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# Mixed Feelings: How Government Leaders Add to the Wickedness of Policy Problems Through Emotional Storylines

Tamara A. P. Metze[1] | Imrat Verhoeven[2]

[1]Technical University Delft, Delft, the Netherlands | [2]University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

**Correspondence:** Tamara A. P. Metze (t.a.p.metze@tudelft.nl)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper redefines wicked problems to better include the emotional dimensions in the social construction of these problems. Drawing on research into policy controversies and the cultural politics of emotions, it examines how government leaders use emotional storylines tied to specific objects and thereby shape the contested-ness of such problems. The study is based on an interpretative analysis of 2381 newspaper articles (2012–2018) and 68 policy documents concerning earthquakes induced by natural gas-production in the north of the Netherlands. The findings show a shift from emotional storylines about material impacts of the earthquakes to those about distrust in relationships between governmental layers. The study highlights that government leaders must account for evolving emotional dynamics in governing wicked problems, as they add complexity. It underscores the importance of relational dimensions, including interactions between emotions, objects, and different levels of government.

## 1 | Introduction

Although public policy literature pays extensive attention to the preferred ways of governance of wicked problems—for instance through policy learning, frame reflection or frame adaptation (Roberts 2000; Hisschemöller and Hoppe 1995; Termeer et al. 2019; Schön and Rein 1994); the political governance of these problems by government leaders is understudied (Head 2022; McConnell 2018). In one of the few empirical studies, Head (2022, 41) distinguishes seven pathways by which government leaders in democracies govern wicked problems. Political governance takes place through avoidance and denial of the complexities; authoritative coercive controls; micro-management of problem elements; technocratic problem-solving; incremental adjustment; stakeholder collaboration; and "coping" strategies. What is missing from this analysis is the emotional dimension through which government leaders may contribute to the wickedness of policy problems. In this paper we further develop the notion of wicked problems with insights from interpretive work on policy controversies (Schön and Rein 1994) and Sarah Ahmed (2014) work on the cultural politics of emotions. This way we aim to better include how wicked problems are constructed by government leaders through the emotional dimension of their political governance.

The concept of wicked problems has been criticised for over-simplifying policy issues (Turnbull and Hoppe 2019; Termeer et al. 2019; Bannink and Trommel 2019; Noordegraaf et al. 2019). These authors point out that the ways in which wicked problems have been defined do not sufficiently highlight their social construction; nor does it allow to better understand the complexity of how these problems arise and develop in daily practices. By including insights from interpretive studies on policy controversies, we can better understand the social construction of the problem, particularly the role of the ongoing contestation of what constitutes a wicked problem. Interpretive

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scholars define policy controversies as unstructured problems in which actors seek to impose their own problem framings and the included (technical) solutions at the expense of others (Schön and Rein 1994; Dodge and Metze 2017, 2024; Verhoeven and Metze 2022). Empirical insights from these studies have shown the importance of discursively expressed emotions (Verhoeven and Metze 2022; Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2015; Wolf and van Dooren 2017; Durnová and Hejzlarová 2023) in the construction of wicked problems.

In this article, we analyse the emotional dimension in the construction of wicked problems through a study of government leaders' use of emotional storylines in a case about conflict arising from earthquakes induced by natural gas-production. Emotional storylines are condensed versions of larger emotional narratives through which policy actors interpret and construct policy controversies (Verhoeven and Metze 2022, 226). Building on Sarah Ahmed (2014) work on the cultural politics of emotions, we can see these emotional storylines as *relational* by being related to objects—such as events, texts or people—and by circulating in relations between actors. By acknowledging the constructed and relational nature of emotional storylines, we analyse the patterns in government leaders' emotional meaning-making during policy controversies. Hence, the aim of this paper is to decipher how government leaders' political governance through emotional storylines contributes to the construction of wicked problems. The main empirical question guiding this paper is: what patterns emerge in the ways in which government leaders' political governance through emotional storylines contributes to the construction of wicked problems?

Our empirical analysis is based on a case study of the earthquakes that were induced by natural gas-production in the province of Groningen in the north-East of the Netherlands. These so-called "gasquakes" led to large material and psychological damage from 2012 onward (Perlaviciute 2018; Postmes et al. 2018) and caused one of the largest policy controversies in the Netherlands. Subnational politicians and activists mobilized to stop gas-production and the national government, and the gas-producing companies initially wanted to continue this production. Our findings build on a longitudinal media analysis of 2381 newspaper articles and 68 policy documents between September 2012, shortly after a strong earthquake in the village of Huizinge that was higher than the monitoring models ever predicted, started the controversy, and May 2018 shortly after the national government announced to terminate all gas-production in the area at the latest in 2030. This decision de-escalated the controversy. Based on these data, we explore the government leaders' emotional storylines and how these constructed the gasquakes as a wicked problem. We will first further conceptualize the emotional dimensions of wicked problems. After this conceptual discussion, we further introduce the case and methods, present the results and close with discussion and conclusions.

## 2 | Conceptual Work: The Emotional Dimension of Socially Constructed Wicked Problems

The concept of wicked problems has been criticised for oversimplifying policy issues. Authors argue that there is an inherent ontological problem with the notion of wicked problems as it reproduces a false dichotomy between the social and natural sciences and assumes that these problems can be identified objectively, thus overlooking that all problems are socially constructed (Turnbull and Hoppe 2019, 318). The concept is also considered too reductionist because it is building on two main dimensions (the factual and normative), and it is too much oriented toward finding governance mechanisms for coping with wicked problems. As a consequence, the notion of wicked problem too easily sets aside the inherently political and social messiness, clumsiness and contestation in the construction of policy problems and their governance (Turnbull and Hoppe 2019; Termeer et al. 2019; Bannink and Trommel 2019; Noordegraaf et al. 2019; see also Hartmann 2012; Ney and Verweij 2015). Finally, wickedness remains too removed from daily practices, people, and places, thus overlooking the ways in which people perceive and experience wicked problems and the practices that may contribute to the wickedness of a problem (Noordegraaf et al. 2019, 281). For example, the emotions of asylum seekers when staying in reception centres in the country they fled to, add a dimension to the wickedness of the problem for local, regional and national government leaders (see Noordegraaf et al. 2019, 289). In response to these critiques, we consider wicked problems as socially constructed policy issues in which uncertainty, ambiguity and contestation of knowledge, information, and emotion are part of discursive conflicts (see also Dodge and Metze 2017; Schön and Rein 1994). This definition opens up the conceptual room to explore the role of discursively expressed emotions in the construction of these issues. We further develop this idea, by building on insights from interpretive studies into policy controversies and into theorizing of emotions as political and cultural practices.

Interpretive scholars have argued that in a mediatized world, government leaders cannot ignore the expression of emotions—whether their own or those of publics—as they must account for dramaturgy in their political performances (Hajer 2009; Van Zuydam and Metze 2018), regardless of whether they are revolutionaries, nationalists, populists, or moderates from the political middle (Hoggett and Thompson 2002). Such insights have prompted policy scholars to recognize the importance of emotions, particularly in policy controversies. At least two avenues of research have developed: one that analyses emotions as objectified categories that play a role in actor coalition formation during processes of contention (Yordi et al. 2024; Fullerton et al. 2025; Scheetz et al. 2024; Gabehart et al. 2023), and another one within interpretive traditions that views emotions as discursively constructed and expressed in policy controversies (Laws et al. 2014; Durnová 2018; Durnová and Hejzlarová 2023; Wolf and van Dooren 2017; Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2015; Verhoeven and Metze 2022). In the interpretive tradition, the discursive expression of emotion plays an important role in policy controversies, when the nature of a problem is political and gets negotiated and constructed (Schön and Rein 1994; Verhoeven and Metze 2022). The expression of emotions by government leaders (and others) during policy controversies may thus contribute to the social construction of wicked problems. Emotional storylines serve as the primary vehicles through which government leaders construct and articulate emotional configurations (Verhoeven and Metze 2022). These emotional storylines can be conceived as



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"condensed versions of larger emotional narratives through which policy actors interpret a policy conflict" (Verhoeven and Metze 2022, 226).

Sara Ahmed (2014) theorization of emotion as a cultural and political practice invites us to understand emotions as relational and performative: emotions "stick" to objects shaping how they are perceived and valued in politics. Emotions do not simply reside within individuals; they circulate because of relations between subjects and objects and as a result of relations between actors, thus accruing affective value over time. Ahmed (2014) emphasizes that emotions are always about something; they are directional, oriented toward objects. These objects, whether an environmental crisis, regulatory decision, or corporate actor, become affectively charged sites of contestation through discursive repetition. In political storytelling, emotional storylines serve to align individuals, define communities, and shape the moral and value laden aspects of wicked problems. When government leaders construct emotional storylines, they use repetition and association to imbue objects with fear, anger, or hope. Through emotional storylines, these objects—which may be events, texts, or people—become part of the government leaders' personal emotional makeup or the emotional landscapes they create in relation to the publics that they represent. For example, when government leaders express "fear" about the risks of fracking or distrust toward industry actors, they are not only revealing personal sentiments. They also participate in an affective economy in which certain actors (e.g., extractive companies) or practices (e.g., deregulation) become sticky sites of these emotions, shaping how policy controversies are framed and understood in relation to publics. As Ahmed pointed out, these emotional storylines are relational: (a) they are in relation to an object, but (b) the emotional storylines also sit in between the individuals (including government leaders) and between these leaders and the public formed around the policy controversy.

Based on interpretivism and Ahmeds relational approach to emotions, we can see government leaders play an important role in the contestation taking place during meaning making about wicked problems. Through their emotional storylines, government leaders can construct a shared emotional landscape in which problems can be seen as being more wicked or less wicked. Wicked problems are thus not fixed properties but subject to change dependent on how government leaders construct them over time in interaction with objects. An example is from a Dutch case of Carbon capture and Storage (CCS), with local government leaders initially telling stories about CCS as a risk to be anxious about, while at a later moment developing stories voicing anger and critique about how the national government operated as a proponent of CCS, thus shifting the focus of the problems wickedness (Verhoeven 2026, ch. 5). By analysing patterns in government leaders' emotional storylines in relation to changing objects, we can better understand how they contribute to the wickedness of problems. Ahmed's framework suggests that the circulation of discrete emotions in these storylines is not arbitrary but socially and politically consequential: it helps form the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, defines who is seen as a threat or ally, and directs public attention toward specific interpretations of what matters, and for whom. Thus, government leaders' emotional storylines not only reflect their own responses but also channel the affective investments of the publics they claim to represent, shaping the stakes and structure of wicked problems.

## 3 | Case Study and Methods

In 1963 the Dutch state and the Nederlandse Aardolie Maatschappij (NAM), a joint venture of Shell and ExxonMobil, started the exploitation of the largest natural gas field in Europe, which is situated in the North-Eastern region of Groningen in the Netherlands. The economic revenue has been massive with the national state earning a total of 288 billion euros and the NAM 29 billion euros (Scholtens 2018). The revenue for the government has largely paid for the Dutch welfare state and to cover budget deficits. Also, the political stakes were high with most households depending on gas for cooking and heating, and export contracts with Germany, France and Belgium (Mulder and Perey 2018). It was clear that the national government had a large interest in maintaining this status quo. This situation was undisputed until August 16, 2012, when an earthquake of 3.6 on the Richter scale hit the little village of Huizinge. While experts for decades had predicted potential minor damages from seismic activity, the Huizinge earthquake and subsequent smaller ones resulted over the years in a total of 170,000 people experiencing damage to their houses, of which 85,000 have multiple damages that occurred after consecutive earthquakes (Postmes et al. 2018). Psychological damage has also been substantive as people worry about their housing situation, physical injuries, and a reduced quality of living (Perlaviciute 2018).

After a report by the Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute (KNMI 2013) in the beginning of 2013 predicted that future earthquakes between 3.9 and 5 on the Richter scale were conceivable, subnational government leaders as well as citizen action groups started to contest national decision-making by the Minister of Economic Affairs Henk Kamp, who was responsible for gas-production. Ever since, the controversy has escalated time and again, until the new Minister of Economic Affairs Erik Wiebes announced in March 2018 that gas-production would be terminated in 2030. This decision was not the end of the controversy, but it did mark the end of the most contentious 5-year phase. Given the impact on so many people's daily lives, the controversy is loaded with emotional storylines by government leaders on all levels of government.

This case is highly suitable for analysis of government leaders' political governance of a wicked problem through emotional storylines, because there were knowledge uncertainties and ambiguities and establishing a link between gas-production and earthquakes was relatively new and very much contested. When this link was first suggested, following upon the Huizinge earthquake, the full extent of the problem was still largely unknown. Homes and other buildings were increasingly damaged, but it was impossible to estimate the extent of the damage or the size of the affected area. Simple solutions were not available either, since many households in the Netherlands relied on gas for cooking and heating. Furthermore, this case involved significant conflicting norms, interests and values. Subnational government leaders, and activists were trying to



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reduce gas-production, whereas the national government and the NAM were keen to maintain high production levels for as long as possible due to the substantial revenues. The gasquakes led to one of the largest policy controversies in Dutch politics, laden with emotional storylines that developed over a longer period, making it a very suitable case for our study.

The empirical material consists of newspaper articles and policy documents. Our newspaper analysis focussed on *NRC Handelsblad*, *De Volkskrant*, *Trouw*, *Algemeen Dagblad*, and *De Telegraaf*, together covering a broad political spectrum of the most important national newspapers. For more detailed coverage of subnational politics, we analysed the well-read regional newspaper *Dagblad van the Noorden* (DvhN). From all newspapers we selected articles for the period between September 2012, shortly after the Huizinge earthquake, and the end of May 2018, 2 months after the Minister of Economic Affairs had announced to terminate gas-production in 2030. From the LexisNexis academic NL-database we retrieved 2176 articles for the five national newspapers and 3269 for DvhN. Within this material we decided to focus on four episodes during which the controversy escalated and subnational politicians were most vocal in their political governance through emotional storylines, limiting our analysis to a total of 2381 articles, 1080 from the five national newspapers and 1301 from DvhN. The four episodes are: "Shocking earthquakes" January–April 2013; "The report, the gas decision and the public hearing" November 2013-February 2014; "Dominant economic motives" December 2014-April 2015; and "The protocol and the historical announcement" January–March 2018. Of course, media framing does play a role here and may have created a bias in the data toward more strongly expressed emotions as carrying more news value (Harcup and O'Neill 2016). Therefore, we triangulated the media material with an analysis of policy documents from Dutch parliament and from the regional authority of Groningen. From 1061 parliamentary policy documents, 36 were analysed related to the four episodes mentioned above. And from a corpus of 259 policy documents from the regional authority the analysis focused on 32, again related to the four episodes, leading to a total of 68 analysed policy documents.

We coded the newspaper articles and the policy documents inductively with Atlas.ti with regular crosschecking of how text and codes were interpreted. In the newspaper material, we only coded direct quotes by government leaders, thus leaving out emotions attributed to them by journalists. Besides using administrative codes for types of articles and for government leaders from different levels of government, we coded emotional storylines by looking for emotion words that directly mention emotions. This is a form of analysis that was invented by Newman (2012) and has been further developed by Verhoeven and Duyvendak (2015) and Verhoeven and Metze (2022). The coding of emotions words was always done in context of the sentence(s) in which they can be found. Simple examples are phrases such as "we are very *angry* about..." or "the minister cannot be *trusted*" (Newman 2012; Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2015). In addition, we coded for metaphors that indirectly refer to emotions, a method suggested by Edwards (1999). An example is using "heat" to express anger: "people are hot under the collar", or "they will be in for a hot summer" (Edwards 1999; Verhoeven and Duyvendak 2015). Similar to the coding of emotion words, the coding of metaphors was always done in the contexts of sentences in which they can be found. So, the whole sentence or even a couple of sentences are coded as containing references to discrete emotions or metaphors referring to such emotions. The main reason for this is that within interpretivism words always need to be interpreted in their context (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). By coding in this way and subsequently retrieving all sets of sentences for each discrete emotion per episode of the conflict through Atlas.ti, we were able to form an idea of the emotional storylines per discrete emotion per episode.

In a secondary analysis of these emotional storylines in their context, we identified the *objects* to which the government leaders related their emotional storylines, to establish the emotion-object relations posited by Ahmed (2014). After comparing these emotional storylines and their objects, we were able to identify the patterns in how government leaders contributed to the construction of the wicked problem of the gasquakes as part of their political governance over time. From all these materials, we selected the most representative quotes to illustrate the emotional storylines expressed by government leaders during the four episodes.

## 4 | Results: The Wicked Problem Shifts From Substantive to Relational Dimensions

In this section, we discus in more detail four episodes in which the discursively expressed emotions by government leaders shifted from anxiety about the earthquakes (episode 1), to expressed feelings of anger towards and distrust of the national government and the NAM (episodes 2, 3 and a bit of 4). In episode four, the subnational government leaders recommitted to emotional storylines about anxiety related to the object of another heavy earthquake and maintained their anger storylines about the minister and the NAM. But they also attached more 'positive' emotional storylines to new policy measures (a damage protocol and the decision to terminate all gas-production by 2030).

### 4.1 | Episode 1 "Shocking Earthquakes"

On the evening of 16 August 2012 at 22:31 the people of the small village of Huizinge heard an enormous growling and roaring sound. For about 9 s their houses were shaking and moving back and forth, walls were squeaking and outside the landscape undulated. An earthquake of 3.6 on the scale of Richter scared them and caused damage to many houses. A few months later, in the beginning of 2013, The Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute (KNMI) published a report that confirmed the suspicion that the increase in trembles and earthquakes is related to gas-production (KNMI 2013). This report was followed by the State supervision of the Mines (SodM) that advised Henk Kamp, the Minister of Economic Affairs, to lower gas-production. The Minister did not act immediately but commissioned more investigations on the relationship between gas-production and the earthquakes (*NRC* 28 January 2013). The earthquake, the report, and the advice sparked a first episode of controversy in which subnational



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government leaders, the Minister and members of parliament articulated emotional storylines.

The subnational government leaders in this episode prominently used anxiety storylines, to express concerns about safety and risks of more earthquakes. For example, the regional deputy employed such anxiety storylines as follows:

> *I am* scared *by the risks for North-Groningen. Earthquakes of 5 on Richter's scale. That is quite something. (...) The minister should come to explain why North-Groningen is exposed to these risks. He should take away the* anxiety *among people that things get out of control.*
>
> (*DvhN* January 26, 2013)

And as the mayor of one of the towns in the region put it: 'There are *concerns* here about heavier earthquakes caused by gas-production in Groningen. People are getting *scared*, asking: how does this end?' (*NRC* February 7, 2013). Another example comes from a letter to Parliament by subnational government leaders after some smaller earthquakes: "With eight earthquakes in 5 days, turmoil amongst our inhabitants increases. The feelings of *unsafety* are substantial and growing" (*DvhN* February 13, 2013). A few days before a visit to the region, the minister articulated that he understood the emotions (uncertainties and worries) of the residents:

> *That I understand very well that they are* uncertain *and* worried *and that it is my responsibility to do something about it. It is important that we gather all information as soon as possible and that we announce it. Sunday I will go to the area and will stay for a couple of days to deliberate with the government leaders and the people and to hear their story. I find good communication very important. The people should exactly know what is going on.*
>
> (*DvhN* January 26, 2013)

A second emotional storyline that subnational government leaders articulated during this episode focused on trustworthiness. The argument in this storyline was that to prevent a deepening of anxiety amongst the people of Groningen, the national government needed to act trustworthy by taking adequate measures. Government leaders from the regional authority frequently used such storylines, for example: "It cannot be the case that citizens and businesses suffer indirect damages or are affected by drawbacks as such. A *trustworthy* and *proactive* approach of this issue is required" (*DvhN* February 9, 2013). The minister at that moment did not react to these trustworthiness storylines. Besides his understanding for people's uncertainty, which he repeated at a later stage during a parliamentary debate after the KNMI report came out (Tweede Kamer 2012–2013a, 3), emotional storylines were strikingly absent from the minister's communication. Instead, he emphasized the need for more knowledge and commissioning reports to be able to make sound decisions. However, members of parliament did respond to the regional politician's trustworthiness storyline by articulating that trust needed to be restored. One member of the Social Democratic party for instance said:

**TABLE 1** | Summary of emotional storylines Episode 1.

| Actors | Object | Expressed emotion |
|---|---|---|
| Subnational government leaders | Earthquake | Scare, anxiety, concerns, feelings of unsafety |
| | National government | Distrust |
| The minister | Earthquake | Uncertainty, worry |
| MP's | Houses, NAM, national government | Distrust |

> *In the path of restoring the* damaged trust*, the safety of the people of Groningen must now be the priority. (...) Damage has been done to the* trust *in your own home, your own village. Damage has been done to the* trust *in NAM and damage has been done to the* trust *in the Dutch government.*
>
> (Tweede Kamer 2012–2013b, 1)

Besides acknowledging the breach of trust, the members of parliament did not propose many concrete solutions, and the few proposals that were made did not gather a majority vote (Table 1).

## 4.2 | Episode 2: Distrust and Anger About Officials

The second episode in this controversy was triggered in November 2013 when a report was issued on the sustainable future of the North-East of Groningen, written by a commission of experts and ex-government leaders. In the report entitled "*Trust* in a sustainable future" the commission wrote: "These feelings of 'not being heard' and 'not being taken seriously' form together with feelings of *distrust* toward the NAM and the national government a potentially explosive mixture" (Commissie duurzame toekomst Noord-Oost Groningen 2013, 24). After the report came out, the minister at first did not respond. This led subnational government leaders to strengthen distrust storylines, as is for example the case with the leader of the regional authority who argued that decision-making and policy making fell short and fed distrust:

> *The* breach of trust only grows *the longer the answer by the government to* uncertainties *concerning the safety of gas-production and proposals to maintain liveability fail to appear. It feeds the thought that nothing will come from safety and compensation.*
>
> (*DvhN* December 21, 2013)

On top of these distrust storylines, government leaders also developed some anger storylines. At the presentation of the report, a member of the committee and well-known ex-government leader for example voiced the growing anger



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among the people in the region: "Before the North becomes *angry*, a lot has to happen. The North has also benefited from gas-production, but that does not mean that you have to accept everything" (*DvhN* November 2, 2013).

Another event that marked this second episode of controversy was what we label the "gas decision" by the Minister of Economic Affairs in January 2014. The Minister came to the village of Loppersum to explain that he had decided to reduce gas-production in that specific area in the center of many earthquakes. In addition, he decided that 1.2 billion Euros were going to be invested for repair and reconstruction of buildings; and citizens were to be involved in further decision making. The Minister also acknowledged that home-owners needed to be compensated for the loss in value of their homes. A national newspaper reported on the Loppersum meeting:

> *Kamp understands the inhabitants, he says in the town hall. He feels for them. "These are quiet and reasonable people that are* concerned *about their safety in the beautiful Groningen countryside". While he says that, protestors are breaking through the police cordon. With dozens they bang on the windows of the hall where the minister speaks. The ringing and the jeering of the crowd is close by. For a moment Kamp is silent, but then he continues to tell his story to console the inhabitants.*
>
> (*De Volkskrant* January 18, 2014)

After this meeting the Minister was criticized for not taking emotions seriously. In an interview he argued that a rational approach was needed: "I understand their [the people's] feelings very well. But that does not release me from the duty to take *rational decisions*" (*AD* January 25, 2014). However, in a letter to parliament the minister showed more understanding. He deployed trust storylines by acknowledging the breach of trust that subnational government leaders had voiced so prominently, for example: "Understanding, recognition, meaningful action, concrete improvements, a willingness to listen and to engage in realistic consultation are all needed to *regain the trust* of the Groningers" (Tweede Kamer 2013–2014a, 9). The agreement with the region had the telling title "*Trust* in repair and repair of *trust*". In a debate with the minister about the agreement, members of parliament were very fierce because it had been revealed that gas-production had gone up rather than down in the year following the Huizinge earthquake. They used distrust and anger storylines to reinforce their argument and to recognize the emotions in the region, as in these examples "(...) [that] on the way to restoring the damaged *trust*, the safety of the Groningers must now really come first" and "The Minister knows by now how *angry* the Groningers are. The political question of this debate is: why has the Minister allowed the *anger* in Groningen to escalate so far?" (Tweede Kamer 2013–2014b, 10).

Another important event during this episode was a public hearing by the committee of economic affairs from the Dutch Parliament on location in the city of Groningen. Regional government leaders were rather disappointed and even stronger articulated distrust storylines blended with critical arguments about the national governments' political performance. This time they also threw in some of their previous appeals to anxiety and safety:

> *We had to build pressure to get something done", says commissioner of the King Max van den Berg [the leader of the region]. Not with the desired result. As far as the provincial government is concerned the* trust *in "The Hague" [seat of the Dutch national government] is further violated. "That is caused by not following up on the advice by State supervision of the Mines to reduce gas-production", as deputy Bote Wilpstra (D66) puts it. "It has not contributed to a* feeling of safety. *On the contrary the* feeling of unsafety *has been strengthened.*
>
> (*DvhN* January 28, 2014, quotation marks in original)

Almost all emotional storylines during this episode move away from the substantive issues such as the risks for people and their homes or other effects, and move towards critiquing the NAM and the minister, as can be seen in Table 2, This is enabled by the shift in the object from substance to relations with people and organisations.

### 4.3 | Episode 3 Relational Conflict: Distrust and Anger

The third episode was induced by a series of events in January and February 2015. In this episode, the cause of the earthquakes was no longer centre of the societal debate. The first event was a parliamentary debate about yet another decision by the minister on gas-production. Before this debate subnational government leaders made themselves heard via the media. The municipal council of Loppersum stated that trust in the minister and the NAM had reached an all-time low. The point was made by Lies Oldenhof from the social democrats (PvdA):

> *Lies Oldenhof from the PvdA has no more* trust *in the NAM and the minister. She plead for a strong declaration by the municipal council. Oldenhof does not want to*

**TABLE 2** | Summary of emotional storylines episode 2.

| Actors | Object | Expressed emotion |
|---|---|---|
| Subnational government leaders | NAM | Distrust |
| | The minister | Feelings of misrecognition, distrust, anger |
| | Gas-production | Feelings of unsafety, uncertainty |
| The minister | Inhabitants | Concern, recognition, trust |
| MP's | National government | Distrust |
| | The minister | Anger |



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*hear about more research. "We talk about a dragon. You chop off one head, and another grows back on. The problem has become an uncontrollable issue".*

(*DvhN* January 20, 2015, quotation marks in original)

The dragon metaphor refers to the Hydra of Lerna, a dragon from Greek Mythology with many heads. After a head was cut off, two more heads grew back. In this struggle the dragon represents the NAM and the minister who proof to be unreliable partners. After the parliamentary debate subnational government leaders remained critical and continued with distrust storylines, as in these examples from a regional deputy and a mayor. Regional deputy William Moorlag stated: "pumping back value and *trust* into the gas-production area is a long way to go" (*DvhN* February 16, 2015), while mayor Eduard van Zuijlen from Menterwolde put it as follows: "He [the minister] makes it difficult for us as mayors by his technocratic attitude. That leads to more *distrust* under the population" (*DvhN* February 14, 2015).

A few days after the parliamentary debate on the gas decision the Dutch Safety Board (Onderzoeksraad Voor Veiligheid) published a report on the historical context of decision-making about gas-production. The conclusions were devastating: economic interests had always prevailed in the decision-making and attention to the safety of the inhabitants in the area had been too low. The board advised to fundamentally change the decision-making processes on the production and the sales of natural gas. Municipalities and regional authorities should have more to say in these processes to represent the voice of citizens (*De Volkskrant* February 19, 2015). The reactions by subnational government leaders were furious:

*According to the mayor of Groningen Peter den Oudsten the people of Groningen have been "*mislead shamefully*". He calls for a Parliamentary investigation.*

(*De Volkskrant* February 19, 2015, quotation marks in original)

*The PvdA deputy William Moorlag reacts very annoyed. He expects an apology, particularly to the people that concluded years ago that gas-production leads to earthquakes. "*Their remarks were put aside as nonsense*. They should be rehabilitated in retrospect." Moorlag finds the report shocking. "Safety was subordinate to financial interests. The gas bastion needs to be forced open".*

(*DvhN* February 19, 2015, quotation marks in original)

The focus in these storylines is in the unjustifiable acts by the national government and the NAM and on restoring a violation of the moral order (forcing open the gas bastion). Such unjustifiable acts and violations of morality are strongly connected to anger in emotion literature (Jasper 2018).

A few weeks later the minister reacted to these distrust and anger storylines by publicly offering his apologies on tv. The next day he was called to parliament for a debate. The MP's predominant emotional storylines voiced anger and distrust. Anger storylines focused on the minister saying sorry only 2 weeks after the critical report came out by connecting his sorry to the wrongdoings presented in the report: "Sorry, Groningen, we didn't think about your safety" (Tweede Kamer 2014–2015a, 1). Again, the violation of the moral order is key here in how anger is expressed. The distrust storylines focused mainly on the necessary restoration of trust by demanding concrete and appropriate measures from the minister, for example:

*As far as we are concerned, this debate is all about* restoring trust*. That* trust *has been firmly, very firmly damaged. (...) As far as we are concerned, words should be accompanied by deeds. If you want to work seriously on* restoring trust*, then it will depend above all on that, not later but right now.*

(Tweede Kamer 2014–2015a, 3)

In his answers to the MP's the minister again offered his apologies, but he did not use any emotional storylines. Only a month later in a letter to parliament in which he reacted officially to the critical report, the minister employed a trust storyline: "The *trust* of the inhabitants of Groningen must be earned anew by the government, NAM and other parties involved in gas-production" (Tweede Kamer 2014–2015b, 2).

The emotional storylines in this episode all reflect a deepening of the object shift from substance to relations that occurred in episode 2. In episode 3 there was no substance left because the events of the gas-decision and the publication of the critical report made the government leaders entirely focus on relational critique on people and organisations (see Table 3).

### 4.4 | Episode 4 "Recognition: The Protocol and the Historical Announcement"

The fourth episode started with another heavy earthquake of 3.4 on the Richter scale at the town of Zeerijp. The earthquake falsified theories that the lowering of gas-production would prevent further heavy earthquakes and subsequent damages. The new minister of Economic Affairs, who had been in office for less than 3 months, visited the region immediately. His emotional storylines referred to horror and anger by typifying the earthquake as "horrendous" for the people in the area (*DvhN* January 9, 2018) and by stating: "if I would live here, I would also be *angry*" (*AD* January 11, 2018). The minister connected these emotional storylines to statements about a great need to reduce gas-production.

**TABLE 3** | Summary of emotional storylines episode 3.

| Actors | Object | Expressed emotion |
|---|---|---|
| Subnational government leaders | NAM | Distrust, anger |
| | The minister | Distrust, anger |
| The minister | Inhabitants | Trust |
| MP's | The minister | Anger, distrust |



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Meanwhile, subnational government leaders continued with their anger storylines but also referred to anxiety, linked to the poor handling of old damages and to the new damage caused by the earthquake near the town of Zeerijp. The leader of the regional authority for example put it this way:

> *But I know what the damage looks like, everyone knows what it looks like, we've been through it so many times. (...) The* frustration *is enormous. You only have one chance to do it right. If you mess it up,* frustration *and* insecurity *will increase even further.*
>
> (*Trouw* January 9, 2018)

Anxiety storylines did not only refer to insecurity, but also to uncertainty, as for example in this quote by a mayor who spoke about the consequences of the earthquake: "Many people hoped that the worst was over. Now we are back to square one. There's a lot of *uncertainty* about the future again" (*DvhN* January 10, 2018).

Subnational government leaders' storylines about fear, anxiety, frustration and distrust were gradually replaced by storylines about hope and enthusiasm when the new minister announced a new damage protocol in which the national government took over responsibility for all damages from the NAM. We see the more "positive" emotional storylines of subnational government leaders about the policy, for example, in the leader of the regional authority referring to enthusiasm and hope: "This protocol is a piece of text, which must become reality through actual behaviour. But we are very *enthusiastic* about the turn the process has taken under the new minister. That makes us *hopeful*" (*AD* February 1, 2018). Subnational government leaders clearly make more positive interpretations of this policy change, which is reflected in their emotional storylines.

The dynamic of "positive" emotional storylines continued when the minister unexpectedly on March 29, 2018 announced the historical decision to stop gas-production before 2030 and to significantly lower production before 2022. At the occasion of the announcement the minister employed a happiness storyline: "If I would live there, I would be *happy*. (...) I have fought for them. (...) Groningen can remain Groningen" (*AD* March 30, 2018). This announcement strengthened enthusiasm storylines by subnational government leaders, as in this example of a regional deputy: "The gas tap is closing and that's great news. The problem is being tackled at the source, and I read in the Ministers letter that this will be done as soon as possible. Faster than fast" (*Trouw* March 30, 2018). Again, positive interpretations of policy change are reflected in the emotional storylines. However, the ministers plan also triggered ambiguous emotional storylines carrying happiness and anxiety, such as with mayor Albert Roodenboog from the municipality of Loppersum amid the earthquake area:

> *In the end the new minister got the benefit of the doubt in the region, which he realized all too well himself by using a trust storyline: "Of course, it is first see, then believe. (...)* Confidence *is not yet back. That is a fact".*
>
> (*NRC* March 29, 2018)

**TABLE 4** | Summary of emotional storylines episode 4.

| Actors | Object | Expressed emotion |
|---|---|---|
| Subnational government leaders | The minister | Anger |
| | Earthquake | Anxiety, uncertainty |
| | Damage protocol | Enthusiasm, hope |
| | Decision stop 2030 | Enthusiasm, Happiness |
| The minister | Inhabitants | Horror, anger, confidence |
| | Decision stop 2030 | Happiness |

In episode 4 we see some of the anxiety related storylines related to substantive issues such as risks and damages returning due to the earthquake and how it was interpreted by government leaders, including the minister. We also see how the shift towards relational critique on people and organizations continued for a little while, until it was mostly crowded out by the enthusiasm, hope and happiness related emotional storylines by subnational government leaders in reaction to the minister's decision to stop gas-production in the area by at the latest by 2030. This is reflected in Table 4.

## 5 | Discussion

Recent work on the governance of wicked problems draws attention to the political dimensions and empirically shows that government leaders in democracies govern wicked problems not only through learning and reflection; but also, by avoidance and denial of the complexities; authoritative coercive controls; micro-management of problem elements; technocratic problem-solving; incremental adjustment; stakeholder collaboration; and "coping" strategies (Head 2022, 41). In this study we focussed on the emotional storylines expressed by government leaders at different layers in government in the case of earthquakes induced by natural gas-production and we explored if and how this became part of the political governance by government leaders.

Our results show *how* the "object" of the expressed emotions by government leaders shifted from the substance and effects of gasquakes (episode 1 and a bit in episode 2) towards blaming national government leaders and the NAM (episode 2 and onwards). The emotional storylines were no longer about concern and anxiety related to damages and potential new gasquakes but shifted to anger about how national government leaders responded and to distrust in their willingness to make changes for the better. Subnational government leaders were "blaming" national government leaders in episode two and three and the NAM in episode three, therefore making them more responsible (see Hansson 2015).

Our analysis not only shows how the emotional dimension contributed to the construction of wickedness of the policy problem, but also that this emotional dimension is dynamical



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and that in the first episode the object of emotion was the substance but over time this shifted towards a more relational object. This continued in the fourth episode, until the new minister introduced policy measures that cause a shift to positive emotional storylines that focus explicitly on objects such as the damage protocol and, above all, the decision to stop gas-production in 2030. Here we see how subnational government leaders express more "positive" emotions to signal their interpretations of the nationally proposed solutions. The general development of emotional storylines in relation to different "objects" seems consistent with literature suggesting that policy controversies over time can shift in focus from substantive dimensions towards a greater emphasis on the procedures and the relations (Wolf 2021).

The results also show that government leaders, through emotional storylines, contribute to an increased complexity of the wicked problem. The wickedness of the policy problem can extend beyond mere contestation and framing of facts (Schön and Rein 1994), moving towards the procedural or relational elements of policy controversies. This pushes the boundaries of the substantive and normative dimensions on which much of the wicked problems literature has focused hitherto.

All these results signify that emotional storylines are part of the political governance of wicked problems. In the first three episodes, for example, the minister initially adopted a technocratic approach focused on rational decision-making and initially proposed symbolic measures such as more investigations into the causes of the gasquakes (compare Head 2022). Only when pressure from subnational government leaders and MPs increased, focusing more on distrust and anger directed at the government in general and the minister in particular, as well as at the NAM, did the minister become more empathetic by acknowledging the feelings and problems experienced by the population of the affected area and by introducing more drastic measures. The exchange of emotional storylines in relation to the objects they focus on thus formed an important part of government leaders' efforts, complementing and interacting with the political strategies we already know from the literature on wicked problems (Head 2022).

These chances in the political governance by government leaders seems to have been propelled by dynamics in the emotion-object relations. Due to new events (such as a new earthquake), new policy texts (such as the critical report by the Dutch safety authority), or new actions by government leaders (such as the minister taking a gas-decision), government actors shifted their expressed emotions towards these new objects and developed new emotional storylines. This added a new interpretation of the wickedness, including a contestation of what is the problem. For some actors this may have been a staged performance of emotional storylines (compare Hajer 2009), but our current materials cannot confirm this dramaturgy of emotions.

The conceptual and methodological innovations, and empirical exploration come with limitations, but also offer relevant insights for other studies of wicked problems. Limitations are that this is a single case study in one country of an exploratory nature in which we further developed the idea of government leaders constructing the wickedness of problems through their expression of emotional storylines in relation to objects. Generalization of these dynamics is not possible without further research. In addition, more in depth data from meetings, participant observations and recordings could have led to better insights in how the meanings of emotions were negotiated, and performed, and how these contributed to the social construction of the gasquakes as a wicked problem. Also, further teasing out what emotional storylines are related to what "objects" offers promising avenues to (1) conduct comparative cases studies (2) combine interpretive analysis with a big data analysis of all media material and all policy documents, to analyse if there are deeper patterns in the emotional storylines and a greater variety of objects these are related to. This would also allow for cross-case comparisons that can confirm similar forms of emotional storylines by government leaders or reveal entirely new ones that may be explained by cultural differences. Such cultural differences in expression of emotions and rules of what emotions are acceptable are for instance very salient between western and non-western countries (Mesquita 2022).

Our findings may also be relevant to other types of contested policy problems than natural gas-production. With the energy transition underway and the emphasis on sustainability, it is to be expected that more similar cases will arise, in which vested interests first become part of the controversy before they are broken down, or in which sustainable forms of energy initially generate a lot of resistance before they are accepted. In almost all of these cases, the national government is part of the emergence of a contested policy problem because it clings to a form of energy production that yields high returns, or because it advocates new forms of energy that can generate considerable resistance from subnational government leaders and citizens who see them as a threat to their communities and way of life (Verhoeven 2026). In all cases, studying the use of emotional storylines in relation to specific objects can provide valuable insight into the construction of wicked problems and thus into the political strategies government leaders use to deal with them.

## 6 | Conclusions

For ontological, epistemological, and practical reasons, we argued that the notion of wicked problems should be re-conceptualized to better reflect the role of emotional dimensions as studied by interpretive researchers in policy controversies, and how emotional meaning is relational by being related to objects and by circulating in relations between actors as in Sarah Ahmed's work. We analysed shifting emotional storylines expressed by subnational and national government leaders' political governance of the gasquakes case in the Netherlands. The results show that in four episodes, the patterns in emotional storylines of subnational governments shifted from anxiety about the earthquakes (episode 1), to expressed feelings of anger towards and distrust of the national government and the NAM (episodes 2, 3 and a bit of 4). In episode four, the subnational government leaders recommitted to emotional storylines about anxiety related to the object of another heavy earthquake (the event) and maintained their anger storylines about the minister and the NAM. But they also attached more "positive" emotional storylines to new policy measures (a damage protocol and on the termination of all gas-production by 2030). The results indicate that in the social construction of wicked problems, and their



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political governance, discursively expressed emotions shift over time and shift from being about the substance, to the relations between government leaders on different layers of government and to relations with the NAM. In the course of time, the "objects" of emotions became people. In line with Ahmed (2014) work, this also shows the relevance of studying the relational—understood as changing relations between emotions and objects and as changing relations between government leaders—as important aspects of the social construction of wicked problems.


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### Ethics Statement

The data collection for this paper were publicly accessible newspaper articles. We conducted background interviews and asked for consent to record. We did not use direct quotes or personal data in this paper.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions. The data set was coded in atlas.ti. On request it can be shared.

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