Political conflicts and the mechanisms behind the concept

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For the reader

In my PhD-project, the concept of political conflict is explored. I use theoretically derived definitions of different forms of political conflict to study both causes and effects of political conflicts in Swedish local government. For this purpose I intend to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. In this paper I aim to present an outline for an upcoming comparative case study within my dissertation project. In order to enable readers' understanding of the purpose of the case study, I will first give a brief presentation of my PhD-project and describe how this study links to the others and to the project as a whole.

1. Introduction: Party conflicts

Political conflict is at the heart of all political systems. Political conflicts can be found between citizens, social groups as well as between political representatives and political parties. In a representative democracy, the societal conflicts are expected to be manifested in the parliamentary arena with the political parties as the standard bearers of the conflicting sides. The parties represent opposing positions and offer alternative solutions to political problems. A party could support a specific solution based on either its own ideological principles or merely as it being in line with the interests of its voters or other favored social groups. In elections, the voters are expected to choose between the solutions offered by different parties, and subsequently the political representatives are expected to use their party mandate to represent their voters in the conflicts to come. But political conflict may also be seen as an obstacle to the political actors' ability to make sound political decisions and for their ability to cooperate.

The role of conflicts varies between different models of democracy. In some systems, political actors strive towards consensus by seeking to bridge conflicts and find common ground, while actors in other systems embrace conflicts and display them openly (Lijphart, 1999).

Even though political conflict is an essential part of all political systems, there is no consensus on how the phenomenon should be defined. From the research on political conflicts, we learn

that the concept is complex and may take many forms, for example political dissent and antagonistic behavior. Different fields of study focus on different forms of conflict, they use different definitions of what a conflict is and adhere to different ideas on how conflict is expressed. From these earlier studies we learn that the complexity of political conflict is often disregarded and that conflict is either treated as a uniform concept (Katz & Mair, 1995: 19), or focus is only given to a single aspect of conflict.

Scholars from various fields have also sought to study both causes and effects of political conflict, and they have arrived at very different answers. A reason for this is, of course, that it is a complex social phenomenon which is not easily explained. But, it is most likely also due to the fact that they have very different conceptual understandings of what political conflict is. Thus, in order for us to learn what political conflict is and in what way it is related to other social phenomena, my aim is to contribute to a higher degree of conceptual clarity.

1.1 Political conflicts in local government

It is often claimed that a difference in democracy at the local and the national level is that the national level to a greater extent is characterized by party conflicts and a polarization between the political parties. Earlier studies have correspondingly described Swedish local politics as dominated by consensual democracy up until the 1950s and 1960s. After which there is an increase in party polarization. This development has created a more conflict oriented approach in the municipalities and local politics has thereby evolved towards majority rule, away from the traditional ideals of consensual democracy (Lantto, 2005; Gilljam, Karlsson & Sundell, 2010).

The aim of my PhD-project is to increase our understanding of the concept of political conflict. And since political conflict at the local level is a growing phenomenon as well as an unexplored one, a further aim is to increase our understanding of local politics in general by studying causes and effects of political conflicts on the local arena.

From this aim, two main research questions are derived:

o *What causes (party) political conflicts in local politics?*

o *What are the effects of (party) political conflicts in local politics?*

In order to fulfill the aim of my project and answer the main research questions, it is necessary to develop a conceptual understanding of political conflict. Hence, a part of the

project is to contribute to a conceptual clarity and to find concepts which are helpful to use in the study of both causes and effects of political conflicts.

I use theoretically derived definitions of different forms of political conflict to study both causes and effects of political conflicts in Swedish local governments. For this purpose I intend to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative data is based on surveys to all elected political representatives in Swedish municipalities 2008 and 2012. The surveys may also serve as a tool for a purposive and strategic sampling for my upcoming case studies.

This paper is structured in the following way: In section 2, I discuss what political conflict is and if there are different forms of conflict. In section 3, I present the general design of the dissertation project as a whole. In section 4, I summarize the existing studies within the project and discuss how comparative case studies may relate to the existing studies. In section 5, I present a proposed outline for an upcoming study within the project.

2. What is political conflict?

When studying political conflict and consensus, some refer to Lijphart's work, where the concepts refer to institutional characteristics (Lijphart, 1998; Lijphart, 1999:2) rather than to the relations between political parties in assemblies. But if one strives to understand political decision-making processes, then it is essential to focus on the relations between parties rather than institutional characteristics (Houlberg & Pedersen, 2015).

Another commonly used definition of political conflict is that it occurs when there are difficulties in reconciling different interests or when there are disagreements over objectives (Pondy, 1967; Schmidt & Kochan, 1972; Gurr, 1980; Bush & Folger, 1994: 56). These are useful but overly simplified definitions, as studies using such definitions have disregarded the complexity of political conflict, and either treated it as a uniform concept (Katz & Mair, 1995: 19), or only given focus to a single aspect of conflict.

Others argue that political conflict may occur as a behavior where actors behave in a confrontational way to promote their interests and try to stop other actors from obtaining their objectives (Mack & Snyder, 1957; Fink, 1968; Deutsch, 1973). Some scholars have observed the tendency among researchers to confuse one form of conflict with another, and have stressed the need for researchers to differentiate between various forms of conflict (Blalock, 1989).

The focus of my PhD-project is on the political conflicts between the political parties and between the political majority and opposition in the parliament. There is reason to argue that there are at least two different forms of political conflict in a parliament; *political dissent* and *antagonistic behavior* (Lantto, 2005; Skoog & Karlsson, 2015). Political dissent refers to the different positions which political actors take on political issues on a scale between agreement and dissent; antagonistic behavior refers to the way political actors act towards one another on a gradual scale between harmony and antagonism in order to reach their goals.

Political dissent refers to disagreement over political principles and issues (compare Oscarsson, 1998). The parties may disagree on political objectives and on what constitutes a good society, and the parties may also have similar objectives, but different views on how these should be pursued (DiMaggio et al, 1996; Bakker et al, 2012). A high degree of political dissent between the parties means that they have positions on political issues which theoretically are far apart, whereas a low degree of political dissent means that their positions are similar to each other.

Antagonistic behavior refers to how the climate among the parties is perceived by the political actors and how they act towards each other. The term antagonistic behavior refers to an act of open critique of other political parties, an emphasis on their differences and a strategic action to stop other actors from exerting political influence. And in contrast, a cooperative behavior means that the parties downplays the party differences and strive towards harmony across party lines. A common premise in studies on the cooperation among political parties is that parties which have similar positions on political issues also have an increased likelihood of cooperation. And conversely, parties which are far apart on an ideological dimension will have trouble cooperating (Axelrod, 1970; DeSwaan & Rapoport, 1973; Desposato, 2006; Adams & Merrill, 2009; Olislagers & Steyvers, 2013).

3. Design

To assess levels of political conflicts such as political dissent and antagonistic behavior are notoriously difficult, especially if the study is focusing on comparing political systems at the national level. What could be taken for highly antagonistic in one country could be normality in another. But studies within the same political system at the local level overcome this issue since differences in cultural and legal contexts between the cases are easier to control (John, 2006). The multiplicity of local political systems also allows for many kinds of statistical

analyses. Furthermore, earlier research on democracy and political conflicts have mainly been focused on the national levels, this means that there is fairly little research on this at the local level. This means that the project will give an important contribution to this body of research.

To enhance the possibilities of generalizing findings to politics at the national level, it is necessary to find a case where party politics plays a major role in the governing of municipalities. In Sweden, the local level is genuinely (party) politicized and the political system is based on parliamentary principles (Bäck, 2003; Skoog, 2011; Gilljam & Karlsson, 2012). Between them, the Swedish municipalities also have varying degrees and forms of political conflict (Karlsson & Skoog, 2014).

In an international comparison, Sweden has relatively large municipalities which have extensive political organizations as well as great political responsibility for welfare services (Hesse & Sharpe, 1991; Lidström, 2003; Sellers & Lidström, 2007). The local governments in Sweden manage issues across the whole political spectrum and are responsible for service production in all stages of its' citizens' life, from child care to elderly care. The work within the local public administration thus affects the lives of practically all Swedes. In addition, Swedish municipalities have long been subject to policy shifts where various organizational changes have succeeded each other. The organization of local governments in Sweden is based on different institutions with different organizational functions. The relations between these institutions are regulated by the Local Government Act (Kommunallagen), but nowadays this law leaves the field open for municipalities to structure their own organizations. This has also led to a great variation in how the Swedish municipalities have chosen to structure their organizations (Statskontoret, 1999).

Overall, this means that using Swedish municipalities as cases in the project will enable me to draw conclusions about political conflict in general, such as what conflict is, what causes conflict, and the effects of conflict. The Swedish municipalities will also enable conclusions about the mechanisms in different institutional arrangements that affect political conflicts.

The project consists of different studies, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods. The studies using quantitative methods and survey data focus on the political conflicts on a general level. The purpose of the case studies is then to provide an in-depth analysis of the underlying mechanisms that influence how and why the political conflicts occur and are expressed in the way that they are.

4. Papers in brief

In this section I will give brief summaries of the two existing studies within the project. This section ends with a discussion on the relevance of comparative case studies and in what way it would add to the project.

4.1 What causes political conflicts in the parliamentary arena?[1]

Many scholars have engaged in trying to answer the question of what causes political conflicts in the parliament; some studies find that the political situation in the parliament is linked to the diversity and social fragmentation in a society (Sullivan, 1973; Koetzle, 1998; Aistrup, 2004), the size of the democratic unit (Bäck, 2000; Karlsson, 2013; Gerring, Palmer, Teorell & Zarecki, 2015), fiscal stress (Lantto, 2005), that the presence of a protest party may be a sign of societal conflict which the established parties have failed in channeling (Erlingsson, 2005), and a raft of studies also suggest political competition fuels political conflicts (Downs, 1957; Adams, Clark, Ezrow & Glasgow, 2004; Adams & Merrill 2009; Ezrow, De Vries, Steenbergen & Edwards, 2011; Schumacher, De Vries & Vis, 2013).

Political conflicts are caused by a range of factors identified by earlier studies. But since earlier scholars have overlooked the complexity of political conflict we have little knowledge regarding how these different causes found in earlier studies relate to the different forms of political conflicts. Thus, in this study we explore the relations between the known and proposed causes and the different forms of conflict in the parliamentary arena. These causes are related to structural factors, financial circumstances, societal discontent, as well as to the relations with other political parties.

This study builds on data from a survey performed in 2012 to all local councilors in the 290 municipalities of Sweden (Karlsson & Gilljam, 2014). Indicators on the degree of political conflicts on the parliamentary arena in the municipalities are mainly based on the perceptions of the councilors within each municipality. Indicators on the causes of political conflicts are built on data from Statistics Sweden (SCB).

In several aspects the results were consistent with our hypotheses. Most of the causes suggested in previous studies are indeed related to the political conflicts in the parliamentary arena. The main result, which relates to the overall theme for my dissertation project, is that

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[1] Manuscript close to completion (Skoog & Karlsson)

the two forms of political conflict – political dissent and antagonistic behavior – are interrelated, but different, phenomena which are explained by different factors.

But, what does this mean? There are different normative aspects of political conflict, where conflict plays different roles in a democracy and is consequently seen as either good or bad depending on point of view. Since our study shows that the forms of conflict are separate phenomena it is likely that they also have different contributions to a democratic system. As political dissent refers to the substance of political programs and policies, it produces much needed clarity towards voters on the parties' positions and on where the parties' political views differ. This in turn supports voters' choice on Election Day. Political dissent may consequently be seen as a democratic facilitator in this aspect and therefore a necessary element to a representative democracy. Antagonistic behavior however, refers to the political climate and to how parties behave towards each other. A high degree of antagonistic behavior refers to situations where the parties actively try to stop other parties from exerting political influence, which ultimately may lead to a negative and disrespectful climate among the political representatives. Other than adding a negative work environment for the political representatives, a high degree of antagonistic behavior may hence serve little purpose in a democratic system. This underlines the importance to make a distinction between the varying forms of conflict. They have different characteristics, are caused by different factors, play different roles in a democracy, and may hence produce different democratic effects.

4.2 Political conflicts and marketization – challenges for political leaders? [Politiska konflikter och marknadisering – utmaningar för politiska ledare?][2]

The influence of mayors shifts between countries of varying local government systems, between municipalities within the same country and within the same municipality over time. Who the mayor is and the institutional context within which leadership is practiced are crucial factors for a mayor's ability to realize their political program.

A trend in many European countries is to strengthen mayoral power. But other trends are creating new challenges for mayors. In this study, two such trends are under investigation. These trends, which have been emphasized by cultural and institutional changes during recent years, are the (party) political conflicts and the marketization of the local administration.

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[2] Published: Skoog, Louise and David Karlsson (2015) "Politiska konflikter och marknadisering – utmaningar för politiska ledare?", In Aarsæther, N. & Mikalsen, K. (ed.): *Lokalpolitisk lederskap i Norden*. Oslo: Gyldendal Akademisk

Theoretically, these trends seem to pull in different directions; according to the former, there is an increase in party politicization and according to the latter, political decision-making is moved away from the political arena.

The aim of this study is to investigate if, and to what extent, political conflicts and marketization of the local administration challenge the influence of local political leaders. The study is based on a survey to all elected political representatives in Swedish municipalities 2008 and 2012.

Our first hypothesis was that an increase in political conflicts decreases influence of political leaders and increases influence of citizens. Political conflicts are often depicted as an obstacle or distraction for political leaders as well as for political governance. However, the results show once again that it is imperative to differentiate between the different forms of political conflict, for it is only antagonistic behavior that is a barrier for political influence, whereas political dissent even has strengthening effects. These effects were the same for all actors of local democracy. This means that political actors need to handle the challenge of communicating their views on policy issues, but at the same time acting with respect towards other political actors and their stances on policies. An environment where differences of opinions are communicated clearly but balanced with acts of respect towards others is not an obstacle for exercising a strong leadership – political dissent may even strengthen political influence.

Furthermore, we hypothesized that marketization of the local administration is a challenge to political leaders. But, the results were in reverse to what we expected – these reforms may even strengthen the influence of political leaders. However, alongside this effect are signs of an increased elitism among councilors where marketization is more prominent, and the influence of "backbenchers" decreases in relation to the political leaders. This means that the ones who in actuality are challenged by these reforms are the "backbenchers", not the mayors.

In conclusion, the results show that it is vital to differentiate between the different forms of political conflicts; they are of different character and produce different effects. Where antagonistic behavior poses as an obstacle for exerting political influence and political dissent strengthens it. These effects are true not only for mayors, but for all of the involved actors, even citizens.

4.3 Why comparative case studies?

The results from the two studies presented above show that it is important to differentiate between the different forms of conflict; they are of different character, are caused by different factors and produce different effects. They also bring different normative values into the political realm, and may hence be seen as either good or bad depending on point of view. The overall aim of the project is to increase our understanding of the concept of political conflict. Thus, in order to generate a more comprehensive understanding of the concept, one would need knowledge regarding the mechanisms behind it and the circumstances surrounding it. With the knowledge from the previously conducted studies as a background, an in-depth study of the mechanisms would hence not only contribute to fulfilling the main aim of the project, but also further adding to the understanding of political conflict as a concept.

It is evident from the previous studies that the different forms of political conflict are caused by different factors and produce different effects. One factor which has an effect on political conflicts, and which have been included in the other papers within the project, is fiscal stress. With the ongoing economic crisis and situation of austerity throughout Europe, there is a growing attention among researchers towards the consequences and effects of economic strains on public institutions. A result from one of the papers within my project showed that an increased fiscal stress is associated with an increase in antagonistic behavior. No such relation was found between fiscal stress and political dissent. A case study which focuses on the mechanisms behind how fiscal stress is related to political conflicts would not only be relevant to the body of research which focuses on the effects of fiscal stress, it would also add an important piece to the puzzle of the project.

5. Case study outline – Stress and political conflicts

5.1 Introduction

Europe has entered a period of economic austerity and political institutions are facing demands to reduce budget overruns and expenditure growth. The pressure on public institutions to increase efficiency is not a new phenomenon; it is perhaps as old as the public administration itself. But this pressure has intensified in recent years. With the present situation of austerity in Europe, researchers are turning their attention to the politics of austerity and the political and organizational responses to the economic crisis (Dellepiane & Hardiman, 2012; Hardiman & Regan, 2013; Kiefer, Hartley, Conway & Briner, 2015). Furthermore, the past months have also meant a rapid increase in the number of refugees coming to Europe. Along with the rising numbers of refugees there has been a politicization of the issue of refugee reception throughout Europe, adding not only fiscal stress but also political stress to public institutions and political decision-making.

Pressures of this kind pose new challenges to political and democratic institutions, and it will for example make it harder for politicians to decide on tough economic questions, to prioritize between policy issues, to come to agreement across party lines, and etcetera. There is also a growing interest among scholars in how political factors affect fiscal performance (Kittel & Obinger, 2003; Hagen & Vabo, 2005), and a common thesis among scholars of political economy is that political competition enhances economic performance (Solé-Ollé, 2006; Padovano & Ricciuti, 2009; Besley, Persson & Sturm, 2010).

Furthermore, some studies have highlighted political conflict and political consensus as factors of special interest and indicate that, for example, political conflict and fiscal stress combined affects managerial turnover (Feiock, Clingermayer, Stream, Coyle McCabe & Ahmed, 2001), political consensus enhances fiscal outcomes (Houlberg & Pedersen, 2015), and that political cooperation is associated with successful municipalities (Brorström & Siverbo, 2008),

This means that we have extensive knowledge regarding the fact that there is a link between the economic and political situation. Focus among scholars so far has been on how political factors affect fiscal performance. We hence have less knowledge regarding the reverse relationship, if and how financial conditions affects the political situation. It has been suggested that fiscal stress is a potential source for political conflicts (Lantto, 2005). This

result is interesting in itself, but it does not teach us about the mechanisms behind the phenomena: how and in what way does fiscal stress have an effect on political conflicts? The aim of this paper is thus to study how fiscal stress affects political conflicts, and the mechanisms which affects how, and why, conflicts are expressed and handled in the way that they are.

5.2 Political conflicts

As previously stated, I have reason to argue that there are at least two different forms of political conflicts; *political dissent* and *antagonistic behavior*. In this section I give a brief recapitulation of what these are and in the following section I discuss how political conflicts may be related to fiscal stress.

Political parties are created to represent different social groups, political ideas and programs. From this perspective, the tensions between the parties regard a disagreement over political principles and issues (compare Oscarsson, 1998). The parties may disagree on political objectives and on what constitutes a good society, and the parties may also have similar objectives, but different views on how these should be pursued (DiMaggio, Evans & Bryson, 1996; Bakker et al, 2012). A high degree of *political dissent* between the parties means that they have positions on political issues which theoretically are far apart, whereas a low degree of political dissent means that their positions are similar to each other.

Antagonistic behavior refers to the climate among political actors and how they act towards each other on a gradual scale from harmony to antagonism. A high degree of antagonistic behavior means that there are acts of open critique towards other political parties, an emphasis on their differences and strategic actions to stop other actors from exerting political influence (Lantto 2005; Skoog & Karlsson, 2015). And in contrast, a low degree of antagonism means that the parties downplays existing party differences and strive towards harmony across party lines.

5.3 Fiscal stress

The economic situation in municipalities is affected by a variation of factors, but the most important is probably economic growth in the locality, development of tax revenues, levels of governmental grants and solvency of local authorities. The increased number of refugees over

the past, and coming, months adds further stress on local finances as well as on local political institutions. Furthermore, the results from the paper *"What causes political conflicts in the parliamentary arena?"* showed that there is a relation between fiscal stress and political conflict. And, more specifically, that there was a separate effect on the two forms of conflict – where a heightened level of fiscal stress was associated with an increase in antagonistic behavior in the council. No such effect was found between fiscal stress and political dissent. These results will be explored further in this paper as the aim of this paper is to explore the mechanisms behind how, and why, stress affects how political conflicts are expressed and handled.

It is plausible that a lack of economic resources would make it harder for the ruling majority to satisfy demands from the voters and different social groups. The current refugee crisis may also further strain local resources. Such stresses make it all the more important for the ruling majority to coordinate their efforts in order to get their policy proposals to pass through a vote in the council (Lantto, 2005). Fiscal stress may therefor strain the relationships between the political parties and lead to an increase in the antagonistic behavior as each party strives to satisfy their voters in a harsh economic climate.

Furthermore, political institutions (electoral systems, parliament, executive bodies, and etcetera) help shape the rules for the parliamentary arena and consequently, how these institutions are designed affects the politicians' behavior of and how they perceive their role (see for example Carey & Shugart, 1995; Vabo, 2000; Bäck, 2003; Hagen & Vabo, 2005). The political bodies and their design set the framework for how political conflicts are expressed and handled. Fiscal stress may affect the relation between the executive board and council committees and would increase the need for coordination between these political bodies. Since the executive board is responsible for the economic situation in a municipality it is likely that a situation of heightened fiscal stress would force the members of the board to increase their control over other political bodies. Such centralized control may in turn lead to an increase in the levels of political conflict.

It is also likely that the rapidly increasing numbers of refugees further adds to the pressures on local authorities as they strive to handle a situation of receiving and taking care of newly arrived refugees, providing them with housing, medical care, schooling, and etcetera. The reception of refugees is not only an issue of strained local resources. It is also a politicized issue, and as such it may intensify both external and internal demands on local political actors. It is hence plausible that the refugee crisis adds to the level of stress, political as well as fiscal,

on local authorities. Since this issues shares traits with fiscal stress, it is possible that an increase in the number of refugees have similar effects on political conflicts. Along with the fiscal stress of a poor financial performance, I thus intend to include an increased number of refugees which might add to the fiscal stress, and perhaps also add political stress, on the local authorities.

5.4 Design

As previously stated, the focus of study one and two within the project is on political conflicts on a general level, as a culture or a general attitude in the political organizations within a municipality. The idea for this study is to identify the mechanisms behind the different forms of political conflicts and how this is affected by stress, fiscal stress as well as the stress of an increased reception of refugees. These mechanisms may also differ due to varying institutional arrangements. The focus here is on the events and situations which form perceptions of political conflict at a general level, which for instance may be done through analysis of experiences of central actors on how political conflicts are expressed and handled in situations of stress. I argue that comparative case studies is an appropriate research design to fulfill the aim of the study, where a number of municipalities would be chosen as representative of varying degrees of stress and for different institutional arrangements. A comparison of similar situations of political conflicts in municipalities with different institutional arrangements and degrees of stress would enable me to draw conclusions on how these factors affects the character of political conflicts. For example, what is in focus of the political conflicts? Do the political conflicts concern the same issues? And etcetera.

As representatives for different institutional arrangements, I would include municipalities with a high, and low, degree of sectorization (for example, number of branches of local authorities) and municipalities with a low and a high degree of NPM-components in the local administration (privatization, marketization, and etcetera). As representatives for situations of stress, I would include municipalities with a heightened degree of stress, and municipalities with low or nonexistent degree of stress. In all other aspects the cases would be as similar as possible.

In interviews with representatives of parties in both majority and opposition the focus will be on the mechanisms in the differing institutional arrangements and fiscal situations which affect the character of political conflicts. Figure 1 below illustrates a possible ground for selection of cases on the bases of institutional arrangements and level of stress.

Figure 1. Selection of cases based on institutional arrangement and level of stress

Level of stress

High

Sectorization   Low   ⟵   ⟶   High

Low
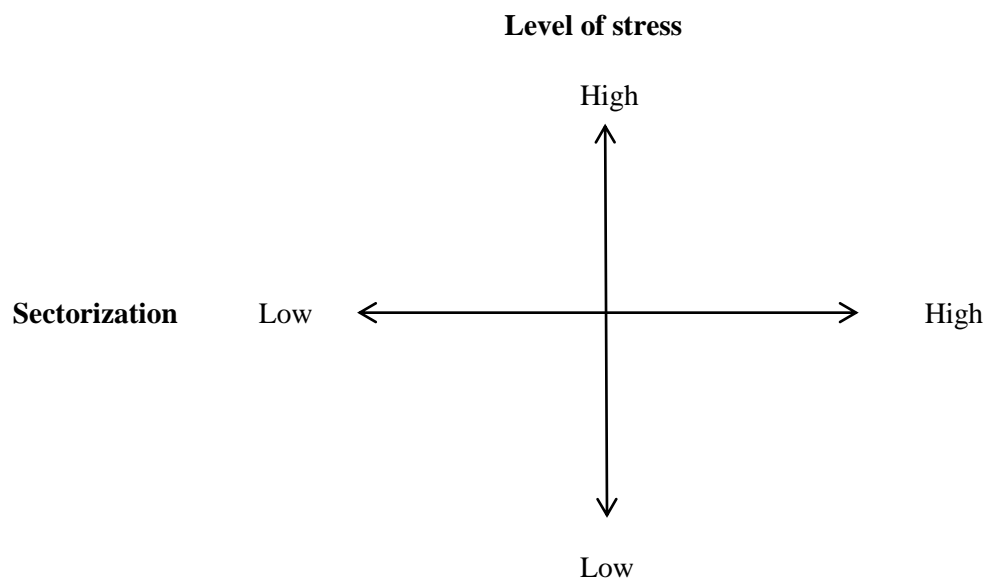
6. Literature

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