Prologue

The idea for the cover image of this dissertation came into being while I was physically trying to avoid stepping in big puddles of dirt with my new black boots. I was on a writing workshop for PhDs where we had just been given the assignment to take a walk in the woods outside the workshop location and to observe any thoughts about our research projects that popped into our heads while walking. Unfortunately, I was finding it extremely difficult to focus on this assignment, because I was trying to navigate my new boots through small paths that were almost impassable due to the muddy remains of a firm rain shower the night before.

This was a problem for two reasons. One: I enjoy keeping myself clean—literally—as opposed to getting dirty. And I don’t mind briefly joining the Ministry of Silly Walks in my attempts to accomplish the former and avoid the latter. But this strategy did not seem to be working quite so well and additionally it was consuming a lot of my physical and mental energy. Which brings me to reason number two: when I am given an assignment, I take it seriously and I want to do it right. And even though this particular assignment entailed that there would be no objective right or wrong way of doing it, I wanted to come up with a superb spontaneous association related to my project. Yet here I was, dodging puddles instead.

For the rest of my walk, I entertained myself with the question: how could these mud-related issues be a metaphor for the way people in organizations respond to errors?
Borrowing from the ideas of cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) on purity and danger, the negative connotation surrounding errors can be explained as follows. Within primitive cultures as well as our current urbanized society, the notion of dirt is strongly associated with threat, morality, and (dis)order. Individuals as well as social groups, organizations and societies as a whole are driven to maintain boundaries between the self and the other (e.g., another group that threatens their survival), deal with deviance (that which is not moral or “right”), and maintain social order. Labeling something as dirty, as a taboo even, may be a way to protect oneself from that which is threatening, improper, or disorderly. In sum, “ideas about order and disorder fundamentally underlie beliefs about what is ‘dirty’ and what is ‘clean’” (Lupton, 1999, p. 40). Extending this argumentation, an error can be seen as a (possible or actual) unwanted disruption of a previously established order.

Regardless of the complicated moves we make in our strives to avoid getting “dirty,” errors can never be completely eradicated; they are “ubiquitous at both the individual and the collective/organizational levels” (Hofmann & Frese, 2011, p. 32). The issue in this dissertation is therefore not how organizational members can prevent errors but how they deal with errors once they occur. I am interested in how people deal with the negative connotation of errors, what they do to limit possible damage to their self-worth in the face of errors, and how this affects themselves and their relationships with the people around them. Moreover, stemming from the conviction that “within a social species, individuality is little more than a short fiction”1 (Houellebecq, 2011, p. 101), the perspective taken on in this dissertation stresses social context more than people’s individual behavior.

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1 Translated from: “binnen een sociale soort is individualiteit niet veel meer dan een korte fictie.”
and concerns. Thus, I study error handling as being closely related to individuals’ embeddedness in social groups. In that sense, this dissertation is more about collective mud baths than about an individual stroll along—and, unfortunately, sometimes through—big puddles of dirt.