**A common response to blame?** *Elite expectations of minister´s blame management tactics in two political cultures*

*Minou de Ruiter*

*Utrecht University*

***Abstract (248 words)*** *: In response to blameworthy events, ministers can influence their political fate by convincing the elite actors who actively determine their fate (media, parliamentary majorities, the Premier, fellow ministers, and top civil servants) that they are not to blame, or at least should not be punished. Ministers use blame management strategies to achieve this aim. The question remains whether elite actors in opposite political environments prefer similar blame management from their ministers, or whether they prefer different blame management strategies. Ministers can either use strategies which <u>confront</u> or <u>accommodate</u> other elite actors. I expect that elite actors in majoritarian systems prefer ministers to use confrontational strategies after blameworthy events, while elite actors in consociational systems prefer accommodative strategies. This paper presents a report of 62 qualitative vignette-interviews conducted in the Netherlands and the state of New South Wales, Australia. Qualitative vignettes consist of series of standardized hypothetical incidents to which interviewees are invited to respond, thereby enabling the interviewer to extract groups norms from actors in opposite systems. NSW interviewees generally preferred more confrontational strategies, such as counter attacks and scapegoating, while Dutch interviewees preferred more accommodative strategies, such as excuses and apologies. To conclude, elite actors in opposite systems expect different blame management strategies from ministers.*

'Survival depends on the ability to mount a successful response to threat' (Taylor et al, 2000; 411)


**Word count paper: 8438 words (without reference list and appendix)**

## 5.1 Should ministers 'flight-or-fight' or 'tend-and-befriend' in blame games?

'Fight or flight' and 'tend and befriend' are two response mechanisms to describe how animals and humans typically respond to stress and external threats to their survival. The classic theory of 'fight or flight' by physiologist Cannon (1932) argues that animals and humans are primed to respond to external threats by either fighting with or fleeing from the threat. Recently, psychologists Taylor and colleagues (2000) argued that females, both human and animal, do not respond by with fight or flight, but are rather primed to respond to external threats by a 'tend and befriend' response. According to the 'tend and befriend' response, humans respond to threats by protecting and calming offspring while blending into the environment (tending) and seeking out their social group for mutual defense (befriending).

Similar to the animals and humans described above, ministers also have response mechanisms to ward off stress and threats to their survival in the political arena. Ministers' political lives are increasingly hazardous. In most parliamentary democracies, more ministers are being called to resign, and more are actually resigning (Dowding and Lewis, 2012; Bovens et al, 2015). Ministers are increasingly being called to account for blameworthy events, such as integrity scandals or policy failures. Ministers can influence their political survival by convincing elite actors that they are not to blame, or at least should not be punished (Boin et al, 2009; Brändström & Kuipers, 2003; Althaus, 2008). Elite actors who are involved in blame games, and who determine ministers' fates, are parliamentarians, other ministers, journalists and civil servants. Ministers use blame management strategies to convince these actors. Broadly, blame management strategies can be divided into strategies that ministers use to confront these elite actors and strategies that ministers use to accommodate them. In other words, ministers' strategies in blame games either fall in the 'fight or flight', meaning confrontational, strategies, or the 'tend and befriend', meaning accommodative, strategies.

In general, ministers can use both accommodative and confrontational strategies in response to a single allegation. However, how ministers respond to threats to their survival is influenced by the political and social environment they find themselves in (Olsen, 2015). Whether ministers use accommodative or confrontational strategies might depend on the nature of the political and cultural system the ministers work in. In other words, how ministers and elite actors behave during blame games could depend on the nature of the political system in which they interact.

However, comparative empirical research efforts in blame avoidance research are sparse (Hinterleitner, 2015; Brandstrom and Kuipers, 2003, cf). Most empirical studies on the use and efficacy of

these reactive blame management strategies after blameworthy events lack a systematic incorporation of 'context', in the form of issue-related or system-specific contextual factors (Hinterleitner and Sager, 2015; Hinterleitner, 2015; Brändström and Kuipers, 2003). Therefore, we do not know to what extent elite actors' interpretations of blame management are shaped by the institutional and political environment they work in. This study poses the question: To what extent do elite actors in opposite political environments prefer or sanction confrontational or accommodative strategies after blameworthy events?

Lijphart (1999) distinguished between consociational and Westminster-type majoritarian systems. In a Westminster majoritarian system, elite actors compete for power and practice decision-making through simple majorities. In a consociational system however, elite actors often share power among themselves in the form of coalitions and focus on decision-making through compromises (Lijphart, 2012; Andeweg, 2000). Majoritarian and consociational systems therefore tend to create opposite elite behaviour among ministers and other elite actors. Ministers and elite actors in majoritarian and consociational systems would be expected to have different ideas about how ministers should respond to blameworthy events.

I hypothetize elite actors in majoritarian systems to prefer confrontational strategies after blameworthy events and to sanction accommodative strategies. By contrast, elite actors in consociational systems are hypothesized to prefer accommodative strategies and to sanction confrontational strategies. In order to 'test' this expectation, I compare how elite actors from a majoritarian parliamentary system, New South Wales, and a consociational parliamentary system, the Netherlands, assess and evaluate various blame management strategies used by ministers after blameworthy events. Specifically, this chapter analyses 62 qualitative vignette-interviews with (former) ministers, parliamentarians, journalists and civil servants in the Netherlands and New South Wales to assess the central expectation.

Section 5.2 addresses blame management, blame games and the staged retreat conceptualization of Hood and others (2009). This section also shows how the strategies in each blame management stage score on the confrontational-accommodative axis. Section 5.3 explains the central thesis of this study regarding how ministers are expected to respond in majoritarian and consociational systems. Section 5.4 shows the design and methods used in this study. Section 5.5 provides a first, quantitative, overview of how the Dutch and the NSW elite actors score on this confrontational-accommodative axis, i.e. whether they mention ministers who employ either fight-or-flight strategies or tend-and-befriend strategies. Section 5.6 provides an overview of how the elite actors interpret the

strategies they mentioned in the problem denial phase, the responsibility denial phase and the problem and responsibility admission. This sections discusses how Dutch and NSW elite actors interpretations regarding under which conditions ministers can use these strategies and the outcomes and morality of these strategies. Section 5.7 compares the overall commonalities and differences in how Dutch and NSW elite actors perceive various blame management strategies and assesses the validity of the dichotomy. Section 5.8 ends with a conclusion and discussion.

### 5.2 Blame management strategies – a staged retreat

Blame avoidance research within public administration mostly starts from the assumption that political actors have an inherent aversion to loss, whether it is in terms of policy or in terms of office, and that to avoid these losses, actors engage in pre-emptive blame avoidance or reactive blame management strategies (Weaver, 1986; Pierson, 1994). According to Hood and others (2015) blame is conventionally defined as a combination of perceived avoidable harm or loss and perceived responsibility at any given point in time (cf, Sulitzeanu-Kenan and Hood; 2005; Hood, 2011). Which strategy is appropriate depends on whether the blame can be completely avoided, or whether the blame game is already going on and can only be managed (McGraw, 1991; 1135).

This study focuses on periods when a blameworthy event has occurred and a blame game has started; when political executives have to rely on reactive (discursive) blame management strategies. When an event is framed as a 'blameworthy event', it sparks lots of 'media attention and political upheaval' up to a point where 'some sort of catharsis is required to alleviate it' (Brändström & Kuipers, 2003; 279). This catharsis could be the resignation of a minister. Therefore, it is important for ministers to 'monitor or even join the political processes that lead to the construction of policy fiascos' (Bovens et al, 1999; 124; cf. McGraw, 1991; 1133). Blame games can be described as framing contests in which political executives and other (elite) actors try to shape and construct public interpretations (Edelman, 1977; 1988; De Vries, 2004). According to Brändström and Kuipers (2003) these discursive contests often move through three stages: significance of the incident (are core values threatened or not), the causality for the incident (who is the agent responsible for the incident) and consequences for the incident.

Many authors provided typologies for strategies political executives can employ in each stage (Hood, 2011; Weaver, 1986; McGraw, 1990; 1991; Boin et al, 2009; Bovens et al, 1999). Generally, these strategies (some call them tactics or accounts) are arranged from a defensive stance, such as counter attacks and denial, to an accommodative stance, such as apologizing or resigning (Resodihardjo et al,

2015). According to Coombs (2007; 143) this order points to executives' need to change tactics over time because as 'the reputational threat increases, crisis teams should use more accommodative strategies'. Within these defensive-to-accommodative typologies, Hood and others' (2011) has provided the most powerful 'staged retreat' typology of political executives. The three stages, defined by Brändström and Kuipers (2003), delineate the strategies: in the first stage the executive will focus on defensive (here: confrontational) strategies of problem denial or on problem denial with responsibility admission (PD or PD + RA), then problem admission but responsibility denial (PA + RD) and in the last stage accommodative strategies of both problem and responsibility admission (PA + RA) (Hood et al, 2009).

The stages range from complete blame denial to blame acceptance. Therefore, the process is also called a 'staged retreat', as the minister gradually accepts more blame for an occurrence or responsibility for the outcomes of the event (Hood, 2009; Schütz, 1998; 121).  A visual presentation can be seen in Figure 5.1. The stages can thus generally be divided into confrontational (problem denial), middle range (problem admission but responsibility denial) and accommodative (problem and responsibility admission), However, multiple studies showed that this order of retreat does not always take place (Hearit, 2006; Hood et al, 2009). Indeed, Brandström and Kuipers concluded in their case study of politicized incidents that 'it is possible or even likely that actors switch and go back and forth within their positions, depending on the postures taken by others and the general 'public mood' about the issue' (2003; 304).
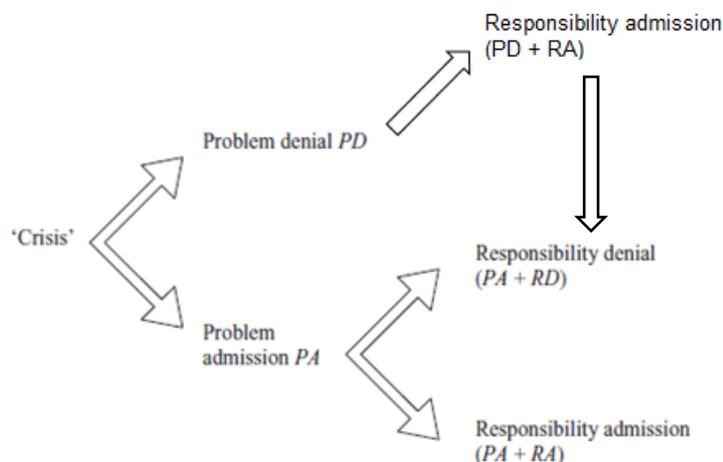


*Figure 5.1 Blame management phases: Staged retreat as explained by Hood et al (2009)*[1]

---

[1] *Note that responsibility admission but problem denial is added to the figure of Hood et al (2009): actors can acknowledge they are responsible for the crisis, but deny the 'crisis', or the harm generated by the crisis (problem denial).*

The strategies within each stage can also be divided into more confrontational and more accommodative stances. Lijphart's (1968) ideal types of elite behaviour can be used to distinguish confrontational strategies from accommodative ones. Elite actors behave in a 'spirit of accommodation' when they have: '1) a positive orientation to consensus, 2) a positive orientation to the common good, 3) support for established procedures, 4) support for preserving the institutional status quo, and 5) respect for political opponents and their positions' (Spinner, 2007; 47; based on: Lijphart, 1968). Strategies can thus be classified as an accommodative response when ministers accommodate opponents' perceptions of the event, focus on established procedures and try to depoliticize the issue. On the other hand, strategies can be classified as a confrontational response when ministers ignore or confront opponents' perceptions of the event, focus on specific outcomes, try to politicize the issue, and shift responsibility to specific other actors.

The first type of blame management strategies focuses on the denial of the severity of the incident, also called problem denial (Bovens et al, 1999; 141; Brandström & Kuipers, 2003; 290; Boin et al, 2009; 84; McGraw 1990, 1991). According to Bovens et al, political executives 'can argue that nothing happened' (1999; 141). However, the political risk of such problem denial is that political executives can be easily accused of ''blindness', 'passivity' and 'rigidity'' (Boin et al, 2009; 85). Problem denial often involves a counter attack on the actor who brought the event to light (Hansson, 2015). A counter-attack often takes the form of a 'negative other presentation', whether in the form blaming the victims in the event, discrediting opponents or threatening opponents (Hansson, 2015; 13). In a less confrontational stance, political executives can always deny the harm caused by the event, or that at least the 'the harm done was outweighed by the positive effects' and by compensation (Bovens et al, 1999; 142). McGraw (1990; 1991) powerfully identified these justifications political executives can use, which often focus on a reframing of the consequences caused by the incident or a reframing of the procedures, such as an appeal to fairness. All strategies can be distinguished as confrontational, with justifications clearly less confrontational than the pure problem denial and counterattack.

The second type of blame management strategies focuses on the (partial) denial of responsibility for the event. These strategies are often used when powerful actors have already decided that the incident is severe and 'questions about responsibility and blame are put squarely on the table' (Brandström & Kuipers, 2003; 291). This type of blame management strategies can be labeled as 'problem admission, but denial or postponement of responsibility' (Hood, 2011; Brandström and Kuipers, 2003). Political executives can potentially use four strategy types in this stage. The most confrontational strategy is the scapegoating of another actor, often a bureaucrat, framing that actor as responsible for

the event and sanctioning him (Polidano, 1999). Another strategy are excuses, in which the ministers deny responsibility in other ways, such as pleas of ignorance or arguing that their hands were bound by policies of predecessors (McGraw, 1991; 1136). The most accommodative strategy includes depoliticization, such as the announcement of a more or less independent commission of inquiry about the incident (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006; McConnell, 2003; Resodihardjo, 2006). According to Brandström and Kuipers, the installation of an inquiry serves a blame management purpose as an ''apolitical', time-consuming investigation process', which can effectively postpone parliamentary inquiry and media scrutiny (2003; 294). However, Resodihardjo and others show in their study of a local Dutch riot that the appointment of an inquiry can also be 'perceived as a whitewash' and therefore lead to more blame for the minister (2012; 239). Political executives in this stage  can choose between more confrontational strategies, such as diffusion of responsibility, and more accommodative strategies, such as excuses and independent inquiries.

In the last stages of the game, when all other tactics have failed, political executives can retreat to the third type of political strategies: apologies, 'repentance' and change, and even resignation (Bovens, 1999; 144; McGraw, 1991). According to Coombs, apologies can be defined as 'accepting responsibility for the crisis and asking for forgiveness' (2007; 253; cf. Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Drew, 1997). Coombs shows that apologies are often accompanied by regret, remorse and measures of reparation (2007; 253; cf. Benoit & Drew, 1997; Bovens et al, 1999). Measures of reparation often take the form of compensating harm, or even further: new policies, newly formed agencies, or other institutional measures to show the minister's commitment to ensure the event 'never happens again'. In the last stage, ministers can also acknowledge personal culpability and resign, although this happens rarely (Bovens et al, 2015). The strategies which admit both the problem and responsibility can clearly be grouped among accommodative strategies.

Table 5.1 shows the division of the blame management strategies in each stage into four categories along a confrontational-accommodative axis.

| Blame management stages | Strongly confrontational strategies | Moderately confrontational strategies | Moderately accommodative strategies | Strongly accommodative strategies |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Problem denial (but responsibility admission possible)* | Pure denial (ignoring stonewalling) Denial and counterattack | Limit the agenda; Justifications: reframing of consequences and reframing of procedures (McGraw, 1991) | ████████ | ████████ |
| *Problem admission but responsibility denial* | Vertical diffusion of responsibility (Scapegoating) | Horizontal diffusion of responsibility (network actors, collective responsibility) | Excuses (plea of ignorance, mistakes are made) | Depoliticization: announcing an Independent investigation |
| *Problem admission and responsibility admission* | ████████ | ████████ | Harm compensated (good money after bad) | acknowledgement of responsibility and apologies (institutional action-taking, i.e. agency and policy) Acknowledging personal culpability (possible resignation) |

*Table 5.1: division of strategies into confrontational and accommodative responses[2]*

According to Edelman, the persuasiveness of these reactive blame management strategies for each stage is shaped by the conventions and perceptions held by participants in the political world (Edelman, 1988; 96; Haider-Markel and Josly, 2001; 522). Political actors have different perceptions, goals and resources, which lead them to pursue different strategies in blame management (Hinterleitner, 2015; Boin et al, 2009; Hood, 2002). According to Haider-Markel en Josly (2001), a given frame can only be persuasive when it is line with the 'predispositions of those receiving the message' (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2001; 522). Blame avoidance strategies of ministers should be in line with the interpretations of other elite actors. Olsen explained in his article about political accountability that, in settled political systems 'repertoires of socially constructed and validated accounts and responses to accounts exist, influenced by what is intelligible, expected and anticipated, appropriate and legitimate in specific political-cultural contexts' Olsen, 2015; 459; cf. March and Olsen, 1995; Thompson 1987). Translated to this study, I expect that the political-cultural environment in which the minister and elite actors do their work affects how elite actors perceive ministers' blame management strategies. To be more concrete, I expect that in

[2] In this paper, I focus on blame management strategies, as defined in most blame literature as 'public' accounts or actions (McGraw, 1991; Hood et al, 2009). Although ministers could also try to manage blame by talking to elite actors behind the scenes, this paper focuses on the public blame game and therefore on how strategies are used and explained on the public stage by the elite actors.

some political environments elite actors prefer confrontational strategies, while elite actors in other political environments prefer accommodative strategies from ministers.

### 5.3 Opposite political elite environments – opposite blame management strategies?

If we follow Olsen' thesis that political elite actors are influenced by their political culture during accountability discussions, it is important to assess whether we can see this influence in blame management. In order to do so, we need to assess whether elite actors' perceptions are similar in two opposite parliamentary systems, which constitute opposite elite environments. I selected two political systems which are opposites on the majoritarian-consensual democracy scale of Lijphart (1999).

As explained, the Netherlands is a powerful example of a consociational parliamentary system (Lijphart, 1968; 211). The Netherlands features mostly broad multi-party coalitions, a strong working parliament with ample (policy) influence for the opposition (Andeweg, 2012), and proportional representation (Lijphart, 1990).  Consociational systems are characterized by fragmented, but stable systems in which numerous political parties represent societal subgroups in Parliament. Within and outside Parliament the party elites have to cooperate across party boundaries, due to the pressures of coalition cooperation (Beyers et al, 2014; 9). Although the Netherlands has recently experienced more adversarial politics in the electoral arena (Andeweg, 2008; Pennings and Keman, 2008), important consociational practices are still in place (Hendriks and Bovens, 201; Kickert, 2003). Long-standing consensual practices are still in place, which could 'reflect a political culture in which consultation has been considered more appropriate than antagonistic political behavior' (Beyers et al, 2014; 10). Therefore, I expect Dutch elite actors to prefer ministers who use more accommodative strategies in response to blameworthy events more than New South Wales elite actors.

Conversely, Australia (and New South Wales) is a clear majoritarian system in the Westminster tradition. New South Wales has one-party majority cabinets (Lijphart counts the Liberals and Nationals as one, 1999), executive dominance, a two-party system and disproportional electoral system and a pluralist interest group system (Lijphart, 1999). Majoritarian systems are characterized by centralized systems in which one party usually rules and the prime minister of this party exerts considerable influence. Within and outside parliament, there is much less need for cooperation between political adversaries, which makes political practices more antagonistic. Since the 1890s, the New South Wales Parliament is known as the 'Bear Pit', due to the 'confrontational style of debate' (Hesford, 2007; 137). Therefore, I expect NSW elite actors to prefer ministers who use more confrontational strategies in response to blameworthy events more than Dutch elite actors.

### 5.4 A qualitative vignette study

In order to gauge whether actors in the two political environments have different perceptions of blame management, a qualitative individual level design is most appropriate. Within comparative research, interviews are useful to  identify the categories and vocabularies used by institutional (elite) actors when formulating and arguing for their positions on practical issues (Miller, 1997). According to Aberman and Rockman (2002; 673) 'particularly elite interviewing, is often important if one needs to know what a set of people think, or how they interpret an event or series of events'. In this study, I conducted 61 open-ended, semi-structured elite interviews, to assess what elite actors perceive as leading rules for ministerial blame management in blame games in both systems. In the Netherlands, I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews between July and December 2014. In New South Wales, I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews between September and December 2015.

Interviewees were evenly distributed between the two systems and across four types of political elite actors: ex-ministers, top civil servants, parliamentarians and journalists. Within-group selection was based on relevant personal experience.[3] The resultant sample included variation on some key characteristics of each subgroup.[4] I used purposeful stratified sampling, starting with identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals' in each of the four groups 'that are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest' (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2011). Table 5.2 shows the variation of interviewees over the different groups and within each group. The way the interviewees are selected limits possibility to full representativeness and empirical generalization. However, the aim of the research is an exploration of how political actors differ in their assessment of ministerial blame management. The resultant sample is salient to the central aim of this research, but does not allow for empirical generalizations.

---

[3] I.e. the interviewees either experienced a resignation or had enough experience (multiple government terms) to have observed multiple political incidents.
[4] Although a spread over different positions does not completely guard the interviewer against self-serving or "party-line" accounts, it helps at least to diminish the bias to some extent (Berry, 2002; 680). The abundance of civil servants with a Justice Department in the Dutch case can be explained by the fact that the Justice-ministers are overrepresented in Dutch ministerial resignations (Bovens et al, 2014).

| Groups | Dutch interviews | Backgrounds represented within groups: | Australian interviews | Backgrounds represented within groups: |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Journalists* | 9 | Daily newspapers (5x), weekly political outlet (3x), TV (1x) | 5 | Daily newspapers (2x),Radio (2x), political historian/journalist (1x) |
| *Parliamentarians* | 7 | Party affiliations: Labor, Social liberals,  Conservative liberals, Socialists (2x)  Christian democrats (2x), Orthodox protestant | 5 | (no ministerial background): Labor (2x), Liberals (3x), |
| *Former ministers (some junior)* | 7 | Portfolio: Justice, Social affairs, Defense, Home affairs, Environment, Education Party affiliation: Cons. Liberals (3x), Labor (3x), Social liberals | 8 | Portfolio/position: Attorney General, Deputy Premier with multiple backgrounds (3x), Premier, Health (2x), Party affiliation: Nationals (2x), Labor (5x) |
| *Top civil servants + political staff* | 8 | Departmental background: Justice (5), Education, Economic Affairs, Environment | 13 | Departmental background: Justice (2x), Health (2x), Family Services, Education Political staff (1x Liberal ministers + 1x Nationals, 4x Labor) |
| **Total interviews:** | **31** | | **31** | |

*Table 5.2: Background of interviewees*

In the interviews, I combined open-ended questions with  qualitative vignettes. Vignettes are 'short stories about hypothetical characters in specified circumstances, to whose situations the interviewee is invited to respond' (Finch, 1987; 105). According to Bloor and Wood (2006; 183), qualitative vignettes can be described as:

> *A technique used in structured and depth interviews as well as focus groups, providing sketches of fictional (or fictionalized) scenarios. The respondent is then invited to imagine, drawing on his or her own experience, how the central character in the scenario will (and should) behave. Vignettes thus collect situated data on group values, group beliefs and group norms of behaviour. While in structured interviews respondents must choose from a multiple-choice menu of possible answers to a vignette, as used in depth interviews and focus groups, vignettes act as a stimulus to extended discussion of the scenario in question.*

The first advantage of these qualitative vignettes is their comparability, because they provide the opportunity to examine the interpretation of 'uniform' situations by different groups of interviewees (Barter and Renold, 1999). The combination of vignettes and open-ended questions ensured a balance between response validity, by providing interviewees room to articulate and explain their views (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; 674) and comparability, by allowing interviewees to reflect on comparable situations (Jenkins et al, 2010). The second advantage is that 'by putting themselves in the character's

place (or in the vignette situation), participants assume that the protagonist is exposed to the same group norms as themselves and so explicate those norms in their responses' (Jenkins et al, 2010; 180-181).

The third advantage is the hypothetical setting. Blame games are also sensitive topics, often involving adverse behavior by one or multiple elite actors, harm to social groups and violation of norms. Therefore, qualitative vignettes can help to create a safe setting for interviewees to give genuine responses, without endangering their current position (Wilks, 2004; 82; Jenkins et al, 2010; 181).[5]

In this research I used three versions of conventional developmental vignettes, in order to ask about 'common' blameworthy events. Developmental vignettes were used in this case, in order to ask interviewees on their interpretations of the three stages identified in 'blame games'[6]: the description of the blameworthy event (perceived harm), description of the reactive blame management of the minister (perceived responsibility) and the description of the consequences (outcome). Following the practice of Jenkins and others (2010), interviewees were asked to describe two critical incidents (relating to responsibility and resignation) they experienced and their general views on ministerial responsibility in incidents. After a short explanation, interviewees were asked to reflect on two or three qualitative vignettes[7]. After each stage of each vignette, the interviewees were invited to voice their thoughts on the event, what they imagined the (described) minister would do after this stage and what they thought (from their role) the minister should do. After the vignettes, questions were asked regarding interviewees' views on the most important contextual influences on whether a minister would stay in office, views on the most important players and arena's in the outcome of these discussions, possible changes of these discussion over time, the role of the media, and others (see appendix).

Qualitative vignettes need to adhere to three quality criteria. First, the situations must appear plausible and real (Barter and Renold, 1999; 2000). Similar to Rahman (1996), Hughes and others (2002) and Jenkins and others (2010), this research constructed the vignettes around historical examples, in this case five historical blame games (3 Dutch and 2 NSW examples). These were rewritten into three developmental vignettes. After every interview, the interviewees were asked whether the vignettes dealt with the core of the ideas about incidents and ministerial conduct and whether the vignettes were plausible. Despite the use of historical examples, the diverse background of the interviewees sometimes caused different views on the plausibility of the vignettes. I followed Jenkins and others (2010; 188), who

---

[5] Especially for top civil servants this had a positive influence, as these vignettes helped them to reflect on the issue without the need to reflect on their current political principals.
[6] Finch found in quantitative vignettes that three changes to a story line was the maximum (1987).
[7] Depending on the time the interviewees (who often had demanding schedules) had for the interview.

argued that instead of trying to eliminate all implausibility it is important that 'researchers prepare the ground so that interviewees are aware at the outset that their predictions may differ from how the scenario unfolds AND understand that highlighting these differences is a desired aspect of the research' (Jenkins et al, 2010; 188).

Second, the vignettes need sufficient context for respondents to have an understanding of the situation being depicted, but vague enough to 'force' participants to provide additions factors which influence their decisions (Barter and Renold, 2000). Therefore, the vignettes were described different types of reactive blame management, context factors (background minister, election time, multiplicity of incidents and involvement Premier) and consequences (in office, resignation, protracted resignation, reshuffle). However, mostly 'fuzziness is strength', since it leaves room for the interviewees' interpretations (West, 1982). Therefore, I asked interviewees to fill in missing context, provide possible strategies by the minister and other actors, and conditions and outcomes of certain strategies.

Third, the vignettes need to be readable, readily understood, internally consistent and not too complex. The vignettes were pre-tested on comprehensibility, ambiguity and plausibility by two public administration scholars, three PhD's and three outside persons.

Table 5.3 summarizes the set-up of the vignettes.

| Type of vignette | Vignette 1 | Vignette 2 | Vignette 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Blameworthy events* | 2 personal scandals: 1 trip from third party, 1 gift from third party | Incident in prison due to departmental errors | program failure, death and fraud[8] |
| *Historical example* | 1 NL historical example (Jorritsma) and 1 NSW (Barry O'Farrell) | 1 Dutch historical example (Teeven) | NL: Aus. historical example (Home insulation program) AUS: Dutch historical example (Fyra) |
| *Blameworthy event: type of resignation issue (stage 1)* | Extra political: possible personal scandal (favouring third party?) | Political: departmental error and possible personal error of minister (budget cuts/prison policy) | Political: departmental error with possible personal error of minister within a network of other actors |
| *Reactive blame management (stage 2)* | 1: Problem denial 2: Problem denial: plea of ignorance | 1: Responsibility denial: agency strategy + policy strategy + refuse independent inquiry | 1: responsibility denial: agency strategy + independent investigation |
| *Context (stage 3)* | 1 minister 'stronger' in terms of background | Close to elections + comparable incidents | Independent inquiry finds averse findings + involvement Premier + deaths (media salience) |
| *Consequences* | 1 stays in office, 1 | 1 resignation after multiple | No resignation: in AUS: reshuffle |

---

[8] The Australian vignette was originally the home insulation story, but it was too familiar and therefore caused too much 'contamination by information' (Fischhoff 1975; Fischhoff and Beyth 1975) NSW respondent. Therefore, I decided to revise the vignette slightly, keeping the type of resignation issue, blame management, context and outcome similar.

| *(stage 3)* | resignation | incidents | later, in NL: give up portfolio |

*Table 5.3: Set-up of the vignettes (see appendix for vignette stories)*

Certainly, qualitative vignettes also have considerable disadvantages: vignettes are by definition short and 'selectively simulate elements of the research topics', focus only on certain blame games, can be coloured by current events in the political sphere or social desirability, and, most importantly, vignettes focus on perceptions and do not have to reflect actual behavior of the interviewees in similar situations. (Hughes et al, 2002; 286; O'Dell et al, 2012). I have tried to overcome these disadvantages by letting interviewees expand the vignettes themselves in terms of behavior of the actors and context, leave room for open questions, keeping the explanation of the goal of the interviews limited and I only reflect on perceptions of elite actors and not actual behavior. The goal of the studies is to 'understand the complexities of the role (of minister) as seen by the key protagonists' in blame games and 'priviliged access of this nature is rare in elite government settings' (Stansfield, 2014; 18).

All interviews were tape-recorded, written into verbatim transcripts and coded using Nvivo software. In this research, I follow a staged approach to comparative data analysis similar to Bird and others (2012; 341). First, I familiarized myself with the data in the form of open coding. I used axial codes, in the sense of conceptualizing codes to distinguish between different strategies, and created hierarchy in codes (grouping of strategies in stages and accommodative-confrontational divide). Third, I recoded the  data using the existing coding tree (still minor changes possible) to focus on responses to the qualitative vignettes (selective coding). Fourth, I created matrices according to key themes: the identified strategies, the conditions interviewees identified for these strategies and outcome/morality assessment interviewees made regarding these strategies. In this part, I conducted a limited quantification of my data, in order to see how broadly some perceptions where shared among interviewees (Bryman, 2012). Last, I interpreted the codes, analyzing at a more in-depth level which strategies where identified by the interviewees, how the interviewees described the strategies and to which conditions and which outcomes the interviewees related the strategies.  In this stage, I explicitly compared to what extent Dutch and NSW interviewees had different interpretations of these elements. Finally, I will ask the interviewees to comment on the extent to which the results were recognizable and if they agreed with the use of their quotes (Lilleker, 2003).

## 5.5 Confrontational and accommodative blame management: a first overview

A quantitative overview can serve as a first broad brush stroke to assess how many interviewees mentioned the accommodative and confrontational strategies in each stage. According to Silverman (1985) and Bryman (2012) qualitative data analyses often suffer from the tendency towards 'anecdotalism'. Therefore, they suggest limited quantifications of the codes in order to uncover how broadly some statements are shared among the interviewees in the study (Bryman, 2012; 625).

First, it is important to assess the number of interviewees who mentioned each of the strategies identified in section 5.2. Table 5.4 shows how many Dutch and NSW interviewees referenced to the particular strategies.

| Blame management stages | Strongly confrontational strategies | | Moderately confrontational strategies | | Moderately accommodative strategies | | Strongly accommodative strategies | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Problem denial (and possible responsibility admission)* | Problem denial | NSW: 22 interviewees | Limit the agenda | NSW: n/a | | | | |
| | | NL: 12 interviewees | | NL: n/a | | | | |
| | PD + counter attack | NSW: 10 | Justifications | NSW: 21 | | | | |
| | | NL: 0 | | NL: 17 | | | | |
| *Problem admission but responsibility denial* | Scapegoating | NSW: 25 | Collective responsibility | NSW: 10 | Excuses (i.e. plea of ignorance) | NSW: 12 | Independent inquiries | NSW: 24 |
| | | NL: 10 | | NL: 20 | | NL: 20 | | NL: 29 |
| *Problem admission and responsibility admission* | | | | | Will compensate harm | NSW: 9 | Apologies | NSW: 12 |
| | | | | | | NL: 7 | | NL: 18 |
| | | | | | Institutional action-taking | NSW: 15 | Culpability - resignation | NSW: 10 |
| | | | | | | NL: 20 | | NL:15 |

*Table 5.4: quantitative overview of references of each strategy by NSW and Dutch actors*

A quick glance of the table shows that in general Dutch interviewees mentioned accommodative strategies more often, while NSW interviewees mentioned confrontational strategies more often.

In terms of confrontational strategies, problem denial and scapegoating (of bureaucrats) were mentioned by 22 and 25 NSW interviewees, while they were mentioned by only 12 and 10 Dutch interviewees. For the moderately confrontational strategies, such as justifications, this picture is less clear. Horizontal diffusion of responsibility (collective responsibility) was even mentioned more by Dutch interviewees (20 over 10).

In terms of accommodative strategies, excuses and apologies were mentioned by 20 and 18 Dutch interviewees, while both were mentioned by 12 NSW interviewees. In fact, Dutch interviewees

trump NSW interviewees in references to all strongly accommodative strategies in which ministers admit both the harm and responsibility (apologies, inst. action-taking and resignation). This is less clear for the strategy of announcing of independent inquiries, which was mentioned by an overwhelming majority of interviewees in both systems (NSW: 24 and Dutch: 29). Slightly more NSW interviewees mentioned ministers compensating harm after admitting responsibility (9 over 7).

## 5.6 Confrontational and accommodative blame management: elite interpretations

In vignette-interviews, interviewees are asked to envision what the minister would do after a situation. In their response, interviewees not only <u>mentioned</u> certain strategies more than others, they also expanded under which <u>conditions</u> ministers would use these strategies and they interpreted the <u>effect and appropriateness</u> of these strategies. Interviewees generally argued that most strategies can only be employed under certain circumstances. At the same time, if interviewees mentioned a strategy, they did not necessarily refer to the strategy positively. Interviewees often added a positive, neutral or negative interpretation to the strategy, by either relating the strategy to certain outcomes in blame levels or to norms and ideas of appropriateness.

To answer the main research question, it is important to assess if interviewees who mentioned particular accommodative or confrontational strategies, also interpreted them positively in terms of outcome and morality and under which conditions they envisioned them.

In the problem denial stage, Dutch and NSW interviewees varied considerably in their interpretation of the strategies[9]. Interestingly, the NSW interviewees who mentioned the confrontational strategies, such as problem denial and counter attack, were equally divided in their interpretation of those strategies as positive or negative. Positive interpretations included the blocking of negative news, restoring public confidence, while negative interpretations included branding these strategies as 'cover-ups'. NSW and Dutch interviewees who mentioned the less confrontational justifications, were either neutral or positive about these strategies. However, they often paired justifications with other strategies and focused less on justifications as independent strategies in their stories. In the problem denial stage, interviewees conditioned success or appropriateness of the strategies upon the strength of the minister, government control of Parliament and the other strategies

---

[9] This paper focus on the differences between interviewees' perceptions in the two systems. A future paper will analyze to what extent the interviewees 'role' affected their perception of blame management strategies. In other words, whether ministers, parliamentarians, journalists and civil servants differ in perceptions.

they are paired with. Table 5.5 shows the interpretations of the interviewees of the strategies in the problem denial stage.

| Strategy | Interviewees | Conditional upon: | Interpretation positively/neutral /negatively | Examples of interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Problem denial* | NSW: 22 | Strong ministers, 'Teflon' ministers, government control of Lower House | Equal divide (5/9/8) | Blocking negative news, restore public confidence, but also minister locked-in, dodging responsibility, spin, cover-up |
| | Dutch: 12 | Strategy only mentioned in general terms | Negatively and neutral (6/6) | Lying, dodging responsibility, against parliamentary standards |
| *Problem denial and counter attack* | NSW: 10 | Strength of Opposition, performance qualities minister | Equal divide (4/2/4) | Credibility opponent lost and incident gone but also lying, not addressing the situation |
| | Dutch: 0 | - | Not mentioned | |
| *Justifications* | NSW: 21 | Pair with positive stories, position of media | Positive or neutral (9/10) | Show fixes, restoring public confidence, highlighting positive stories  (strategy often paired with other strategies) |
| | Dutch: 17 | Pair with institutional action-taking (optreden niet aftreden),  position of parliament | Neutral, some positive (10/7) | Put incident in context, procedural fairness, procedures followed (strategy often paired with other strategies), cliché |

*Table 5.5: Assessment of strategies in the problem denial stage*

In the responsibility denial stage, Dutch and NSW interviewees only interpreted the accommodative strategy of announcing an independent investigation overtly positively. Positive interpretations include 'shelving' the incident, part of the ritual response, control over the inquiry and showing willingness to learn. Dutch interviewees are either negative or equally divided over the two confrontational strategies which focus on the diffusion of responsibility (scapegoating and collective responsibility). Scapegoating practices of the civil servants are sometimes even described as a 'deadly sin'. Surprisingly, NSW interviewees are also equally divided or neutral about these strategies. NSW interviewees consider scapegoating as minister showing tough action, framing themselves as part of the answer, but also problem admission and installing fear. Both Dutch and NSW interviewees are mostly neutral (some negative) about excuses. Interestingly, while most Dutch interviewees describe ministers

using excuses, especially pleas of ignorance, after integrity incidents, NSW interviewees mostly exclude ministers to use excuses after integrity incidents. Both interviewees mention conditions such as the type of incident and the strength of the minister. Interviewees conditioned the appropriateness and success of these strategies in the responsibility denial phase upon the position of either media actors (NSW interviewees), or parliamentary actors (Dutch interviewees).

| Strategy | Interviewees | Conditional upon: | Interpretation positively/neutral /negatively) | Examples of interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Scapegoating* | NSW: 25 | Position media: wanting tough action, 'public need for blood', issue can be framed as operational mistake | Equal divide (9/7/9) | Show tough action, show minister as part of answer, but also problem admission, install fear in public service |
| | Dutch: 10 | Weak minister, low performance in parliament | Negatively (7) | Strategy of weak minister, alienating public service, lying, 'deadly sin' |
| *Collective responsibility* | NSW: 10 | Only mentioned in general terms | Neutral | - |
| | Dutch: 20 | Fractured policy field, Need to be paired with 'appropriate procedural measures', minister strong policy reputation | Equal divide (7/4/9) | Often mentioned, but focus on the procedural measures taken, otherwise weak |
| *Excuses (i.e. plea of ignorance)* | NSW: 12 | Combination with other strategy, not for integrity scandals | Neutral or negative (8/4) | Underestimate the situation |
| | Dutch: 20 | During integrity scandals, reputation of 'clean sheet' | Neutral or negative (11/9) | Misinforming parliament, underestimate situation, lying |
| *Announcing independent inquiries* | NSW: 24 | Pressure to announce inquiry expected in media, political sensitive incident | Positive or neutral (18/6) | 'Shelves' incident, create distance between minister and incident, part of ritual response, control over inquiry |
| | Dutch: 29 | Pressure to announce inquiry expected in parliament, political sensitive incident, | Positive or neutral (20/5) | Classical approach, show willingness to learn from incident, part of ritual response, control over inquiry |

*Table 5.6: Assessment of strategies in the responsibility denial stage*

In the problem and responsibility admission stage, both Dutch and NSW interviewees were mostly neutral or divided on the accommodative strategies. In contrast to what expected, Dutch interviewees were quite divided in their interpretation of the accommodative strategies, such as apologies, institutional action-taking and resignation, in this stage. For example, Dutch interviewees interpreted apologies both positively and negatively, linking the strategy to both lower and higher blame

levels. Also for institutional measures, Dutch interviewees' interpretations were equally divided, both denouncing these strategies as platitudes and praising it as learning from mistakes. NSW interviewees were either similarly divided, or neutral and positive. Both NSW and Dutch interviewees often conditioned the outcome of institutional measures and resignations upon the strength of the minister and the type of incident. NSW interviewees often conditioned the outcome of the strategies in this stage upon the position of journalists, which is similar to their conditioning in other stages. In a similar vein, Dutch interviewees conditioned the outcome of most strategies in this stage upon the position of parliamentarians. Although resignations were mentioned by almost half of the interviewees in each environment, these interviewees mentioned many conditions the event needed to have in order to warrant resignation and iterated this strategy was only employed rarely.

| Strategy | Interviewees | Conditional upon: | Interpretation (positively/neutral/ negatively) | Examples of interpretation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Harm compensated | NSW: 9 | Position of media and labor unions, budget available, often paired with other strategies | Neutral (6/3) | Mostly paired with other strategies |
| | Dutch: 7 | Budget available, often paired with other strategies | Neutral | Mostly paired with other strategies |
| Institutional measures[10]: 'fixes' (policy, new agency, etc.) | NSW: 15 | Strength of minister, position of own party and coalition partner | Almost equal divide (6/5/4) | Fix the system, fixes, tough action, wishy-washy, weasel words |
| | Dutch: 20 | Strength of minister, often paired with other accommodative strategies, wishes of parliamentary parties | Mixed (5/9/6) | show learning, platitude (stepping up not stepping down), real vs symbolic |
| Apologies | NSW: 12 | Australian culture, done early in blame game, esp. in integrity incidents | Positive or neutral (8/4) | Leads to survival, according to public wishes, in line with culture |
| | Dutch: 18 | Part of other strategies, towards Parliament, also integrity incident | Equal divide (5/8/5) | Leading to higher blame, lower blame, show repentance, 'bowing down', show respect to Parliament |
| Culpability - Resignation | NSW: 10 | Severe event, blame inescapable, but also for Premier, party liability | Equal divide (5/5) | Shows loyalty to Premier, grand gesture needed to restore confidence, circuit breaker, but also shows you utterly failed, never happens |
| | Dutch: 15 | Severe event, blame high, | Equal divide (6/3/6 | Grand gesture, show |

---

[10] Difficult category, because coding both refers to bigger institutional changes, as over the more ritual-like 'stepping up, not stepping down'. Need to distinguish better between the two.

| | | minister repeat offender, cabinet instability, caretaker status | | remorse, good for reputation minister and party, but also cheap gesture, election strategy, never happens |
|---|---|---|---|---|

*Table 5.7: Assessment of strategies in the problem and responsibility admission stage*

To summarize, while NSW interviewees mentioned confrontational strategies more often, they were also equally divided on the effect and outcome of these strategies. A similar conclusion can be made for Dutch interviewees interpreting accommodative strategies.

In this type of study, we must be careful though not to confuse 'frequency with meaning' in these limited quantitative exercises (Beuving and de Vries, 2015; 169). Quantifying interviewees' interpretations can gloss over considerable differences within the categories. Besides, Beuving and de Vries argue that 'sometimes the rarity or absence of a particular word/theme in your material is more telling than the abundance of these words' (2015; 170). However, this study can be used as a first insight into the neglect area of how elite actors in opposite environments interpret consensus and confrontational blame management strategies.

### 5.7 Blame management strategies – rhetorical rules and storylines

The overviews presented in 5.5 and 5.6 could overshadow one of the most often mentioned responses: it depends on <u>how </u>ministers respond in terms of staging, of controlling the narrative, of hedging their strategies, of performing and appearance in the public/parliamentary arena. Hajer (1995; 645) already pointed out in his work on the politics of environmental discourse that 'storylines are devices through which actors are positioned, and through which specific ideas of `blame' and `responsibility', and of `urgency' and `responsible behavior' are attributed'. In another research vein, Hearit (2006) concluded that citizens only consider apologies to be sincere, when they are said in the right tone and the proper setting. In the interviews, elite actors discussed two 'storyline elements' accompanying blame management strategies: rhetorical rules and combining strategies in a coherent story.

Smullen interpreted 'ethos', 'pathos' and 'logos' as the rules of speaking in both adversarial and consensus contexts (2010; 945). Ethos refers to the 'character' of the minister and how they show themselves to the various audiences, while pathos refers to how the minister puts emotion and 'mood music' in an argument and logos refers to the logic of the strategy the minister uses (Smullen, 2010; 946). 'Ethos' was mentioned in one way or another by more than 20 interviewees in each environment.

These interviewees reflected on ministers' ability to control the narrative in a blame game by portraying themselves as a reliable source of information about the incident , referred by some as 'agents of information'. Most NSW interviewees who reflected on ministers as 'agents of information' also discussed the use 'ethos' in Parliament: how ministers should 'hedge' their strategies. Hedging refers to the use of guarded language within strategies, such as 'I am advised' and 'to the best of my knowledge', in order to maintain plausible deniability and room for maneuver after an incident. Dutch interviewees more often discussed 'logos' and 'pathos' in relation to Parliament, such as the need to show policy knowledge and skills and to create a good 'working 'relation' with the Lower House of Parliament by showing 'respect'. In public performances, both NSW and Dutch interviewees referred equally to 'ethos' and 'pathos' elements. These findings are in line with Resodihardjo and others' (2015; 11-12) conclusion that 'blame management response is more than presentational strategies' and that the importance of for example rituals, in connecting with the public and showing compassion with victims, should not be underestimated.

When we use Hajer's (1995; 645) concept of storylines, it follows that elite actors often use more than one strategy at the time, which they weave into a larger, comprehensive, 'story'. Also in the interviews, both Dutch and NSW interviewees often mentioned ministers combining two or three strategies in order to strengthen the effect of individual strategies. For example, interviewees paired apologies and acknowledgements of 'wrongdoing' with promises of institutional action-taking, to show commitment to the promise the incident 'will never happen again'. In most blame management research, and also in my analysis, the blame management effect of individual strategies is assessed. A focus on individual strategies however, could blind us from how ministers use strategies as building-blocks in a larger narrative or storyline.

Therefore, this admittedly broad brush study needs to be extended in the future by a qualitative, in-depth analysis of how interviewees used strategies in broader narratives, which conditions they considered and how they interpreted the strategies in terms of effect and appropriateness.


## 5.8 Conclusion

Nieuwenburg concludes in his article (2014) on value conflicts and political forgiveness, that if political executives want to be forgiven for moral wrongs 'in a public procedure, it is important that both sides (political executive and audience) perform their proper speech acts and that they do so in the right order'. This study is in essence an attempt to see what elite actors in two particular political environment see as the 'proper' response of a minister after blameworthy events.

To summarize, the political environment seems to matter for how elite actors expect ministers to behave in political accountability discussions and blame games after blameworthy events. First, although both Dutch and NSW interviewees mentioned ministers using a whole range of strategies, NSW interviewees indeed generally mentioned more confrontational strategies, such as counter attacks and scapegoating, while Dutch interviewees mentioned more accommodative strategies, such as excuses and apologies. Second, while  NSW elite actors often conditioned the success or appropriateness of strategies upon the position of journalists in the blame game, Dutch actors often conditioned the outcome of strategies upon  the general position of parliamentarians. However, both Dutch and NSW interviewees agreed that the personal strength of the minister, in terms of reputation, was an influential condition for a strategies in all blame game stages. Third, while NSW interviewees mentioned confrontational strategies more often, they were also equally divided on the effect and outcome of these strategies. A similar conclusion can be made for Dutch interviewees interpreting accommodative strategies. This could show that more prominent strategies can also be the most contested strategies in a political environment. Opposite to expectation, both Dutch and NSW elite actors preferred the accommodative strategy of announcing independent inquiries. This preference could show that particular (accommodative) strategies can be part of blame management norms, even in confrontational political environments.

 The results give room to possible avenues for future blame management research.

To start, environments do seem to matter in how blame is managed in a particular political environment, or in certain political systems. Blame management research is currently dominated by studies of majoritarian, Westminster systems. This research shows that at least in one consociational environment, elite actors prefer different blame management than their majoritarian counterparts. Comparative case studies, including both majoritarian and consensual systems, would enable us to see whether the found differences in elite interpretations are mirrored in elite behavior in blame games.

After all, elite actors are the ones who often play an active role, whether public or not, in supporting, countering and judging ministers' strategies in blame games. They are the ones who often pass  sanctions for political executives after blame games. So far, studies of blame focus on the effect of strategies on acceptance by the public, such as citizens assessments in experiments (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006; James et al, 2016; McGraw, 1991) or on media blame levels (Hood et al, 2009; 2015). In further research, the focus on citizens and media perceptions of blame in blame games could be expanded to include assessment of strategies by the (political) elite actors.

Last, the qualitative assessment of this study showed elite actors do not only interpret the content of a strategy, but also its delivery in terms of performance and storyline qualities. The more and more sophisticated quantitative work in blame studies is valuable (Hood et al, 2009; 2015; James et al, 2016). However, continued qualitative studies is necessary, because blame is a concept with many qualitative elements (Hajer, 1995; 645). Further research in the storytelling qualities of political executives'    blame management would help our understanding of the more performative aspects of blame management.

We can conclude that not all elite actors expect ministers to flight-or-fight after blameworthy events. In some environments elite actors prefer ministers to tend-and-befriend. Therefore, successful response to threat for survival could have different meanings for ministers in opposite political environments.

**List of references:**

Aberbach, J.D. and B.A. Rockman (2002), 'Conducting and Coding Elite Interviews', *PS: Political Science & Politics* 35(4), pp. 673–676Althaus, 2008

Andeweg R.B. (2000), Consociational Democracy, *Annual Review of Political Science* 3: 509-536.

Andeweg R.B. (2008), Coalition politics in the Netherlands: From accomodation to politicization, *Acta Politica* 43: 254-277.

Andeweg R.B. (2012), The Netherlands. In: Inoguchi T, Blondel J (Eds.) *Political Parties and Democracy; Contemporary Western Europe and Asia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 93-110.

Barter, C. and Renold, E. (1999) 'The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Research', *Social Research Update* 25:
    1–7.

Barter, C. and Renold, E. (2000) '"I Wanna Tell You a Story": Exploring the Application of Vignettes in Qualitative Research With Children and Young People', *International Journal Of Social Research Methodology* 3(4): 307–23.

Benoit, W.L. and Drew, S. (1997) Appropriateness and effectiveness of image repair strategies. *Communication Reports*, 10(2): 153-163

Benoit, W.L. (1995*) Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: A Theory of Image  Restoration*. Albany: State University of New York Press

Beuving, J. and de Vries, G (2015) *Doing qualitative research: the craft of naturalistic inquiry*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press

Beyers, J., Vollaard, H., & Dumont, P. (2014). European integration and consensus politics in the Low Countries: observations on an under-researched relationship. EUI Working papers: SPS 2014/04

Bird, P., Campbell-Hall, V., Kakuma, R., and the MHaPP Research Programme Consortium (2013) Cross-

national qualitative research: The development and application of an analytic framework in the mental health and poverty project. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *16*(4), 337-349.

Bloor, M and Wood, F. (2006) *Keywords in Qualitative Methods: A Vocabulary of Research Concepts*. London: Sage.

Boin, A., P. 't Hart & A. McConnell (2009). 'Crisis exploitation: political and policy impacts of framing contests'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16: 1, 81-106.

Bovens, M.A.P., Brandsma, G.J. and Thesingh, D. (2015) Political death and survival in the Netherlands: Explaining resignations of individual cabinet members 1946–2010*. Acta Politica* ; pp. 1–24

Bovens, M.A.P, Hart, P. 't, Dekker, S., and Verheul, G. (1999) 'The Politics of Blame  Avoidance: Defensive Tactics in a Dutch Crime-Fighting Fiasco.' in: H.K. Anheier (ed.) *When Things go Wrong: Organizational Failures and Breakdowns*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage: 123–147.

Brändström, A. and Kuipers, S.L. (2003) 'From "normal incidents" to political crises: understanding the selective politicization of policy failures.' *Government and Opposition*, 38(3): 279–305

Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*. New York: Oxford University Press

Cannon (1932) *The wisdom of the body*. New York: W W Norton & Company

Coombs, W. (2007) Protecting Organization Reputations During a Crisis: The Development and Application
of Situational Crisis Communication Theory**.** *Corporate Reputation Review*, 10: 163.

Cresswell, J.W. and Plano Clark, V.L. (2011) *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Dowding, K. and Lewis, C. (2014) Newspaper Reporting and Changing Perceptions of Ministerial Accountability in Australia. *Australian Journal of Politics and History. 58*(2), 236-250.

Edelman, M. (1988) Constructing the political spectacle. Chicago: University of Chicago    Press

Finch, J. (1987) The Vignette Technique in Survey Research. *Sociology,* 21(1): 105–14

Haider-Markel, D. P., & Joslyn, M. R. (2001). Gun policy, opinion, tragedy, and blame attribution: The conditional influence of issue frames. *The Journal of Politics*, *63*(02), 520-543.

Hajer, M. A. (1995). *The politics of environmental discourse: ecological modernization and the policy process* (p. 40). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hansson, S. (2015). Discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government: A framework for analysis. *Discourse & Society*, *26*(3), 297-322.

Hearit, K. M. (2006). *Crisis management by apology: Corporate response to allegations of wrongdoing*. Routledge.;

Hesford, S. (2007). Being mauled in the 'bear pit'!: opportunities for and the effectiveness of opposition and
independent members in the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales. *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, *22*(2), 137.
Hendriks, F., & Bovens, M. (2008). Bleef alles anders? Kentering of continuïteit in de Nederlandse politiek-bestuurlijke verhoudingen. *Bestuurskunde*, *17*(3), 2-3.

Hinterleitner, M. (2015). Reconciling perspectives on blame avoidance behaviour. *Political Studies Review*,
1478-9302.

Hinterleitner, M. and Sager, F. (2015), Avoiding Blame—A Comprehensive Framework and the Australian
        Home Insulation Program Fiasco. *Policy Studies Journal*, 43: 139–161

Hood, C. (2011) '*The blame game: spin, bureaucracy, and self-preservation in government*.' Oxford:
        Princeton University Press.

Hood, C., Jennings, W., Dixon, R., Hogwood, B. and Beeston, C. (2009) 'Testing times: exploring staged
        responses and the impact of blame management strategies in two examination fiasco cases.'
        *European Journal of Political Research*, 48(10): 695-722.

Hughes, R. and Huby, M. (2002) The Application of Vignettes in Social and Nursing Research, *Journal Of
        Advanced Nursing* 37(4): 382–6.

Jenkins, N. Bloor, M., Fischer, J., Berney, L. and Neale, J. (2010) Putting it in context:  the use of
        vignettes in qualitative interviewing*. Qualitative research*, 10(2);  175–198

James, O., Jilke, S., Petersen, C., & Van de Walle, S. (2016). Citizens' Blame of Politicians for Public Service
        Failure:  Experimental  Evidence  about  Blame  Reduction  through  Delegation  and
        Contracting. *Public Administration Review*,*76*(1), 83-93.

Kickert,  W.  J.  (2003).  Beneath  consensual  corporatism:  Traditions  of  governance  in  the
Netherlands. *Public
        Administration*, *81*(1), 119-140.

Lijphart, A. (1999) *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*.
        New Haven, Yale University Press

Lijphart,  A.  (2012)  *Patterns  of  Democracy:  Government  Forms  and  Performance  in  Thirty-Six  Countries*.
2nd
        updated edition, New Haven, Yale University Press

Lijphart, A. (1968) *The Politics of Accommodation: Pluralism and Democracy in the Netherlands*. Berkeley,
        University of California Press

Lilleker, D.G. (2003), 'Interviewing the Political Elite: Navigating a Potential Minefield', *Politics* 23(3), pp.
        207–214

March, J.G. and J.P. Olsen (1995) *Democratic Governance*. New York: Free Press.

McConnell,  A.  (2003).  Overview:  Crisis  management,  influences,  responses  and
evaluation. *Parliamentary
        Affairs*, *56*(3),363-409.

McGraw, K.M. (1990). Avoiding blame: An experimental investigation of political Excuses and
        justifications. *British Journal of Political Science* 20(1): 119–132.

McGraw, K.M. (1991) 'Avoiding Blame: An Experimental Investigation of Political Excuses and
        Justifications.' *British Journal of Political Science*, 20(1): 119-131.Miller, 1997

O'Dell, L., Crafter, S., de Abreu, G., & Cline, T. (2012). The problem of interpretation in vignette
        methodology in research with young people.*Qualitative Research*, *12*(6), 702-714.

Olsen, J. P. (2015). Democratic order, autonomy, and accountability.*Governance*, *28*(4), 425-440.

Pennings,  P.,  &  Keman,  H.  (2008).  The  changing  landscape  of  Dutch  politics  since  the  1970s:  A
comparative
        exploration. *Acta Politica*, *43*(2-3), 154-179.

Pierson, P. (1994) Dismantling the Welfare State: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Politics of Retrenchment in
        Britain and the United States. Cambridge: Cambridge UP

Polidano, C. (1999). The bureaucrat who fell under a bus: ministerial responsibility, executive agencies and

     the Derek Lewis affair in Britain.*Governance*, *12*(2), 201-229.

Rahman, N. (1996). Caregivers' sensitivity to conflict: The use of the vignette methodology. *Journal of Elder*

     *Abuse & Neglect*, *8*(1), 35-47.

Resodihardjo, S. L. (2006). Wielding a Double-Edged Sword: The Use of Inquiries at Times of Crisis. *Journal*

     *of Contingencies and Crisis Management*,*14*(4), 199-206.

Resodihardjo, S.L., Carroll, B.J., Eijk, C.J. and Maris, S. (2015) Why traditional responses to blame games

     fail: the importance of context, rituals, and sub-blame game in the face of raves gone wrong.

     *Public Administration*, 94: 350–363.

Resodihardjo, S. L., Eijk, C. J., & Carroll, B. J. (2012). Mayor vs. Police Chief: The Hoek van Holland

     Riot. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*,*20*(4), 231-243.

Schütz, A. (1996) Selbstdarstellung in der Defensive-Reaktionen in politischen Skandalen. In: Laux, L.

     and Schütz, A. (eds.) *Wir, die wir gut sind*. München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.

Silverman, D. (1985). *Qualitative methodology and sociology: describing the social world*. Gower Pub Co.

Spinner, M. (2007). *Compulsory Consensus? The Sources of Elite Political Culture and the* Consolidation of

     *Central and East European Democracies.* (Doctoral dissertation, Budapest: Central European

     University).

Stansfield, A. (2016). Clear Purpose or Sheer Survival? National Ministerial Leadership Across Multiple

     Arenas. *The American Review of Public Administration*, *46*(4), 478-498.

Sulitzeanu-Kenan, R., and Hood, C. (2005, April). Blame avoidance with adjectives? Motivation,

     opportunity, activity and outcome. In *ECPR Joint Sessions, Blame Avoidance and Blame*

     *Management Workshop, Granada, Spain, 14th-20th April*.;

Sulitzeanu-Kenan, R. (2006) 'If they get it right: an experimental test of the effects of  UK public

     inquiries' appointment and reports*.' Public administration*, 84(3): 623-653.

Taylor, S. E., Klein, L. C., Lewis, B. P., Gruenewald, T. L., Gurung, R. A., and Updegraff, J. A. (2000).

     Biobehavioral responses to stress in females: tend-and-befriend, not fight-or-flight. *Psychological*

     *review*, *107*(3), 411.

Thompson, D. F. (1987). *Political ethics and public office*. Harvard University Press.

Weaver, R. K. (1986). The politics of blame avoidance. *Journal of public policy*,*6*(04), 371-398.

Wilks, T. (2004) The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Research into Social Work Values. *Qualitative Social*

     *Work* 3(1): 78–87

**Appendix A: Qualitative vignettes and topic list**

- To what extent do you identify yourself with one of the roles (parliamentarian, minister, journalist, civil servant)?
- If I was to ask you what were the critical incidents in your career (as a State minister yourself, or involving other ministers) involving political responsibility and risk, what would you nominate? Why?

- If you had to  describe the political responsibility of State ministers in political incidents, what would you say?


- Explain process of interview: hypotheticals: incident, reaction, outcome.
o To stay clear of the contested real-world cases
o Could be that hypothetical situation is not plausible: please say and explain why not.
o Short and simplified: if missing context, you are welcome to expand.


**Vignette 1**

*The Daily Telegraph reveals some State Ministers have very close ties to the big industrial corporations. Especially the Minister for Resources and Energy and the Minister for Transport and Infrastructure are criticised in the article. The Minister for Resources and Energy would have flown to a prestigious tennis tournament in the private jet of an important energy supplier. A big infrastructure company has sent the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure a small painting which is over thousand dollars' worth. The Minister did not disclose this gift in his returns. Multiple newspapers, among them the Sydney Morning Herald and the Daily Telegraph, report both incidents. The Parliamentary opposition criticizes the behaviour of both Ministers and demands an explanation.*

1. How would you assess this situation? How would you describe it in one line?
2. What do you think the Minister should do? (and which Minister?)
3. What do you think the Minister will do? What would you advise?

*The Minister for Resources and Energy states she does not understand the uproar. According her spokesperson 'the Minister is a person of integrity; therefore the trip with the jet is no problem'. The Minister for Transport and Infrastructure claims, both in Parliament and on television, to have no memory of a painting as a gift.*

1. What do you think of the Ministers' accounts?
2. What do think the Ministers should do now?
3. What do think the Ministers will do now? What would you advise?

*The Minister for Resources and Energy stays in office, despite the indignation from both the Opposition and from the flanks of the Minister's party. Insiders say anonymously that the Premier is wary to force her due to her popularity in the powerful right faction of the party. The Minister for Transport and Infrastructure retracts his statements shortly after his address in Parliament. His staff recognized gift as one of the paintings hanging in a room next to the Minister's office. The Minister stands by his claims that he does not remember the gift, but has to acknowledge that he misinformed Parliament. He announces his resignation after a consultation the Premier.*

1. What do you think of the fact that the Resources Minister will stay in office, while the Transport Minister

27

will resign?

2. What do you think the Ministers should have done? Do you see other politically viable options instead of resignation?

3. To what extent would your opinion change if new information surfaces that one or both of these companies recently were awarded with a big contract from relevant department, even though there is no direct evidence linking the gifts to the contract?

**Vignette 2**

*The news channel ABC reports the murder of a prisoner by his cellmate while in custody. The penalty of the murdered man had already expired, but he was not yet released due to a communications error within the facility. The murderer has multiple psychological problems and needed medication. The guards on duty at the time of the murder, were not informed of the fact that both detainees have had several quarrels and that the murderer hadn't received his medication. It appears that such communication errors were common at this division of the prison due to low staff numbers. Human rights groups criticize the Corrective Services NSW and the Minister for Corrections in the media. They point to the recent budget cuts in the prison budget and a related ministerial directive to increase the number of detainees in one cell without detailed screening of those detainees. A powerful crossbencher (an Independent) demands an immediate debate with the Minister for Corrections, responsible for the Corrective Services NSW.*

4. How would you assess this situation? How would you describe it in one line?
5. What do you think the Minister <u>should</u> do?
6. What do you think the Minister <u>will</u> do? What would you advise?

*According prison experts, this incident shows that the current budget cuts put prison staff under too much time pressure and the cell directive threatens the security of prisoners and the diligence of the prison system. The Minister explicates during the debate that he regrets the death and promises Parliament to place the Corrective Services under tightened departmental supervision. He declares: "This should never have happened. I intervene to prevent such mistakes in the future." He advises against a motion tabled by the opposition for a broad and independent investigation into the quality and safety within all detention centres.*

4. What do you think of the Minister's accounts?
5. What do think the Minister <u>should</u> do now?
6. What do think the Minister <u>will</u> do now? What would you advise?

*In the weeks after the incident two new violent incidents occur in other prisons, both related to cell placement and staff communication errors. Various newspapers and talk shows cite the incidents as examples of abuses within government. They link the incidents to the Minister, who was previously also confronted with negative news related to budget cuts and prison staff. The latest polls for the upcoming elections (in about four months) indicate that large numbers of voters have no confidence in the Minister and his party. The incident seems to affect the balance of power between the two major factions in the*

*party. The Minister indicates, after consultation with the Premier and the chairman of his party, that he takes responsibility and will resign.*

4. What do you think of the fact that the Minister resigned?
5. Do you see other politically viable options instead of resignation?
6. What do you think the Minister should have done? / Timing of resignation in electoral process?

**Vignette 3:**

*Three years ago, the Premier and the Minister for Transport finally launched the prestigious new light rail service to Western Sydney. The program budget of 25 million Dollars allowed the extension of the rail tracks and the procurement of faster high-tech trams. The Transport Minister claimed that the new light rail service would have three major advantages: it would ease Western Sydney's overloaded roads and train lines, it would benefit businesses in Western Sydney and it would reduce air pollution (and thus contribute to help accomplish the climate goals of the incumbent State Cabinet).*

*The program was popular, and instigated a major increase in support for the party in the polls. However, within a year, the first problems emerged: citizens in the corridor between CBD and Western Sydney complained about the lack of proper consultation regarding the rail extension plans and the SMH reported above market-price procurement of the new trams from manufacturers with ties to the governing party. On top of everything, a couple of months later, two tram accidents occurred and multiple passengers were injured. Due to corrosion on the trams exterior, metallic strips affixed to the roof of the trams had come undone during service and had bent upwards towards the overhead cables, leading to severance of those cables.*

7. How would you assess this situation? How would you describe it in one line?
8. What do you think the Minister <u>should</u> do? (and which Minister?)
9. What do you think the Minister <u>will</u> do? What would you advise?

*The Premier and the Transport Minister emphasize in the media their regret regarding the tram accidents and their intention to investigate the reported procurement fraud. They explain that meanwhile, the program seems to be a success in terms of reducing overcrowding of public transport and roads. They refrain from any further comments, because they are awaiting the investigation by  the Office of Transport Safety Investigations into the accidents. The Opposition argues that a mere investigation will not suffice, and calls for a Royal Commission regarding both the extension of the rail and procurement of the trams.*

*The Premier and the Minister for Transport have to testify during the Royal Commission inquiry. The Minister for Transport claims that the problems relate to a network of actors. He claims that other manufacturing companies leaked false information to discredit the procurement process, the Federal government withdrew funding for the program at the last minute and the private operator of the trams failed to maintain and inspect the new trams. Leaks show that the Minister required a speedy*

*procurement of the new high  tech trams  without proper testing, as the Premier was eager to provide relief for Western Sydney commuters. The Minister for Transport admits that the program took off so fast that proper inspection of the trams did not take place. He refuses to react to suggestions by one of the inquiry committee members that the new rail service had to prove its success before a vital  by-election in Seven Hills in the previous summer.*

10. What do you think of the Ministers' accounts?
11. What do think the Ministers <u>should</u> do now?
12. What do think the Ministers <u>will</u> do now? What would you advise?

*The Royal Commission concludes that especially the Minister for Transport and the Transport for NSW have failed in their oversight of the program's implementation. They should have established quality criteria for the new trams and provided a better inspection. The inquiry committee holds the Minister responsible for not informing Parliament on early signs of trouble with the implementation of the new rail service. The Commission cannot prove fraud in the procurement process, but does find 'large irregularities' in the procurement.*

*The Minister replies in the ensuing Legislative Assembly debate that he partly agrees with the conclusions of the Royal Commission, but that he thinks that causality between the missing criteria and the tram accidents is exaggerated and that the allegations of misinforming Parliament are too strong. The Minister claims he wants to 'step up' (to deal with the current situation) rather than step down and he proposes to work guidelines for a better procurement process. The Opposition asks for the Minister's resignation during the debate. The Minister announces to hand over part of his rail portfolio to the Minister assisting the Minister for Transport, but he does not step down.*

13. What do you think of the fact that the Minister for Transport stayed on?
14. Would it have mattered if the policy had been designed by his predecessor of the same political party?
15. What do you think the Minister for Transport should have done?

   About hypotheticals (possible questions):

- To what extent did we talk about core issues related to political responsibility, political risk and ministerial resignations?
- What do you think we missed and would you like to add?
- To what extent do these hypotheticals mirror 'real' incidents in NSW politics?
- How did you respond to these hypotheticals? Do you use experience to judge these hypotheticals or is more innate?
- How do you link the assessment of the situation to responses ministers have to take?
- To what extent do you think former or current minister would assess these incidents in the same way as the other actors: journalists, civil servants, political advisorsor parliamentarians?

Features of political incidents and accountability:

- Is political risk assessment/assessment of political accountability different in opposition? If so, how?
- To what extent does assessment of political accountability change during the electoral cycle?
- How does it change between general assessments and when confronted with critical incidents?
- What role do you think the media plays in relation to political accountability?
- Which are the most important players in the decision of a ministers fate? Who have a key role and why?