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Exposing the Emotional Dynamics of Making Tensions Tangible in Systemic Design

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Increasingly in systemic design there is an emphasis on the value of visualizing, materializing and enacting tensions. However, there has to date not been much focus on what happens when these tensions are exposed within systemic design processes. The emotional aspects of responding to tensions play a particularly central role in guiding people's resulting actions, but are seldom discussed in the systemic design discourse. Fear is positioned as a key emotion driving tensions and a conceptual framework (the four Fs) is proposed to unpack the consequences to fear. Ignoring emotions such as fear in change processes may perpetuate a false narrative about emotional dynamics and increases the risk of harmful, unintended consequences. This paper shares stories and reflections from Förnyelselabbet's work that uses designerly approaches to facilitate meaningful change within complex societal challenges in Sweden, particularly in relation to newly arrived minors. These stories situated in the context of exploratory lab and co-design work reveal the emotional dynamics unfold when tensions are exposed and help raise an emotional literacy in systemic design practice.

Keywords: materializing systems; enacting tensions; feeling fear; co-designing for social change

Introduction

Within the evolving systemic design discourse, there has been growing acknowledgement of the role of tensions in this practice. In design, conflicting requirements are recognized as fruitful triggers to creating alternative frames for understanding a problem situation (Dorst, 2011). One key strategy that is often advocated for within systemic design is to make these tensions tangible through visualizations, materializations or enactments. For example, GIGA maps offer a way of investigating the tensions amid complexity by exploring the relations between seemingly separate things (Sevaldson, 2011). In addition, there are approaches to materializing relations by representing them through different types of string that support a more open dialogue on the tensions between stakeholders in a system (Aguirre Ulloa & Paulsen, 2017). Constellations have been another way in which tensions between stakeholders have been explored with different people positioning themselves relative to others within a room to explore the energy and tensions within a stakeholder network (van der Lugt, 2017).

While there is recognition that managing tensions well within the systemic design process can result in deeper trust, it has also been highlighted that mismanaging tensions can result in the polarization and disenfranchisement of stakeholders (Gaskin, 2020). Questions have been raised about how far tensions should be pushed and how to create safe spaces for working with them (Ryan, Baumgardt and Pangaro, 2016). A lot is still unknown about what happens when designers work with, make tangible and further expose tensions in systemic design. In particular, there is a need to further delve into the emotional dynamics of making tensions tangible as these emotions play such a significant role in people's responses within the evolving systems adaptation. As such, this paper zooms into the emotional dynamics of exposing tensions in the context of systemic design practice through a narrative exploration by designers in Förnyelselabbet, a group that has been employing systemic design to address complex challenges in Sweden. The stories told through the perspectives of the designers, often with input and reflections from others involved, offer hopeful and sometimes uncomfortable accounts of what happens when tensions are made explicit and the different emotions that

emerged from various stakeholders involved. These situated anecdotes help to show the importance of building an emotionally conscious practice when confronting tension in systemic design.

About Förnyelselabbet

Initiated by the Swedish Ministry of Social Affairs and the Swedish Association of Local Municipalities and Regions, Förnyelselabbet has been run by the Swedish Industrial Design Foundation since 2016. In an effort to explore new methods and mindsets for design in the field of organizational complexity, the lab has served as an explorative arena. There has been a particular emphasis where inhabitants risk falling in between the cracks of the system and where a more holistic and collaborative approach is needed across siloed organizations. The team is made up primarily of designers but collaborates with other disciplines as well such as analysts, change managers and legal experts.

When the lab was first set up, the societal challenge most pressing at the time was the wellbeing of newly arrived minors. This has been a focus of the work in Förnyelselabbet and the context in which most of the methods have been developed. We believe the work with systems change needs to be contextual, which is why the labs have been set up in close collaboration with local municipalities and the stakeholders needing to collaborate locally. They have worked in several local communities all over Sweden and engaged hundreds of children, youth and related stakeholders. The team now has an ambition to apply the same methods and mindsets to other societal challenges in need of a systems and collaborative transformation. A central acknowledgement in the Förnyelselabbet team is an awareness that these design processes need time for reflection both amongst participants, but also within the design team itself.

Tensions have been inherent in the multi-stakeholder, complex and political systems in which the design team is working. The team uses a variety of designerly approaches to work with complex challenges and expose tensions within the systems their labs are situated within. In particular, Förnyelselabbet has made visual maps, developed a visual survey for children, make enactments of tensions out of clay and materialized relations between people with different types of yarn (based on the work of Aguirre Ulloa & Paulsen, 2017). Below are four stories told through the perspective of the designers involved: The Wall Between Us, Forces at Play, Winter Sandals and A Sign of Relief. The stories unfold the emotional dynamics that Förnyelselabbet encounters when exposing tensions in their systemic design work.

The Wall Between Us

During 2019, we set up one of our first labs where we worked with the general reception of newly arrived children and youth. "What is their experience and how can it improve?" —the integration coordinator in the municipality asked a group of teachers and civil servants that were gathered from different parts of the administration. The work of the lab is organized in activities where each group shares their own experience and reflect upon stories from the children's experience when interacting with the municipality and other agencies. These activities serve to broaden the understanding from different perspectives and develop a more systemic view on the underlying patterns of issues.

In this process, we mainly met children at their school or at the local leisure centre. The municipality has a policy document that suggests that the school is the space to meet and interact with people from different backgrounds. However, the stories from children and youth at different schools in the town suggests that what is experienced is much different. The newly arrived students (from age ten) spend their first couple of years learning Swedish and other subjects at introductory courses. These systems differ between municipalities, but many schools organise the newly arrived children in separate introduction classes at first. The classes, regardless of age, were all situated outside or at the periphery of the school. This meant that the students rarely interacted with the other students as they did not share the schoolyard or have breaks at the same time. To surface the experiences of newly arrived students, we asked them to map where they felt safe and unsafe. "They probably think I'm a monster" —said one eleven-year-old girl as she described how it feels eating in the canteen. "I feel unsafe walking in that part of the school, where the national programs are" —a teenager at a high school in the same town said.

The students were also invited to describe the social dynamics inside the school through clay, role play, and storyboards. They were asked to share their gestalt with the rest of the group and their stories were documented through video. One group of students from the high school, with students from both the national and the introduction programs, shared their experience by shaping an imaginary wall raised between them, dividing those in the national programs from those in the language introduction program (shown in Figure 1). The realness of this imaginary wall was described in how they felt they could not walk in the corridor of the other. They felt as the wall was placed by the school, in particular by their principals and administrative staff as one student was told not to go to the corridor of the introduction program. The imaginary wall, they said, reproduces and upholds segregation and feelings of uncertainty inside the school. “As there is this wall between us, we feel like question marks to each other in our shared space.” When we asked them how they would change these segregated dynamics, they felt powerless at first, but then they reflected on their space of action, on the micro actions that could change the dynamics. As the group checked out from the session, most of the students felt motivated to act differently.

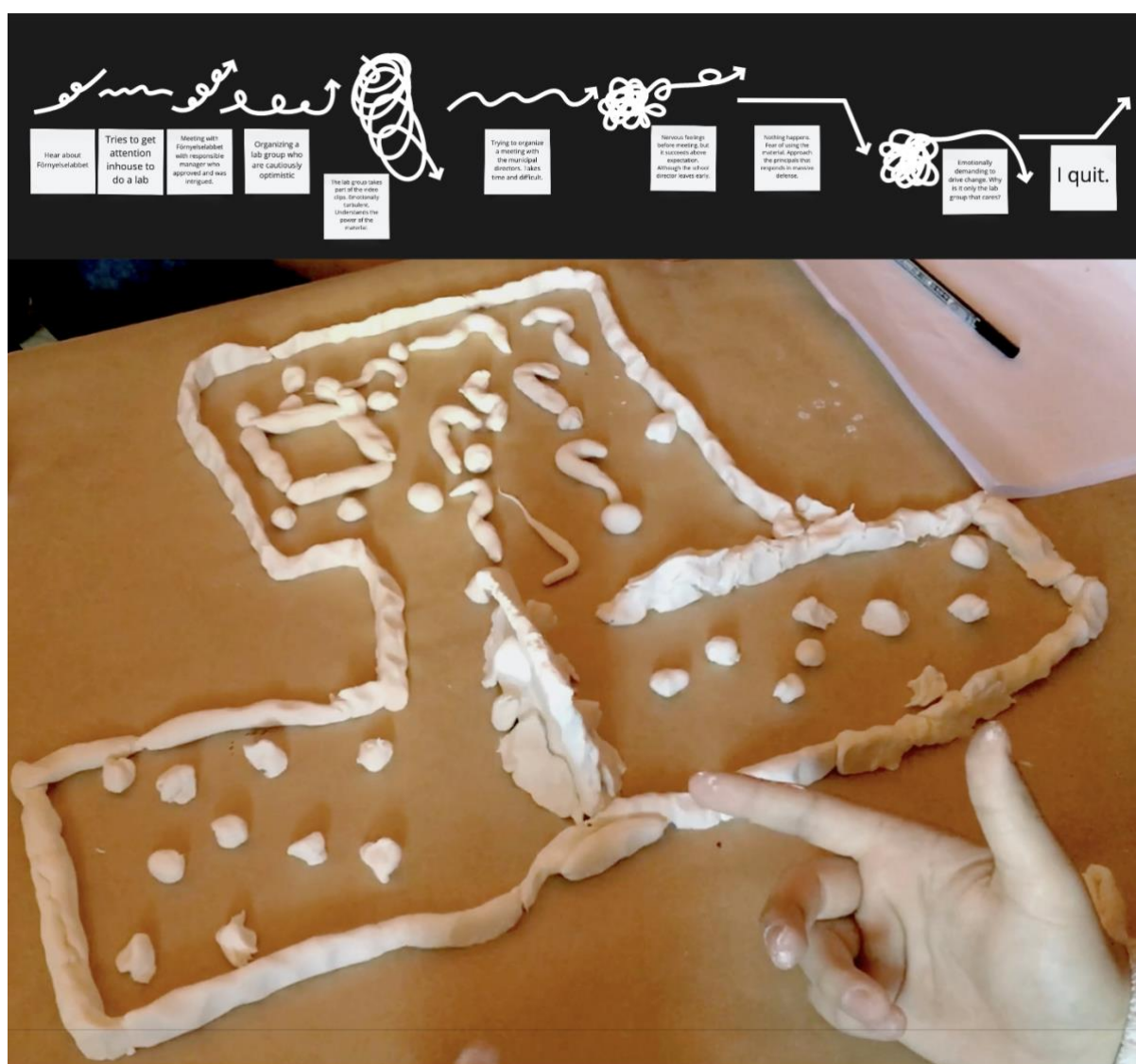


Figure 1: The clay wall created by the students annotated above with the emotional journey of the civil servant leading this process.

The stories from the students were shared with the rest of the lab group and the leading civil servants of the municipality at two different occasions. “I’ve always thought the school was a reflection of society, but what if the society is a reflection of school?” —a leading manager asked, while listening to the students’ video clip. The lab group responded emotionally and said that their suspicions were confirmed. However, they said, slightly resigned, that change

will never come out of this, even if we have these stories to share. They suggested that it was too loaded as these stories are also a description of the overall mental model that the lab unfolded; these newly arrived children are treated as a burden rather than people with resources. The lab group felt as this group of children was not being prioritised in the highest levels of the system.

Throughout the lab process, the lab group described a nervous administration, where people who engage with a critical view and from the perspective of the citizen are less supported. The person who gathered the lab group felt at first that the only way to use this material was to go to the media. She felt uncertain of the consequences she would face if she would suggest change based on these stories. She felt at risk of losing her position or becoming discarded from projects. Despite her fear, she took the materials to discuss with the responsible school principals. They reacted defensively and wanted the name of the students who said this, rather than being curious about how such experiences might have emerged. As our lab process ended, the municipality was offered to continue in a second phase focused on actions within the school. They turned down the offer and the integration coordinator has now left the administration as she felt it is not possible to drive change anymore there.

Forces at Play

The finale of a year-long project was coming up. We had explored the situation of arriving in Sweden as a refugee child, unaccompanied by parents. The participants in the lab ranged from the border police to the Red Cross—all actors who meet the child in the process of entering into Sweden. We were, for different reasons, not able to include the youth who had participated in the process in the final event, but we felt that it was crucial to include children and their experiences in some way. This event included both the people that had participated during the year, but also people new to both the findings and the method. The main purpose of this event was to present findings and get feedback from the organization's funder. This was an important event with a lot at stake for everybody involved.

In order to bring the voices and bodies of youth in the room, we suggested that a youth theatre group, with their own experience of arriving as refugees to Sweden, come and perform a play. The play had already been performed a few times at theatres and we had seen it. The play pin-pointed the situation of being a lonely child, and the feeling of being in a slow, odd process where you feel randomly tossed around by a grown-up world with a language that is, perhaps intentionally, hard to understand. We, as designers, were aware of the power of the arts and making things tangible and experiential. We saw the benefit of using “another language” as a way to tap into the experiences of one's own. We saw that this process was also a way to allow others to be invited to the feelings of an experience. However, in this case, we did not fully account the immense power of the arts and that this power can be scary when you are not in control.

The script for the play was sent to us by the theatre group, and we communicated this to the project manager who was hosting the event. We had, together with the theatre group, chosen two scenes that we felt were most fitting to the event. The email was sent, and the response was: “Scene 1 is ok, but do you have another alternative for the other scene? This is not really relevant for this particular process.” Another scene was selected, and so the back and forth continued. This process was tormenting. It was extra frustrating due to the fact that the project manager, who was initially positive in their response, later became more hesitant around the same question. We understood, since she also was a project leader, she was trying to balance the needs she felt with the organisation's approach. The tension between a stand-alone project and the main organisation became more visible.

The final request was to exclude one specific word “because it is so politically sensitive”. At this point we had a tense relation with the theatre group who had gone from expressing excitement of doing their play at this event to telling us how many hours it took from their free time to do these changes. We claimed their right to their artistic freedom, as we had tried to do during the process, and suggested to find a middle ground. We knew that the youths' own stories would not be possible to have opinions on in the same way, so we suggested that the youth in the theatre group instead would do a reading of a story they had written themselves of their own experiences. This was accepted with a sigh of relief from the organisation, and with a sigh of frustration from the theatre group.

During this process, and in the aftermath, I have questioned my assumption of why art is not more strategically involved in change processes of communities. I have assumed that art or artistic expressions are not used due to a lack of craft skills that are wrongly assumed that you need to have to participate in artistic processes. However, I am now inclined to believe that the artistic expression is not used partly because of its power. Art's interpretation is not specific, but rather dependent on the person's previous experiences, and is often multi-layered. I have found it fascinating and beneficial as a facilitator to use artistic expression, sketches, and clay in order to get in touch with the feelings, such as those of youth. Through this process, these feelings become possible to bring into another room by making them materials as we try to create an understanding of a system in a facilitated change process.

To turn experiences into a complete piece of art that awakes feelings, maybe feelings of guilt and discomfort, is hard. One of the worst fears for many, including me, is to create feelings of discomfort in contact with your superior. But as I see it, sitting in feelings of discomfort is one way to start a process for change. This supported that feelings of discomfort might have to play out in safe rooms with a safe group with supported reflection, often meaning that managers and superiors cannot be present. I think we as designers were a bit naive, and the organisation was not. We did not fully understand the forces in play and the immense mind moving power of the arts.



Figure 2: Illustration of the process of adapting a play from a powerful provocation to a “safe” format (Illustration by: anonymized for review).

Winter Sandals

We were invited to a preschool as a part of an exploration into the school system for children with experience of migration, either experienced by themselves directly or by their parents. We had scheduled an interview with three preschool teachers. We started our semi-structured interview by putting a blank paper on the table, drawing a line across with “entering the Swedish school” at the start and “included in the school” at the end. We asked them to describe what happens and what information is given when a child starts here at the pre-school. They talked about the difference for children with parents who are born in Sweden and who have lived experience of what a “mellanmål” (snack) is, compared to the blank faces expressed by parents with no previous experience of the Swedish system and or knowledge preschool terminology.

As they were talking, we were drawing the childrens’ and parents’ way into the school system and into a Swedish culture. Then one of the preschool teachers says: “at one time, a mother brought her three-year-old with sandals on her feet in the middle of the winter”, the mother explained. “If she can’t have the sandals she screams, and if she screams,

then the neighbours think I am hitting her, and then the social workers might come and take her away.” This is a common and very present fear for many of the newly arrived parents. The winter sandals were embodied in clay, shown in Figure 3, to reflect on and spark further dialogue around this underlying tension.

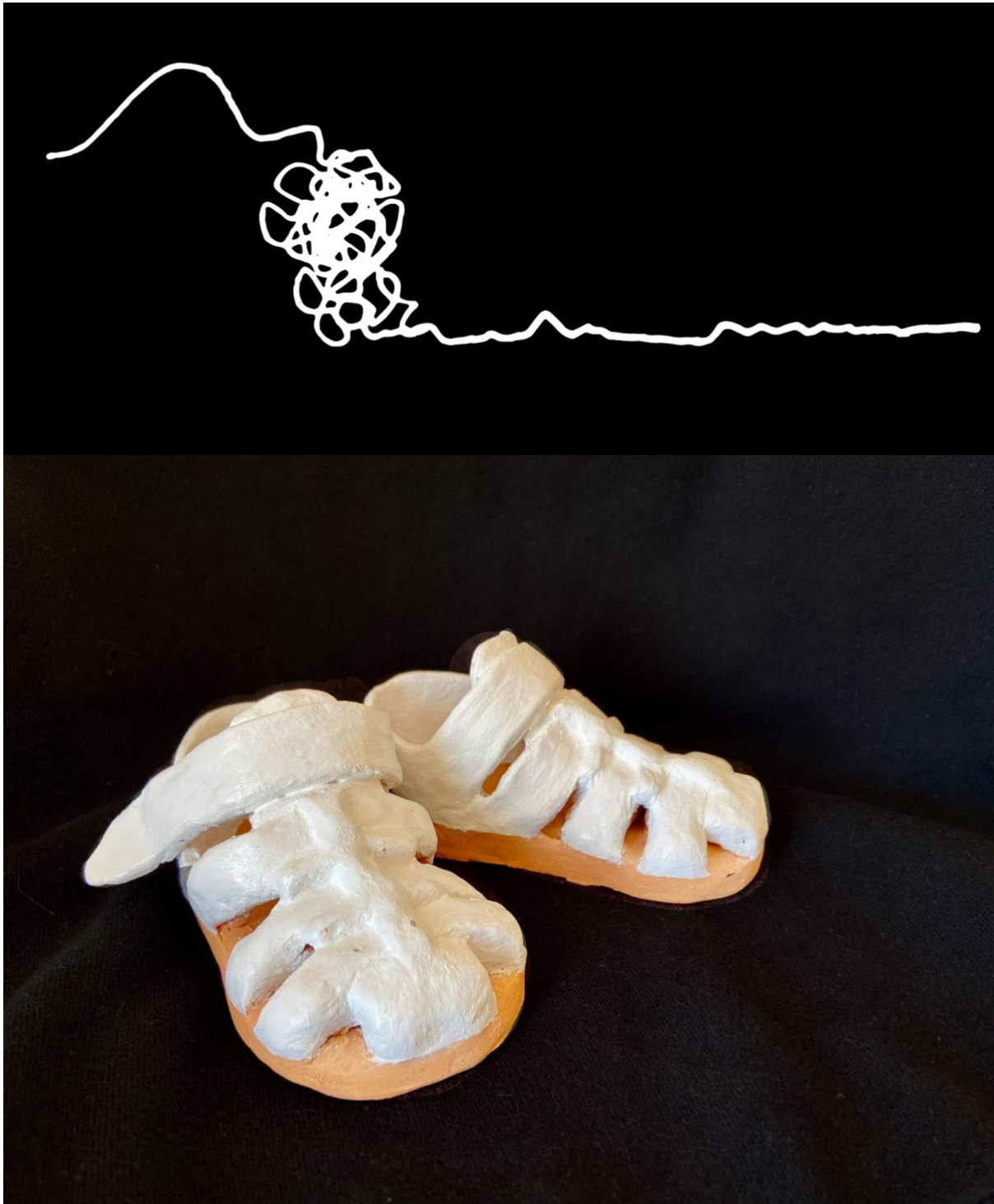


Figure 3: An embodiment of the winter sandals in clay that spark dialogue around an underlying tension, together with the emotional journey map by the designer who created it above (sandals by: anonymized for review).

It is a terrifying outcome to fear that your child might be taken if other's fear that you do not obey the government. According to the pre-school teachers, this fear is affecting the parent's behaviour and clouding their judgement. The preschool teachers are handling situations like these by explaining, time and time again, how the system is set-up.

However, what was more heart-breaking was the next discussion, which actually made the fear expressed by the newly arrived parents more tangible and real.

“Sometimes we understand that a child is being physically reprimanded in some way by their parents. We have a duty to report child abuse to the authorities. But when the families recently have arrived, we explain to the parents that physical reprimands are not allowed in Sweden. They often know and understand that it is wrong, but they are unsure of how to raise a child without being physical. How do I teach my child what is right or wrong if I can’t reprimand them properly?”

The preschool teachers continued to talk about how they weigh the responsibility towards the child. They experience a tension between being physically hurt and being emotionally traumatized because of separation from their parents. They also must adhere to the dualities of teachers’ responsibility in relation to Swedish authorities and laws. How much bending is beneficial and when is the actual law broken? This type of question, they said, is the main reason for their loss of sleep.

Setting up a safe space where this discussion can take place is what we as designers aspire to do. Analysing the experiences and putting these experiences in the context of the system of laws, authorities, policies, practitioners and cultures surrounding these issues. Considering the feelings and fears involved in making decisions and affecting relationships in this system of actors.

A Sign of Relief

The final story we will share is about when we engaged different participants who assisted newly arrived children on a daily basis from both from the public sector and civil society in an exercise to identify how many levels of managers or governing bodies they have in their respective organizations. Due to covid-19, the activity was held through a digital workshop with breakout rooms. One breakout room had participants from the municipality and other breakout rooms had different civil society organizations. One organization identified as many as 5-8 different layers of hierarchy. “I have no idea what the top management of my organization does, and they probably have no idea what kind of issues I deal with at work. There is no contact between our layers.” —said a social worker participating in the lab.

What happens to people in such hierarchical organizations? What do these layers of hierarchy do to creativity and collaboration? How much tension is being created and how much is being released in such a structure? These were the questions that surfaced during the lab workshop. The participants in our lab groups are often positioned at the lower managerial levels, close to the citizens, but sometimes we have higher-level managers included in the groups as well. Through our lab process, there was growing acknowledgement that our lab participants need to navigate entrenched hierarchical organizational structures which result in many tense relationships, high threshold for meeting and structures around power sharing and mandate. Could hierarchical layers be a reason for participants feeling a lack of mandate in collaborative processes? To some extent, these organizational layers seemed to add fear of doing something wrong.

a perceived threat described as “fight or flight” (coined by Cannon 1927). These possible responses were later expanded to also include “freeze”, where for example one could “pay dead” (Gallup, 1977). However, we also see one other hopeful additional response that shows up in these stories, the response is simply to “feel”.

In the first story (This Wall Between Us) and the second (Forces at Play), we see examples of *fight* as a response to fear, with the principals seeking to blame the students and the staff censoring the play based on lived experience. The first story also shows an example of *flight*, where in the end one of the civil servants seeks to remove themselves from the situation by quitting her job. The third (Winter Sandals) and fourth (A Sigh of Relief) stories show *freeze* as another response to the intense emotion of fear, where the day care workers feel as though they are stuck carrying out the law and the staff have little room to act amid the many layers of their organization. However, the first (This Wall Between Us) and the last (A Sigh of Relief) stories also show a fourth response to fear which is to *feel*, where the youth by embodying the tensions start to feel the dynamics of the divide and it motivates them to act and the staff within the organizations start to genuinely take in what their hierarchies mean for them and their collaborative work.

We see the four Fs – *fight, flight, freeze, and feel* – as a potential starting place for understanding responses to fear that arises in systemic design practice. Perhaps knowledge of the four Fs can aid service design practitioners in better planning for how to support stakeholders to work with tensions in a constructive way. Further investigation into the four Fs and the conditions that contribute to each response would help to further advance working with the nuances of emotions in complex systems change processes.

These stories prompt many questions and suggest that there is a lot more knowledge needed on how best to navigate the emotional dynamics of exposing and working with tensions in systemic design. What contributes to tangible enactments of tensions sparking motivation for action versus defensiveness? How can systemic designers support safety in exploring the tensions and constructive dialogue related to tensions? How might systemic designers confront resistance, flight or freeze and instead support feeling tensions to address them head on? Much work needs to be done within systemic design, not just in the technical aspects of how to make tensions tangible or leverage them in problem reframing, but also with the emotional dynamics that transpire as these tensions are further illuminated through the four Fs.

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