Taking previous policy experiences into account: Conceptualizing and measuring general policy alienation

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ABSTRACT

Research mainly looked at problems frontline workers[1] have with specific policy programs. However, policies are not developed in a vacuum. Frontline workers are often confronted with (a series of) policy changes, intended to refine, replace or complement other policies. This policy accumulation results in frontline workers having a certain predisposition towards policies in general. To conceptualize this predisposition, we introduce the term general policy alienation. We investigate whether the earlier developed policy alienation scale can be adapted to measure general policy alienation. Our analyses show that the scale performs satisfactorily. Theoretical relevance, as well as directions for practical applications are discussed.

1 Please note that in the original article (Van Engen *et al.*, 2016), we apply the term 'public professionals' instead of 'frontline workers'. To increase readability, we apply the term 'frontline workers' throughout this whole thesis, including this chapter.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

> "*This strike is about much more than the compulsory seven and a half hours teachers should spend daily at school.*"
>
> - President of the Norwegian Teachers Union
> (Education International, 2014)

This quote illustrates that frontline workers who regularly work on the frontline of public administration (such as teachers), where they interact directly with citizens, are confronted with government policies that they do not always support. Moreover, they have an important role in the success of these policies given their discretion during implementation (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Gofen, 2014). As such, their support influences the effectiveness and legitimacy of government policies (Freidson, 2001; Bekkers *et al.*, 2007).

Surprisingly, the experiences of frontline workers with new policies are often studied in isolation (e.g., Handley & Howell-Moroney, 2010; Sager *et al.*, 2014), ignoring the fact that these policies are not developed in a vacuum (Hogwood & Peters, 1982). Very often, these experiences have a history because they build upon earlier experiences with other related policies. This process can be described as policy accumulation (In ´t Veld, 1989): the continuous aggregation of policies that follow each other. What this accumulation notion suggests is that frontline workers have a certain predisposition, with varying degrees of positivity, towards policies in general. Insights from change management studies - where terms such as 'change fatigue' and 'change cynicism' are used - show that employees' previous experiences of change affect their openness and willingness to change at a later stage (Bordia *et al.*, 2011). The same mechanism may also apply to frontline workers and their receptivity of new policies, and this will also influence the effectiveness and legitimacy of these policies. If we want to increase our understanding of the influence of this policy predisposition, we first have to conceptualize it and, second, have to operationalize and measure it.

Tummers, Bekkers, and Steijn (2009) proposed a policy alienation framework to systematically analyze whether public actors identify with a specific policy. However, the framework does not take the accumulation of previous experiences

into account. Here, we introduce the term *general policy alienation* based on distinctions made in the literature between general and specific trust (Kenning, 2008) and self-efficacy (Schwoerer *et al.*, 2005). To demonstrate that this is a phenomenon that frontline workers genuinely experience, we return to the quote that introduced this article: 'This strike is about much more than the compulsory seven and a half hours…'. This strike by Norwegian secondary school teachers *did* start as a reaction to the introduction of a new controversial government proposal, but the strike was about more than that. Months before the strike started, the Norwegian teachers had already voted against another government proposal because they perceived it as a threat to their professional autonomy and their ability to deliver high quality education. The later attitude of these Norwegian teachers was therefore in line with our conceptualization of general policy alienation as a state of mind reflecting accumulated past policy experiences. Alongside conceptualizing general policy alienation, we also investigate whether an adapted version of the previous policy alienation scale (Tummers, 2012) can be used to assess frontline workers' general perceptions of government policy, thereby helping in the analysis of the effect of frontline workers' past policy experiences. By taking history into account, this would contribute to a more realistic and context-sensitive approach when studying policy implementation.

This article is structured as follows. In the first part, we discuss the existing theory on policy accumulation and policy alienation. The second part presents the empirical component of this study based on data from a survey among 1.096 Dutch secondary school teachers. Here we report the steps taken in the development of a reliable and valid measurement scale, including exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, and internal and convergent validity tests. After discussing the results, we conclude by evaluating our contribution to the policy implementation literature. Finally, we discuss how our results can benefit public administration scholars and practitioners in their continuous quest to improve public service delivery.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.2.1 Policy accumulation

When studying policies, history matters (Pierson, 2000). A policy's past should therefore not be ignored. Hogwood and Peters (1982) noted that scholars often speak of creation, birth, and innovation as though policies come new into the world. In reality, they argued, new policies are rarely written on a clean slate, but rather on a well-occupied or even crowded tablet of existing laws, organizations, and clients. Policies fit within a certain tradition of policies and policy changes. Attention has also been paid to this notion of history in studies of institutional change. Here, Thelen (2004) introduced the concept of institutional layering to explain transformation as a process in which new elements are attached to existing institutions, thereby gradually changing their status and structure. The institution is not replaced, but new layers, such as policies, policy processes, actors, or rules, are added to it. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011, p. 8) commented that "the detail of public sector reforms turns out to be more like geological sedimentation, where new layers overlie but do not replace or completely wash away the previous layer". The introduction of a new policy is thus shaped by interactions with the pre-existing policies it is intended to either specify, replace, or complement as it adapts to unanticipated implementation circumstances and evolving political needs (Van Gunsteren, 1976; Wildavsky, 1979). The term 'policy accumulation' is used to refer to these processes (In 't Veld, 1989). Due to this accumulation process, frontline workers will have a certain predisposition towards policies in general, and this will affect their receptivity towards new policies.

2.2.2 General policy alienation

Tummers, Bekkers, and Steijn (2009) conceptualized policy alienation in order to systematically and coherently analyze why frontline workers do, or do not, identify with government policies. Policy alienation is defined as "a cognitive state of psychological disconnection from the policy program being implemented by a public professional who regularly interacts directly with clients" (Tummers *et al.*, 2009, p. 688). They distinguished two main dimensions of policy alienation: policy powerlessness and policy meaninglessness. In this chapter, we make a conceptual distinction between frontline workers' specific policy alienation

(disconnection from a specific policy program) and general policy alienation (an overall disconnect from government policies).

We first need to define the terms 'profession' and 'frontline workers'. However, distinguishing professions from non-professions has proven difficult. Several authors have argued that professionals must have specific knowledge and do certain things to be professional (content), and they must be part of a professional association (control) to acquire content and be regarded as professionals with special privileges (Elliot, 1972; Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2011). Others, such as Etzioni (1969), proposed a distinction between professions and semi-professions. The latter referring to professions with limited discretion and decision-making responsibility. In light of our research topic, we use a fairly broad definition of professions offered by Gabe, Bury, and Elston (2004, p. 163): "to describe an occupation as a profession may be simply to identify it as a particular kind of occupation, typically one with high status and high rewards, requiring long formal training and delivering a personal service". In line with this, a semi-profession is then an occupation without high status and high rewards. We subsequently define frontline workers as employees working in professions (such as medical doctors) and semi-professions (such as teachers or social workers) in the public sector. With this definition, we want to emphasize that our research is relevant for understanding both professionals' and semi-professionals' experiences with national policies. For our study, two distinguishing characteristics of frontline workers are relevant. The first is that these frontline workers are responsible for implementing and thereby defending the policies of the government (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Hupe & Hill, 2007). The second is that, in doing this, they have a certain degree of discretion in their regular interactions with citizens (Sandfort, 2000; Brodkin, 2011).

In the realm of policy formulation and implementation, policy powerlessness relates to the degree of influence frontline workers have (or rather lack) over shaping a policy program. This power may be exercised on the strategic, tactical, or operational levels (Tummers *et al.*, 2009) where it influences, respectively, the national level, the organizational level, and the actual policy implementation. The second dimension of policy alienation is meaninglessness. In the context of policymaking and implementation, meaninglessness refers to frontline workers' perceptions of the contribution a policy makes (or fails to make) to some greater

purpose. Societal meaninglessness refers to the perception of frontline workers concerning the value that policies add to socially relevant goals (Tummers *et al.*, 2009). For instance, frontline workers may perceive a policy program as not actually providing desirable public services or outcomes, such as improved educational quality. Client meaninglessness reflects frontline workers' perception of the value added for their own clients. If frontline workers perceive that they are not helping their clients by implementing certain policies, this amounts to a high level of client meaninglessness. The latter should logically be most pertinent to public servants such as teachers who have direct working relationships with citizens (as clients) and we use the term 'frontline' to refer to those in such a relationship.

The policy alienation framework has primarily been used to analyze frontline workers' experiences with single policies. In this study, however, we focus on general policy alienation. Do frontline workers have the impression that they can, in general, influence the shaping of government policies? Further, do they have the impression that government policies are, in general, meaningful and add value for society as a whole and for their own clients? As with specific policy alienation, general policy alienation can be conceptualized using five dimensions. We conclude this section by summarizing and defining these dimensions in Table 2.1 (on the next page). This table also shows, for each dimension, the definition of specific policy alienation in order to clarify the distinction between the two concepts. Further, an example is provided of each dimension.

Here, we should emphasize that we are not claiming that the way frontline workers respond to new policies is dependent only on their alienation towards a specific policy or their general policy alienation: other factors are also relevant. These include the influence of professional culture and organizational socialization (Oberfield, 2010; Hatmaker *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, personality characteristics can play a role, such as psychological reactance and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Brehm & Brehm, 2013). This is fully acknowledged, and will be discussed more extensively in the concluding section. However, since the main goal of our article is to capture, using the new concept of general policy alienation, how past policy events influence later responses of frontline workers, we do not focus explicitly on such aspects.

Table 2.1 Definition of general policy alienation: Five dimensions

Dimension	Policy alienation*	General policy alienation	Example high general policy alienation
Strategic powerlessness	The perceived influence of frontline workers on decisions concerning the content of policy X as captured in rules and regulations.	The influence that frontline workers usually perceive themselves as having on decisions concerning the content of government policies as captured in rules and regulations.	A teacher feeling that the government drafts education policies without involving teachers.
Tactical powerlessness	Frontline workers' perceived influence on decisions concerning the way policy X is implemented within their organization.	The influence that frontline workers usually perceive themselves as having on decisions concerning the way (new) government policies are implemented within their organization.	A teacher stating that the school leader does not involve teachers structurally in designing the implementation of government policies within the school.
Operational powerlessness	The perceived influence of frontline workers during actual implementation of policy X.	The influence that frontline workers usually perceive themselves as having during the actual implementation of government policies.	A teacher answering 'totally agree' to a survey question asking if autonomy during the implementation of government policies is usually lower than it should be.
Societal meaninglessness	The perception of frontline workers concerning the added value of policy X to policy goal Y.	The perception of frontline workers concerning the added value of contemporary policy to socially relevant goals.	A teacher stating in an interview that contemporary education policy is, in their opinion, not contributing to socially relevant goal A.
Client meaninglessness	Frontline workers' perceptions of the added value of policy X for their own clients.	The perception of frontline workers concerning the added value of contemporary policy for their own clients.	A teacher noting that, overall, contemporary education policy has detrimental effects on their own students' wellbeing.

* The definitions presented in this column are drawn from Tummers (2012).

2.3 GENERAL POLICY ALIENATION MEASUREMENT SCALE

In this section, we report on how we developed an empirically validated measurement scale for general policy alienation. We first briefly introduce the case in which we tested our scale, and then show how we developed the items and collected our sample. We then describe our analysis plan and present the results of the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, as well as internal construct and convergent validity tests.

2.3.1 Case

The case we selected for our study is the Dutch secondary education sector. Within this sector, there are around 700, both publicly run and privately run, schools. We selected this case because, in recent decades, the sector has experienced many problems as a result of the reshuffling of authority and responsibilities between the ministerial and the school levels (Pijl & Frissen, 2009). Further, the sector has been characterized by numerous policy changes (Bronneman-Helmers, 2008). These problems were also highlighted by the 2008 Dutch Parliamentary Commission ('Commission Dijsselbloem') that investigated problems with education reforms. The Commission's main conclusion was that the government interfered too often in education. They recommended that schools should have greater autonomy, rather than, as in the past, being mere executors of central government policies. That the findings of the Commission are still relevant is highlighted by a recent report by the Dutch Education Council that stated that teachers have not seen any improvement since the Commission Dijsselbloem report (Onderwijsraad, 2014).

2.3.2 Item generation and expert review

The proposed general policy alienation measurement scale is an adaptation of the validated policy alienation measurement scale (Tummers, 2012). As such, we used the same items (measured on five-point Likert scales), but adjusted them to measure general policy alienation. For instance, in the policy alienation measurement scale the following item is used to measure tactical powerlessness: *In my organization, professionals were not listened to about the introduction of the policy*. To measure general policy alienation, this becomes: *In my organization, professionals are not listened to during the introduction of government policies*. An example item for the meaninglessness dimension of the policy alienation scale is: *The policy is contributing to the welfare of my clients (R)*. To measure general policy alienation, this becomes: *In general, government policies contribute to the welfare of my clients (R)*.

To further increase content validity (DeVellis, 2003), we asked ten experts to evaluate the adjusted items. We selected these experts for their range of different expertise, including public administration scholars, specialists in electronic surveys, policy officers working at the Ministry of Education, and teachers. Appendix I presents an overview of the items in the general policy alienation scale.

2.3.3 Sample and procedure

The general policy alienation measurement scale was tested using large-scale survey data. These data were collected in June 2013. A nationwide sample of 2.863 secondary teachers, selected through the records of the pension fund for all Dutch government and education employees (ABP), was identified. This ensured that the sample would be sufficiently representative of all Dutch secondary school teachers. All the potential respondents were sent an e-mail with an invitation to voluntarily participate in the questionnaire; and a reminder was sent one week later. In total, 1.096 teachers completed the questionnaire: a response rate of 38 percent. The average age of the respondents was 51 years, and 59 percent were male. National statistics on secondary school teachers in 2013 indicate that the average age is 46 and that 48 percent are male (DUO, 2014). As such, men are overrepresented in our sample, and the respondents were on average older than the population from which they were drawn.

2.3.4 Analysis

In order to establish whether the general policy alienation measurement scale performed as expected, a number of analyses were completed using the latent variable program Mplus (version 6). All parameters were estimated using full information likelihood estimation (FIML) such that all respondents with data on at least one of the variables were included in the analyses. As a first step, we conducted factor analyses. Factor analysis is a statistical method used to determine the number of underlying dimensions contained in a set of observed variables and to identify the subset of variables that corresponds to each dimension. Since the policy alienation scale had been validated in previous studies, the dimensionality of policy alienation was already known, and so a confirmatory factor analysis was in principle sufficient (Brown, 2012). However, since we made minor modifications to each item and previous survey studies using the scale were conducted in the healthcare sector, an exploratory factor analysis was nevertheless conducted. Here, we randomly split the total sample of 1.096 into two (subsample 1: N=543; subsample 2: N=553). We carried out an exploratory factor analysis using the first subsample, and a confirmatory factor analysis using the second. Osborne and Fitzpatrick (2012) refer to this as internal replication and recommend this approach for determining the extent to which solutions are

likely to be robust. Finally, we conducted tests to establish the construct validity of the general policy alienation scale by comparing the measured construct to other constructs based on hypothesized relationships (DeVellis, 2003). Here we looked at convergent validity: the similarity between measures of theoretically related constructs.

2.3.5 Results of factor analyses

Exploratory factor analysis

An exploratory factor analysis was carried out on our first subsample of 543 teachers. We employed oblique rotation since this enabled us to study both the pattern and the structure matrix. This is a common approach when factors are known to be related (Brown, 2012). Further, given the hypothesized five dimensions of general policy alienation, we allowed Mplus to vary the number of factors to be found from 1 to 5. In assessing the number of factors that best fitted the survey data, we referred to the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) (see also Schreiber *et al.*, 2006). Generally accepted cutoff criteria for the CFI and TLI indices are ≥0.95 for a good fit and ≥0.90 for a moderate fit. Similarly, RMSEA values ≤0.06 indicate a good fit and ≤0.08 a moderate one (Brown, 2012). SRMR values ≤0.08 reflect a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Table 2.2 shows that CFI and TLI increased, and the RMSEA and SRMR decreased, as the number of factors distinguished increased (i.e., the fit improved). As expected, the five-factor structure of general policy alienation best fitted the data. Only when five factors were distinguished, did all the indices achieve at least a moderate fit.

Table 2.2 Fit indexes exploratory factor analysis

	Number of factors				
Fit index	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
CFI	0.48	0.74	0.79	0.88	0.95
TLI	0.44	0.69	0.73	0.83	0.92
RMSEA	0.15	0.11	0.10	0.08	0.06
SRMR	0.13	0.08	0.06	0.03	0.03

Confirmatory factor analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis was completed using the second subsample of 553 teachers. Again, we assessed the fit of the model based on the CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR values. The fit of the hypothesized five-factor model was again good (with CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR values of 0.92, 0.91, 0.06, and 0.05 respectively). This is a good indication that no further modifications to the model are necessary to measure general policy alienation.

Descriptive statistics

Table 2.3 shows the mean scores of our respondents on general policy alienation and its sub-dimensions. Examining Table 2.3, we see that teachers on average experience considerable policy alienation (mean 3.46). They have the impression that, in general, they do not have the power to influence policies (mean 3.34) and neither do they perceive policies as being meaningful for society or for their own clients (means for societal and client meaninglessness 3.49 and 3.67 respectively). Nevertheless, we should also note that the variation in scores between individual teachers is quite large (with mean scores varying between 1 and 5). This indicates that there are also Dutch secondary teachers who do not experience policy alienation at all.

Table 2.3 Means of general policy alienation and its dimensions

	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
General policy alienation (1-5)	3.46	0.58	1.39	5
Powerlessness (1-3)	3.34	0.60	1.72	5
1. Strategic	3.71	0.66	1.33	5
2. Tactical	3.07	0.88	1	5
3. Operational	3.22	0.75	1	5
Meaninglessness (4-5)	3.58	0.75	1	5
4. Societal	3.49	0.85	1	5
5. Client	3.67	0.78	1	5

2.3.6 Results of construct validity tests

Internal construct validity

Given that the three powerlessness and the two meaninglessness dimensions all measure the same underlying latent construct (general policy alienation), the factors should correlate. Table 2.4 shows the correlations among the powerlessness and meaninglessness dimensions, and indeed they, as expected, are all positively correlated.

Table 2.4 Internal construct validity

		1	2	3	4	5
1	Strategic powerlessness	-				
2	Tactical powerlessness	0.39*	-			
3	Operational powerlessness	0.45*	0.56*	-		
4	Societal meaninglessness	0.48*	0.30*	0.42*	-	
5	Client meaninglessness	0.49*	0.26*	0.47*	0.77*	-

* $p<0.001$

Convergent validity

Our final test examined the relationship between general policy alienation and theoretically related concepts to test the convergent validity of the scale. If our scale truly measures general policy alienation, it should correlate with scales of related concepts. Here, we examined the correlations of general policy alienation with four related concepts: alienation towards a specific policy program; policy consistency; transformational leadership; and frontline workers' willingness to implement new policies. Below, we describe why we expect a relationship to exist between each of these four concepts and general policy alienation, and whether correlational analyses confirmed the expectations.

Alienation towards a specific policy program

We argued earlier that alienation towards a specific policy (program) is determined by a combination of frontline workers' degree of general policy alienation and their perceptions of the unique characteristics of this specific policy (in terms of both content and process). If this is true, general policy alienation should positively correlate with policy alienation towards a specific policy program. To

estimate this relationship, we asked half of our respondents (randomly selected; *N*=551) to assess the societal and client meaninglessness of a specific recent government policy program, namely 'data-driven teaching' (in Dutch: 'opbrengstgericht werken'). This program aims to stimulate teachers to make educational decisions based on data, a policy apparently dedicated to the achievement of better student results. Indeed, research in Canada and the US shows that data-driven decision-making in teaching contributes to better student results (e.g., Marsh *et al.*, 2010). The policy program is thus to an extent evidence-based. However, another characteristic of the policy is that it intervenes at the classroom level by prescribing how teachers should teach and organize their lessons. This touches on the sensitive 'what-and-how debate' in the Dutch education sector, which postulates that government should focus on *what* should be taught, and schools (school leaders and teachers) on *how* this should be taught. The data-driven teaching policy program is not aligned with this principle. As such, we would expect these specific characteristics to affect the degree of policy alienation teachers feel towards this policy. However, given the purpose of the correlation analyses - to test the correlation of general policy alienation with related concepts - we do not focus further on this misalignment. As expected, the correlation between frontline workers' general policy alienation and their perceived societal and client meaninglessness of data-driven teaching is positive. This is true for all five dimensions of policy alienation, with the correlation between general and specific policy alienation varying between 0.26 (general tactical powerlessness and policy-specific client meaninglessness) and 0.77 (general client meaninglessness and policy-specific client meaninglessness). This suggests that general and specific policy alienation are indeed related, but distinguishable, concepts. This conceptual distinction would be questionable if the correlation was close to unity.

Policy consistency

The second correlation that we investigated is between general policy alienation and policy consistency, a concept closely related to policy accumulation. Frontline workers are often confronted with new policies, and with new rules, regulations, and organizations that they bring. It takes some time to identify with a new policy program (e.g., Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988) and so being regularly

confronted with new policies could be an important cause of general policy alienation. We would expect that the extent to which teachers have the impression that policies are introduced on an ad-hoc basis and are inconsistent - both over time and in relation to other policy measures - to influence whether they feel connected to these policies, as feeling connected is a process that takes effort and time. As Table 2.5 shows, all five dimensions of general policy alienation are, as expected, negatively related to policy consistency. We see that strategic powerlessness and societal and client meaninglessness are especially correlated with policy consistency (correlations (*r*) of -0.47, -0.48, and -0.50 respectively). This suggests that policies that are more consistent, implying more consistent policy accumulation, result in lower general policy alienation.

Table 2.5 Convergent validity

General policy alienation dimensions		Policy alienation specific program: data driven teaching^		Policy consistency^^	Transformational leadership^^	Willingness to implement new policies^^
		SM	CM			
1	Strategic powerlessness	0.45*	0.41*	-0.47*	-0.23*	-0.33*
2	Tactical powerlessness	0.31*	0.26*	-0.15*	-0.71*	-0.21*
3	Operational powerlessness	0.34*	0.35*	-0.25*	-0.42*	-0.31*
4	Societal meaninglessness	0.70*	0.61*	-0.48*	-0.30*	-0.47*
5	Client meaninglessness	0.63*	0.77*	-0.50*	-0.28*	-0.51*

* $p<0.001$; ^ $N=551$; ^^ $N=1.096$

Transformational leadership

The third correlation investigated was between general policy alienation and transformational leadership. Here we made use of the concise measure of transformational leadership by Carless, Wearing, and Mann (2000). We have two main arguments for expecting this correlation. First, the organizational change literature shows that organizational leaders play a crucial role in the successful management of change. Transformational leaders are able to provide an inspirational vision of the future and encourage others to understand the rationale behind new policies (DeCelles *et al.*, 2013). The second argument is that transformational leadership is characterized by empowering and inspiring behavior, thereby supporting others to take personal responsibility when facing

new challenges (Moynihan *et al.*, 2012) - such as new policies. As can be seen in Table 2.5, all five dimensions of general policy alienation are, as expected, negatively related to transformational leadership. We see that especially tactical and operational powerlessness are negatively correlated with transformational leadership (r=-0.71 and r=-0.42 respectively) - which is in line with the findings discussed above.

Willingness to implement new policies

The fourth correlation investigated was between general policy alienation and willingness to implement new government policies, using the five–item change willingness scale of Metselaar (1997). The assumption is that frontline workers who experience greater general policy alienation will be less willing to implement future policies. We offer two main reasons for this. The first is that, in the change management literature, the 'case for change' notion, which is closely (and negatively) related to the meaninglessness dimension of policy alienation, increases willingness to change. Further, it is well established that influence over decisions related to change – i.e. reduced powerlessness - leads to increased commitment and performance, and less resistance to change (Wanberg & Banas, 2000). Furthermore, Tummers (2011) showed that the degree of policy alienation shown by mental healthcare professionals' towards a specific policy (a new reimbursement policy) negatively influenced their willingness to implement that policy. We would expect a similar correlation between general policy alienation and willingness to implement future policies. Indeed, as can be seen in Table 2.5, all five dimensions of general policy alienation are negatively related to willingness to implement new policies. There are especially strong correlations between both societal and client meaninglessness and the willingness to implement (r=-0.47 and r=-0.51 respectively). This suggests that if frontline workers have the impression that government policies in general contribute to important societal goals and achieve desirable outcomes for their own clients, they will be more willing to implement future government policies - possibly because they expect these future policies to be meaningful for society and for their clients as well.

2.4 DISCUSSION

Policies have a history - they are not developed in a vacuum. When studying the effects of specific policies, it is important to take account of the accumulation of policy programs within a specific sector (In 't Veld, 1989). Studying policies in a vacuum, and ignoring the consequences of their history, fails to deliver a complete picture. The starting point of this study was the argument that frontline workers' earlier experiences with government policies will affect their current predisposition towards policies in general. This predisposition will, in turn, affect their attitudes and behaviors towards new policies. Many studies focus on the attitudes and behaviors of frontline workers in relation to policy implementation - accepting that appropriate attitudes and behaviors are crucial for successful implementation - but often fail to consider the possible consequences of their policy predisposition. In this study, the focus is on this policy predisposition, and we conceptualize and operationalize it. In this, we build on the earlier work by Tummers, Bekkers, and Steijn (2009; 2012) on policy alienation, defined as a psychological disconnection from a policy program. As we are interested in investigating overall policy experiences, we introduce and operationalize the term general policy alienation, which will enable future research to analyze the overall experiences of frontline workers with government policy.

In our study, we theoretically related general policy alienation to the consequences of policy accumulation: the continuous aggregation of policies that historically follow upon each other, and the new rules, regulations, and organizations that result. By studying policy alienation in relation to its historical context, we are not only contributing to the work on policy alienation, we also extend the theoretical work on policy accumulation (In 't Veld, 1989) and related concepts such as policy succession (Hogwood & Peters, 1982) and institutional layering (Thelen, 2004). Our respondents' relatively high scores for general policy alienation show that Dutch secondary school teachers do not in general identify with government policies: they have the impression that they lack sufficient power to influence government policies and they sometimes fail to perceive these policies as meaningful, either for society as a whole or for their own students. Relating this to the concepts of change fatigue and change cynicism, it may be that frontline workers experience something akin to policy fatigue or policy cynicism.

This is not the same as private sector employees developing cynical attitudes that characterize organizational change efforts as just the 'flavor of the month' (Herold *et al.*, 2007), but about frontline workers developing cynical attitudes that characterize new policies as just the 'political flavor of the month'. This is a serious problem, especially for governments, as these frontline workers form a crucial link between formulated and implemented policies and between governments and citizens (Bartels, 2013; Tummers *et al.*, 2015).

We would urge future studies to dig deeper into this topic. This is important for at least two reasons. First, our analyses found some evidence that frontline workers' general policy perceptions are indeed related to their perceptions of a specific new policy program. That is, the analyses showed that frontline workers which have a relatively high level of general policy alienation also show greater alienation towards a specific policy program. This suggests that, if one wants to fully understand frontline workers' attitudes towards a specific new policy, both their perceptions of this policy's characteristics as well as their overall policy perceptions should be simultaneously investigated (along with other relevant variables as discussed in the next paragraph). Excluding either set of perceptions is likely to result in an inability to put forward satisfactory explanations of why frontline workers do, or do not, identify with a specific new policy. Thus, the main advice resulting from this study would be to *bring in policy history*.

Second, the developed and validated measurement scale enables future researchers to quantitatively examine the antecedents and effects of the extent of frontline workers' general policy alienation (reflecting their policy predisposition). Although we conceptually link frontline workers' general policy alienation to the consequences of policy accumulation, we are not implying that general policy alienation is the result *only* of accumulated past policy experiences. We acknowledge that other factors play a role, and future research should address this. Regarding new theoretical avenues, we would first urge future research to further analyze the concept of policy accumulation. What policy characteristics influence the degree to which frontline workers perceive policy accumulation as either positive or negative? Policy accumulation may, for instance, be perceived as negative when the rate of policy change is high (Huy, 2001) or the accumulated policies are inconsistent. We have provided some initial evidence of the latter through our correlational analysis between policy consistency and

general policy alienation: greater perceived policy consistency - an indicator of more continuous policy accumulation - seems to be related to lower general policy alienation. Second, we recommend further investigation of general and specific policy alienation, and particular responses alongside other important antecedents on the policy, organizational, and individual levels. In this way, one could determine which factors have the greatest influence in specific contexts. As noted, organizational socialization and culture may be important predictors. More generally, potentially important factors can be found in the literature on the sociology of professions (Teodoro, 2014), organizational behavior (Vigoda-Gadot & Beeri, 2012), and street-level bureaucracy (Hupe & Buffat, 2014).

Regarding the possible effects of general policy alienation, our convergent validity tests showed that general policy alienation is negatively related to willingness to implement future policies. This could have important consequences for (the study of) change management in the public sector. Kickert (2010) noted that the change management literature is primarily focused on the private sector and that little attention is paid to the way in which public employees react to change. Our measurement instrument is useful for researching public employees' experiences with past, current, and future policy changes and the consequences of these changes. It will enable future research to fill the gap in the literature on change management by specifically applying a public administration perspective (Kuipers *et al.*, 2014). Ultimately, this could contribute to a better understanding of why, despite all the efforts made, many change efforts in the public sector fail.

Despite the progress made, this study has, as all studies, some limitations. The first limitation is that the data used to establish convergent validity are cross-sectional. In recent years, authors, reviewers, and editors of leading public administration journals have become increasingly concerned about the validity of such research. One of the main concerns is that causal inferences are not possible. In our research, we investigated correlations without aiming to make statements about causality. However, especially in light of the relationship found between policy accumulation, (general) policy alienation, and willingness to implement a specific policy, future studies should adopt longitudinal (or experimental) designs to investigate causality. In this way, it could be established whether frontline workers' general policy alienation (at t=0) influences their feeling of policy alienation towards a newly introduced policy program at some later

time (t=1), which in turn could influence their general policy alienation (after the implementation of the policy program, at t=2). Further, it would also enable an assessment of whether perceptions of policy accumulation processes (at t=-1) affect the degree of general policy alienation (t=0). A second limitation is that the organizational context was not included in the analyses. Government policies are implemented in this context, and it is therefore likely to have a significant influence on overall policy perceptions. Although we focused on the government context, the convergent validity tests on general policy alienation and transformational leadership show the importance of organizational leadership and thus organizational context. In future studies, greater attention could therefore be paid to processes at the organizational level.

2.5 CONCLUSIONS

In concluding, we would emphasize that the present study explicitly considered processes of policy accumulation and promoted the notion that, when investigating the formulation and implementation of a specific (new) policy, this policy's past should not be ignored. Future research should take advantage of this, and use the framework to ensure that attention is given to the previous policy experiences of frontline workers. This acknowledges that they bring with them a policy history, and cannot be regarded as 'neutral' implementers. In our opinion, this recognition contributes to a more realistic and context-sensitive research perspective on policy implementation and its effects on frontline workers.