

Policy alienation of public professionals: Structural factors at the governmental level

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Panel II: Public professionals and their (new) connections

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ABSTRACT

Previous research that used the policy alienation framework to understand why or why not public professionals identify with policies, applied the framework to analyze the experiences with one specific policy. The present paper complements these studies by adopting a different stance towards policy alienation, namely by analyzing the feelings of strategic (national), tactical (organizational) and operational (personal) powerlessness and societal and client meaninglessness of public professionals towards policies more generally speaking. The main reason for this is entangled in processes such as policy layering and policy succession, that suggest that new policies should not truly be regarded as new. In this paper we adopt the point of view that policies are not developed in a vacuum and that earlier experiences with policies or policy processes result in a public professional having a certain disposition, more or less alienated, towards policies in general. We aimed at investigating structural causes at the governmental level that affect this degree of alienation. A review of the literature suggested that experienced trust from the government (i.e. to what extent a public professional has the impression that the government is trusting him and colleague professionals), the perceived consistency of policies over time and the quality of information provided are all negatively related to policy alienation. Since policy alienation is a multidimensional concept, we undertook a survey among 1.183 Dutch education professionals, and analyzed the data using structural equation modeling in order to determine the relative strengths of the relationships and to estimate for each of the dimensions which factors were most relevant. Theoretical contributions to the policy implementation literature concerning the attitudes and behaviours of public professionals, as well as directions for future research and practical implications, are discussed.

Keywords: Policy alienation, public professionals, government, trust, policy consistency, informing, red tape

INTRODUCTION

Many public professionals have problems with governmental policies. U.S. health care professionals, for example, are having difficulty with the constant flow of policy changes in primary care, resulting in tensions, conflicts and burn-outs (Nutting et al., 2011). Yet, it is essential for policy effectiveness that implementers identify with policies (Duyvendak et al., 2006; Freidson, 2001; Leicht & Fennel, 2001; Noordegraaf & Steijn, 2013). This is not only a necessary requisite for successful implementation, a low level of identification might also affect the quality of interactions between professionals and citizens, which was, for instance, at risk when 550.000 pupils in Israel were not receiving education as their teachers went on a strike to protest against a large-scale education reform (Berkovich, 2011). Such actions may ultimately result in diminished legitimacy of the government (Bekkers et al., 2007).

Why professionals do not identify with a policy, can be understood with the policy alienation framework developed by Tummers, Bekkers and Steijn (2009; 2012b). The authors (2009:688) define policy alienation as “a general cognitive state of psychological disconnection from the policy program being implemented by a public professional who, on a regular basis, interacts directly with clients”. The framework considers possible reasons why professionals are not supporting new policies, and consists of two main dimensions: powerlessness and meaninglessness. In the realm of policy formulation and implementation, powerlessness relates to the degree of influence public professionals have over shaping policy programs. Meaninglessness refers to a professional’s perception of the contribution the policy makes to a greater purpose (Tummers et al., 2009).

Until now, the policy alienation framework has been used to analyze whether professionals feel alienated from a specific policy (for example the degree of policy alienation of Dutch mental healthcare workers implementing the new financial DRG-policy, see Tummers, 2012). The more meaningless the policy is considered by professionals and the less perceived influence they had over the shaping of the program, the higher the level of policy alienation towards that policy. However, as we will argue in this paper, one important notion is not fully acknowledged in these studies, namely that (new) policies or policy measures are not developed in a vacuum. New policies are rarely written on a tabula rasa, but rather on a tablet of existing laws, organizations and clients (Hogwoods & Peters, 1982). This interdependency of policies has received considerable attention previously, and is referred to as policy layering (by Thelen, 2004) or policy succession (by Hogwood & Peters, 1982). Regarding the concept of policy alienation, this notion of layering or succession suggests that when analyzing the experiences of public professionals with a new policy, earlier experiences with other policies are likely to be reflected in their attitude. Besides that, factors that are relevant in explaining alienation towards one specific policy

are likely to be relevant in explaining alienation towards other policies too. As a consequence, in the present study, we decided to investigate the cognitive state of psychological *disconnection from policies in general* by a public professional who, on a regular basis, interacts directly with clients. Policy alienation, following our line of reasoning, should then be regarded as a more institutional form of policy alienation that is embedded in the relationship between the actors involved, against the background of (negative) past experiences and ingrained practices and manners. The following quote is illustrative of a professional that in general does not identify with policies he is supposed to implement (this quote is drawn from one of the exploratory interviews we conducted in order to test our main assumptions and that preceded the development of the survey)

“I experience irritation, distance... policies are not yet internalized at [the implementing organization] and then already abolished. I often regard policies as deus ex machina... Unrealistic goals, ridiculous measures”

The first objective of this paper is thus to determine whether the policy alienation framework can also be meaningfully used to analyze why public professionals experience feelings of alienation towards policies in general. The second objective is, once we established that the framework performs satisfactory, to identify what causes these feelings of alienation. More specifically, we aim to gain insight in structural factors that affect feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness towards policies in general, i.e. factors that are not unique to experiences of public professionals with one specific policy, but that influence the experiences of professionals with all policies. These structural factors can be identified on at least three different levels, namely at the governmental (for instance the consistency of policies over time or the information provided by the government when they introduce new policies) organizational (for instance the leadership style of the organization leader or organizational culture) and personal level (such as big five personality characteristics). For this paper, we decided to focus solely on structural factors at the governmental level. As we feel that combining all levels in one paper, would come at the expense of generating usable scientific and practical knowledge.

Hence, the following outline for this paper is adopted. We first discuss the theoretical framework. We start this section with a brief discussion of the literature on policy layering and the introduction of the policy alienation framework. Next, we consider what structural factors at the governmental level are relevant in explaining policy alienation, and introduce our hypotheses. The third section presents the empirical part of this study, where we report the results from the survey we undertook among 1.183

Dutch education professionals. Finally, we will discuss the contribution of this study to the policy implementation literature concerning the attitudes and behaviours of public professionals.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Relevant backgrounds

Policy layering

When studying policies, history matters (Pierson, 2000). According to Sewell (1996) path dependency broadly means that what happened at an earlier point in time will affect the possible outcomes of a sequence of events occurring at a later point in time. Applying this notion to the present topic under study, the experiences of public professionals with policies, a ‘policy’s past’ should not be neglected.

Hogwood and Peters (1982) noted that in the study of policy making and policy analysis, scholars often speak of creation, birth, and innovation as though policies came new into the world. In reality, they argue, policy making is mostly policy succession: the replacement of an existing policy or policy program by another. Also in the study of institutional change attention has been paid to the path dependency notion. Thelen, a leading scholar in the field of incremental institutional change, described a number of mechanisms of this type of change. One of these mechanisms is policy layering. She uses this concept to explain institutional transformation through a process in which new elements are attached to existing institutions, and thereby gradually change their status and structure (Thelen, 2004). The institution is not replaced, but new layers, for instance policy processes, actors or rules, are added to it (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010). What can be learned from this, is that when introducing a new policy it should be taken into account that the outcome of this introduction is shaped by (the interactions with) existing policies which the proposed policy is intended to replace or complement (Wildavsky, 1979).

Also in other literature streams one can witness a shift in focus, when past events are taken explicitly into consideration. Within the field of organizational change, for example, a great deal of research attention is devoted to understanding factors that affect employee receptivity toward organizational change (see for example Jimmieson, Peach, & White, 2008; Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994; Oreg, 2006). Traditionally, this research has largely focused on understanding employee reactions to one particular event of change, thereby ignoring that past events play an important role in shaping employee responses to current events (Pettigrew, Woodman & Cameron, 2001). Recently, Bordia and colleagues (2011) aimed to fill this gap by proposing a model of the effects of poor change management

history on employee attitudes. They found that poor change management practices not only hurt current changes being implemented, but that they have detrimental effects on attitudes towards future change initiatives as well. Poor change management may, for example, result in change cynicism. That is, a real loss of faith in the leaders of change in response to a history of change attempts that are not entirely or clearly successful (Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997).

What the evidence presented above points out, is that when investigating policy alienation towards one specific policy, the notion that experiences with earlier policies and policy implementation processes will be reflected in a public professional's attitude, is an important one. Besides that, we argued that new policies are only unique to a certain point, as, for instance, many new policies are introduced to complement or replace existing policies. This suggests that more general experiences of policy alienation influence experiences of policy alienation towards specific policies. In order to increase identification with new policies, it is a good starting point to first understand what structural factors influence the degree of alienation towards policies in general, thereby recognizing the importance of policy layering processes.

Policy alienation

Tummers, Bekkers and Steijn (2009) were the first to conceptualize policy alienation. In line with other scholars, who see powerlessness and meaninglessness as “the key psychological ingredients of alienation” (DeHart-Davis & Pandey, 2005:133), they distinguish two main dimensions of policy alienation: policy powerlessness and policy meaninglessness (for a more elaborate explanation of policy alienation and its dimensions, see Tummers et al., 2009, 2012b). In the realm of policy formulation and implementation, policy powerlessness relates to the degree of influence public professionals have over shaping a policy program (Lynch, Modgil & Modgil, 1997). This influence may be exercised on strategic, tactical or operational levels. Strategic powerlessness refers to the perceived influence of professionals on decisions concerning the content of a policy, as is captured in rules and regulations at the government level. Tactical powerlessness refers to professional’s perceived influence over decisions concerning the way a policy is executed within their own organization, and operational powerlessness relates to the influence of professionals during actual policy implementation. As such, while the tactical level looks at the influence of the professional on the way his organization executes the policy, operational powerlessness examines the influence professionals perceive themselves to have while actually implementing the policy.

The second dimension of policy alienation is meaninglessness. Meaninglessness broadly refers to an individual’s sense of understanding of the events in which he or she is engaged (Seeman, 1959). In the context of policy making and implementing, meaninglessness refers to a professional’s perception of the

contribution a policy makes to a greater purpose. The policy alienation framework distinguishes two types of policy meaningfulness: societal and client meaningfulness. The first, on the societal level, refers to the perception of professionals concerning the added value of policies to socially relevant goals. For instance, a professional may perceive that a policy program is not actually providing desirable public services or outcomes, such as security (Van Thiel & Leeuw, 2002). When this is the case, a professional may experience high societal meaningfulness. Second, on the client level, client meaningfulness reflects the perception of a professional regarding the value added for their own clients. If professionals perceive they are not helping their clients by implementing certain policies, they are likely to experience a high level of client meaningfulness.

As noted, in earlier research the policy alienation framework has been used to analyze feelings of powerlessness and meaningfulness toward specific policies. In this study, we apply the framework to analyze feelings of powerlessness and meaningfulness towards policies in general, thereby explicitly paying attention to the notion of policy layering. We thus investigate a more institutional form of policy alienation that is embedded in the relationship and ingrained practices and manners between the government, and implementing organizations and public professionals. Figure 1 shows (in a simplified manner, as we ignored for instance factors at the personal level) how a public professional's more general feeling of policy alienation relates to the policy alienation he experiences towards a specific (new) policy, and what is investigated in the present study.

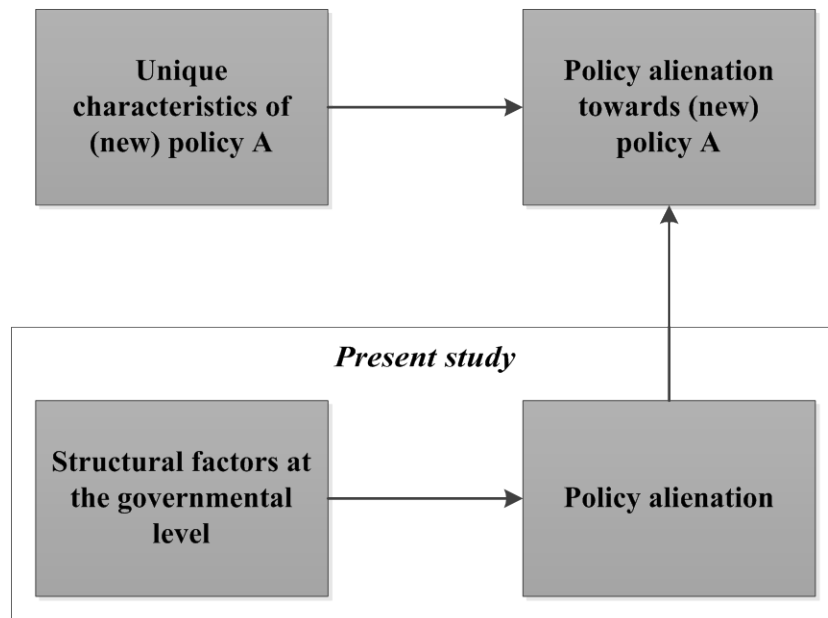


Figure 1. Theoretical representation of policy alienation and policy alienation towards a specific policy

Building the theoretical framework

Policy alienation will be influenced by several factors, both at the governmental and organizational level, as well as the personal level. In this paper we focus on three important structural factors at the governmental level. A review of, among others, public administration, change management and political science literature, suggested that the degree to which professionals have the impression the government is trusting them ('experienced trust'), the perceived consistency of policies over time ('policy consistency'), and adequate provision of information by the government ('informing') seem particularly relevant.

Trust

Earlier studies on policy alienation showed that characteristics of New Public Management (NPM) – a model encompassing a broad set of management approaches and techniques, borrowed from the private sector, now applied in the public sector - influence the degree of policy alienation of public professionals. The more prominent a specific policy focuses on NPM elements such as strict performance management and a focus on output controls, the higher the level of policy alienation towards that policy (Tummers, Bekkers & Steijn, 2009; 2012b). What is interesting here, in the light of this study, is that the NPM model is partly based on distrust: it is characterized by relationships based on audited performance, and on distrust between principals and agents. Or, as Bouckaert (2012:99) stated, that a result of NPM, "the adage 'trust is good, control is better' was replaced by 'distrust is better, audit is best'." What can be learned from this, is that signs of distrust positively affect the degree of policy alienation. What we expect is that this relationship also works the other way around, namely that trust is negatively related to policy alienation.

Cook and Wall (1980:39) defined trust as "the extent to which one is willing to ascribe good intentions to and have confidence in the words and actions of other people." In general, trust between actors in collaborative arrangements has been associated with, among others, more exchange of knowledge and information (Becerra, Lunnan & Huemer, 2008), better performance (Steijn, Klijn & Edelenbos, 2010), better and easier conflict resolution (Das & Teng, 1998), and better compliance (Davies et al., 2009). Within the public sector, Bouckaert (2012) distinguishes three types of trust relationships: citizen's and organization's trust in government and the public sector, government and public sector trust in citizens and organizations, and trust within the government and the public sector. It is the last type of trust that seems particularly relevant for the present topic under study.

Two broad types of trust relationships can be distinguished within this last realm, namely the trust that the public sector has in the government, and the trust the government has in the public sector. In this

paper, we focus on the last trust relationship; the trust the government has in the public sector. We define this type of trust, based on the definition by Cook and Wall (1980), as ‘the extent to which public professionals perceive the government is willing to ascribe good intentions to and have confidence in the words and actions of public professionals’. What we expect is that the more a public professional experiences that the government trusts him and his colleague professionals, the more connected he will feel with the policies introduced by this government. Therefore, we propose our first hypothesis:

H1. The more public professionals experience that the government trusts them, the lower their level of policy alienation

Policy consistency

A second possible cause of policy alienation is the consistency of policies over time, or rather the lack thereof. A main aspect of human nature is that people have an inherent need for order and predictability (Sutton & Kahn, 1987). What we assume is that this is also of relevance in the policy domain, and thus for public professionals. Many policy changes, following each other rapidly, may be experienced in ways that contradict this basic need and likewise deplete public professionals’ adaptive resources, which makes it more difficult for them to identify with policies. This assumption is in line with findings in the business administration literature on ‘change fatigue’ or ‘change cynicism’ (DeCelles, Tesluk & Taxman, 2013; Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997). When the rate of change is perceived as too frequent, the potential for negative outcomes is particularly heightened (Huy, 2001).

However, we do not have the impression it is the number of policy changes per se that leads to feelings of general alienation, as, for example, also the type of policy change is a factor of relevance here (first versus second versus third order change, see Hall, 1993). Nevertheless, what we consider especially relevant for the present topic under study is the consistency of policies. What we assume is that when policies are, at least to a certain extent, consistent, it is easier to identify with them. Once public professionals have the impression that policies are introduced ad-hoc, and they do not experience them as consistent – both over time and in relation to other policy measures – it becomes more difficult to feel connected to these policies, as this is a process that takes effort and time.

We thus expect that the consistency of policies is negatively related to policy alienation. The fact that introducing numerous policy changes, when one regards numerous policy changes as an indicator of an inconsistent policy program, increases the sense of societal meaninglessness, also supports this line of reasoning (Tummers et al., 2012a). Therefore, we formulate our second hypothesis as:

H2. The more public professionals consider policies as consistent, the lower their level of policy alienation

Informing

Ineffective communication, is commonly cited as being the explanation for the failure of organizational change by many researchers, managers, and communication experts. Kotter (1995:63), for instance, argues that most change programs fail because they “under communicate by a factor of 10.” Effective communication and provision of information, on the other hand, is seen as a basic prerequisite for the attainment of organizational change. Change information as communicated to employees is, for instance, related to higher willingness to change (Wanberg & Banas, 2000), and less resistance to change (Oreg, 2006). One possible explanation for these effects is that timely and detailed information seems to have an anxiety or uncertainty reducing effect (Ashford, 1988). A second explanation offered is that information provision is a prerequisite of fostering goal clarity (Rainey, 2003). Ultimately, the goal of a public policy is to make a meaningful contribution to society. For implementers it is therefore important to understand what contribution a policy makes to obtaining this goal (Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003). Meaninglessness, for instance, occurs when implementers are unable to comprehend what goal a policy aims to achieve.

Robertson and colleagues (1993) stated that, especially if change is about how to change the tasks of individuals, communication about the change, and information to these individuals is vital. Policies directly affect the work of public professionals, and therefore, communication about the policy generation and implementation process to these public professionals is vital. It is assumed that dissemination of information such as mission and philosophy, and the provision of a course of action and plan for achieving policy goals (Arnold et al., 2000), increases the identification of public professionals with policies. Consequently, we develop the following hypothesis:

H3. The more the government is informing public professionals about policies, the lower their level of policy alienation

As the three factors described above are governmental level indicators, we expect them to be especially related to the governmental level policy alienation dimensions, that is strategic powerlessness, societal meaninglessness and client meaninglessness.

METHOD

The case we selected to test our proposed model is the Dutch secondary education sector. This sector has experienced many problems, among else because of the reshuffling of authority and responsibilities across the Ministerial and school level (Pijl & Frissen, 2009). Next to that, the sector was characterized by numerous policy changes over the past decennia (Bronneman-Helmers, 2008), thereby making it a promising context to investigate the concept of policy alienation more thoroughly.

Participants

Data was collected in June 2013 through a panel (“Internetspiegel”), which was established in 2006 at the request of the Dutch Ministry of the Interior. Currently, over 40,000 employees in the public sector are voluntary member of the panel. Members were invited to join based on random selection through the pension fund for all employees in the government, public and education sectors (ABP). In this way it is ensured that the panel is sufficiently representative for the whole population per sector. The subpanel relevant for the present study is ‘professionals working in secondary education’, in total 3,126. Of this group 264 are managers with no teaching duties (school leaders), 271 teachers with managing responsibilities (such as team heads) and 2,592 teachers.

All 3,126 education professionals were sent an e-mail with an invitation to participate in the questionnaire. One week later they received a reminder. In total 1,183 of them responded, a response rate of 38 percent. Respondents who only partially filled out the questionnaire were deleted from the sample. 87 respondents were managers with no teaching duties, 93 teachers with managing responsibilities, and 1,003 teachers (response rates respectively 33, 34, and 39 percent). On average the respondents were 52 years old, and of them 60 percent was male and 40 percent female. Dutch national statistics of the year 2012 on secondary school professionals show that the average age was 46, and 48 percent was male and 52 percent female (DUO, 2013). In our sample males are thus slightly overrepresented, and the respondents are on average slightly older than the national average. This difference is partly explained by the fact that in our sample the percentage of managers is higher than the national average (8.4 versus 4.4 percent). Managers are more often male and on average older than teachers. Our sample is thus reasonably comparable with the secondary school professional population. Nevertheless, in the analyses we will add management position (yes/no), so that possible differences between respondents due to this characteristic will be controlled for.

Measures

Policy alienation

The dependent variable in this study is the level of policy alienation, a multidimensional concept that consists of a powerlessness and meaningfulness dimension. To measure the degree of policy alienation, the policy alienation measurement scale as developed by Tummers (2012) was used.

Powerlessness. The powerlessness dimension of policy alienation is divided in powerlessness at the strategic, tactical, and operational level, respectively the influence of professionals on the decisions concerning education policy at the national, school and personal level. All three dimensions were measured using six items. The cronbach's alphas were respectively .79, .91 and .85. Sample items were 'Education professionals can not at all influence the development of education policy at the national level (Minister and Ministry of Education, Parliament)' for the strategic level, 'Education professionals are not listened to over the introduction of education policy in my school' for the tactical level, and 'When I work with education policy, I have to adhere to tight procedures' for the operational level.

Meaninglessness. The meaningfulness dimension is divided in meaningfulness for society and meaningfulness for the client. Again, the dimensions were measured using six items. For both scales the cronbach's alpha was .90. Societal meaningfulness reflects the perception of professionals concerning the benefit of policies to socially relevant goals, in this study improving educational quality. A sample item was 'In general, I think that current education policy will lead to higher educational quality. Client meaningfulness refers to the perceptions of education professionals concerning the benefits of policies for students. A sample item was 'In general, current education policy is contributing to the welfare of my students'.

Experienced trust and policy consistency

Although we aimed at using validated measures for all concepts used, as far as the authors are aware of, no satisficing validated measurement scales for experienced trust from the government and policy consistency exist. Hence, we decided to develop measurement scales for these concepts ourselves, as this would allow us to quantitatively test our hypotheses. In order to develop reliable and valid scales, and obtain initial evidence of construct validity, we followed the recommendations of DeVellis (2003) for scale development.

First, for both concepts a list of potential items was generated, based on prior theoretical and empirical literature and the exploratory interviews we conducted (with relevant stakeholders in the education sector) before developing the questionnaire. The scales were formatted as five-point Likert

scales, with allowable responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. When appropriate, we used templates, since these allow researchers to use specific phrases that fit the specific context of the research (DeVellis, 2003:62). The main advantage of using templates is that it makes it not only easier for respondents to understand the items, but it also makes it easier for researchers to use the items in other contexts; with other policies and other professionals in other countries. Second, to further increase content validity, a number of experts examined the initial pool of items. We selected these experts for their range of different expertise, including public administration scholars, two specialists in electronic surveys, policy offers, and education professionals. Eventually, we ended with what can be regarded as the four most appropriate items for both experienced trust and policy consistency, thereby following the recommendation of Harvey and colleagues (1985 in Hinkin, 1998) of having at least four items per scale so that one can test the homogeneity of the items within each latent construct.

Subsequently, we included the four items per scale in our survey. After collecting the survey data, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis in order to examine whether it was possible to actually discern two different concepts based on the items we used to measure experienced trust and policy consistency. Prior to conducting the factor analysis, we assessed the correlations of the items and checked for common statistical warning signs, such as items having correlations less than .40 or more than .90 with other items within the same hypothesized scale, or items having a negative contribution to cronbach's alphas (Field, 2005; Hinkin, 1998). The examination suggested that one item of the experienced trust scale might not be truly measuring experienced trust, as the correlations with the other three items were below .40 and the item was having a negative contribution to the cronbach's alpha. Still, we decided to include this item in the exploratory factor analysis, before making a final decision on whether or not to delete it.

The results of the exploratory factor analyses, using the latent variable program Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2010), showed that indeed two factors could be identified. Following the findings of the correlation analysis, the same item for the experienced trust scale was not showing statistical fit, as it loaded below the threshold of .4 on its corresponding factor. Therefore, we decided to delete this item. The two factor model fitted the data better than a one factor model, as all the three fit indices recommended reporting by, among others, Van de Schoot, Lugtig and Hox (2012) improved considerably (CFI from .51 to .99, TLI from .27 to .98, and RMSEA from .30 to .04). We then proceeded to determine the cronbach's alphas for both scales, indicating whether the internal consistency of the items is sufficient. Both alphas are .82, which is above the minimum acceptable level of .70. Finally, we conducted tests to establish the construct validity of the scales, that is, 'the extent to which a measure "behaves" the way that its construct it purports to measure should behave with regard to established

measures of other constructs’ (DeVellis, 2003:53). First, we examined convergent validity, thus the similarity between measures of theoretically-related constructs. Experienced trust and policy consistency correlate significantly, and in the direction expected according to our hypotheses, with, for instance, strategic powerlessness (respectively $r = -.22$ and $r = -.17$; $p < .01$) and societal meaninglessness (respectively $r = -.28$ and $r = -.27$; $p < .01$). Second, we checked for discriminant validity, that is the absence of correlation between measures of constructs not assumed related. Experienced trust and policy consistency do not correlate with those measures they were not expected to strongly correlate with, such as gender (respectively $r = -.01$ and $r = -.02$; n.s.).

Given the fact that we followed the widely recommended guidelines of DeVellis (2003) in the scale development process, and the satisfactory results found on the exploratory factor analysis, internal consistency and construct validity tests, we can be reasonably confident that we are truly measuring experienced trust and policy consistency with these two scales. Tables 1 and 2 respectively show the proposed experienced trust and policy consistency measurement scale.

Table 1. Experienced trust measurement scale

Items in standard template	Items in present study
The trust the <u>Ministry</u> has in the functioning of <u>implementing organizations</u> is high	The trust the Ministry of Education has in the functioning of schools is high
The <u>Ministry</u> takes into consideration the opinion of <u>implementing organizations</u>	The Ministry of Education takes into consideration the opinion of schools
The <u>Ministry</u> respects <u>public professionals</u>	The Ministry of Education respects education professionals

Table 2. Policy consistency measurement scale

To what extent do you have the impression that <u>policy</u> from the Ministry of <u>X</u>...
is consistent
focuses on the long term
is determined by ‘the issues of the day’ (R)
expresses long-term vision

Note. Template words are indicated using underline type. These are policy (for this study ‘education policy’ was used), and X (‘Education’ was used).

Informing

To measure whether a professional has the impression that the Ministry provides sufficient information when introducing new policies or policy measures we made use of the subscale 'informing' of the empowerment leadership questionnaire, a scale developed for measuring effective leadership (Arnold et al., 2000). The scale consists of six items, that were reformulated in order to fit our specific research context. Sample items were 'When introducing new policies or policy measures the Ministry explains how my work contributes to achieving policy goals' and 'When introducing new policies or policy measures the Ministry explains what they have decided'. The cronbach's alpha of this scale is .84.

Control variables

Alongside the variables described above, we included three commonly used control variables. That is, any differences due to these variables are controlled for in the analyses. We took into account gender, age, and level of education. Next to these commonly used control variables, we controlled for management position (yes/no) and the perceived degree of red tape. Red tape was measured using the single item measure proposed by Pandey and Scott (2002). The formulation of this item is: 'If red tape is defined as burdensome administrative rules and procedures that have negative effects on the organization's effectiveness, how would you assess the level of red tape in your organization?' Red tape was measured on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 indicated 'no red tape at all' and 10 indicated 'a very high level of red tape'.

Measurement model

The analysis of the data was based on structural equation modeling (SEM) using the latent variable program Mplus. In light of the present study, the main advantage of using SEM is that the structural model allows testing a single model of policy alienation, thus with all five dimensions as dependent variables at the same time, whereas ordinary regression analysis only allows a single dependent variable.

First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed in order to test the construct validity of the latent concepts that were measured. Given our large sample size (N = 1,183) the data was, using a random procedure, split in two and the proposed model was first separately tested using CFA in the first (N = 596) and second (N = 587) subsample. According to a review of articles reporting structural equation modeling and confirmatory factor analysis by Schreiber and colleagues (2006) for one-time analyses, as in the present study, most authors prefer to report the two comparative fit indexes TLI and CFI, and the RSMEA, a fit index which tests the absolute fit of the model. Models achieve an acceptable

fit to the data when CFI and TLI equal or exceed .90, and RMSEA falls below .05 (Hu & Bentler, 1999), although some authors consider a threshold of below .08 already acceptable for a satisfactory model fit (Wright, Moynihan & Pandey, 2012). CFA results indicated a nearly acceptable model fit for the first subsample (CFI = .90, TLI = .89, RMSEA = .05) and an acceptable fit for the second subsample (CFI = .91, TLI = .91, RMSEA = .05). The analyses also indicated that the model proved to be an acceptable fit for the overall data: CFI = .91 (criterion \geq .90), TLI = .90 (criterion \geq .90), and RMSEA = .05 (criterion \leq .05).

Since all the items used in the model were measured within the same questionnaire, possible effects of common method variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003) need to be examined. Common method variance is attributable to the measurement method rather than to the construct of interest and it can have a considerable impact on the observed relationships in the structural model. Although a recent study showed that “in contrast to conventional wisdom, common method effects do not appear to be so large as to pose a serious threat to organizational research” (Lance et al., 2010:450), we did assess the potential consequences of common method bias by comparing a four-factor structure (experienced trust, policy consistency, informing and policy alienation) with a one-factor model. The fit indices showed a much poorer fit for the latter than the former, suggesting that common method variance does not seem to have a major impact here.

Summarizing, the results of the CFA have shown that the policy alienation framework can, next to investigating experiences of public professionals with a specific policy (see, for example, Tummers, 2012), also be used to analyze more general experiences with policies. Since the analysis of common method bias indicated satisfactory results too, we then constructed variables for each of the latent concepts. Next, a measurement model of these variables, including the hypothesized interactions between these variables, was fitted to the data in order to test our three main hypotheses (thus whether the three structural causes are indeed negatively related to the five dimensions of policy alienation). The results of the SEM-analyses are reported in the next section.

RESULTS

Correlation analysis

Correlations of the main variables are presented in table 3. As can be seen, all correlations for the variables linked via our hypotheses are in the anticipated direction. For example, experienced trust and policy consistency are negatively related to all policy alienation dimensions. Besides that, we see that all powerlessness and meaningfulness dimensions positively correlate. Since we assume these five dimensions to measure the same underlying construct, policy alienation, we also expected them to be interrelated in this manner.

Table 3. Correlations between main variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Experienced trust								
2 Policy consistency	0.23*							
3 Informing	0.12*	0.13*						
4 Strategic powerlessness	-0.22*	-0.17*	-0.12*					
5 Tactical powerlessness	-0.12*	-0.07*	-0.13*	0.16*				
6 Operational powerlessness	-0.16*	-0.12*	-0.08*	0.16*	0.28*			
7 Societal meaningfulness	-0.28*	-0.28*	-0.13*	0.23*	0.21*	0.25*		
8 Client meaningfulness	-0.23*	-0.22*	-0.11*	0.17*	0.14*	0.20*	0.45*	

Note. * $p < 0,01$

Structural model

The results of the structural equation model, including the four control variables, are shown in table 4 (on the next page). Overall, the structural model proved to be a good fit of the data: CFI = .92 (criterion $\geq .90$), TLI = .91 (criterion $\geq .90$), and RMSEA = .04 (criterion $\leq .05$). We will now discuss the individual hypotheses in more detail.

Table 4. Results from structural equation modeling

	Strategic powerlessness	Tactical powerlessness	Operational powerlessness	Societal meaninglessness	Client meaninglessness
<i>Control variables</i>					
Gender (female=ref.)	0.11	-0.04	-0.02	0.19*	0.07
Age	-0.03	0.13*	0.08*	-0.07	-0.07*
Education level	-0.09*	-0.03	-0.03	0.02	0.04
Management position (no=ref.)	-0.35*	-0.66*	-0.47*	-0.27*	-0.27*
Red tape	0.05	0.10*	0.23*	0.05	0.07
<i>Structural causes</i>					
Experienced trust	-0.51*	-0.16*	-0.27*	-0.27*	-0.30*
Policy consistency	-0.15*	0.04	-0.06	-0.35*	-0.35*
Informing	-0.15*	-0.23*	-0.07	0.02	-0.03
R ²	0.52	0.19	0.24	0.36	0.41

Note. * $p < 0.01$. Standardized scores are reported (StdYX Mplus scores are reported for all variables, as these incorporate variances of the latent variables as well as the background and outcome variable, except for the dummy variables gender and management position for which we report StdY scores).

Hypothesis 1 states that the more public professionals experience that the government trusts them, the lower their level of policy alienation. We will now discuss for each of the five policy alienation dimensions whether we can accept or should reject this hypothesis. As can be seen in table 4 experienced trust is negatively related to all five dimensions of policy alienation. We therefore accept hypothesis 1 for all dimensions of policy alienation. Experienced trust seems most relevant in explaining feelings of strategic powerlessness ($\beta = -.51$; $p < .01$). This suggests that a professional that has the impression that the government trusts him, is more likely to perceive that he can influence the content of a policy at the governmental level. The dimension of policy alienation that experienced trust relatively has the least influence on, although the negative relation is still significant, is the tactical powerlessness dimension ($\beta = -.16$; $p < .01$). As this dimension of policy alienation measures a professional's perceived influence over decisions concerning the way a policy is executed within their own organization, this is a finding that seems to make sense, both theoretically and intuitively.

Hypothesis 2 examines the influence of policy consistency on policy alienation. What the results reported in table 4 show is that the consistency of policies is negatively related to strategic powerlessness ($\beta = -.15$; $p < .01$), but most strongly to the two meaninglessness dimensions (both $\beta = -.35$; $p < .01$). This suggests that the higher the perceived inconsistency of policies, the less likely it is that professionals

consider them as meaningful, both for society and their own clients. Finally, the third hypothesis predicts that the more a professional has the impression that the government is adequately informing public professionals about (new) policies, the lower his level of policy alienation. The results of the analyses suggest that we can only accept this hypothesis for the strategic and tactical powerlessness dimension. Informing is especially relevant in explaining tactical powerlessness ($\beta = -.23$; $p < .01$). For the other three dimensions, the relation was in the expected (negative) direction, but failed to reach significance.

We assumed experienced trust, policy consistency and informing especially influential in explaining the governmental level policy alienation dimensions, that is strategic powerlessness, and societal and client meaningfulness. When we compare the explained variance per dimension of policy alienation, this assumption seems to be confirmed by the data. The explained variance for strategic powerlessness, and societal and client meaningfulness (respectively 52, 36, and 41 percent) is substantially higher than the explained variance for tactical and operational powerlessness (respectively 19 and 24 percent). On the other hand, when we look at the scores per cause per dimension, we see that, for example, experienced trust is significantly related to all five dimensions of policy alienation, whereas informing is not related to the meaningfulness dimensions. Hence, our assumption is only partially confirmed by the data. What these findings do suggest is that the policy alienation dimensions should be investigated separately, in order to truly understand what causes these feelings of alienation.

Regarding the control variables that were also incorporated in the structural equation model, two interesting results should be noted. The first is that professionals with managing responsibilities experience less policy alienation. This finding is applicable to all five dimensions of policy alienation, and suggests that the further down the hierarchical line a professional's position, the more he feels alienated from policies in general. A second interesting finding is that red tape is positively related to both tactical and operational powerlessness. This is especially so for the operational powerlessness dimension ($\beta = .23$; $p < .01$). Since this dimension examines the influence professionals perceive themselves to have while actually implementing policies and red tape measures the perceived degree of burdensome administrative rules and procedures within the organization, this is again a finding that makes theoretical and intuitive sense.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this paper we investigated the experiences of public professionals with policies in general, thereby using the policy alienation framework developed by Tummers, Bekkers and Steijn (2009; 2012b). Previously, the measurement scale of policy alienation has been used to analyze experiences of public professionals with one specific policy. The present study investigated policy alienation – a psychological disconnection from policies by a public professional who, on a regular basis, interacts directly with clients – from a more institutional point a view, regarding policy alienation as a state of mind embedded in the relationship between the actors involved, against the background of (negative) past experiences and ingrained practices and manners. The analyses showed that the policy alienation framework can also be meaningfully used to analyze more general experiences with policies. A major advantage of this more general approach is that it allows for comparative research, both between different sectors within the same country, as between the same sectors, but then in different countries.

The second aim of this study was to identify structural factors at the governmental level that explain the degree of policy alienation. A review of relevant literature suggested that the degree to which professionals have the impression the government is trusting them ('experienced trust'), the perceived consistency of policies over time ('policy consistency'), and adequate provision of information by the government ('informing') seemed relevant in explaining policy alienation. Since these are governmental level indicators, we expected them to be especially relevant in explaining the governmental level dimensions of policy alienation, that is strategic powerlessness and societal and client meaninglessness. We undertook a large-scale survey among 1,183 Dutch education professionals, in order to test whether the three causes are indeed negatively related to policy alienation, and determine for each factor the relative explanatory strength per dimension of policy alienation.

First, the analyses revealed that the more a professional has the impression that the government trusts him and his colleague professionals, the lower his level of policy alienation. This is true for all five dimensions of policy alienation. Of the three structural causes investigated, overall, this variable seems most influential. Taking into consideration the notion of Bouckaert (2012) that trust is increasingly becoming a crucial element of performance in the public sector of OECD countries, it seems a worthwhile strategy for governments to rebuild trust relationships throughout the public sector, especially with street-level bureaucrats who play an important role in effective policy implementation (Lipsky, 1980).

Second, we established that policy consistency is negatively related to, as anticipated, strategic powerlessness and societal and client meaninglessness. This is particularly so for the two

meaninglessness dimensions. The more a professional perceives policies as consistent and focusing on the long term, the more likely he has the impression these policies contribute to socially relevant goals and are of added value for their own clients. Recently, Tummers and colleagues (2012a) found that especially societal meaninglessness is negatively related to the willingness to implement policies. In order to increase identification with policies and make public professionals in the future more willing to implement new policies, policy consistency deserves a prominent place on both current and future policy agendas. In order to increase our understanding of the exact effect policy consistency has on the feelings of policy alienation of public professionals, we could compare feelings of alienation in relatively consistent and relatively inconsistent policy areas. Also studying the interactions between policy consistency, the actual number of new policies introduced, and professionals perceived degree of policy accumulation, seems an interesting line of research.

The third and final structural factor we investigated, informing, is firstly negatively related to strategic powerlessness. The provision of information about the policy goal, the process of policy formulation, and what, from a practical point of view, is exactly expected from professionals, reduces the level of strategic powerlessness. This suggests that policymakers do not necessarily need to involve professionals more in the design of policies to increase identification and acceptance; instead they should focus on informing professionals at all stages in the policy cycle. Professionals might not consider it necessary to be actively involved in all these stages, what the results of the present study do seem to imply, is that they expect to be informed. The provision of information will increase their identification with policies, which will make them more willing to implement these policies (Tummers et al., 2012). It would be interesting to conduct experiments in which it is tested whether the level of experienced strategic powerlessness of public professionals is indeed influenced by the provision of information. Do professionals that systematically receive information about new policies or policy measures experience less strategic powerlessness than professionals that do not receive such information? This would not only provide us insight in the 'staticness' of policy alienation, as far as the authors know experiments are not that common in public administration yet (with few exceptions, such as Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006), despite the valuable information on policy acceptance of public professionals (quasi-)experimental hypotheses testing could provide.

Secondly, somewhat more surprising, informing is relevant in explaining tactical powerlessness, thus professionals' perceived influence on decisions concerning the way (new) policies are usually implemented within their organization. What can be learned from this is that government behavior also affects feelings of alienation at the organization level; a level that they do not have direct influence over – in that school management can decide themselves to what extent they involve teachers in the actual

implementation of policy at the school level. It has been noticed by some scholars that the emergence of polycentric governance network arrangements, which are characterized by more decentralized, multi-level decisional and implementation arrangements, has changed the conditions for successful policy implementation (Tollefson, Zito & Gale, 2012). With regard to policy alienation, instead of adopting a top-down implementation approach, the national government should focus on policy alignment, thereby ensuring the involvement and contribution of actors at all levels in order to successfully implement new policies. In future studies on policy alienation, the role of the organizational leader should thus be studied thoroughly. Ideally by adopting a multi-level approach, as this would allow us to study how the degree of policy alienation of a public professional varies according to the organization's context, including the effect of the attitude and behavior of the organizational leader, as well as the level of policy alienation of colleagues. These forces are likely to be especially relevant in explaining the tactical (organizational) powerlessness dimension of policy alienation.

In this paper we discussed only factors at the governmental level related to feelings of policy alienation. Given the fact that the policy alienation framework is subjective in the sense that it concerns alienation as perceived by the professionals (Tummers et al., 2009), in future studies on policy alienation more attention should also be paid to the personal-psychological forces at play. Why do some public professionals, within the same governmental or organizational context, do experience high levels of policy alienation, whereas others do not? Literature on work alienation, a concept that is closely related to policy alienation, suggests locus of control, self-efficacy, and engagement are examples of variables that could be of relevance here (see for example Hirschfeld & Field, 2000; Ng, Sorensen & Eby, 2006).

The present study has, as the above discussion shows, important theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical point of view, we showed that the policy alienation framework is also applicable in a satisfactory manner when investigating the attitude of public professionals towards policies in general. The framework can thus be used in at least two regards. First, as we did previously, it can be used to understand why public professionals do not identify with a specific policy (Tummers et al., 2009). Second, by assessing the experiences with policies in general, the framework can also be used by government to estimate whether professionals in general can identify themselves with policy programs. As a result, governments could for example decide to measure the level of policy alienation at different points in time. A decrease in the level of general policy alienation would suggest an increased identification of public professionals with policies, whereas an increase suggests less identification. A longitudinal study of (changes in the level of) policy alienation makes it also possible to investigate whether the interventions we suggested, ranging from easy applicable as systematically providing

information, to more encompassing as rebuilding trust relationships, affect the level of policy alienation as anticipated.

As in all studies, this study has some limitations. The first limitation is that we made use of panel data. Despite some obvious advantages related to, for instance, the speed of data collection, self-selection problems might arise. Second, the results of this study should be interpreted in light of the study's context. On the one hand, we should be cautious in generalizing the findings to other public-sector domains. On the other hand, the large sample size, and high internal consistency values (Cronbach's alpha ranging from .79 to .91), make us reasonably confident in the results presented in this paper. Nevertheless, testing the proposed model in a range of public domains in various countries would increase the generalizability and validity of the results found, and is therefore highly recommended as an area for further research. A third and final limitation of this study lies in the fact that, despite the fact we established initial construct validity for the scales, we developed measurement scales for the variables experienced trust and policy consistency ourselves. In order to be sure that these scales truly measure the intended concepts, they should be tested again in another large-scale survey, again preferably in a different country and policy domain.

Concluding, what the present study once again highlights is the fruitfulness of the concept of policy alienation. Further increasing our understanding of why public professionals do not identify with policies, should result in the joint formulation of meaningful policies that are more readily accepted by public professionals, which would ultimately lead to more effective policy implementation.

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