Determining whether consistent government policies lead to greater meaningfulness and legitimacy on the frontline

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ABSTRACT

We investigate the impact of policy consistency on frontline workers' perceptions of policy meaningfulness and legitimacy. The results from an experiment involving 779 teachers indicate that policy consistency does have a positive effect on legitimacy and to a lesser extent on meaningfulness. However, the extent depends on policy content and the degree of autonomy. Overall, our findings emphasize the potential positive impact of policy consistency. Although this, to some extent, conflicts with the nature of political decision- and policymaking (i.e., democratically elected governments have been mandated to change policy), our study suggests that policy consistency could be a valuable strategy for governments to strengthen successful policy implementation. This adds a new perspective to the continuing debate within policy implementation and street-level bureaucracy research on how to account for the complex, messy and sometimes contradictory implementation of public policies.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Teachers, nurses and police officers working on the frontline of public service delivery are often confronted with new policy programs that usually result in them having to implement new rules and regulations. This could influence the way in which they perform their tasks, with established practices being challenged. For the successful implementation of these policies, policymakers are dependent on the willingness of these frontline workers (the term 'street-level bureaucrats' is used interchangeably, e.g., Meyers *et al.*, 1998) to cooperate (Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980; Hill & Hupe, 2009; Tummers *et al.*, 2009; Brodkin, 2012; Gofen, 2014; Van Engen *et al.*, 2016). These frontline workers need to tailor the new policies to their clients' needs (Sommer Harrits & Ostergaard Moller, 2014), deal with conflicting demands from different policies (Tummers *et al.*, 2015) and have discretion in doing so (Lipsky, 1980). Research has shown that their actual behaviors during policy implementation does not necessarily align with the policymakers' ambitions (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; May & Winter, 2009). In effect, frontline workers have the ability to create major difficulties for governments democratically mandated to introduce new policies.

Being continuously confronted with the consequences of political decisions that result in new policy measures – ones that are not necessarily coherent with previous policies – can be challenging for frontline workers. Often, they need to adapt to a new perspective or mind-set (e.g. the introduction of performance management systems in professional organizations; Kerpershoek *et al.*, 2016), cope with budget cuts (Kiefer *et al.*, 2015), all while having to deal with multiple accountabilities at the same time (Hupe & Hill, 2007). Research indicates this is particularly the case when a large number of new policies are introduced (Huy, 2001), when there are conflicting political signals (May & Winter, 2009) and when incompatible goals are set (Boerzel & Van Huellen, 2014).

It is therefore important to understand how frontline workers, as well as other stakeholders, perceive and experience government policies over time. In this article, we focus on the effects of policy consistency. In other words, we study how the continuity of policies over time influences frontline workers. Many, and perhaps rather capricious, inconsistent changes might generate resistance among these workers, which might influence not only the efficiency and effectiveness of

the policies involved but also their legitimacy. Although the street-level bureaucracy literature recognizes the important role of frontline workers in determining the effectiveness and legitimacy of public policy implementation (Lipsky, 1980; Freidson, 2001; Bekkers *et al.*, 2007), public administration and management research still tends to marginalize the perspectives and experiences of those who enact the policy in practice (O'Toole, 2000; DeLeon & DeLeon, 2002; Barrett, 2004; Saetren, 2005; Werts & Brewer, 2015). In particular, the micro-level (psychological) underpinnings of this (Grimmelikhuijsen *et al.*, 2017) have not been well researched although there have been recent notable exceptions (Andersen & Jakobsen, 2017; Raaphorst, 2018; Thomann *et al.*, 2018). This inattention is surprising given that policy implementation is sometimes complex and contradictory, and remains one of the main challenges facing civil servants worldwide (O'Toole, 2004; Moulton & Sandfort, 2017). This matter therefore deserves the attention of public administration and management scholars.

Putting policy into practice is not easy: it requires the investment of scarce funds and time, and not only of the organizations involved but also on a personal level. Frontline workers' 'investment decisions' are constrained, including by budgets, laws, policies, managers, social and professional norms and past experiences (e.g., Lipsky, 1980; Ewalt & Jennings, 2004; Ackroyd *et al.*, 2007; Hupe & Hill, 2007; May & Winter, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2010; Van Engen *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, when frontline workers have to decide whether to put effort into implementing a new policy, the government's past performance in maintaining policies could be an important consideration (cf. White *et al.*, 2013). This suggests that governments should not regard frontline workers as 'neutral' implementers since they bring with them a history of experienced government policy changes and, hence, ideas about the contribution of policies to a greater purpose and their added value ('meaningfulness') and how justified and appropriate these government policies are ('legitimacy'). Our premise is that policy consistency has a positive influence on how frontline workers perceive the policy programs they are required to implement and, vice versa, that policy inconsistency has a negative influence. However, little empirical research has investigated this, and this study aims to fill this gap. Our main research question is formulated as: What is the effect of policy consistency on how frontline workers perceive the meaningfulness and legitimacy of the policies they are required to implement? Given the

apparent importance that frontline workers attach to autonomy (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), we also investigate if, and then how, this effect is moderated by experienced autonomy.

This article is structured as follows. The next section offers some theoretical background and introduces our assumptions. Next, we outline the method adopted and describe the experimental design and the results of the experiment. The final section then presents the discussion and conclusions, focusing particularly on the theoretical implications for public administration and public policy scholars, practical implications, and future lines of research.

4.2 FRONTLINE WORKERS AND POLICY PERCEPTIONS

Policy implementation may involve a reformulation of policies that lead to unexpected outcomes or even to outright failure (e.g., Elmore, 1980; Lipsky, 1980; Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980). Over time, several explanations have been put forward, mostly focusing on street-level bureaucracy, to explain this difference between intended and realized policy (i.e. the 'implementation gap'). These include the lack of control and monitoring (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984), insufficient training opportunities (Kroll & Moynihan, 2015) and the discretionary power of those who enact the policy (Lipsky, 1980). For many citizens, their encounters with frontline workers are their most immediate and personal experience of state representatives (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Therefore, it is seen as crucial that these workers adhere to the values of fairness, equality and equity when implementing rules that were determined through democratic procedures (Deutsch, 1975). Thus, frontline workers should, regardless of their own ideological beliefs, neutrally and loyally implement public policies (Gruber, 1987). However, numerous studies have shown that the way in which they implement public policies is often influenced by their opinions, values, preferences and world views (Kaufman, 1960; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), as well as by their perceptions of specific policies (Brehm & Gates, 1997; Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003; May & Winter, 2009; Tummers *et al.*, 2009; Van Engen *et al.*, 2016). Although there seems to be little consensus on how perceptions actually influence behaviors, there does seem to be broad agreement that they

frequently do (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The transition from perceptions to behaviors is assumed to take place through a cognitive process in which beliefs about what is expected influence behaviors. Research in both public administration and psychology suggests that understanding frontline workers' perceptions of a given policy is relevant, and perhaps even a prerequisite, for understanding policy implementation behaviors (Andersen & Jakobsen, 2017). In this respect, we argue that policy consistency, or the lack thereof, influences the perceptions of frontline workers.

Before we discuss the theoretical mechanism that links policy consistency with policy perceptions, we first define policy consistency. When applied to the public policy domain, policy consistency can be defined as the degree to which government policies are constant and steady over time (based on White *et al.*, 2013; Béland & Powell, 2016; Cayton, 2017). Hence, policy consistency is associated with terms such as certainty, continuity and predictability. Consistency can relate to multiple characteristics of the policy (and associated process), including overall policy approach (e.g., should frontline workers be involved in establishing policies or should policies be decided in a top-down fashion?) and policy direction (e.g., should all students have obligatory Chinese lessons or will these be non-compulsory?). Hence, in our definition of consistency, the approach, direction or other characteristics of policies are immaterial, as long as these are consistently applied. For example, if a specific policy that funds teacher development programs is continued by successive government officials, and thus endures over the passage of time and shifts in party lines, and receives persistent funding (White *et al.*, 2013), this could be seen as a case of policy consistency. The same would be true for a consistent policy that strictly prescribes teachers' desirable classroom behaviors.

In public policy studies, the importance of consistency has been emphasized in two streams of literature. First, in the literature focusing on policy implementation in bureaucracies and its administrative processes (e.g., Dunsire, 1978), it has been argued that a government's desired policy outcomes can sometimes best be obtained through consistent policies rather than through ad-hoc ones (Calvo, 1977; Kydland & Prescott, 1977). The main argument for this is that individuals – in our study, frontline workers – form their own expectations of what will happen in the future based on what has happened in the past (Cagan, 1956). This implies

that when frontline workers form an opinion about a policy, the government's past performance in maintaining previous policies (over a significant period) is an important consideration. If the government has previously shown itself to be unwilling or unable to do so, this may have consequences for frontline workers' expectations regarding the future and, hence, for their present perceptions and behaviors.

Second, there is an extensive literature in political and economic science showing that people, including frontline workers, have a bias in favor of the status quo. That is, when faced with a complex decision, they often prefer to stick with the existing situation (i.e., the policy as it currently is) (Fleming *et al.*, 2010; Arnold & Fleischman, 2013). This 'status quo bias' is shaped by a number of complex and interacting factors, including the economic costs involved in transitioning (e.g., Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). That is, when deciding about investments – such as should a teacher follow a training course to prepare for the implementation of inclusive education (Sharma *et al.*, 2006) or initiate a cross-school informal network (Coburn, 2001) – a prognosis of future policies needs to be made. If the future is uncertain, larger 'risk margins' will be factored into such decisions (White *et al.*, 2013), which may trigger a status quo bias. Policy uncertainty or inconsistency thus affects policy perceptions: how wise is it to support and invest in a policy if the likelihood is that, based on previous experiences, this policy will be abolished or changed, or a new policy will be introduced?

Therefore, we hypothesize that policy consistency has a positive effect on frontline workers' policy perceptions. Based on the discussion above, we first expect policy consistency to positively affect frontline workers' perceptions of a policy as meaningful for reaching important social goals and as valuable for their clients (Freidson, 2001; Van Engen *et al.*, 2016). In other words, policy consistency contributes to the perceived added value of government policies to frontline workers. This is consistent with previous research, which has found that a large number of policy changes (an indicator of policy inconsistency) increases the likelihood that frontline workers will not perceive policies as meaningful in achieving important societal goals (Tummers *et al.*, 2009). This is because it takes some time for frontline workers to identify with a new policy program (e.g., Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988). Further, a lack of consistency makes it hard to understand policies (Brehmer, 1974). Moreover, belief sometimes follows

action (Fullan, 1986) such that frontline workers who initially do not support a certain policy could, by working with this policy, come to recognize its added value and therefore become more supportive. Meaningfulness is important because research has repeatedly shown that meaningfulness and implementation willingness (Matland, 1995; Higgs & Rowland, 2005; Tummers *et al.*, 2012; Van Engen, 2017) and commitment to change (Van der Voet *et al.*, 2017) are strongly connected.

Second, we hypothesize that policy consistency positively affects legitimacy. Legitimacy amounts to a general confidence that the government's power to make binding decisions regarding the policy is justified and appropriate (Dahl, 1998). Where authority rests upon legitimacy, frontline workers will feel an obligation or duty to uphold laws and accept governmental decrees as legal and authoritative (Peters, 1986). It reflects a voluntary willingness to obey policy decisions (Tyler, 2006) and to trust that the government is acting in society's best interests (Levi, 1997). In terms of procedure, observers of public policy are virtually all agreed on the importance of time (Wallner, 2008). Polsby (1984) argues that time facilitates 'policy incubation', a phase in which actors can adopt the idea, adapt it and reshape it, and place it in the ongoing culture. Inconsistent, rapidly changing policies do not allow this, and this may contest their legitimacy among frontline workers. Therefore, we expect policy consistency to strengthen frontline workers' sense of duty to uphold laws and accept, and have confidence in, the governmental decrees. That is, policy consistency heightens perceived legitimacy. Summarizing the above discussion, our first hypothesis is:

Hypothesis 1: Policy consistency (as against policy inconsistency) has a positive effect on how frontline workers perceive a policy's (a) meaningfulness and (b) legitimacy.

The question is of course whether this is true in all circumstances. Street-level bureaucracy research has shown that autonomy, generally defined as the extent that frontline workers have freedom to choose among possible courses of action or inaction (also referred to as discretion), is usually valued highly by frontline workers (e.g., Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Their expertise (Johansson, 2012), multiple accountabilities (Hill & Hupe, 2007) and professional

values (Kerpershoek *et al.*, 2016) then allow them to adhere to equity and equality principles when putting policies into practice. Indeed, they often feel that a reasonable amount of autonomy is beneficial in achieving the public values that policies pursue. Furthermore, research indicates that if frontline workers feel that policies do not guarantee an acceptable level of autonomy, then this negatively impacts their policy support (Tummers, 2012). In relation to our first hypothesis, this apparent importance of autonomy for frontline workers raises the question if, and then how, the hypothesized effects of policy consistency on meaningfulness and legitimacy are moderated by the degree of autonomy that frontline workers perceive themselves as having; that is, their ability to choose among alternative behaviors when implementing a policy (Hoogerwerf, 1978). It could be, for instance, that the positive effects of policy consistency on meaningfulness and legitimacy are neutralized or outweighed by perceptions of low autonomy. To evaluate this, we formulate the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: The positive relationships between policy consistency and a policy's (a) meaningfulness and (b) legitimacy are moderated by autonomy. These relationships are stronger if experienced autonomy is high rather than low.

It should be stressed that we do not rule out factors other than policy consistency and autonomy influencing frontline workers' policy perceptions. Indeed, previous studies have highlighted various factors that impact policy perceptions, including the influence of professional culture and organizational socialization (Oberfield, 2010; Hatmaker *et al.*, 2011) and frontline workers' political beliefs (e.g., Riccucci, 2005). Furthermore, personality characteristics, such as psychological reactance and self-efficacy, may also play a role (Bandura, 1977; Brehm & Brehm, 2013). Our goal is, nevertheless, limited to clarifying the effects of policy consistency and autonomy on meaningfulness and legitimacy, rather than to comprehensively explain the latter.

4.3 AN EMPIRICAL TEST FOR POLICY CONSISTENCY EFFECTS

4.3.1 Case

The case we selected to test the hypotheses is the Dutch secondary education sector. The Dutch education system consists of an obligatory eight years of primary education, followed by an obligatory four, five or six years of secondary education (depending on student capacities). The Dutch secondary education sector comprises around 700 schools. All schools are funded by the Dutch national government and have to adhere to the same rules and regulations (EP-Nuffic, 2015). All teachers in secondary education in the Netherlands are public sector workers. From an international perspective, decisionmaking in the Netherlands is the most decentralized of all OECD countries (OECD, 2013). The Dutch Ministry of Education is responsible for the education system as a whole, and is responsible for education quality, efficiency and accessibility (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2018).

We chose this case for three reasons. First, teachers play a crucial role in delivering services. Second, the sector has experienced many problems in recent decades as a result of the reshuffling of authority and responsibilities between the ministerial and the school levels (Pijl & Frissen, 2009). Third, the sector can be characterized by numerous policy changes (Bronneman-Helmers, 2008). This makes it an appropriate case for investigating the possible effects of policy inconsistency on the perceptions of frontline workers.

4.3.2 Data collection

An experiment was conducted that involved collecting large-scale survey data in June 2016. A nationwide sample of 1.682 secondary school teachers was used. These potential respondents were all members of a large voluntary panel of Dutch public sector employees organized by the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations (subsample secondary school teachers). For more information on the panel, which has been used in other studies including Van Loon *et al.*, 2016 and Van der Voet & Vermeeren, 2017, see http://www.internetspiegel.nl. To ensure the representativeness of this large panel, the members were selected using the records of the ABP pension fund that all Dutch government employees are legally obliged to join. All the 1.682 potential respondents were sent a person-

alized e-mail with an invitation to voluntarily participate in the questionnaire. Two reminders were sent. In total, 908 respondents accepted the invitation to participate. The respondents who accepted the invitation did not differ significantly from the respondents who did not accept the invitation in terms of gender, age, function and education level.

To increase the quality of our sample, we asked the respondents to indicate whether they were presently working in secondary education. Sixteen respondents indicated they were not/no longer working in secondary education and six respondents did not provide an answer to this question. A further 20 respondents indicated they were not working as a teacher. These 42 respondents were all removed from the sample. Of the remaining 866 respondents, we further excluded all who did not meet the threshold of providing answers to at least 95% of the survey questions (in total 87). This resulted in a final sample of 779 respondents, a response rate of 46%.

4.3.3 Background characteristics and representativeness

Overall characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 4.1 ('total sample' column). The average age of our respondents was 54 years; the youngest being 23 and the oldest 69. Of the respondents, 58% were male. Nearly all of our respondents (96%) have at least a (university) degree. On average, our respondents have worked for almost 23 years in secondary education and 8% have managerial responsibilities as section or team heads, i.e. middle managers. We compared the sample characteristics with national statistics on teaching personnel in secondary education for the 2015-2016 school year (DUO, 2016). Most notably, our respondents are on average older than the population (mean age respectively 53.6 versus 44.3) and males were overrepresented in our sample (58% versus 45.7%). Hence, our sample does not fully reflect the population (i.e., Dutch secondary school teachers) we are aiming to study. Therefore, we should be cautious in generalizing our results.

4.3.4 Experiment design

This research uses an experimental approach to explore the effects of policy consistency on frontline workers' perceptions of meaningfulness and legitimacy. Although experiments, by definition, manipulate situations (i.e. situations are

not 'real', which limits ecological validity), they do allow one to isolate and explore causal effects of interest in ways that other methods cannot (Grimmelikhuijsen *et al.*, 2017). In this way, we can get some idea of the causal effects of top-level political and policy decisions, which can subsequently be explored in the field.

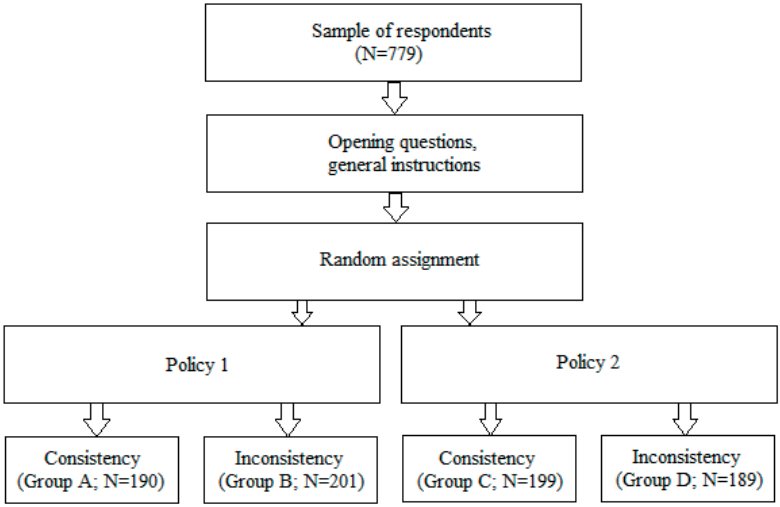

Figure 4.1 Experiment design

Figure 4.1 summarizes the experimental design of this study. First, the respondents were invited to participate in a survey. Upon accepting this invitation, the respondents were randomly assigned one of two policy measures, and to either a consistent or inconsistent outcome. In a typical fully randomized set-up, treatment and control groups have the same characteristics except for the treatment they are given (Remler & Van Ryzin, 2011). Hence, in a typical experimental set-up, respondents would first answer some questions relevant to the experimental treatment (such as general degree of trust in the government, policy consistency, implementation willingness and autonomy) before being allocated. Although we did not follow this procedure, the lack of statistically significant differences across the four groups, summarized in Table 4.1, shows that our groups are statistically equivalents.

Subsequently, the respondents were asked to carefully read a case, and answer some questions about it. Although fictitious, the political and policy decisions that we presented were relevant, authentic and inspired by real policy and political decision-making processes. This improves the ecological validity of the experiment. First, the respondents were asked to imagine that, in the current school year (2016-2017), the Secretary of State for Education (a Junior Minister) introduces a new policy. In the vignette, a rationale, based solely on research, was made for this policy so that respondents could see that there were more than just personal or political arguments in favor of it. Research has shown that policy content affects the way frontline workers perceive policies (e.g., Meyers *et al.*, 1998; May & Winter, 2009; Tummers *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, we evaluated the effect of policy consistency using two different policy cases that varied in terms of topic, policy goal and how prescriptive the government was in achieving these goals. In this way, we acknowledged that policy content might influence the relationships that we were studying. Although evaluating the influence of policy content is not the main goal of our study, including the manipulation of content improves the validity of our experiment. Further, if we find the same relationships between variables with two different policies, we can be more confident in the generalizability of our results than if there are different relationships.

Hence, we designed two fictitious policy measures, with both addressing actual policy challenges in the Dutch secondary education sector and both having direct consequences for the frontline workers and the organizations in which they work. Two prominent policy challenges in the Dutch secondary education at the time of the experiment were the professional development of education professionals and the inequality of education opportunities for children with the same intellectual capabilities but unequal family socioeconomic status (Inspectorate of Education, 2016). Policy 1 therefore focused on professional development, and policy 2 on inequality. Policy 1 consists of a government measure that provides each school with additional funding for professional development. School leaders and teachers at these schools are invited to formulate their own specific goals and to determine how they will to spend the budget. Policy 2, on the other hand, consists of a government measure that introduces a norm that all schools should adhere to in order to reduce inequality, thereby restricting professional leeway.

Table 4.1 Background characteristics and comparison across control and experimental groups

	Total sample	A	B	C	D	χ2/F*	*p* value
Categorical							
Gender						2.20	0.53
Male	58%	58%	62%	55%	57%		
Female	42%	42%	38%	45%	43%		
Education level						7.08	0.63
Appl. University	54%	55%	53%	5856%	51%		
University	42%	42%	42%	41%	42%		
PhD	3%	2%	4%	2%	4%		
Other	2%	1%	2%	1%	3%		
Position						1.20	0.75
Teacher with managing responsibility	8%	8%	9%	7%	7%		
Teacher	92%	92%	91%	93%	93%		
Nominal/ordinal							
Age	53.60 (9.28; 23-69)^	55.08	53.82	52.44	53.09	0.17	0.68
Tenure	22.39 (11.03; 1-45)	24.19	21.40	22.20	21.84	3.93	0.05
Trust in government	2.03 (0.60; 1-4)	1.99	2.05	2.06	2.03	0.06	0.81
Policy consistency	2.01 (0.67; 1-5)	2.02	2.01	2.00	2.03	0.04	0.83
Implementation willingness	3.18 (0.82; 1-5)	3.17	3.25	3.16	3.12	0.12	0.73

* $\chi 2$ reported for categorical variables (gender, education level, position); F reported for nominal and ordinal variables; ^ Respectively standard deviation and minimum and maximum scores.

Next, we stated that a new government would be formed in 2017, with a new Secretary of State for Education. As elections for the Dutch House of Representatives were scheduled for March 2017, it was realistic that a new government would be formed in 2017. Then, we indicated that one of the first debates facing the new Secretary of State in the House of Representatives would concern a policy decision of the former Secretary of State. A member of the new House of Representatives makes a statement suggesting that the new Secretary of State should end the policy which was only recently introduced. As such, the statement was encouraging the Secretary of State to act inconsistently (i.e., by discontinuing the policy). The new Secretary of State responds to this suggestion and, depending on the group to which the respondent is randomly assigned, decides either (1) to continue the policy (policy consistency) or (2) to discontinue the policy

(policy inconsistency). To ensure that respondents given the consistency condition would not score higher on meaningfulness and legitimacy than respondents with the inconsistency condition simply because a decision to continue could be interpreted as a positive policy evaluation, we indicated that the reason why the new Secretary of State wants to continue the policy is simply because nothing is yet known about the policy outcomes. Furthermore, it should be noted that the Secretary of State had to decide between continuing or discontinuing the policy as it is. That is, we did not include the option to make changes and then continue with the policy. Finally, the responses of the new Secretary of State provided to the respondents did not differ by more than 5% in the number of words used, and we also ensured that the responses had the same number of sentences. This was to ensure that differences between the groups could not be caused by such language differences rather than the experimental treatments. All the vignettes are provided in Appendix III.

4.3.5 Measures

Unless indicated otherwise, all scales were formulated using five-point Likert-type items. The main measures are discussed below and a summary of all the items for each measure is provided in Appendix IV.

Policy meaningfulness

We evaluated the perceived meaningfulness of the decision of the Secretary of State to (dis)continue the policy with an index that consists of three policy meaningfulness items taken from the policy alienation questionnaire (Tummers, 2012). These items were tailored to meet the specific goal of our study. For instance, the item 'I think that the policy, in the long term, will lead to goal 1' in this study becomes 'I think that the decision of the new Secretary of State, in the long term, will lead to greater professionalization' (with policy 1). A second example is the item 'Overall, I think that the policy leads to goal 1' which, in this study, becomes 'Overall, I think that the decision of the new Secretary of State leads to greater equality' (with policy 2). The Cronbach's alpha for the three-item scale is 0.90. Given that the items used reflect the fact that the two policy measures have different goals means that scores for these measures cannot be directly compared. This is not problematic since we are only interested in establishing

the differences between meaningfulness scores related to the consistency/inconsistency condition.

Legitimacy

A voluntary willingness to obey and accept (authoritative) decisions is connected to legitimacy (e.g., Tyler, 2006), which means that a stated willingness to accept a decision can be treated as an empirical indicator of legitimacy (De Fine Licht, 2014). Therefore, we operationalized legitimacy as policy acceptance, which we measured with three items. The first two items are 'What do you think of the decision of the new Secretary of State?' and 'How willing are you to accept the decision of the new Secretary of State?'. Since these items measure a somewhat passive reaction to a political decision (De Fine Licht, 2014), we included the more active self-reported likelihood of protesting the decision as a third item in the measure: 'How likely do you think it is that you will protest against the decision of the new Secretary of State?' (R). The Cronbach's alpha of this scale was 0.79.

Autonomy

This study measures autonomy with a four-item scale extracted from the 'operational powerfulness' dimension of the general policy alienation questionnaire (Van Engen *et al.*, 2016). The items include 'Generally, I have freedom to decide how to use government policies' and 'Generally, when working with government policies, I can be in keeping with clients' needs'. Here, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.73.

Stimulus control: manipulation check

The consistency manipulation check consisted of the four-item policy consistency measure of Van Engen *et al.* (2016). These items were tailored to match the specific goal of our study. For instance, the item 'To what extent do you have the impression that policy by the Ministry of Education is (a) consistent and (b) focuses on the long term', in this study becomes 'The new Secretary of State is (a) consistent and (b) focuses on the long term'. The Cronbach's alpha of this four-item scale was 0.88.

4.4 RESULTS

In this section, we report the results of the analyses. First, we conducted tests to evaluate whether our experimental manipulation had worked. We expected respondents in the consistency group to score higher on perceived consistency than respondents in the inconsistency group. Here, Table 4.2 shows that this is indeed the case (with the means of the consistency and inconsistency group being 3.22 and 2.21 respectively). This provides sufficient confirmation that the experimental manipulation worked. Next, we also analyzed the mean scores for meaningfulness and legitimacy (using ANOVA). The results are again shown in Table 4.2 and provide evidence that supports hypothesis 1 as the means for meaningfulness and legitimacy are higher in the consistency group (respectively 2.88 and 3.66) than in the inconsistency group (respectively 2.40 and 2.99), In other words, policy consistency, as compared to policy inconsistency, has a positive effect on how frontline workers perceive policy meaningfulness and legitimacy. All these differences are statistically significant.

Table 4.2 Means of manipulation check and dependent variables

					Policy 1		Policy 2		
	Complete sample^	Consistency group	Inconsistency group	t	Consistency (A)	§Inconsistency (B)	Consistency (C)	Inconsistency (D)	F
Manipulation check									
Perceived consistency	2.72 (0.96; 1-5)	3.22	2.21	16.87*	3.28	2.03	3.17	2.40	104.16*
Dependent variables									
Meaningfulness	2.64 (0.93; 1-5)	2.88	2.40	7.28*	3.01	2.12	2.76	2.72	35.91*
Legitimacy	3.32 (1.08; 1-5)	3.66	2.99	8.96*	3.90	2.64	3.43	3.38	54.73*

* $p<0.01$. ^Between brackets, respectively standard deviation and minimum and maximum scores.

Table 4.2 further shows that, when confronted with policy 1, respondents in the consistency condition group perceive policy meaningfulness as significantly higher than respondents given the inconsistency condition (means are respectively 3.01 and 2.12; $p<0.01$). These teachers thus believe that the decision to con-

tinue the policy is meaningful in that it will enhance professional development, which, ultimately, is the goal of the policy. Further, these respondents have the impression that the decision to continue the policy is more legitimate than the decision to not continue the policy was perceived by that group of respondents (means are respectively 3.90 and 2.64; $p<0.01$). Similarly, respondents given the consistency condition perceive policy meaningfulness when confronted with policy 2 as slightly higher than respondents seeing the inconsistency condition, but this difference is not statistically significant (means are 2.76 and 2.72 respectively). The same is true in relation to legitimacy: i.e. respondents given the consistency condition score higher on legitimacy than respondents considering the inconsistency condition, but this difference is very small and not statistically significant (means are 3.43 and 3.38 respectively). This shows that policy content affects perceived meaningfulness and legitimacy. As a robustness check, we conducted ANCOVA and included age, gender, tenure, position, trust in government, policy consistency and implementation willingness as covariates. This supported the results presented above.

Our theoretical arguments argue in favor of a moderating effect of policy autonomy on the relationships between consistency and meaningfulness and legitimacy. To further understand this effect and the moderating effect of policy content, we conducted regression analyses. The results are shown in Table 4.3.

First, Table 4.3 shows that consistency has a positive effect on meaningfulness and on legitimacy in model 1 (treatment only) (respectively $\beta=0.52$ and $\beta=0.65$; $p<0.01$). This is in line with the results we presented in Table 4.2 and provides support for hypothesis 1. Second, the results indicate that policy content also affects perceptions of meaningfulness and legitimacy, although this effect is less strong and only statistically significant for meaningfulness ($\beta=0.16$; $p<0.01$). It would thus seem that evaluations of meaningfulness at least partially depend on the specific policy that is (dis)continued. In model 2, we add autonomy. The results indicate that the degree of autonomy also influences meaningfulness and legitimacy: the more autonomy frontline workers experience, the more they feel that policies are meaningful and legitimate. The results show that the effect of autonomy is weaker than the effect of consistency.

Table 4.3 Analyses with meaningfulness (M) and legitimacy (L) as dependent variables

	Model 1: Treatments only		**Model 2 Model 1+ discretion**		**Model 3: Model 2 + interaction consistency and policy content**		**Model 4: Model 2 + interaction consistency and autonomy**		**Model 5: Full model**	
	M	**L**	**M**	**L**	**M**	**L**	**M**	**L**	**M**	**L**
Consistency *ref=inconsistency*	0.25**	0.31**	0.24**	0.30**	0.47**	0.58**	0.24**	0.30**	0.47**	0.58**
Policy content *ref=policy 1*	0.16*	0.06	0.09*	0.06	0.33**	0.34**	0.09*	0.06	0.33**	0.34**
Autonomy			0.11*	0.11**	0.12**	0.12**	0.04	-0.01	0.05	-0.01
Consistency* Policy content					-0.41**	-0.49**			-0.42**	-0.49**
Consistency* autonomy							0.10	0.18**	0.05	0.18**

** $p<0.01$; * $p<0.05$; $N=779$. Standardized coefficients are reported.

In models 3 and 4, we added interaction effects to the analyses. Model 3 shows that the relationship between consistency and meaningfulness is significantly moderated by policy content (respectively β=-0.41 and β=-0.49; $p<0.01$): if the interaction term is added to the model, the direct effects of consistency and of policy content become stronger. However, the results from model 4 indicate that the interaction between consistency and autonomy is only statistically significant for legitimacy (β=0.18; $p<0.01$) and not for meaningfulness.

In the fifth, full model, both interactions are included. To more easily understand these interaction effects, we present them in graphical form. The results for meaningfulness and legitimacy are shown in Figures 4.2 and 4.3 respectively. First, for meaningfulness, Figure 4.2 shows that policy consistency results in greater meaningfulness than policy inconsistency. Furthermore, we see differences depending on policy content. Consistency has a stronger and more positive effect with policy 1 (professional development) than with policy 2 (educational inequality). Moreover, the degree of autonomy that a teacher experiences makes a difference. The positive effect of consistency on the meaningfulness of policy 1 is slightly stronger if the respondent experiences high rather than low levels of autonomy. However, with policy 2, we see a different effect: if experiencing low autonomy, policy consistency has a negative effect on meaningfulness; whereas with high autonomy the effect of policy consistency is positive (but small). A similar analysis for legitimacy produces similar but stronger effects than those

found for meaningfulness. Confronted with policy 1, policy consistency has a strong effect on legitimacy, and this effect is slightly stronger for respondents who experience high rather than low autonomy. Confronted with policy 2, the effect of consistency is only positive for those who experience high autonomy and negative for respondents experiencing low autonomy.

It is noteworthy that we have found different effects of consistency on both meaningfulness and legitimacy depending on policy content and the experienced autonomy of the respondents. Can we better understand these results if we look at the fictitious policy measures we introduced? As explained in our experimental design, we included two policy cases differing in topic, policy goal and how prescriptive the government was in the desired approach. Perhaps not surprisingly, the positive effect of consistency is less strong for the policy that has a more top-down approach to what should be done (policy 2 on educational inequality). Particularly for respondents who already experience low autonomy; the effect of consistency is even negative.

Overall, the results of our analyses support hypothesis 1: policy consistency, as expected, has a positive effect on teachers' perceptions of meaningfulness and, particularly, of legitimacy. The results partially confirm hypothesis 2: the positive effect of consistency is stronger if autonomy is high, but only statistically significant for legitimacy. By studying these relationships with respondents who had been confronted with different policies, our results show that the continuation of certain policies (in our experiment: a policy measure that restricts professional leeway and discretion), but not all, has a negative effect on meaningfulness and legitimacy for respondents experiencing low autonomy. This suggests that policy consistency should not be seen as a 'one size fits all' solution.

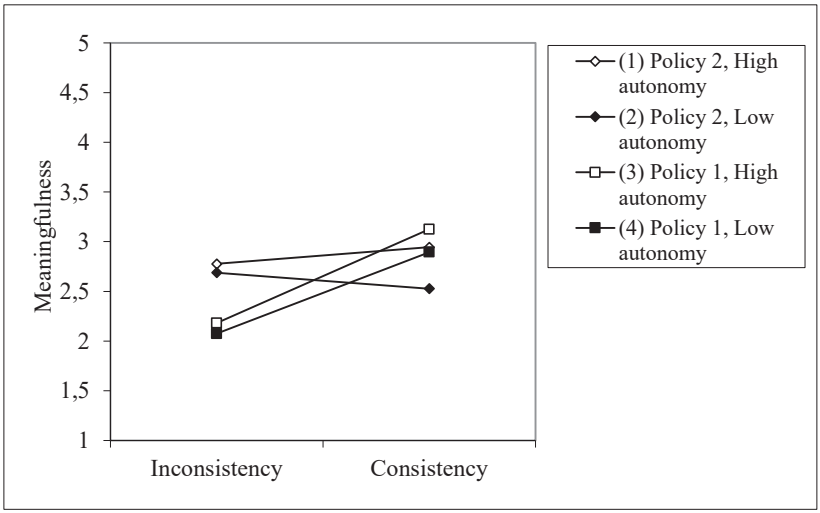

Figure 4.2 Interaction effects for meaningfulness

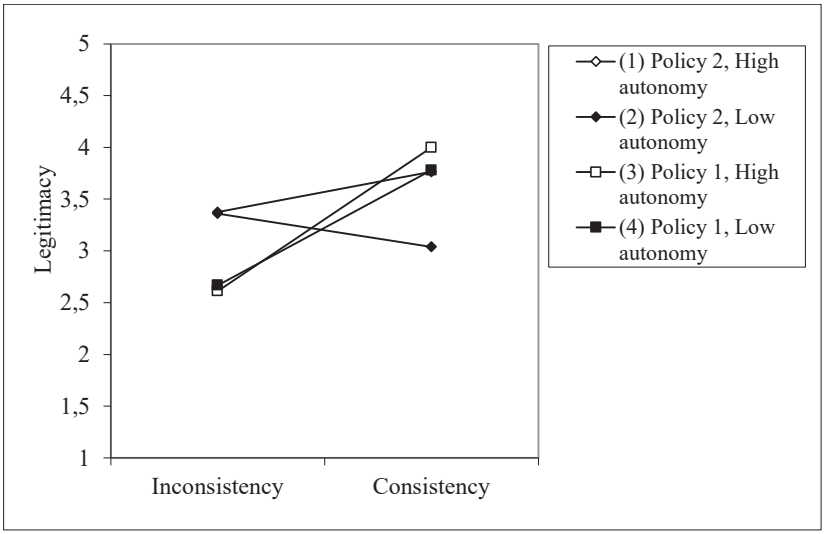

Figure 4.3 Interaction effects for legitimacy

4.5 DISCUSSION

We have investigated the effect of policy consistency on how frontline workers perceive policy meaningfulness and legitimacy. We found, in line with our expectations, that policy consistency positively affects perceptions of meaningfulness and, particularly, of legitimacy. Nevertheless, our results also indicate that policy consistency should not be regarded as something government should always aim for: greater consistency is not a 'one size fits all' solution or a panacea for all governmental implementation challenges on the frontline.

To single out the effect of policy consistency, and how this is affected by autonomy and policy content, we designed an experiment in which we confronted Dutch teachers with a political decision to continue (indicating consistency) or discontinue (indicating inconsistency) a policy. We also tested how the relationships between policy consistency and both perceived meaningfulness and legitimacy are influenced by autonomy. It would seem that the more autonomy that frontline workers experience, the stronger the positive effect of policy consistency. Furthermore, our results indicate that policy content is a relevant factor to consider when studying the effects of policy consistency, as our findings differ for the two policy measures with which we confronted the teachers.

To summarize, our findings emphasize the potentially positive impacts of policy consistency on perceived meaningfulness and on legitimacy. Furthermore, our results suggest that frontline workers might find policy consistency more important than their own autonomy during policy implementation, although more empirical research is necessary to confirm this impression. Although to some extent at odds with the nature of political decisionmaking and policymaking, our study suggests that aiming for policy consistency might be a useful strategy for governments aiming to improve public service delivery – perhaps even more useful than increasing autonomy –, given its ability to increase policy meaningfulness and government legitimacy among frontline workers. Although frontline workers may not find a specific policy meaningful, or see it as the best way to address societal challenges and create public value, they appear to be more likely to support this policy if they know – possibly from previous experience – that the government is willing and able to maintain this policy over time. Interestingly, our results suggest that frontline workers who experience greater autonomy are

more likely to appreciate consistency than frontline workers who experience less autonomy. This finding illustrates an interesting paradox: although politicians have full democratic and legal authority to introduce inconsistent policies (if supported by a majority in the House of Representatives), this can make it more difficult for administrators to successfully implement these policies. Rapid and inconsistent changes have a negative impact on frontline workers' perceptions of these policies and the government's legitimacy, and may even make them cynical or indifferent (Van Engen *et al.*, 2016). This conclusion aligns with previous studies that have shown that 'what you see (in terms of formal policy) may not be what you get (in terms of policy-as-produced)' (Brodkin, 2012, p. 943) and studies that have concluded that consistency heightens organizational rule-following (Borry *et al.*, 2018).

Naturally, the aim of our study has never been to claim that policies should not be changed. Policies must certainly be flexible and sufficiently responsive to adapt to new technologies, changing circumstances and societal developments (Cayton, 2017). Not least because research has shown that policymakers benefit from being seen to act by their citizens (i.e., potential voters), even if the problem gets worse (Olsen, 2017). However, inconsistent policies may have negative consequences for policy implementation. Although we recognize that policy change can be sensible, we would advise governments who want to change their policy to take the frontline perspective into account when doing so (De Boer & Eshuis, 2018; Lavee *et al.*, 2018). This implication of our study highlights a relevant and unsolved public administration dilemma: what may be regarded as perfectly legitimate and efficient from a top-down perspective may be regarded as entirely illegitimate and inefficient from a bottom-up point of view (Sabatier, 1986; Brodkin, 2012; Gofen, 2014; Alon-Barkat & Gilad, 2016). Nevertheless, the reality is that public values can only be achieved if governments and frontline workers cooperate and align their interests for the sake of society (Bryson *et al.*, 2015). If this is not achieved, and divergent perspectives and behaviors result, core public values might be put at risk. It is crucial that frontline workers adhere to the values of fairness, equality and equity when implementing policies that were decided upon through democratic procedures (Brehm & Gates, 1999).

The main findings of this study suggest a number of relevant future research questions. The first is how do frontline workers respond to and prepare for major

shifts in policy: 'when do they believe the implementation pain is worth the gain?' Unforeseeable events and developments (such as a sudden influx of large numbers of school-age refugees or a growing teacher shortage) will obviously require policy changes, but how can the resulting 'inconvenience' for frontline workers be minimized by practicing due diligence when developing policies? In other words, under what circumstances will frontline workers support policy changes, or what specific actions can governments take so that policy changes meet the criteria of being consistent and logically coherent with previous policies? It would be especially interesting to investigate the effect of policy consistency over time: do the short-term effects we found in this study also hold in the longer term? It could be wise for governments to discontinue a specific policy that frontline workers do not support. However, if governments do this repeatedly, this might trigger 'policy cynicism': "Bend over, here it comes again" (Connel & Waring, 2002).

The second topic for further research, and related to the first, is that future experiments should recognize that policies are often changed or fine-tuned during the implementation process. That is, new policies or policy changes are often intended to either refine or complement already existing policies to adapt them to (un)anticipated implementation circumstances, a lack of results or evolving political needs (Van Gunsteren, 1976; Wildavsky, 1979; Thelen, 2004; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). In this study, we investigated the possible effects on frontline workers of quite a radical policy change. However, would we find similar results if the government decided to implement more incremental policy changes? We would recommend future researchers studying this topic to also pay attention to the 'rules versus principles debate' that postulates that it might be difficult to consistently apply policy if policies lack specific guidance and rules, and are mostly based on principles. The implementation of such policies by frontline workers is inherently inconsistent (e.g., Wüstemann & Wüstemann, 2010). Although we defined policy consistency as consistency over time (i.e., continuity) in this study, it would be relevant to investigate whether we would find similar effects of another subtype of consistency, namely consistency in terms of alignment with other policies (i.e., coherency), on meaningfulness and legitimacy.

The third topic where we see further research as valuable is the influence of frontline workers' personal characteristics (including their political and moral beliefs and their values), as well as the characteristics of the organization they

work for. In this study, we have established that policy consistency influences policy meaningfulness and legitimacy, and that these relationships depend on autonomy. However, elsewhere, it has been shown that meaningfulness and legitimacy also depend on other personal and organizational characteristics (e.g. Tummers *et al.*, 2009; De Fine Licht, 2014). Future research could seek to shed light on this, ideally by conducting a natural field experiment (Grimmelikhuijsen *et al.*, 2017). It could, for instance, be that policy consistency has a stronger effect on frontline workers who are more risk-averse or in organizations where general trust in government is low. It would be welcome if future research could disentangle these effects.

As all studies, this study has its limitations related to both internal and external validity issues. The first limitation is that we conducted an experiment in one sector in one country. Ideally, our experiment would be replicated in other sectors and other countries to assess whether the relationships found in this study also hold elsewhere. A second limitation is that we used a sample made up of volunteers. Although this is not uncommon in public administration studies, there are drawbacks. First, the sample might not necessarily be fully representative of the entire population (as is the case in this study). The second limitation is that we used a survey experiment with hypothetical – albeit realistic – scenarios to assess the effects of policy consistency on perceived policy meaningfulness and on legitimacy. Third, we only investigated the effect of policy consistency on frontline workers, in this case teachers. Although frontline workers are key actors in policy formulation and implementation, we know that other relevant stakeholders, including professional organizations and organizational managers (such as school leaders), should ideally support the introduction or reform of policies, or should at least be non-obstructive (Park & Rethemeyer, 2014; Bryson *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, future research should test whether this study's findings also apply to other stakeholders. Finally, we operationalized legitimacy as policy acceptance. Although this is not uncommon, it should be noted that policy acceptance involves only one aspect of legitimacy. Hence, future research on the relationship between consistency and legitimacy could focus on aspects that move beyond acceptance, including moral and normative approval (Christensen *et al.*, 2016).

4.6 CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this chapter has tested the influence of policy consistency on frontline workers' perceptions of policy meaningfulness and the legitimacy of government actions. Specifically, we looked at the effect of policy consistency, in terms of continuity and steadiness, over time. The results of our experimental study show, first, that policy consistency has an overall positive effect on both meaningfulness and perceived government legitimacy and, second, that this effect is enhanced if frontline workers experience greater autonomy. Our findings thus argue in favor of frontline workers having a status quo bias, which is likely to influence the success of new policy implementations. Overall, our study contributes to a better understanding of why frontline workers may create major difficulties for new governments democratically mandated to change policy. At the same time, our study emphasizes the importance of consistency in improving frontline workers' policy perceptions. Yet, it also nuances this statement by showing how frontline workers' evaluations of a policy that is (dis)continued may play a role. Consistency may be less important for frontline workers if they do not support the policy. These findings provide valuable information for governments striving to improve public service delivery.