Organisational Ambidexterity Across Multiple Levels of Analysis: The Importance of Routinisation for Promoting Innovation

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Abstract

The concept of organisational ambidexterity, a balancing act between the conflicting demands of exploitation and exploration, has been a part of the discussion in innovation research for a long time. A manager's ability to balance tensions is crucial for organisations to be able to promote and support innovation. However, there is still a lack of research that focuses on a single organisation and which takes into account multiple levels of analysis and how organisations can become ambidextrous.

This is a qualitative case study which investigates the balancing of tensions in a Swedish municipality and the connections between the organisational and individual levels of contextual ambidexterity. The article identifies and describes a low ambidextrous environment, how it is affected by the interplay between the two levels of analysis in which the organisational mechanism enforces routines which contribute to a lack of ability to balance tensions amongst individuals and at a group level. Furthermore, in low ambidextrous environments, behaviour amongst individuals alone does not appear to be enough to promote organisational ambidexterity.

The article finds the routinisation of innovation to be an important step for organisations that wish to improve the environment for ambidexterity. The article contributes to the understanding of ambidexterity by showing the need to focus on both mechanisms and behaviours, as well as on the aggregated group level, in order to further develop understanding of how public sector organisations promote and support innovation.

Keywords: Organisational ambidexterity, contextual ambidexterity, public sector innovation, innovation capacity

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) put forth by the United Nations (2015) address many of the challenges of today such as gender inequality, poverty, climate change and crime prevention to name a few. Innovation is often argued to be a potential solution for tackling issues which are hard to manage within the current structure of public sector organisations (PSO) (Torfing, 2018). The local government level is an important arena to focus on when it comes to innovation and sustainability since it is the part of government which is closest to the citizens and where many of the responsibilities lie (Bonnedahl et al., 2022; Gustafsson et al., 2022; Lewis et al., 2018).

The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) conducted an extensive survey on innovation in municipalities, regions, and agencies in 2018. SALAR (2019) found that 80 percent of the organisations surveyed claimed to work actively with innovation, but only 18 percent (of the 80%) claimed to have an innovation strategy to support it. SALAR also found that only a few of these organisations claimed to have a culture which supported experimentation and risk-taking (SALAR, 2019), which is important for breaking down the common barriers preventing innovation in the public sector (Clausen et al., 2020; De Vries et al., 2016; Mulgan, 2007).

Quite naturally, previous research on public sector innovation often draws on experiences from past or present innovation initiatives. Empirical studies tend to rely on successful innovations rather than the environments in which they occur according to Lewis et al. (2018). In their systematic review, De Vries et al. (2016) likewise found that empirical studies generally lack explanations as to what happens after innovations are initiated since interest is focused on the innovation processes and/or their adoption. Other issues concern a lack of insight into what precedes public sector innovation processes (Gullmark, 2021), and Clausen et al. (2020) state that there is a lack of research-based insight to guide managers and policy makers.

This focus on innovation processes may have contributed to creating two blind spots when it comes to how PSOs support innovation: a lack of understanding of the environmental factors important for potential innovations, as highlighted by Lewis et al. (2018), and a lack of knowledge concerning the more long-term effects and the actual implications of this, as highlighted by De Vries et al. (2016). According to Sørensen and Torfing (2022, p. 46), research that focuses on innovation processes has created a "myopic gaze at a particular innovative solution that can solve a particular problem." This might say a lot about attempts, solutions, and processes but less about how innovation could be supported. One potential pitfall created by focusing on innovation processes, especially if they are successful, is that they draw on the experiences from those that Albury (2005) labels as "high performers," who already have a higher capacity for innovation. This creates issues regarding transferability since innovation is contextually embedded (Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017) and depends on a pre-existing supportive infrastructure (Lewis et al., 2018) or organisations in which the internal context might be more or less conducive to innovation (Cinar et al., 2019).

A low-performing PSO cannot merely copy the experiences of high performers and expect to innovate.

The organisations which attempt to innovate, either by actively pursuing this strategy or allowing isolated attempts to do so, have taken some steps towards trying to manage the trade-off between the concepts of efficiency and effectiveness (Brix, 2020; Gieske et al., 2020; Magnusson et al., 2021) associated with organisational ambidexterity (Boukamel & Emery, 2017; March, 1991; Smith & Umans, 2015). Organisational ambidexterity has developed into a key concept for understanding the capacity for innovation in organisations, and it has been shown to play a key role in innovation (Boukamel et al., 2019; Brix, 2020; Gieske et al., 2020). One emerging discussion today revolves around contextual ambidexterity, which is the capacity to simultaneously align and adapt while maintaining a continuous balance (Boukamel et al., 2019; Brix, 2019; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013).

Even though ambidexterity has been an established part of organisational research for a long time, there are still aspects that need to be explored further. For one, there tends to be conceptual confusion in studies where there is a lack of clarity if the focus is on ambidextrous behaviours or outcomes according to Pertusa-Ortega et al. (2021). And according to Mueller et al. (2020), previous research on ambidexterity and its different, often interchangeable uses rarely takes levels in an organisation into consideration. Another aspect to highlight is that the understanding of ambidexterity across multiple levels is still lacking according to Raisch et al. (2009). Previous studies on ambidexterity have mainly focused on the organisational level (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021; Turner et al., 2013). The empirical studies that have been done at the individual level have often looked at ambidexterity through individual managers (Kobarg et al., 2017; Palm & Lilja, 2017; Smith & Umans, 2015; Sohrab et al., 2021) but often across multiple organisations. According to Mueller et al. (2020), the question of how organisations can be become more ambidextrous is not addressed, and there is a gap with regard to the links between levels of analysis. Boukamel and Emery (2017, p. 18) call for a "diagnosis of the tensions" in the public sector, which remains largely unexplored. The interplay and potential tensions between organisational routines and the potential effects on individual behaviours is less explored (Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021). Given the importance of ambidexterity for innovation, there appears to be a significant gap when it comes to the state of tensions and conditions for innovation in PSOs without previous experience, as well as a lower capacity for innovation.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the contextual ambidexterity in a Swedish municipality. This is achieved by answering the following questions: (1) How do managers perceive organisational and individual abilities to manage tensions? And (2), How can potential connections between the organisational and the individual levels be understood? This is done to help fill the current gaps in knowledge pertaining to the multi-level approach to contextual ambidexterity (Mueller et al., 2020; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021; Raisch et al., 2009) and the tensions connected to such an approach (Boukamel & Emery, 2017), and to

provide an empirically grounded study of ambidexterity in the public sector (Boukamel et al., 2019).

The article begins by providing a short overview of the contextual conditions for innovation and the managers' role in supporting innovation. This is followed by the article's main theoretical focus on contextual ambidexterity and the conceptualisation of the two levels of analysis.

Contextual conditions for supporting innovation

Many highly capable organisations innovate and continue to do so, but some do so with unclear long-term effects. Then there are organisations who innovate, but they do so by chance or accident since they lack appropriate support for systematic innovation (Albury, 2005; Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017). Interest in a PSO's capacity for innovation has been increasing over the years, and attempts have been made to create a theoretical and conceptual understanding of innovation capacity (Boukamel et al., 2019), what models support and develop such capacity (Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017; Palm, 2020) and how leadership, networks and drivers contribute to creating innovation capacity (Lewis et al., 2018). There are also examples of studies which have drawn on experiences from innovation processes to find possible implications for capacity (Gullmark, 2021; Trivellato et al., 2021). There have also been systematic reviews of both drivers and barriers specific to PSO innovation (Cinar et al., 2019; De Vries et al., 2016). However, as stated by Gullmark (2021, p. 523), the "one-size-fits-all approach to innovation capability" should be avoided.

Potential for innovation varies across the quite diverse forms of PSOs since some have a higher capacity for supporting innovation while others do not (Albury, 2005). They also receive different degrees of support and encouragement that allow innovation to occur (Lewis et al., 2018). Barriers to innovation tend to be internal in organisational contexts according to Cinar et al. (2019), which makes innovation capacity and support an organisational pursuit in which ambidexterity has been argued to play a key facilitating role (Boukamel et al., 2019; Brix, 2020; Meijer, 2019). Ambidexterity and innovation capacity are sometimes treated as similar or connected concepts in studies of PSO innovation capacity (Bason, 2018; Brix, 2019; Palm, 2020) or as a subset of innovation capacity (Boukamel et al., 2019; Meijer, 2019).

The responsibility for supporting and promoting innovation falls mainly on managers along with the extra challenge of balancing the demands of day-to-day operations while also promoting innovation; unfortunately, this does not always fit in with the organisation's existing processes. Supporting innovation is a complex task in itself for PSO managers since innovation processes are enmeshed in ordinary operations (L. Lidman et al., 2022; Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017). The managers' role in supporting innovation has been looked at from many perspectives, such as boundary-spanning leadership (Bekkers et al., 2014), entrepreneurial leadership (Miao et al., 2018), or courage (Bason, 2018) as important types of leadership abilities required to promote innovation. Other studies have examined managers' psychological traits as a source of organisational performance (Sohrab et al.,

2021). When it comes to innovation support in PSOs, managers are often, as stated by Lidman et al. (2022, p. 104) "wedged between expectations and conditions when public organisations implement innovation support". Managers are often left to their own devices to find a balance between the contradictory demands of exploitation and exploration (Bason, 2018; Lidman et al., 2022). Creating favourable environmental conditions for innovation hinges on more than just ambitions to innovate; it is enmeshed in the everyday actions by managers tasked with supporting innovation.

Balancing and managing tensions: An endeavour across levels

Organisations needs to be able to deliver on their day-to-day activities while simultaneously developing operations through minor adjustments and major innovations. This has famously been described as a balance between *exploitation*, a focus on production and efficiency, and *exploration*, a focus on innovation and flexibility (March, 1991). An organisation with the ability to manage the tensions between both is seen as an ambidextrous organisation that successfully exploits current resources while simultaneously exploring new opportunities (Boukamel & Emery, 2017; Brix, 2020; Smith & Umans, 2015). According to O'Reilly and Tushman (2013, p. 329), organisational ambidexterity is "reflected in a complex set of decisions and routines that enable the organisation to sense and seize new opportunities through the reallocation of organisational assets". Ambidexterity is about the "integration of two distinct cultures in one organisation", one performance-based and one innovation-based according to Khan and Mir (2019, p. 653). The balance, according to Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004, p. 213), is between "hard elements of discipline and stretch" and "soft elements of trust and support". The pursuit of innovation is generally concerned with the exploration new opportunities through innovation, while exploitation is concerned with the optimisation of established organisational routines (Gieske et al., 2020).

One emerging discussion on ambidexterity is that of contextual ambidexterity, the capacity to simultaneously align and adapt through balance rather than achieving ambidexterity through periods of change initiatives or by dividing exploitation and exploration between different departments (Brix, 2019, 2020; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2013). Contextual ambidexterity has been identified as an intermediary between innovation and ambidextrous culture in organisations (Khan & Mir, 2019). According to Brix (2020), studies of contextual ambidexterity consist of at least two units of analysis: the organisational context, and individual employees, which are not mutually exclusive. Firstly, organisational routines are needed to enable individual ambidexterity, which in turn is needed for organisational performance (Boukamel et al., 2019; Brix, 2019) Second, It is merely not an individual capability, such as ambidextrous leadership amongst individuals, as it is about how "ambidextrous leadership functions within an organisation" according to Mueller et al. (2020, p. 46). According to Boukamel et al. (2019, p. 8) "exploitation and exploration are simultaneously processed by the same structures and individuals". Even though the levels are conceptually different, individual perceptions can be aggregated to assess the organisational

level if it is homogenous (Gibson and Birkinshaw 2004). The importance of contextual ambidexterity in a municipality, which is the topic of this study, comes from the wide array of tasks they perform. Different parts of the organisation could be involved in innovation processes at different times or whenever issues cut across policy areas and departmental silos. This creates a need for contextual ambidexterity through a simultaneous balance between the two logics and a supportive environment rather than a separation between units or time periods (Boukamel & Emery, 2017; Brix, 2019).

Ambidexterity at the organisational level: Mechanisms

Ambidexterity at the organisational level can be defined as the administrative mechanisms which foster certain behaviours and provides the incentives and informal systems of belief (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). Ambidexterity is the capacity for both alignment, which represents the coherent patterns of activity, and adaptability, which is the capacity to reconfigure activities and routines due to changing environmental demands (Brix, 2020; Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008).

Organisational routines which support both exploitation and exploration are needed to create a link between optimisation and innovation (Boukamel et al., 2019; Gieske et al., 2016). Not having mechanisms for adaptability risks enforcing path-dependent developments which might be based less on needs since they are connected to historical developments (Becker, 2004; Piening, 2013). Supportive conditions for creating balance at the organisational level are slack resources, incentives or rewards connected to the pursuit of new opportunities, and routines of different rationalities which promote a culture tolerant of risk and ambiguity (Boukamel et al., 2019; De Vries et al., 2016).

Ambidexterity at the individual level: Behaviours

In this article, the focus on ambidexterity at the individual level is concerned with the managers' behaviours. Managers do not have to be innovators themselves, but they do have a crucial role in enabling others through organisational design, decision-making, and recognising the need for exploration and exploitation (Bason, 2018; Hijal-Moghrabi et al., 2020; Smith & Umans, 2015). At the individual level, the balancing of tension is a skill which needs to be developed and supported in order to achieve organisational ambidexterity (Mueller et al., 2020).

Ambidexterity at the individual level relies on individual skills, relationships, and the policies and routines which shape organisational behaviour (Boukamel et al., 2019; Hijal-Moghrabi et al., 2020; Smith & Umans, 2015). Managers are important for ambidexterity (Hanneke et al., 2016; Smith & Umans, 2015) because their ability to balance between exploitation and exploration is a key aspect of promoting and supporting innovation in organisations (Bason, 2018; Boukamel et al., 2019; Brix, 2020). Ambidextrous behaviour is contradictory in the

sense that balance is achieved by developing two contradictory behaviours and having the ability to make judgements on how to manage tensions (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Mueller et al., 2020; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021).

Individual attributes which promote balance and contribute to performance have been identified by Birkinshaw and Gibson (2004). They indicate four types of individual attributes: being able to take initiative and search for opportunities outside of one's own stated responsibilities, being co-operative and seeking to collaborate with others, being committed to constantly searching for internal linkages, and being able to multitask and be comfortable in more than one role. Ambidextrous behaviours are essentially concerned with identifying possibilities and acting outside of one's day-to-day activities as well as developing relationships which are outside of one's own area of responsibility.

Ambidextrous behaviours are about the balancing of tensions and the ability to manage them appropriately while simultaneously making connections between innovation and ordinary processes, as well as harbouring conflicting values at the individual level (Gieske et al., 2016; Magnusson et al., 2021).

A multilevel approach: Summary of connections between the levels

The individual level of ambidexterity is linked to the organisational level. Even though individual ambidexterity is concerned with behaviours, these are situated within the organisational context. According to Gibson & Birkinshaw (2004), ambidexterity is achieved by having systems which encourage individuals to make judgements on how to behave when faced with tensions. Organisations are dependent on ambidextrous individuals for improved performance, and individuals are dependent on organisational routines that allow for divergence from standard operations. This is achieved by linking innovation to the standard organisational routines, practices, and goals of the organisation, as well as fostering commitment and tolerance towards innovation processes (Boukamel et al., 2019; Gieske et al., 2016). Being able to make individual judgments on how to divide one's attention and switch between conflicting rationalities requires tolerance and an expectation to receive permission at the organisational level to do so (Brix, 2020).

Setting

This article is based on a larger project being carried out in a Swedish municipality that wishes to improve its capacity for innovation and collaboration (internal as well as external). This makes it an organisation with ambition, but not necessarily a high-performing one in the context of innovation. The municipality has slightly more than 100,000 inhabitants, and the municipal organisation employs roughly 10,000 of them. The researcher is following two groups of managers, top and mid-level, who are responsible for promoting safety and security.

Municipalities constitute the largest part of the Swedish public sector (SALAR, 2022), and it is the level of government tasked with delivering public services since it is in closest contact with the citizens, thus making them key in the effort to create innovation (Lewis et al., 2018). Swedish municipalities possess features that are often associated with creating difficulties for innovation, such as their size and structural complexity, their wide array of tasks, a high degree of specialisation in silos, and a tendency towards stability over flexibility (Adolfsson & Solli, 2009; Andrews et al., 2015; Bason, 2018; Magnusson et al., 2020).

At the time of this study, the municipality did not have an innovation strategy or a structure to support innovation. A search of public records (in February 2022) identified nine policy documents showing that innovation was mentioned for the first time in 2011. There has not been a policy specifically targeting innovation since 2015. Innovation has since been used sparsely, undefined and as a side effect connected to other issues such as public procurement and digitalisation. There have been developments which could be understood as innovative, but the municipality is still lacking strategic direction and systematic support for innovation. This makes the studied municipality an interesting example of the Swedish municipal sector, in which innovation does occur but is not governed by a strategy (SALAR, 2019).

Method

This case study is based on a larger co-production project in a Swedish municipality with an interactive approach (Lindhult & Axelsson, 2021) in which the ambition lies in achieving particularisation rather than generalisation all while still striving to generate further knowledge of an issue (Stake, 1995). The goal of this qualitative study is to research a phenomenon in its natural setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998), where the researcher is personal rather than impersonal (Lindhult & Axelsson, 2021; Stake, 1995). The article is primarily based on exploratory interviews with middle-managers (n:7), top managers (n:10) and respondents with supporting functions (n:3) during which the researcher introduced a theme and then followed the subjects' responses in search of new information (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

The interviewed managers had responsibilities that covered a large part of the municipal operations, such as education, including adult education, social services, city planning, parks, public housing (corporation), culture, and recreation, as well as labour market services. The article also covers top management with strategic responsibilities encompassing social sustainability, communications, and security. The respondents with supporting functions are responsible for safety, communications, and security. The city manager was also interviewed. This broad range of municipal responsibilities provides an in-depth look at much of the municipality's strategic management in terms of ambidexterity. None of the respondents, however, is expressly responsible for promoting innovation, or managing personnel with innovation in their job description. Nevertheless, senior managers have an important role in promoting innovation (Hijal-Moghrabi et al., 2020) and are ideal respondents for studying ambidexterity (Smith & Umans, 2015).

The interviews were structured around three themes: innovation, collaboration and complexity. The themes where chosen to identify how tensions were perceived by the managers and how they are connected to the discussion on public sector innovation and the inherent tensions PSOs need to balance to promote and support innovation (Boukamel & Emery, 2017; Boukamel et al., 2019; Gieske et al., 2020; Gieske et al., 2016; Meijer, 2019). Innovation is important due to its inherent connection to exploration and how ambidextrous capacity has been identified as a subset of innovation capacity (Boukamel et al., 2019; Gieske et al., 2020). Collaboration was chosen as a theme since collaborative skills are an important aspect of individual ambidexterity (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004), and the importance of inter-organisational collaboration is commonly cited in the literature on PSO innovation (Bekkers et al., 2014; Torfing, 2018). Finally, complexity was chosen as a theme to identify potential tensions in issues which cannot be managed by mere exploitation, such as the SDGs. Complex issues challenge the PSOs' functional divisions and siloed operations (Torfing, 2018), and ambidexterity is important for organisational performance in a changing environment (Brix, 2020; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). The open format of the interviews allowed for follow-up questions while letting subjects tell their stories more freely (Bryman, 2011) and made it possible to explore the difficulties connected to the tensions the respondents identified. The data from the interviews were supplemented with a review of internal documents (67 pages) related to the annual cycle of strategic planning for each of the departments involved.

Data analysis

The analysis was guided by an inductive approach which recognises that the participants are knowledgeable agents and that the study's focus is on how people understand, construct, and make sense of their experiences (Gioia et al., 2012; Kennedy, 2018; Weick et al., 2005). The interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes (a total of 863 minutes), and approximately 14.5 hours of interview data were transcribed and coded in Nvivo. The analysis was carried out using a three-step process inspired by the Gioia methodology (2020). First, all the transcripts were read in full with a focus on the managers' perceptions, which were then coded based on recurring concepts identified in the respondent's answers and using their words as much as possible (such as encouragement, trust, routines, leadership, and time). These codes were neutral in the sense that if one respondent identified trust as an enabler for innovation while another respondent highlighted lack of trust as a problem, they were both coded as trust since the aim of the study is concerned with the tensions connected to the continuous balance of contextual ambidexterity, not barriers and drivers. Second, the first-order categories and subsequent quotes were read again in search of overarching themes and how the tensions connected to the two levels of analysis, (individual and organisational) the interplay between them, as well as other themes, emerged from the data. Third, the themes were reread to look for patterns that revealed aggregate dimensions, two of which were identified: the *Lack of systematic support for innovation,* and *Innovation ambiguity,* which are presented in Table 1. Quotations are translated from Swedish by the author.

Table 1: Data structure and examples of supporting quotations.

Theme	Representative quotes
Lack of systematic support of innovation	
Collective promotion of exploitation at the cost of innovation	"Public sector organisations use terms like trust, we are supposed to govern by trust. It never happens, we are way too cemented in new public management " (5). "Today, you are expected to show exactly what you are supposed to do with the tax money you have. You need to show to the Crown exactly what the effects are and how you achieved them" (3). "We are fairly traditional in how we govern, which could be a barrier to innovation (…) If we then identify an idea that a department wants to try, which would be quite expensive, but if successful would be beneficial for many others, we still end up with "who is paying and how" (15). "So even if we have a group which is innovative, the organisation is still slow" (9).
Group mechanisms as obstacles for individual behaviour	"I think we are quite anxious, what will this lead to; will we create expectations which we will not be able to live up to and we end up asking ourselves, how can we resume control again? (…) To actually try, let loose, and to live in it a little longer to try. There is not really any space for that today. It does not conform with our structures" (4). "That idea was interesting, maybe we could do something like that? And then you know how it is. Then the everyday operation comes along, and it turned out to be something else instead" (7). "All of us are different, some have a harder time joining a process which comes with a high degree of uncertainty" (16). "Sadly, I am not part of promoting innovation enough, and we are not that good at incorporating it within the organisation" (9).
Room for action in pursuit of innovation	"And then we still need to dare to try, and unless we feel that this step is doomed to fail, well then, we should not do it, but there has to exist some acceptance for attempts as well" (2). "What are you allowed to do? What do we allow managers to do who identify potential improvements and to do something completely new which we are not used to" (9)? "I think it's easy for an organisation to state that we are going to steer towards innovation, but instead of actually opening up for a variety of processes which could lead to something new, it's easier to ask for successful projects" (18). "I would like to see where we are now, what we need to modify to create conditions for our managers; I do not think we take enough the time to stop. Everything just goes on and on" (1).

	"Innovation is not a priority; it must be conscious and part of the discussion from the beginning. If you only talk about it as something we need to do and then attempt to, it will not happen. It must be structured and systematic" (3).
Innovation ambiguity	
Lack of conceptual clarity concerning innovation	"There is something bigger in innovation. It takes quite a lot of us to be innovative" (2). "It has to create value to count" (13). "It is daring to think in new ways (11). "There are a lot of objections when discussing innovations (...) It is trendy to talk about being innovative, and then it is limiting since you are not allowed to mix it with something else" (15). "It is a rather dull term (...) It needs more content for organisations to be able to get anywhere" (17). "I think that we are making things more complicated than it has to be with all these terms" (4). "It is a term I rarely use, it almost creates pressure on myself when am I actually innovative." (7). "Buzzword, I have a hard time with the term" (8).
Perception on novelty and context	"Evolution is about adjusting and making small improvements all the time and not abandoning everything in pursuit of something new which never gets a chance to settle. Then you will not have improvement" (8). "Even if all the other municipalities have done something, it would still be innovative for us to think in new ways" (10). "It is everything from the small-scale decisions to the grand complex issues" (13). "An innovation is something new which is useful and you choose to use" (14). "It is not enough to do something slightly better; it is about doing something else, something different" (2). "To take steps that others have not" (5). "It does not have to be completely new, something which no one has done before. It can be something that someone else is already doing, but we then do slightly better or exactly the same. It is both" (6). "To dare to think new thoughts, to be inspired or to take something from others and make it your own" (11).

The internal documents were analysed using the content analysis research method (Weber, 1990) with a focus on descriptions related to capacity (fiscal conditions, demands, new and/or changing tasks and responsibilities), references to innovation (in descriptions related to tasks and/or as a potential approach/solution/strategy) and the potential need for collaboration from outside the departments. The interviews were used as the primary data, and the

documents were used as secondary data and will not be the primary focus of the following section discussing the findings.

Findings

These sections will focus on the tensions that come with promoting and supporting innovation and how these relate to the different levels of analysis as well as the interplay between them.

Lack of systematic support for innovation

Managers describe how mechanisms promote exploitative work, which creates difficulties in grasping how one is supposed to act to promote innovation. Throughout the interviews, there was a clear view that mechanisms provide strong support for exploitation and weak support for exploration. Organisational mechanisms appear to enforce exploitation rather than supporting contradictory cultures (Khan & Mir, 2019) and adaptability towards new opportunities and changing demands (Brix, 2020; Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; O'Reilly & Tushman, 2008). Respondents described a rigidity at the organisational level when it comes to goals and a lack of dynamism while pursuing them through the reconfiguration of activities. The organisational routines did not support adaptability since the goals were set and static. Managers had a role in formulating and setting goals and creating policy, but there was less room for reconfiguring previously set goals or policy. This was summarised by a top manager talking about the difficulties in pursuing innovation:

> *"We should be able to reconsider our goals at least once a year, which requires us to be more dynamic, to be able to follow developments and then see what happens when we try new things. It is a perspective we need to, to dare to be, dare to think again, to change and to constantly reconsider during our work"*
> *(15).*

Having mechanisms which encourage adaptability at the organisational level is an important aspect of ambidexterity (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), as is the existence of supportive conditions such as slack resources (De Vries et al., 2016). Judging by the documents connected to the annual planning process, the general descriptions concerning each department's operations are generally directed towards the need to focus on the core mission of each department in response to increasing demands, fiscal strain, and capacity issues. The risk here is that each department focuses on their respective core as a response to difficulties, which strengthens silos at the expense of potential innovation. Innovation is only mentioned twice in relation to the departments' identified priorities for the following fiscal year. Both co-ordination and collaboration (inter and intra) are highlighted as potential solutions but rarely in connection to specific priorities. All the departments highlight coordination and collaboration, but none highlights a clear priority to develop this by calling for additional resources for example. Collaboration is highlighted as a response to fiscal strain rather than a more systematic search for potential new opportunities and connections

outside of the department that would be in line with ambidexterity (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004; Brix, 2020). There is less room for identifying and developing potential cross-departmental issues or synergies in the budgetary planning process, where each department competes for resources for their internal priorities. Innovation is at risk of being siloed or levelled even though there might be possibilities within the departments for innovation if it is closely connected to the core mission or if individuals are able to act within their own areas of responsibility.

Collective promotion of exploitation at the cost of innovation

The perceived lack of supporting mechanisms at the organisational level, such as an innovation policy and processes for innovation support, leads the managers towards a collective promotion of exploitation at the cost of innovation. The managers, while focusing on themselves as individuals and at the group level, are aware of the constraining conditions for innovation but struggle to find potential ways forward. The lack of systemic support is explained by the respondents as being conditioned by time constraints, the prioritisation of performance/output measurements, the demands of everyday operations and a lack of incentives to explore. There are factors making it difficult for managers to be ambidextrous, such as not having room to recognise opportunities outside their areas of responsibility or incentivised to build linkages suggested by Birkinshaw and Gibson (2004) when mechanisms are described as primarily promoting exploitation.

Even making conscious attempts to innovate risks reinforcing existing operations rather than exploring new innovations since there is less room to support exploration when individual managers tend to adhere to exploitative behaviour over explorative behaviour. Ambidexterity is about harbouring conflicting rationalities and the ability to make judgments between them (Khan & Mir, 2019; Mueller et al., 2020; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021). Even though the respondents were aware of this conflict, the ability of the individual to make judgements and switch between logics, as suggested by Brix (2020), appears limited. As put by a mid-level manager concerning the potential room to act in pursuit of innovation:

"In the end, you do what is expected of you, then it is mostly about the delivery of measurements, performance indicators and goals" (3).

There are tensions generated between the organisational levels themselves due to the lack of mechanisms for innovation, which makes it difficult to maintain a continuous balance with the individual level, which can constrain potential innovative initiatives. The individual managers stated that anxiety exists at both the individual and group level in the face of uncertainty and the divergence from routines:

"I think that, if we wanted to, we could have all the possibilities if we had more time. If we were encouraged to be less cautious and less worried about the next step" (4).

Across all the interviews, managers described the conditions which they perceive to constrain innovation as tensions between current modes of operations versus perceived conditions which are assumed to be supportive of innovation. Managers, both individually and as a group, have a role in reproducing the conditions which make the balancing of tensions difficult, though they sometimes question them themselves.

> *"I see it like this: all of us become representatives. We must be in some way for how we govern and the culture surrounding it. And as managers, it is very hard when we have the strong governance system that we do, and to question it and to say, 'now we need to ask ourselves if this really helps us to succeed'" (16).*

Managers as individuals are aware of the conflicting logics associated with individual ambidexterity (Gieske et al., 2016; Magnusson et al. 2021) but not in terms of actions which would promote exploration. The respondents questioned aspects about current practices, but there is a lack of collective discussion about the implications of the current order. Because of this, the lack of support is reproduced by the managers by following and enforcing routines while refusing to discuss the implications of innovation amongst themselves as a group and the potential consequences on organisational performance.

Group mechanisms as obstacles for individual behaviours

The lack of opportunity to question current modes of operation makes it difficult to adopt ambidextrous behaviours. Stability and alignment with routines and static goals are prioritised at the expense of adaptability and reconfiguration. The individuals harbour conflicting rationalities associated with ambidexterity (Gieske et al., 2016; Magnusson et al., 2021), and express ideas about strategies such as trust and encouragement, which are assumed to promote contextual ambidexterity, but which are hard to act on.

> *"It is a lot about culture as well. If I believe that something is not working, how do I reach others? it is quite a long step to just go to someone and wish for something else" (7).*

The difficulty adopting ambidextrous behaviours is not only an individual concern. It is also combined into collective behaviours which promote exploitation and are enforced by mechanisms. Interviewees used a "we," which refers to their own behaviours as well as those of other individuals and as a group. The demands of their day-to-day activities appear to constrain innovation in terms of time, what you are allowed to do, and other managers, who may not agree on a shared need to innovate or believe that changing their operations through innovation will affect the organisation's capacity to explore. A particularly prominent tension connected to these behaviours is identified by Birkinshaw and Gibson (2004), who state that part of being a ambidextrous individual is to seek collaborative opportunities and build internal linkages. This was described by a top manager while discussing the difficulties of acting on potential opportunities which require collaboration:

"We are not on the same page regarding how to collaborate. Some are very hierarchical, believing that everything must pass through the manager, and others are not" (15).

The low degree of individual ambidexterity concerning intra-organisational collaboration across departments is an apparent barrier in promoting innovation in the municipal organisation. The default behaviours are described as a focus on fiscal control and alignment with current routines and goals rather than innovation as a means to respond to changing circumstances. A mid-level manager emphasised this when discussing conditions for citizen involvement in pursuit of co-production with citizens:

"You can talk about it a lot, for instance involving citizens in the development and innovation of new solutions for public sector services, but we always fall back to modes of governance which promote performance measurements" (3).

Individual behaviours may constrain potential exploration for others when issues cut across departments that affect the ability to act together since the potential for exploration can clash with policies that prioritise exploitation between two departments. Even though individual managers could practice ambidexterity in certain cases within their areas of responsibility, it is still a question of departmental ambidexterity within certain silos rather than organisational ambidexterity through a simultaneous balance.

Room for action in pursuit of innovation

The respondents talked about leadership as being important in creating an environment in which exploration is allowed. This endeavour applies not only to the individual manager's relationship with their employees but also to the relationship between managers. The perceived room to act is constrained by a lack of mechanisms and routines that promote balance between exploitation and exploration at both levels of analysis. The individual room for action is also constrained by the rules and routines at the organisational level and the constraints related to daily operations at the individual level. A mid-level manager highlighted the difficulties in promoting innovation:

"I think my role is about thinking beyond the horizon and reflecting upon my operations a lot more, to be given space for it (...) It is an ongoing process, but it gets diminished since you have thirty minutes here and thirty minutes there when you have time to be creative, and then it is on to the next meeting and you have lost the thread and are forced to start all over again" (7).

None of the interviewees in this study used terms like risks or being risk-adverse when discussing tensions. Instead, they tended to talk about the lack of spaces and resources to be able to even dare to attempt to innovate by supporting exploration or to find space for themselves to contribute through their roles as managers.

"There is rarely room to let go some more. To try and let go and to live in it a bit longer, to actually try. There is no space for that today, and it does not conform to our structures" (2).

The use of *space* and *dare* is not another way to frame risk-adverse behaviour. It is about a lack of tolerance for ambiguity, where organisational routines and day-to-day operations do not allow any room for daring; instead, anxiety is created when diverging from routines. It is less about the trade-offs of risk management, strategic choices between flexibility and stability, or conscious efforts by managers to avoid risks; rather, it is the perceived lack of space, tolerance of uncertainty, and the current routines which reduce room for adopting ambidextrous behaviours such as pursuing opportunities outside one's own operational sphere (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004).

Innovation ambiguity: A value-loaded concept

Innovation lacks conceptual clarity for the interviewees at the individual level in the organisation studied. This is not only rooted in the lack of an innovation policy; innovation is also a value-loaded concept with ambiguous meaning, and this contributes to difficulties in achieving ambidexterity. The ambiguity is both an issue connected to the *lack of conceptual* clarity towards innovation and how managers perceived the *novelty aspect* of innovation. Some see innovation as incremental adjustments and adaptation of current practices, while others have a firm image of innovation as something completely novel and disruptive. When discussing innovation, the bar can be set rather high for when something can be called innovation. It is about *"finding solutions to questions which are almost impossible to ask"* (16), or *"taking steps that no one else has done"* (5), or "*when we do something that others want to copy*" (2). There is a perceived right or wrong use of the term, which managers see as a problem and source for potential conflict when innovation is used.

"I think that there are a lot of stalemates when it comes to talking about innovation. There are a lot of arguments like, 'no, that is not an innovation, and you are using it wrong.' And we cannot say that we are going to be innovative and use examples from history such as inventions because it is not the same thing (...) It is trendy to say that we are going to be innovative and that creates limitations since you are not allowed to mix innovation with something else" (15).

The lack of conceptual clarity makes it a difficult concept to approach and to promote, which contributes to unclear conditions for individual judgments for balancing conflicting rationalities.

"I think that is part of the difficulty and it is a bit sad; it makes your head spin. That is why we get innovation as something on the side, or that we think we are supposed to do on the side. For some reason, I do not know why, but we cannot get it to work systematically" (13).

Innovation ambiguity is a factor for contextual ambidexterity in the sense that if the issue of innovation falls outside of common practices, it is something else instead of something that is part of the balance. Managers claim innovation should be an inherent part of how the organisation operates, but due to the lack of routines and the lack of conceptual clarity, they see no tangible ways to systematically support it. Innovation might still occur, but in siloed attempts since the room for supporting exploration across departments is low. This is especially true if other managers do not share the same view of what innovation means or if there is even a need for it.

Discussion

Improving organisational ambidexterity appears to be difficult in the organisation studied. There is a lack of systemic support for innovation in the environment, and managers struggle to balance tensions. The municipality serves as an example of when organisational ambidexterity could not be clearly observed, and this makes for an interesting discussion. There is extensive research on ambidexterity, but less so when it comes to achieving it or addressing the obstacles which organisations need to overcome (Boukamel & Emery, 2017; Mueller et al., 2020). Based on the findings, this study identified a low ambidextrous environment which could be summarized as an organisation with weak support for exploration, where organisational mechanisms promote exploitation and individual behaviours reinforce these mechanisms. Individual assessments of organisational ambidexterity can be aggregated (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004) to say something about the organisational level, and it was quite clear that individual struggles were reflected in a lack of mechanisms that promoted exploration at the organisational level.

Previous empirical studies of ambidexterity have been dominated by quantitative studies in which the organisational level is the primary unit of analysis across multiple organisations (Mueller et al., 2020; Pertusa-Ortega et al., 2021). This study has been an attempt to look further into the gap in the literature on ambidexterity by attempting to merge both the organisational and individual levels of ambidexterity. The results from this study indicate that the organisational level is restricting the ambidextrous behaviour of individuals in organisations that appear to have a low capacity for innovation. Ambidextrous behaviour amongst individuals alone does not appear to be enough to promote organisational ambidexterity without some form of routinisation or support for innovation at the organisational level. Gullmark (2021) found that innovation capacity in municipalities can be routinised to either a high or low degree, but both will produce innovation. In the context of this article, the routinisation of innovation at the organisational level appears to be a potential prerequisite for increasing ambidexterity. The lack of an innovation policy and supporting routines in the organisation studied was an apparent problem for the managers.

In low ambidextrous environments, behaviour amongst individuals alone does not appear to be enough to promote organisational ambidexterity without some form of routinised support for innovation. There is less potential opposition connected with exploitation than exploration

(Brix, 2020), and when there are no routines to support exploration or strategies for creating a balance, the bias is towards the path of least resistance. So even though in theory the relationship between exploitation and exploration is not a dichotomy with trade-offs between different choices (Boukamel & Emery, 2017; Brix, 2019), this study shows that the lack of balance between exploitation and exploration causes them to be perceived to exist as an either/or relationship rather than two concepts whose tensions can be managed simultaneously. This is further complicated by the confusion surrounding innovation and its inherent ambiguity. Innovation does not have a thematic place in existing practices and just means different and/or better in general discourse. Unless there are organisational mechanisms which contribute to conceptual clarity and routines which help promote innovation, achieving ambidexterity will remain difficult. Linking standard operations and innovation is part of individual ambidexterity, which requires routines for both (Boukamel et al., 2019; Gieske et al., 2016).

Risk aversion is part of the discourse concerning barriers to public sector innovation (De Vries et al., 2016; Mulgan, 2007) and a subset of innovation capacity (Boukamel et al., 2019). However, risk is not talked about by managers. Even the term *risk* was not used across all interviews. Instead, they talked about the lack of *daring* and *space* regarding innovation in current practices. The concept of daring should not be seen as another framing of risk or risk-taking. Risk is often calculated by managers through trade-offs and choices between different alternatives rather than through the continuous balance of contextual ambidexterity. Daring is more about supporting innovation and accepting leaps of faiths rather than taking calculated risks and making optimal decisions. Bason (2018, p. 297) talks about managerial courage in which innovation leadership is "played out in a force field" between different values. In the context of this study, courage is daring to step outside the confines of organisational routines and practices, which is not perceived to be supported.

Wihlman et al. (2016) found a difference between senior and middle managers in municipalities regarding the implementation of innovation policies and their perceptions of the barriers hindering innovation. However, this study did not find any discernible differences in the interviews between top and mid-level managers or persons with supporting functions. For this study, the only real divergence between individuals were connected to the lack of conceptual clarity concerning innovation through perceptions of what could be considered an innovation. Similar to Wihlman et al. (2016), however, this study found that the respondents were aware of the difficulties, but that there was a lack of action towards change. Lidman et al. (2022) found that first-line managers in municipalities were caught between conflicting expectations to innovate while simultaneously experiencing contextual conditions which did not support it. The results from this study add to these findings by identifying similar difficulties, but they were perceived by both middle, and top-level management in a municipal organisation.

According to Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004, p. 213) "too much emphasis on discipline and stretch creates burnout and disillusion," and the subsequent one-sided focus on support and

trust did not lead to getting any work done. When the work to be done is innovative, a perceived lack of support and trust seems to reinforce the disillusion of managers, who see the need for something else but without appropriate means to reach it. Since managerial support has been identified as important for successful PSO innovation (Boukamel et al., 2019; Lidman et al., 2022; Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017), this disillusion risks turning into innovation-frustration, which in turn continues to contribute to the lack of systematic transformation within the public sector.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to investigate the contextual ambidexterity in a Swedish municipality by answering the following questions: (1) How do managers perceive organisational and individual abilities to manage tensions? and (2) How can potential connections between the organisational and the individual levels be understood? For the first question, exploitation is strongly promoted while exploration is weakly supported, which makes it difficult for managers to attempt to balance tensions in the organisation studied. For the second question, in weak ambidextrous environments, the mechanisms at the organisational level promote exploitation, which in turn affects an individual's ability to act ambidextrously. Overall, this affects the organisation's ability to support exploration other than through delimited, siloed attempts with limited potential to innovate with regard to the complex issues facing the public sector.

The results show the importance of highlighting the context that precedes innovation processes through the balance of contextual ambidexterity. Sørensen and Torfing (2022) have proposed a new set of questions concerning the need to further investigate the strategic management of institutions and processes to better support innovation. This study contributes to this discussion by highlighting the importance of multiple levels of analysis and the interplay between them as previously suggested by, for example, Raisch et al. (2009), and the environmental conditions which may or may not support innovation (Lewis et al., 2018). Contextual ambidexterity appears to be a key concept in this pursuit since it encompasses both the standard operations and innovation process which managers need for balance, and it focuses on multi-level analysis.

Municipalities are complex and siloed types of PSOs (Adolfsson & Solli, 2009; Nählinder & Fogelberg Eriksson, 2017), which calls for attention to be placed on the intra-organisational environment. Collaboration was called for but rarely connected to actual departmental priorities. It thus becomes a way to highlight issues that are difficult, but it does contribute to improve operations by allocating resources towards collaboration. This suggests that mechanisms at the organisational level which incentivise and encourage cross-departmental collaboration in the ordinary planning process, together with the routinisation of innovation, are two main steps towards ambidexterity in low ambidextrous environments.

Concerning ambidexterity for PSOs, there is still unexplored territory which needs to be covered in future research. The hardships of supporting innovation through ambidexterity found in this study are not solved merely by formulating and implementing an innovation policy at the organisational level, just as the solution is not merely the promotion of skills at the individual level. The findings of this study suggest the need to further investigate the relationship between organisational and individual levels of contextual ambidexterity and to continue to develop an understanding of the mechanisms at the group level in organisations which is less theoretically conceptualized. Future research should also look deeper into the interplay between organisational and individual levels of ambidexterity in organisations which have previously excelled at innovation, preferably drawing on multiple cases to identify factors amongst high performers. Finally, this study reveals the need for further research into the political governance of an organisation and politician's potential role in promoting innovation since this subject was not mentioned frequently in the interviews. There were a few comments in this regard, but this study did not find any clear results on how political aspects influence ambidexterity. Future studies should investigate the roles of politicians in organisational ambidexterity to identify potential aspects which are specific to PSOs.

The implications of promoting ambidexterity in practice constitutes an important part of the discussion concerning the conditions for innovation in an organisation, which based on the results from this study and from Lidman et al. (2022), seem to exist across multiple management levels in municipalities. The first step forward appears to be the routinisation of innovation through policy measures and supporting routines in organisations having difficulty supporting and promoting innovation. This is not merely handled by creating innovation policies where there are none, but rather by developing a mutual understanding of innovation and highlighting conditions in the current environment as a first step.

Finally, there are limitations to this study. Since it draws on experiences from a single municipality, transferring results to other contexts must be done with care. The studied organisation's difficulties with ambidexterity were an apparent obstacle on the path to innovation. It should be emphasised that the lack of conceptual clarity concerning innovation may have clouded the interviewees' answers. If the interviewees' view of innovation pertained strictly to novel, radical changes, they may have failed to highlight ambidextrous behaviours that pursued more incremental innovations. Finally, this study is based on a manager's perceptions over a limited time span. The focus of contextual ambidexterity was on behaviours which might be difficult to identify in individual reflections. It is possible that longitudinal observations could highlight ambidextrous behaviours of which the managers themselves were not aware.

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