of enhancing user-centrism

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contradicted the management systems and the organizational and technological infrastructure around the frontline work.

Handling the double binds in the frontline organizations

As we have shown, this inconsistency and double communication left the frontline workers in a position where they would contradict at least one of the logical levels either way – they were 'damned if they did and damned if they didn't'. Adhering to the level of autonomy would involve circumventing the digital tool and adhering to the level of standardization would lead to non-user-centric services. The organizational 'mixed feelings' of adhering to contradictory demands led to double binds that caused frustration and anxiety among the frontline workers. These effects are analogous to the situation of parents with ambivalent relations to their child – causing them to express both affection and hostility at the same time, in which the child's response will be inappropriate either way (Bateson et al. 1956).

One way of handling the double bind by the frontline workers was by 'tinkering' with the digital work procedures in Arena. This tinkering meant they found creative ways to work around the formal procedures. For instance, a formal work step required detailed descriptions of the clients' background, current situation, health and other issues and aims regarding the outcome of the services. This information was required to get a holistic understanding of the clients' situations and assess the clients' formal eligibility for employment-oriented programmes. However, as this was a very time-consuming exercise, and the frontline workers had many clients and limited time, the boxes would often be ticked off with an 'X' in order to complete the work procedure. A frontline employee described this as a common practice:

> We see that when we get to the work capacity assessments, where one box after the other has just been ticked off with an X. It shows that they just had to get through it. (Røhnebæk 2014, 208)

Importantly, impressions from the empirical studies were that such examples of frustrations and deviating practices were generally not expressions of hostility towards the new work methods. Rather, they were strategies for handling the double bind among frontline employees. While tinkering with the system was a practical way of working around prescriptions related to the secondary message, a broader set of strategies was used to handle the general pressure of dealing with the double bind. One strategy was 'pragmatic ignorance' – that is, purposefully ignoring the standardized prescriptions related to the secondary message and favouring the primary message through tinkering. Another strategy was 'compliance' – that is, adhering to the prescriptions in the

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system and hence prioritizing the premises of the secondary message at the expense of the primary message. A third strategy was 'adaptation', which involved efforts to bring attention to problems of the mixed messages and suggest practical solutions for addressing them at the local level. This involved, for instance, making suggestions to middle managers for alterations in the local system concerning how to prioritize and structure the local follow-up of clients (Røhnebæk 2014, 244–46).

Addressing the double binds through meta-communication

For many years, there was limited acknowledgement of this double bind – which caused predicaments and exhaustion for the organization, the frontline workers and managers and, consequently, affected the service provision and the clients. Over time, the double binds have been gradually addressed at the level of the public authorities.

Among the most influential changes is a new white paper *NAV in a New Era* (Arbeids- og sosialdepartementet, 2016) which highlights the need for more local autonomy and discretion at the service level. Although this message was the same as the original primary message, the original vision had been largely undermined by the contradictory secondary message in the years passing. These unfortunate dynamics are acknowledged in the white paper, and discussions of existing challenges are used as the basis for outlining new strategies for organizational development. Granting more autonomy and room for discretion to the local level is one part of this, which also links to the implementation of new digitalization strategies and the development of new systems. The new digitalization strategies emphasize releasing pressure on the local offices and freeing capacity for frontline employees to work more in line with the original visions of providing user-centred services. This involves the automation of routine tasks and development of digital self-help solutions, which is expected to free capacity and improve the quality of the follow-up in complex cases:

> The long-term ambitions for digitalization are important for releasing pressure at the NAV offices so they may spend more time with users distant from the labour market and are in need of adjusted and coordinated services. (Arbeids- og sosialdepartementet 2016, 31–32)

Thus, the documents discuss digitalization processes as ingrained in a 'channel strategy'. The channel strategy refers to a strategic plan to ensure that the appropriate channel of communication (phone, digital or face-to-face) is used, depending on the task and situation of the user.

Simultaneously, a new digital system for the internal follow-up services of users (Modia) has been gradually implemented. This system supports the visions of user-centric services by providing clients with information about their case online and enabling digital interactions between clients and frontline workers (e.g. a chat function; Breit et al. 2020; Breit, Egeland, and Løberg 2019). The new

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system is also designed to allow for more flexibility in the frontline work compared to the 'workflow' design of Arena, which largely contributed to the double binds identified in our analysis. A recent study indicates that the new system better supports frontline employees' efforts to provide user-centred services (Breit et al. 2020).

Much of this strategic content presented in the white paper *NAV in a New Era* came from a thorough investigation of NAV carried out by an expert group (Vågengutvalget 2015). The group's mandate was to suggest directions for the strategic developments of NAV that would enable the organization to meet its stated objectives. The expert groups' assessments and recommendations were based on an analysis of findings from research on NAV and evaluations of the reform and summarized in a report (Vågengutvalget 2015) that was influential in the development of the new white paper. Furthermore, the white paper led to the development of a revised internal strategy in NAV, which was also formalized in a strategic report (NAV 2017). Moreover, the head of the expert group eventually became the head manager in NAV and thus was set in a position to enforce the outlined strategy in the organization.

In sum, the proposed strategies at the policy level can be understood as an emerging 'meta-communication' that recognizes the organization's struggles with double binds, and that, in turn, proposed strategies of aligning the gaps between the primary and secondary messages. The meta-communication took place in the development and operationalization of the white paper and strategic refinement in NAV as an interplay between researchers and analysis with an 'outside' perspective and decision-makers that were in the position to address the double binds through new strategies.

Conclusions

We have, in this paper, departed from the assertion that public service organizations are required to incorporate conflicting demands, such as those embedded in competing government paradigms, in different institutional logics or competing public values. Based on the double bind theory (Bateson 1972; Bateson et al. 1956), we have developed a framework to identify and analyse such conflicts. The framework highlights the implications of mixed messages and double communication – specifically between explicit primary messages and more elusive and implicit secondary messages, its effects and responses in the service organization, and the role of meta-communication and meta-communicators in addressing, and potentially moderate, inconsistencies for the service organizations.

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First, we believe this framework adds to theoretical understandings of the nature and organizational implications of contradictory demands – understood here as messages – and particularly how such messages may be stated through different means. Specifically, we have tied the theoretical application of double binds to other key theoretical applications in neo-institutional theory, paradox theory and public values theory. Our outlined framework aids analyses of contradictions stemming from incoherent relations between primary and secondary messages over time, and hence, challenges for public service organizations that may be elusive and go relatively unnoticed in other types of analyses. Our example has shown that the primary messages were clearly and verbally stated, but the secondary message was more subtle and elusive and expressed through other means than through explicit verbal communication.

Attention to double binds enables insight into the performative effects of contradictory messages on frontline organizations. When such contradictory communication persists over time, it is likely to generate 'schizophrenia' in service organizations and distress for frontline employees and local-level managers. Arguably, the greater the differences between the messages and/or the more pervasive they are over time, without being identified and discussed, the more disturbing they may be for the organizational recipients involved. In addition, the negative consequences may also involve the service users, as the service providers' efforts to handle the double binds may directly influence the way the services are provided and their relationship with the clients. For example, in our case, the digital system failed to support user-centred frontline work, which left frontline employees frustrated and distressed because they felt more obliged to adhere to the system (secondary message) rather than the clients' individual needs (primary message).

In addition, the double binds metaphor provides a framework for understanding how public organizations may respond to contradictory messages. Prior research has outlined different response strategies for dealing with conflicting institutional pressures within organizations, such as compromise, avoidance, defiance, manipulation and acquiescence (Oliver 1991); selective coupling between incompatible demands (Pache and Santos 2010); and hypocrisy (Brunsson 1986, 2002). Relatedly, the public values literature discusses a range of strategies employed for dealing with value conflicts either separately or in concert (Oldenhof, Postma, and Putters 2014; Stewart 2009; Thacher and Rein 2004). The double binds framework enables understanding of situations where available response strategies are limited, as frontline employees and managers are set in a position in which they will be 'wrong' and/or sanctioned regardless of which message they adhere to. Thus, they somehow face a dead end leading to predicaments and dilemmas that are difficult to address for those entangled in double binds. Relatedly, the framework highlights the role of meta-communication, which requires an outside-in perspective that can identify and articulate the

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occurrence of contradictory messaging and its problematic effects. Such meta-communication is similar to mental therapy; in the original work on double binds, the therapist is presented as the key to enabling such meta-communication. Meta-communication needs to be relational, whether it is set in a therapy room or in organizational contexts. As in our case, research and external analysis were crucial for articulating double binds, but for the meta-communication to bring about change, it had to be interpreted and translated into action by strategic decision-makers. While previous research has largely focused on how inconsistencies, paradoxes and conflicting values are handled within organizations, the double binds framework highlights the potentially crucial role of external actors that can analyse, disentangle and contribute to addressing organizational problems stemming from double binds.

Second, we also believe our study adds to the empirical knowledge of how conflicting demands may emerge in public service organizations and the effects they may have on the actors at hand. We have illustrated the applicability of our framework by applying it to Norwegian labour and welfare services and shown how systemic contradictory communication left the receivers of the messages 'trapped', as they were unable to fully make sense of the communication and consequently unable to respond to it properly. It shows the challenges for frontline professionals in providing services that are to be holistic, and integrated, in connection with extant activation policies (van Berkel et al. 2017) and forms of government emphasizing collaboration and participation (Christensen, Fimreite, and Lægreid 2007; Christensen and Lægreid 2011). Rather than understanding the frustrations and coping mechanisms of frontline professionals only as forms of street-level bureaucracy (i.e. between users' complex service needs and limited resources), we can also see how such coping mechanisms are the result of double binds. While we have used the example of NAV here, we also believe that similar processes and dynamics are present in service organizations in many other contexts and hence not isolated to the predicaments of employment services to vulnerable groups.

Third, our framework provides a practical tool to analyse and understand organizational inconsistencies. The outlined framework can advance understanding of the processes, as well as possible unintended and undesirable outcomes, of well-intended efforts to enhance organizational performance. The framework therefore provides concrete tools for making sense of processes shaped by tensions and contradictory demands. While contradictory demands and value conflicts can be seen as a positive force that may stimulate creativity and innovation (Friedland and Alford 1991; Hartley, Sørensen, and Torfing 2013; Rossi and Tuurnas 2019; Thornton, Lounsbury, and Ocasio 2012), our framework sheds light on how tensions between contradictory demands may also have problematic and destructive implications in public service organizations. Specifically, we believe the framework is more concrete and practical compared to existing theories dealing with competing

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demands; therefore, it can provide a useful means for policy makers, public administrations and frontline organizations to analyse and practically deal with such seeming conundrums.

Finally, we hope this framework may spur new empirical and theoretical questions and debates around how public service organizations are set to manoeuvre in complex and paradoxical landscapes. As we have outlined the double binds framework in relation to interlinked and complementary frameworks, we contribute with integration and expansion of existing analytical tools that may facilitate further research dialogues across disciplines. Moreover, our analysis shows how researchers can play a central part in constructive meta-communication, but future research should examine more thoroughly the discursive aspects of the meta-communication and the reception of such communication in the organization, as well conditions for its success. We also see potential for research examining different forms of 'organizational schizophrenia' and studies focusing on different means of communication through which mixed messages appear. Finally, we believe the framework is suitable for addressing, in further detail, the complexity and contradictions of networked and collaborative forms of government associated with new public governance (Hartley, Sørensen, and Torfing 2013; Osborne 2010; Torfing and Triantafillou 2013). As this brings together a range of stakeholders, interests, values and perspectives, it also implies that the level of complexity is amplified, and organizational development and innovation processes are thus increasingly guided by contradictory demands. The double binds framework can be helpful for disentangling the ways such processes may be confusingly guided by mixed messages.

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Table 1: Overview of different frameworks on competing demands in organizations

	Institutional complexity	Paradox theory	Competing public values	Double binds
Source of competing demands	Competing demands emerge from plurality ('layering') of institutional logics at the field/societal level	Competing demands are inherent in organizations to, for example, relational dynamics or individual sensemaking	Competing demands emerge from the underlying values of public sector organizations	Competing demands stemming from the reception of two or more conflicting messages
Nature of competing demands	Multiple logics can coexist in organizations Multiple logics are not only often contradictory but can also be complementary	Elements existing in relation to one another. The elements are both contradictory and interdependent	Values are connected with a 'public service ethos' – guiding and conflicting principles for serving 'the public' or a collective of citizens	Different messages are inherently contradictory, as they appear on different logical levels (double communication)
Challenges to competing demands	Competing logics generate challenges of external legitimacy and internal conflict	Competing demands persist over time and generate challenges of internal conflict	Value conflicts involve dilemmas that can create stress and paralysation for actors in organizations	Conflicting demands cannot be resolved: a successful response to one message results in a failed response to the other
Responses to competing demands	Can be resolved by implementing effective structures at the field/societal level. Can be handled by organizational response strategies (e.g. hybridity)	Paradoxes cannot be resolved, only managed. They invoke dynamic interactions, which can be managed by ongoing, processual responses	Value conflicts can be coped with and managed within organizations through different strategies, compromising, hybridity, decoupling, etc.	Double binds can be resolved by identifying the messages (primary and secondary), often through assistance by a third actor engaging in meta-communication

Table 2: Overview of key events in the trajectory of NAV

Year	Event
2005	*The reform is approved in Parliament.*
2006	*The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration is launched.* *The first frontline offices (NAV offices) are established.* *Use of the digital tool Arena for the follow-up of state clients and tasks (in connection with other digital tools such as follow-up of municipal clients, internal communication, benefit case processing, etc.).*
2007–2011	*Gradual establishment of frontline offices in all municipalities providing employment services, benefit case processing and social services.*
2008–2009	*Centralization of benefit provision into specialized case-processing units.*
2009	*New legislations: for minimum provision of social services (Act on Social Services within the Labour and Welfare Administration) and measures provided by the state administration ('Content Reform', Innholdsreformen).*
2010	*Criticism of NAV's performance from the General Audit Office, followed by an open hearing in Parliament.*
2011–present	*The 'channel strategy': Emphasis on directing citizens' inquiries away from NAV offices to services online self-services or services (telephone, chat) provided by a centralized communication unit in NAV.*
2014–2015	*Report by an expert committee (Vågengutvalget) critiquing excessive standardization and emphasizing revitalization of the original reform ideas and empowerment of the frontline offices.*
2015–2016	*White paper ('NAV in a New Age', Meld St. 33 (2015–2016)) passed in the Parliament as a continuation of the expert committee report.*
2018–present	*Gradual replacement of Arena with Modia, a new follow-up tool for frontline professionals enabling digital communication (e.g. chat, digital documents) with citizens.*

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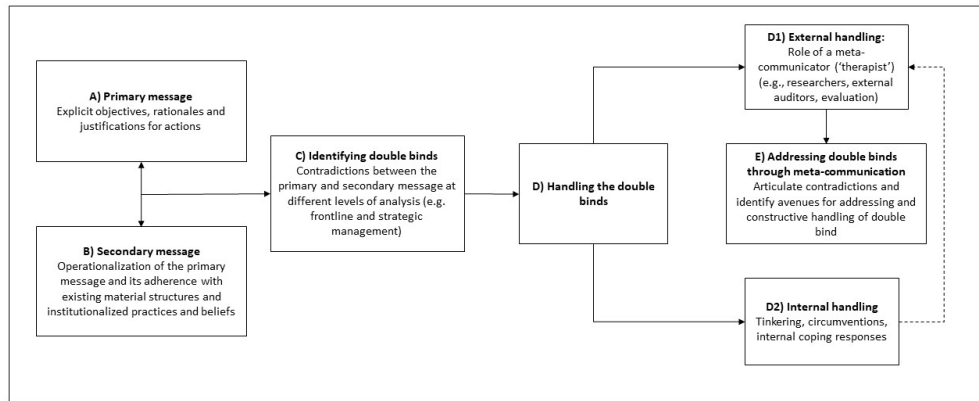41
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Figure 1: Visualization of the double binds framework
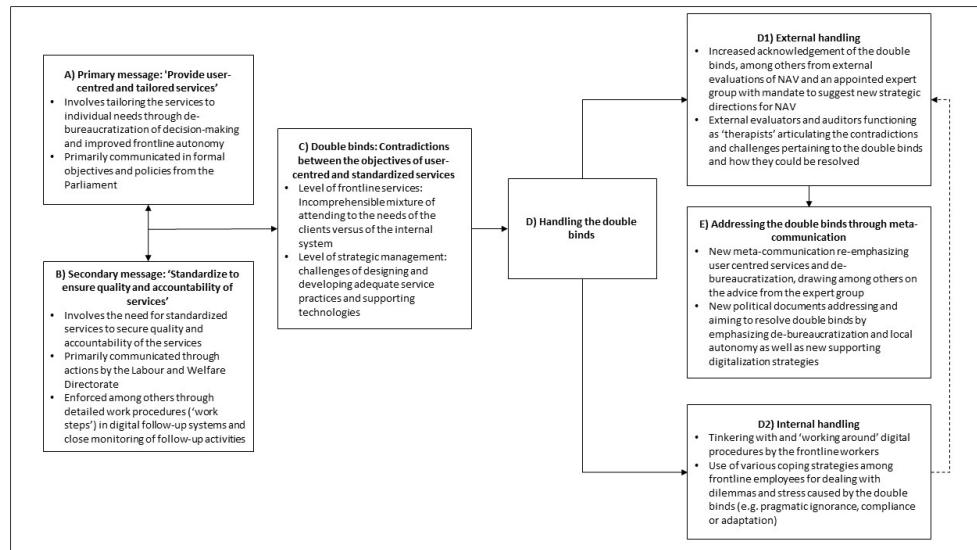
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Figure 2: Visualization of the Analysis based on the Double Binds Framework

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