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A street-level perspective on government transparency and regulatory performance: Does relational distance matter?

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This study investigates the extent to which inspectors perceive government transparency as impacting regulatory performance. It theorizes that when inspectors perceive an increase in transparency, they find that the perceived relational distance between themselves and their inspectees rises and this, subsequently, increases regulatory performance. The findings from a survey among Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority inspectors (n = 466) confirm that inspectors view an increase in transparency as enhancing regulatory performance. This study further investigates this mechanism by comparing two divisions with different levels of factual relational distance (i.e., frequency of inspector–inspectee interactions). The findings reveal that only in the division with small factual relational distance does perceived relational distance mediate the effect of transparency on regulatory performance. More specifically, in divisions with small factual relational distance, more perceived transparency increases perceived relational distance; this in turn, increases perceived regulatory performance.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Government transparency is commonly understood to contribute to better governance in general (Hood 2007) and to improving regulation in particular (Meijer and Homburg 2009; Van Erp 2011; Van Dooren and Van de Walle 2016). The external pressure that develops when governments make information public about the compliance of inspectees such as business owners is assumed to help governments in executing their task of ensuring and improving the compliance of inspectees (Van Dooren and Van de Walle 2016). Encouraging inspectees' compliance also implies that the public sector itself performs better, in the sense of its effectiveness in ensuring compliance with public rules and regulations. However, empirical evidence to support this assumption is scarce and mixed (see Meijer and Homburg 2009; Im et al. 2013; Porumbescu 2017). The actual effect of government transparency on regulatory performance, therefore, remains unclear.

Regulatory performance depends, to a large extent, on the ways inspectors interact with inspectees during face-to-face encounters (Hood et al. 1999; Boyne et al. 2002; Baldwin et al. 2012). During these encounters, inspectors interact and form relationships with inspectees through often-repeated interactions. The relational distance between inspector and inspectee can have important implications for regulatory performance. An intimate and cooperate relationship may foster inspectees' compliance (see Ayres and Braithwaite 1994; Pautz 2009; Baldwin et al. 2012; Pautz and Wamsley 2012; Etienne 2013), but it can also result in the 'capture' of inspectors. An inspector's position will be weakened because s/he gets too close to the businesses s/he regulates and, in turn, gets captured (Makkai and Braithwaite 1992; James 2000; Ashworth et al. 2002). Government transparency interferes with this street-level relationship because the behaviour of both inspectees and inspectors becomes visible (see Winter 2003; Etienne 2014; de Boer et al. 2018) to all stakeholders in the public sphere, making it, in turn, less intimate (see Black 2010).

Transparency research has barely addressed this effect on the relational distance between inspector and inspectee at the street level, nor the implications for inspectors' perceptions of regulatory performance (see Meijer and Homburg 2009; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017; Porumbescu 2017). There is, thus, a lack of research on government transparency and regulatory performance in which inspectors' perceptions are put at the centre—even though they are crucial actors in regulatory governance (see de Boer et al. 2018). This study sets out to contribute empirical evidence to the debate on government transparency and regulatory performance by answering the question: To what extent do inspectors perceive government transparency as impacting regulatory performance? It is hypothesized that this effect can be explained by the perceived relational distance between inspector and inspectee.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. First, the theoretical framework of government transparency, regulatory performance, and relational distance between inspector and inspectee is highlighted. Second, the method is discussed, followed by the results of a survey (n = 466) among Dutch inspectors from the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA). Third, a concluding section summarizes the main points and provides a discussion on the implications for public administration and management scholarship, as well as policy implementation.

2 | CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND EXPECTATIONS

This section theoretically explores the main concepts and their interrelations. It discusses the independent variable of government transparency, the dependent variable regulatory performance, and the mediating variable relational distance between inspector and inspectee.

Governments are increasingly making information transparent about their own and inspectees' regulatory performance (see Grimmelikhuijsen and Welch 2012; Van Dooren and Van de Walle 2016; de Boer et al. 2018). Government transparency has been defined in many ways. Cucciniello et al. (2017) emphasize that these definitions often address the availability of information about decision-making processes such as budgetary matters, about operational aspects, or about the performance of governmental bodies. Government transparency enables inward observability. Inward observability allows stakeholders to monitor governmental bodies' internal workings, for example regulators' activities and decision-making (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2012; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013). Stakeholders will be able to monitor and make judgements about whether or not regulators are performing well because regulators make the level of compliance by inspectees transparent. Therefore, government transparency is defined as 'the availability of information about an organization or actor allowing external stakeholders to monitor the internal workings or performance of that organization' (Grimmelikhuijsen 2012, p. 55). For instance, when regulators disclose how restaurants are performing concerning hygiene rules and regulations, this allows citizens to observe not only the performance of specific restaurants but also the performance of regulators; if restaurants fail to comply with hygiene regulations, the regulator has failed to enforce those rules.

Government transparency can vary concerning the amount and type of information disclosed. Regulators must make choices about the amount of performance information they disclose, and this varies across regulators. It is important to understand these variations, because the greater the amount of information made public, the more visible the performance of regulators, and, in turn, the greater the inward observability. The amount of regulatory performance information can be understood to vary along three dimensions (Grimmelikhuijsen 2012; Douglas and Meijer 2016): completeness, colour, and usability.

First, governments vary in the completeness of performance information made available to stakeholders (Grimmelikhuijsen 2012). Some may disclose only basic information, lacking details, whereas others disclose elaborate quantitative and qualitative data (Douglas and Meijer 2016). To illustrate, governments may translate the performance of inspectees into a smiley system. They may indicate good or bad performance by displaying a happy or a sad smiley (Meijer and Homburg 2009), or make full datasets transparent that include all sanctions any inspectee has received over a certain period of time.

Second, governments must decide about the colour of performance information disclosed. The extent to which the presented information is coloured varies, however (Grimmelikhuijsen 2012; Douglas and Meijer 2016). Notably, facts in the political realm are always interpreted and presented in a certain way (Stone 2002); neutral information does not exist (Douglas and Meijer 2016). For example, governments can present all steps and communication with inspectees online for each restaurant in a specific city, or disclose solely the names of violators of a hygiene law. Colour does not necessarily concern a purposeful intention to cover or hide information; rather, it addresses the consciously or unconsciously invoked overtone and connotation of performance information.

Third, the usability of performance information differs. The advent of information and communication technologies means that anyone can read government information anytime, but the information is not necessarily understandable and usable by all actors. Disclosed information may be usable by experts but not by laypeople, or vice versa. Meijer and Homburg (2009) describe how the Danish National Veterinary and Food Inspectorate places happy or sad smiley faces on the door of restaurants and on their own website because they are simple and easy to interpret. This system is specifically targeted at laypeople, but it may not be very useful to experts who want details about food quality.

Finally, besides the amount of transparent information, the type of information that governments disclose can also vary. This study specifically addresses transparency about regulatory performance information. One of the core tasks of regulators is to enforce rules and regulations and, ultimately, limit social risks (Ayres and Braithwaite 1994; Levi-Faur 2011; Baldwin et al. 2012). Therefore, regulatory performance information concerns data about the ways inspectees comply with rules and regulations, and about assessing social risks. Notably, performance remains a contested concept and needs conceptual clarification (Boyne 2002, 2006; Andersen et al. 2016). This study focuses specifically on regulatory performance, which is defined as governments' effectiveness in achieving inspectees' compliance with public rules and regulations and in assessing social risks.

2.1 | Hypothesized effects of government transparency on regulatory performance

We hypothesize both a direct and an indirect effect of transparency on regulatory performance. Figure 1 shows the conceptual model underpinning this study. All core variables are based on the perceptions of street-level inspectors. The model shows that inspectors' perceived government transparency is expected to impact perceived regulatory performance directly. Because theories on capture and responsive regulation emphasize that relational distance between inspectors and inspectees plays an important role (Ayres and Braithwaite 1994; Hood et al. 1999; Mascini and Van Wijk 2009; Black 2010), it is hypothesized that the relation between government transparency and regulatory performance is also mediated by perceived relational distance. The remainder of this section addresses the variables and relationships in the conceptual model.

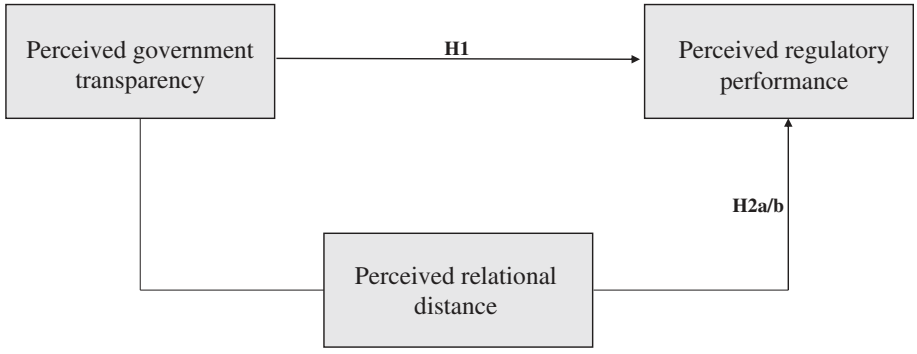

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model

2.1.1 | Direct effect

Scholars frequently question whether transparency is the 'golden tool in policy making' (de Fine Licht 2014, p. 362). Although transparency is often positively associated with performance for a range of different reasons, such as reducing corruption and enhancing financial efficiency and accountability (Hood 2007; Cucciniello et al. 2017), the pros and cons of transparency are contested and results are mixed (see Hood and Heald 2006; Fung et al. 2007; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013; de Fine Licht 2014; Cucciniello et al. 2017; Porumbescu et al. 2017). These mixed results are, however, almost solely based on studies addressing the effects of transparency on citizens (see Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017), for example, effects of transparency on citizens' trust in government, their perceived government legitimacy and their voice behaviour (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017). None of these transparency studies, however, are—to the authors' knowledge—based on the perspective and insights of street-level bureaucrats.

A notable exception is the recent work by de Boer et al. (2018). De Boer et al. (2018) studied the effect of perceived government transparency on the perceived resistance of inspectees by inspectors and their enforcement style during face-to-face encounters with inspectees. De Boer et al. (2018) found that when regulators disclose more performance information, inspectors experience less resistance from inspectees during face-to-face interactions. They explain this result by suggesting that inspectors actually see government transparency as an effective instrument to enhance compliance and assess social risks. In this line of reasoning, Meijer and Homburg (2009) studied government transparency explicitly within the regulation sector. They argue that, under certain conditions, transparency practices can, indeed, contribute to the minimization of social risks. In sum, inspectors take the view that government transparency reduces resistance of inspectees (de Boer et al. 2018) and thus contributes positively to ensuring compliance and assessing social risks (Meijer and Homburg 2009; de Boer et al. 2018). It is, therefore, expected that transparency will be perceived by inspectors as enhancing regulatory performance. The first hypothesis reads as follows:

H1: Perceived government transparency has a positive effect on perceived regulatory performance

2.1.2 | Indirect effect via perceived relational distance

We do not expect the direct effect to fully explain the hypothesized relationship between perceived transparency and perceived regulatory performance. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between perceived government transparency and regulatory performance, we investigate an indirect effect. We focus on an often-discussed but under-researched element in effective regulation at the street level, namely relational distance between inspector and inspectee (Hawkins 1984; Hood et al. 1999; Ashworth et al. 2002; Black 2010; Baldwin et al. 2012; Lodge and Wegrich 2012).

Relational distance concerns the degree to which the inspector and the inspectee participate in each other's (professional) lives (see Boyne et al. 2002; Baldwin et al. 2012). Relational distance may have profound implications for regulatory performance. Indeed, Black (2010) argues that intimacy breeds partnership. To illustrate, the intimacy of small relational distance may help inspectors to better understand the inspectee and be responsive (Ayres and Braithwaite 1994), as well as facilitate trust between inspectors and inspectees. According to Pautz (2009) and Pautz and Wamsley (2012), a trusting relation between inspector and inspectee can encourage inspectees' cooperation. To put it differently, small relational distance may benefit regulatory performance because it allows inspectors to be responsive and encourage inspectees towards more compliant behaviour (Ayres and Braithwaite 1994). Nevertheless, the unintended consequences of being responsive while also punishing wrongdoers and (re)building trust present difficulties for inspectors in practice (Mascini and Van Wijk 2009).

Hood et al. (1999) argue that, in intimate relationships, there is a chance of inspectors sympathizing with their inspectees and becoming allies. In other words, small relational distance could also hinder regulatory performance because it may result in capture. Capture occurs when inspectors 'go native' and identify too much with the business organizations with which they interact (Makkai and Braithwaite 1992; James 2000). The perceived relational distance between inspectors and inspectees, ultimately, becomes too low (see Ashworth et al. 2002; Baldwin et al. 2012). Capture undermines regulatory performance because it clouds inspectors' independent judgement and, thus, the information collected about inspectees' regulatory performance (Ashworth et al. 2002). In essence, inspectors must juggle between cooperation and persuasion while ensuring that they are not getting too close to inspectees and, ultimately, getting captured.

Relational distance consists of two dimensions, namely a perceived and a factual one. First, the factual dimension concerns the frequency of face-to-face interactions between an inspector and inspectee (see Boyne et al. 2002; Baldwin et al. 2012). Factual relational distance is largely beyond the control of inspectors themselves. Even though inspectors as street-level bureaucrats have a certain discretion (Lipsky 2010), organizational boundaries and regulatory structures largely determine how often certain groups of inspectees are to be inspected (see Ayres and Braithwaite 1994; May and Burby 1998; Sparrow 2000; Baldwin et al. 2012). For instance, in risk-based regulation regimes certain 'at-risk' groups are identified that are more likely to non-comply. These groups are then set to more frequent inspection visits than non-risk groups (Black 2006; Rothstein et al. 2006; Baldwin and Black 2008). Second, the perceived dimension concerns the experienced intimacy between an inspector and inspectee. This intimacy builds and evolves during the face-to-face inspection visits of inspectors with inspectees. Perceived relational distance is, thus, shaped through the way inspectors behave and interact with inspectees (see Pautz and Wamsley 2012; Etienne 2013). Both dimensions of relational distance together make up the total relational distance between an inspector and an inspectee.

Factual and perceived relational distance are interrelated. To illustrate, when the frequency of face-to-face interactions between an inspector and inspectee is high (i.e., small factual relational distance), inspectors physically meet inspectees and have the opportunity to build an intimate relationship (i.e., small perceived relational distance) and almost become 'insiders'. When the frequency of interactions is low (i.e., high factual relational distance), inspectors cannot build such a close relationship simply because they do not interact with the inspectee often. Intimacy between inspector and inspectee cannot evolve and inspectors remain 'outsiders' (Boyne et al. 2002; Baldwin et al. 2012; Pautz and Wamsley 2012; Etienne 2013).

In this line of reasoning, this study primarily investigates the role of perceived relational distance because a governmental organization's decision to make information about compliance transparent and public may have consequences for the perceived relational distance between inspectors and inspectees, but not for the factual relational distance. When an inspector perceives government transparency to be substantial this may have implications for their level of intimacy between inspector and inspectee (i.e., perceived relational distance) because their relationship becomes more visible (see de Boer et al. 2018), but not for the frequency of interactions (i.e., factual relational distance) since this is mostly beyond the control of inspectors and is predetermined by organizational structures (see Ayres and Braithwaite 1994; May and Burby 1998; Sparrow 2000; Baldwin et al. 2012).

If information is disclosed, external stakeholders become monitors in the background of the intimate relationship between inspectors and inspectees (de Boer et al. 2018). Ultimately, this brings the relationship into the public sphere and, therefore, the relationship becomes less intimate (see Black 2010) and, in turn, the perceived relational distance becomes larger. Because of the difficulties that inspectors face while being responsive and controlling for the unintended consequences during face-to-face interactions (Mascini and Van Wijk 2009), the potential hindrance of capture (Hood et al. 1999) to regulatory performance is expected to outweigh the potential benefits of being able to persuade inspectees towards more compliance (see Ayres & Braithwaite 1994). In other words, it is expected that inspectors will perceive the growing perceived relational distance to be beneficial for regulatory performance because it limits their struggle with becoming captured.

In addition, as we mentioned before, factual relational distance and perceived relational distance are interrelated. We therefore expect perceived relational distance to work differently for inspectors in environments with large and small factual relational distance from inspectees. For inspectors in environments with small factual relational distance, perceived relational distance will play an important role in enforcement at the street level (see Pautz and Wamsley 2012; Etienne 2013). These inspectors must, as we mentioned above, juggle being responsive while not getting too close and being captured (see Ayres and Braithwaite 1994; Hood et al. 1999). On the other hand, for inspectors who enforce policies in street-level environments where the factual relational distance is large, the relationship with the inspectee will matter much less in their day-to-day work (see Boyne et al. 2002; Baldwin et al. 2012) simply because they do not meet inspectees often or more than once. In sum, when the factual relational distance is small, inspectors must deal with the implications of their intimate relationship with inspectees for regulatory performance. However, when the factual relational distance is large inspectors do not face the consequences of an intimate relationship with inspectees because it is not present in the first place. Our final hypotheses, therefore, read as follows:

> *H2a*: In a division where factual relational distance is large, perceived relational distance does not mediate a positive effect of perceived government transparency on perceived regulatory performance.

> *H2b*: In a division where factual relational distance is small, perceived relational distance does mediate a positive effect of perceived government transparency on perceived regulatory performance.

3 | METHOD

This research was carried out at the NVWA. The NVWA is among the largest inspectorates in the Netherlands. Its core task is to ensure compliance with rules and regulations concerning public safety, public health, and animal welfare. Moreover, the NVWA is in the process of developing and implementing ways of disclosing performance information about compliance performance of the businesses that it regulates. Furthermore, responsiveness and relational distance are prominent topics in the NVWA's enforcement strategy (Mascini and Van Wijk 2009; Van Rooij-van den Bosch et al. 2015). NVWA inspectors conduct face-to-face inspection visits based on performance criteria. For some sectors, business organizations' performance on several of these criteria is made available to the public on the NVWA website or via a mobile application.

NVWA inspectors are classic street-level bureaucrats because they implement public policies with autonomy and room to manoeuvre using their discretion (Lipsky 2010). Inspectors deliver not only public services—like social workers or physicians—but also obligations, because they set out to punish wrongdoers (Sparrow 2000); this makes them especially powerful (Raaphorst 2018). They are particularly suitable for studying the influence of relational distance, as they often interact with a heterogeneous clientele—such as powerful corporations—and often have repeated interactions with their inspectees (Braithwaite 2003; Nielsen 2015).

3.1 | Data

Between October and November 2016, an online survey was distributed among NVWA inspectors. All respondents were informed by email about the research and assured full anonymity and confidentiality of their answers. The NVWA consists of five divisions, an advisory board, and a board of directors. The sample frame consists of all inspectors working for two divisions (n = 804), namely, Veterinary & Import (n = 406) and Consumer & Safety (n = 398). These two divisions were chosen because in Veterinary & Import there is a high frequency of interactions between inspectors and business owners and in Consumer & Safety there is a low frequency. Thus, we could compare inspectors with low levels and high levels of relational distance vis-à-vis inspectees. Experts from the NVWA confirmed that these divisions differed in terms of relational distance between inspectors and inspectees. A complete overview of the departments within each division can be found in Table 1.

New scales are used in this study. These were developed and validated using expert interviews (n = 11). The experts were inspectors from the divisions Consumer & Safety (n = 4) and Veterinary & Import (n = 2) and a senior staff committee including middle and upper management (n = 5). The items were revised in light of the feedback from the expert interviews, and the survey was distributed after the final set was approved to suit the context of street-level bureaucrats and their day-to-day enforcement (see also de Boer, 2018; de Boer et al., 2018).

A total of 466 inspectors filled in the questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of 58.0 per cent. The number of respondents from Consumer & Safety was 221, and 245 from Veterinary & Import. Because they filled in less than 50 per cent of the questions, 123 respondents were omitted from the analyses, resulting in a total sample of 343 respondents. Of these, 168 were from Consumer & Safety and 175 from Veterinary & Import. The total sample consists of 69.1 per cent male, 30.3 per cent female, and 0.6 per cent other. Respondents were between 23 and 73 years old (M = 49.7, SD = 10.78). Their work experience ranged between 1 and 40 years (M = 15.9, SD = 10.77). Table 2 gives an overview of the characteristics of the two samples and the actual population. The total sample is representative of the total population. Only work experience is slightly lower in the sample than in the total population (M = 19.9 years). This slight difference in years' work experience is present in both samples (M = 23.8 and 16.0,

TABLE 1 Departments within the divisions Veterinary & Import and Consumer & Safety

Division	Department
Veterinary & Import	Veterinary 1
	Veterinary 2
	Import
Consumer & Safety	Catering industry
	Food safety & industrial production
	Sustainability, food safety, and EU subsidy
	Product safety (excluding laboratory)

TABLE 2 Sample and population characteristics

	Consumer & Safety (n = 168)		Veterinary & Import (n = 175)		Total (n = 343)	
	Sample	Population	Sample	Population	Sample	Population
Age (M)	49.2	48.5	50.2	49.0	49.7	48.8
Years' work experience (M)	18.6	23.8	13.4	16.0	15.9	19.9
Female (%)	24.6	28.1	35.4	40.2	30.3	29.0
Male (%)	74.3	71.9	64.2	59.9	69.7	71.0
Other sex (%)	1.2	–	0	–	0.6	–

Note: No data are available on other sexes for the total population.

respectively). Also, women are slightly under- and men overrepresented in both samples. This should be considered when the findings are being interpreted.

3.2 | Measures

The three key variables in this study are: perceived government transparency, perceived regulatory performance, and perceived relational distance.

Perceived government transparency: Building on Grimmelikhuijsen (2012) and Douglas and Meijer (2016), the focus is on the perceived amount of performance information made available by governments to other stakeholders. The amount of performance information disclosed is based on the three criteria mentioned earlier, namely (1) completeness, (2) colouring, and (3) usability (Grimmelikhuijsen 2012; Douglas and Meijer 2016). Two items were formulated for each criterion. Examples of items included are: 'I would typify the inspection results that the NVWA discloses as detailed' (completeness); 'shedding light on all aspects of an inspection' (colouring); and 'understandable for non-experts' (usability). Using exploratory factor analysis, it was found that the three criteria did not form one factor, but two. The third criterion—usability—formed a separate factor. Usability was, however, measured by only two items and was therefore omitted from further analysis. The four items that remained formed a reliable measure for perceived government transparency (ω = .88). McDonald's omega is reported and not Cronbach's alpha; Cronbach's alpha has been criticized because it is prone to over- and underestimation (Sijtsma 2009).

Perceived regulatory performance: The core tasks of the government body that employs the inspectors in this study, the NVWA, were used to develop a measure of regulatory performance. The NVWA has two core tasks in which the inspectors are involved. First, enforcement entails all proceedings that are geared towards influencing compliance behaviour. Second, risk assessment concerns judgements of societal dangers (Nederlandse Voedsel- en Warenautoriteit 2015). For each core task, two items were formulated. To illustrate, an item included is: 'My division is successful in … tracing violations of rules and regulations' (enforcement). The first two core tasks formed a reliable measure of perceived regulatory performance (ω = .85).

Perceived relational distance: Part of the relational distance index (Hess 2003) was used to measure the way inspectors perceive the relational distance between themselves and business organizations. Hess (2003) describes three tactics that people can use to distance themselves, namely, (1) avoidance, (2) disengagement, and (3) cognitive dissociation. The first tactic was not used to operationalize relational distance, as business organizations cannot avoid street-level bureaucrats during face-to-face inspections. This tactic is, therefore, not realistic or suitable for the context of this study. Disengagement entails individuals' efforts to disengage from those with whom they are interacting. Cognitive dissociation 'refers to changing perceptions about the relationship and the meaning of people's actions in an effort to perceive less association in the relationship' (Hess 2003, p. 203). For both disengagement and cognitive dissociation, two items were created. These included, among others, 'When I talk to the inspectee, I do not mention personal subjects' (disengagement) and 'In my mind, I position myself as superior to inspectees in order to make a clear distinction between myself and them.'

The exploratory factor analysis and reliability statistics showed that the four items did not form a reliable scale. Dropping items did not result in a reliable scale either (Field et al. 2012). Therefore, it was decided to use one item only. Out of the four items, the item 'In my mind, I position myself as superior to inspectees in order to make a clear distinction between myself and them' was chosen because it is the least ambiguous and the least open to multiple interpretations. In addition, this item measures cognitive dissociation, and this fits well with the focus on perceptions in this research (Hess 2003).

Controls: Sex, age, and work experience were included as demographic control variables. Trust in government transparency was also included and measured using one item, namely, 'I think that disclosing inspection results will increase the compliance of inspectees.' Controlling for the extent of street-level bureaucrats' trust in the effect of the instrument is important, because it may relate to the way they perceive the overall effectiveness of government transparency and regulatory performance. Appendix 1 provides an overview of all items.

3.3 | Common source bias: design—and *ex-post* remedies

Common source bias is a potential limitation for survey research using perceptional data (Podsakoff et al. 2012; George and Pandey 2017). Design remedies are best suited to limiting common source bias, and therefore several measures were taken (Podsakoff et al. 2012). First, the importance of this research was communicated by the researchers but also by the NVWA management and team leaders to ensure support and careful answering of the questions by the respondents. There was, thus, substantive organizational support. Second, respondents were informed that the NVWA management and they themselves would get a report; this served as an incentive to participate. Third, all items of the multi-item questions were coloured in a different shade of grey to facilitate respondents' focus while answering the questionnaire. Finally, as already mentioned, the questionnaire was tested among experts. This enhances face validity (Podsakoff and Organ 1986; Podsakoff et al. 2003; Lee et al. 2012; Podsakoff et al. 2012; George and Pandey 2017).

Although post-hoc statistical remedies have been criticized substantially (Podsakoff et al. 2003; Podsakoff et al. 2012; George and Pandey 2017), they are a useful indication of whether common source bias influences model estimation. Two tests were conducted. First, the independent, dependent, and mediating variables were all loaded on one latent factor for a confirmatory factor analysis (Podsakoff et al. 2003). The comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root square residual (SRMR) were used to assess the fit of the models. Cut-off criteria are between ≥ .95 (good fit) and ≥ .90 (moderate fit) for CFI and TLI, between ≤ .06 (good fit) and ≤ .08 (moderate fit) for RMSEA with PCLOSE >.05, and ≤ .08 (good fit) for SRMR (Hu and Bentler 1999). The fit of the model for the total sample is very poor (χ^2 = 339.021, *df* = 27) with CFI = .665, TLI = .553, RMSEA = .232, PCLOSE = .000, and SRMR = .152. When the sample is split, the model fits remain poor (χ^2 = 187.580, *df* = 27, CFI = .615, TLI = .486, RMSEA = .226, PCLOSE = .000, and SRMR = .161; and χ^2 = 174.552, *df* = 27, CFI = .714, TLI = .618, RMSEA = .238, PCLOSE = .000, and SRMR = .138, respectively).

Second, all individual items of the variables were loaded on a first-order factor as well as on their own latent constructs. This is known as a common latent factor model estimation (Podsakoff et al. 2003). The differences in χ^2 between the conceptual and the common latent factor model were tested in the total sample using ANOVA. The ANOVA is not statistically significant (χ^2 difference = 1.182, *df* = 1, *p* = .277). For both samples separately, the ANOVA tests are not statistically significant either (χ^2 difference = 1.925, *p* = .1653; and χ^2 difference = 0.222, *p* = .6377, respectively). Adding a common latent factor to the conceptualized model did not result in a better fit. It can, therefore, be concluded that there is no indication that common source bias impacts the findings in this study.

4 | FINDINGS

The statistical program R was used to determine the impact of perceived government transparency on perceived regulatory performance, as well as the extent to which relational distance mediates this relationship. The packages 'lavaan' (Rosseel 2011), 'psych' (Revelle 2014), and 'semTools' (Pornprasertmanit et al. 2013) were used. Our data vary slightly from normality, and therefore the parameters in our models were estimated using the Satorra-Bentler correction (Satorra and Bentler 1994).

Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics and the correlations between the independent, dependent, mediating, and control variables. Perceived government transparency correlates positively with perceived regulatory performance (.37) as well as perceived relational distance (.16). Likewise, perceived relational distance correlates positively with perceived regulatory performance (. 22). Both government transparency and regulatory performance correlate positively with the control variable trust in government transparency (.18 and .18, respectively). Perceived regulatory performance also correlates positively with the sex dummy (1 = Female) (.13). Perceived relational distance correlates with none of the control variables. All significant correlations were included in the estimation of the parameters.

TABLE 3 Means, standard deviations, and correlations of total sample (n = 343)

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Perceived government transparency	5.45	1.76	1							
2 Perceived regulatory performance	6.77	1.50	0.37***	1						
3 Perceived relational distance	5.07	2.45	0.16**	0.22***	1					
4 Age	49.67	10.78	0.08	−0.01	0.08	1				
5 Years' work experience	15.92	10.77	−0.05	0.03	0.04	0.60***	1			
6 Sex (1 = Female)	0.30	0.46	−0.03	0.13**	−0.04	−0.43***	−0.31***	1		
7 Sex (1 = Other)	0.01	0.08	−0.01	−0.04	−0.02	−0.02	−0.05	−0.05	1	
8 Trust in government transparency	7.33	1.99	0.18**	0.18**	−0.01	0.00	0.03	−0.05	−0.01	1

Note: *** p < .001, ** p < .01.

TABLE 4 Model fit statistics

	Model 1 (Consumer & Safety)	Model 2 (Veterinary & Import)
χ^2	63.618	43.579
df	41	41
CFI	.949	.995
TLI	.932	.994
RMSEA	.066	.021
PCLOSE	.225	.880
SRMR	.060	.066

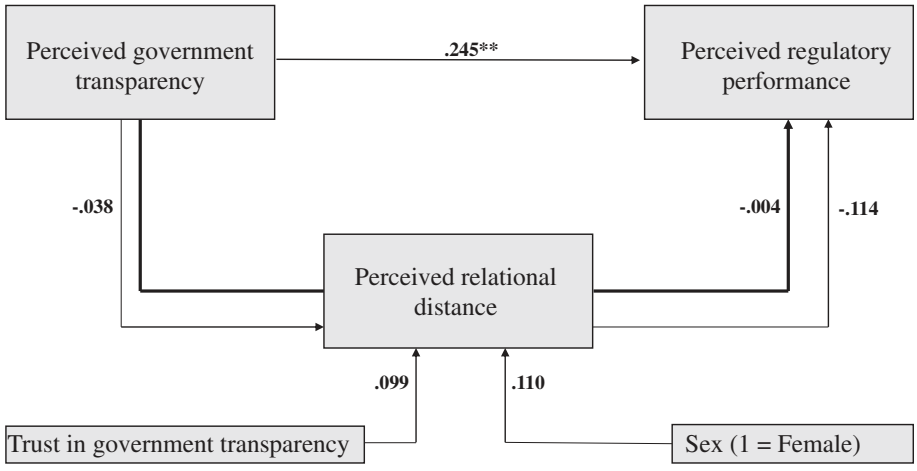

FIGURE 2 Graphical representation SEM result model 1 (Consumer & Safety division)

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to further study the relationship between the core variables in this study because of the latent nature of both the independent and the dependent variables and the multiple regression paths (Kline 2015). The sample was split, as we were interested in a comparison between the division with a low frequency of interactions (Consumer & Safety) and the division with a high frequency of interactions (Veterinary & Import) between street-level bureaucrats and businesses. For both samples, the same model was used for parameter estimation. Table 4 shows the model fit statistics for both models; the fit is good in each case.

The results of the hypothesized relations are displayed in Figures 2 and 3 and Table 5. The first hypothesis concerns the direct relation between perceived government transparency and perceived regulatory performance. More

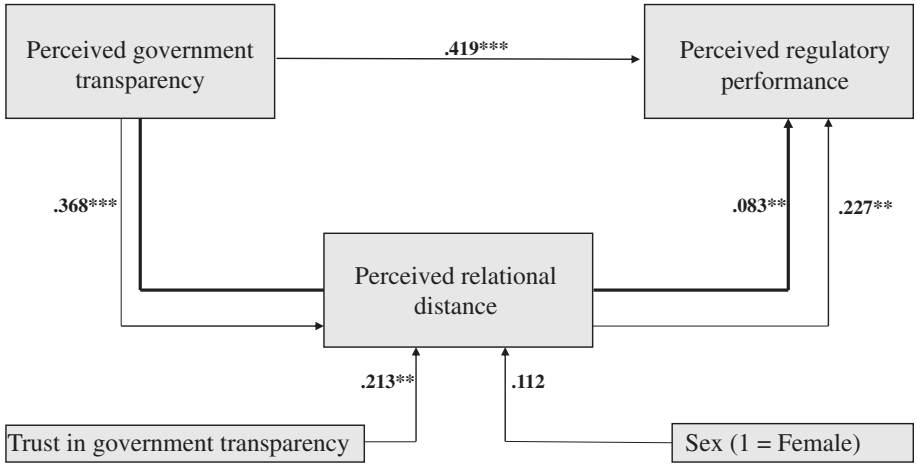

FIGURE 3 Graphical representation SEM result model 2 (Veterinary & Import division)

specifically, it predicts that inspectors' perceptions of government transparency and regulatory performance are positively related. The standardized regression coefficients for both models confirm this expectation. For both the inspectors who have few interactions with the same inspectees (model 1 Consumer & Safety) and the inspectors who have frequent and recurrent interactions (model 2 Veterinary & Import), it is found that when their perception of government transparency rises, so does their perceived regulatory performance (z = 2.305, st.B = .245, SE = .054, p = .021; and z = 3.516, st.B = .419, SE = .077, p = .000, respectively). The effect is strongest for the inspectors with a high frequency of contact (model 2).

The second set of hypotheses concerns the mediating effect of perceived relational distance. On the one hand, Hypothesis 2a predicts that the effect will not be mediated by perceived relational distance for inspectors working for divisions where the recurrence and occurrence of contact with inspectees is low (model 1). Hypothesis 2b, on the other hand, expects that for inspectors working at divisions where the frequency of face-to-face interactions with

TABLE 5 Results SEM

	Model 1 (Consumer & Safety)						Model 2 (Veterinary & Import)					
	Perceived regulatory performance			Perceived relational distance			Perceived regulatory performance			Perceived relational distance		
	z	St.SE	St.B	z	St.SE	St.B	z	St.SE	St.B	z	St.SE	St.B
Direct effect												
Perceived government transparency	2.305	0.054	0.245**	−0.417	0.116	−0.038	3.516	0.077	0.419***	3.621	0.132	0.368***
Perceived relational distance	1.147	0.040	0.114	–	–	–	2.625	0.043	0.227**	–	–	–
Indirect effect via perceived relational distance												
Perceived government transparency	−0.409	0.005	−0.004	–	–	–	2.265	0.024	0.083**	–	–	–
Total effect												
Perceived government transparency	2.306	0.053	0.240**	–	–	–	3.870	0.084	0.502***	–	–	–

Note: *** p < .001, ** p < .01.

inspectees is high, the relational distance between them will mediate the effect between perceived government transparency and perceived regulatory performance (model 2). Both Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b are confirmed. Model 1 shows, indeed, that the relationship between perceived government transparency and perceived regulatory performance is not explained by perceived relational distance (z = −.409, st.B = −.004, SE = .005, p = .681).

In addition, this study finds a statistically significant total indirect effect for model 2 (z = −2.265, st.B = .024, SE = .083, p = .023). When the inspectors' perceptions of government transparency rise, so does their perceived relational distance and, consequently, also their perception of regulatory performance. When we examine this relationship more closely, a statistically significant relationship is found between perceived government transparency and relational distance (z = 3.621, st.B = .368, SE = .132, p = .000) as well as between relational distance and regulatory performance (z = 2.625, st.B = .227, SE = .043, p = .009). In sum, the relationship between perceived government transparency and perceived regulatory performance of inspectors working in a division where the frequency of contact between themselves and inspectees is low can be explained by their perceived relational distance.

5 | CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates the extent to which inspectors, who are classic street-level bureaucrats, perceive an impact of government transparency on regulatory performance and how this is mediated through perceived relational distance between the inspector and the inspectee. Our findings contribute to the existing literature in three ways.

First, transparency scholars often stress that the pros and cons of government transparency are contested (Hood and Heald 2006; Fung et al. 2007; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013; de Fine Licht 2014; Van Dooren and Van de Walle 2016; Cucciniello et al. 2017). The transparency debate, however, lacks a street-level perspective (see de Boer et al. 2018). Our findings indicate that, according to street-level bureaucrats, government transparency does contribute to good performance of their division. More specifically, the more street-level bureaucrats perceive that regulatory performance regarding business organizations' compliance is made transparent, the more they perceive that their division is performing well in fulfilling its public tasks such as tracing rule violations and monitoring risks.

Second, one reason why street-level bureaucrats perceive regulatory performance as improving when more performance information is made transparent is because of an indirect effect through increased perceived relational distance. The results show that, for street-level bureaucrats working in divisions where the factual relational distance is small (i.e., frequency of interactions with business owners is high), there is not only a direct positive effect of increased perceived government transparency on perceived regulatory performance, but also an indirect effect: increases in perceived government transparency lead to larger perceived relational distance, which, consequently, increases perceived regulatory performance. This indirect effect does not occur in divisions where the factual relational distance is large (i.e., the interaction between street-level bureaucrats and business owners is low). In other words, in divisions with a lot of face-to-face encounters, the perceived mechanism through which regulatory performance is realized changes when the level of transparency increases.

In such divisions, perceived regulatory performance becomes less dependent on the close relationship between the street-level bureaucrat and the inspectee, and more dependent on public scrutiny by other stakeholders. This points to a shift from a more relational regulatory procedure to a more public regulatory process. Interestingly, although scholars investigating the relationship and interactions between street-level bureaucrats and their clients have shown that fostering trust and a cooperative relation may be beneficial for delivering and implementing public policies (Pautz 2009; Pautz and Wamsley 2012), our findings indicate that, according to street-level bureaucrats' perceptions, the shift towards more transparent public procedures and less intimate relationships enhances regulators' ability to perform. Future research is needed to assess whether these findings also hold among other stakeholders such as public managers or business owners. A cross-sector approach using, for instance, experiments may be especially fruitful (see de Fine Licht 2014; Porumbescu et al. 2017).

Finally, the results contribute to the literature on regulatory capture (James 2000; Mitnick 2011; Baldwin et al. 2012; Carpenter and Moss 2013) by providing empirical confirmation for theory stating that, when there is little contact between street-level bureaucrats and business owners, street-level bureaucrats do not go native, because the factual relational distance is high and, consequently, the regulated industry does not control or capture government agencies (Makkai and Braithwaite 1992; James 2000; Mitnick 2011). When there is a lot of contact, street-level bureaucrats run the risk of going native because the factual relational distance is small and they, in turn, get captured. The findings may indicate that street-level bureaucrats feel pressure from their clients and are not able to create a desirable perceived relational distance themselves but need institutional arrangements—such as government transparency—to remain at a distance. In sum, this research indicates that increasing government transparency helps to limit regulatory capture because it increases perceived relational distance (see Carpenter and Moss 2013). Future research is needed to understand the implications of increasing relational distance at the street level, for instance, in terms of bureaucrats' engagement in policy design (see Lavee et al. 2018), policy alienation (see Van Engen et al. 2016) and enforcement style (see de Boer et al. 2018; de Boer 2018).

As with any research, there are methodological limitations to this study. First, surveys collecting data from respondents at a single point in time have been criticized because of the risk of common source bias (Podsakoff and Organ 1986; Meier and O'Toole 2012). Risking common source bias was unavoidable, as we are interested in perceptions, but common source bias was limited through design remedies. The *ex-post* remedies conducted did not indicate common source bias in our findings (George and Pandey 2017). Second, it is not possible to make causal inferences because our data are cross-sectional. Future studies, for instance using experimental methods, could be used to further distil the mechanisms identified in this research. Third, relational distance is only measured by one item since the intended four-item scale did not pass reliability thresholds (Field et al. 2012). Relational distance may be more complex and nuanced than the single item used in this study. Future research should pay attention to continuing the development and validation of a reliable measurement scale for relational distance.

Finally, this research has theoretical limitations. First, it addresses a specific type of street-level bureaucrat, namely, inspectors, in a specific context, the Netherlands. Inspectors are similar to other street-level bureaucrats. For instance, they enforce policies, just as for example police officers. Inspectors may, however, also differ from other street-level bureaucrats. Second, the Dutch context may differ from other countries, for example because of specific features of Dutch culture or of the Dutch regulatory system. More research is needed to determine which contextual features may be of influence and whether our results can be generalized to other countries and sectors. Future research with cross-sector and cross-national comparisons will help to assess how other street-level bureaucrats view the impact of government transparency on regulatory performance in other sectors and countries across the globe.

Third, this study addresses the impact of government transparency on regulatory performance and assesses whether relational distance matters. The transparency of the bureaucrat–inspectee encounter may, however, also influence their relational distance and have implications for how street-level bureaucrats perceive the impact of government transparency. Future research could compare the impact of government transparency for bureaucrat–inspectee encounters which are public (e.g., police arrests) and not public (e.g., slaughterhouse inspection visits). Finally, and most importantly, this study is unable to explain how street-level bureaucrats interpret the effects of government transparency on their relational distance with inspectees and regulatory performance. Future research using qualitative methods, such as interviews, will be crucial to distil the interpretations of street-level bureaucrats on how government transparency, relational distance and regulatory performance interact with one another.

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APPENDIX: Questionnaire items

TABLE A1

Variable	Item	Answer categories
Perceived government transparency	I would typify the inspection results that the NVWA discloses as: 1. Complete 2. Detailed 3. Shedding light on all aspects of an inspection 4. Without judgement	Scale from 1 to 10
Perceived regulatory performance	My division is successful in: 1. Tracing violations of rules and regulations 2. Ensuring companies comply with rules and regulations 3. Monitoring risks for consumers 4. Reducing risks for consumers	Scale from 1 to 10
Perceived relational distance	In my mind, I position myself as superior to inspectees in order to make a clear distinction between myself and them	Scale from 1 to 10
Trust in government transparency	I think that disclosing inspection results will increase the compliance of inspectees	Scale from 1 to 10
Sex	What is your sex?	3 answer categories (male; female; other)
Years' work experience	How many years have you been employed as an inspector at the NVWA (or predecessors of the NVWA)?	Filled in by respondent in numbers