Mother, should I trust the government? The impact of personal characteristics, professional position and policy alienation on trust of public professionals in the government

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ABSTRACT

Trust is seen as crucial for the legitimacy of governments: Without trust governments cannot act in name of its citizens. Although various studies have studied citizen trust in the government, much less is known about whether those citizens who have to execute policies and are at the forefront of delivering services – for instance teachers and nurses - trust the government, and which factors matter for their trust. Trust of these professionals is crucial as they form the linking pin between state and citizens. This study aims to fill the gap in knowledge about public professional trust by analyzing three potential influences on the trust of public professionals: personal characteristics (age, gender, education), professional position (tenure, managing responsibility), and policy alienation (client meaninglessness). To test this we use two survey samples from professionals working in two policy fields in the Netherlands: education (n=1,183) and healthcare (n=1,723). Results show firstly that personal characteristics and professional position were far less important than expected. Instead, trust of public professionals was mostly related to whether they perceived current government policies as meaningful and contributing to their work. These findings were robust as they were found in both samples. Our results show that taking into account experiences with public policies is essential for understanding trust, which can ultimately influence policy performance.

Keywords: Trust, Policy alienation, Policy meaninglessness, Performance, Education, Healthcare

1. INTRODUCTION

Trust in government is seen as crucial for the functioning of governments, beyond being appreciated for the government's efforts. Without trust, some say, government cannot count on citizens to follow the rules, respond appropriately when necessary, or provide the government with the legitimacy it needs to make binding decisions and execute its policies (Van Ryzin, 2011; Chanley et al., 2000). Recent scholarship has devoted a great deal of attention to the trust gap between citizens and public services. The focus here was mainly on the perspective of citizens (see, for instance, Kim, 2010; Van de Walle, Van Roosbroek & Bouckaert, 2008). Whether a relevant subtype of citizens – the citizens who have to execute the policies in the field, such as nurses, police officers and teachers – trust the government, has received far less attention.

This is surprising given the fact that these public professionals – also termed public employees, frontline workers, public service workers or street-level bureaucrats – are at the forefront of having to implement and defend the policies of the government. Moreover, in implementing the policies, these professionals have considerable discretion and are those who most regularly interact with citizens on behalf of the government (Lipsky, 1980). If they do not trust the government, they may be less inclined to execute policies and following the rules, undermining the functioning of governments. Public professionals have considerable discretion and if they perceive the policies to be unfair or wrong they may use this space to go against the government's ideas (Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2007). They may prefer to follow their own ideas on how to deliver services, resulting in 'runaway agents' or sabotage and shirking (Brehm & Gates, 1999; DiLulio, 1994). Therefore it is necessary to not only gain insight in the levels of trust of public professionals, but also what factors influence this trust.

Despite the apparent importance of trust among public professionals, not much is known about their trust in government, nor what determines their trust. This study aims to shed light on the general trust of public professionals in the Minister and State Secretary, the Ministry and politicians who determine the policies they have to execute. Because public professionals are also citizens, we can expect many of the same factors to be important for their trust as found in previous studies on

citizen trust. In this study possible factors are combined in three general categories and adjusted to the specific context of a public professional.

First, personal characteristics such as gender, age and education may alike as for citizens play a role for the trust of public professionals (Christensen & Lagreid, 2005). Second, the professional position as defined by tenure (experience) and managerial position may matter (Christensen & Lagreid, 2005). The longer individuals work in the organization, the more reform they may have experienced, which may be detrimental for their trust in the competence and fairness of government. Moreover, studies on professionals have argued that there may be a 'clash' between street-level professionals and managers since the latter are inclined to choose side with their (political) principal (Ackroyd, 1996). However, others argue that this clash has been exaggerated and managers often side with their professionals or even deem themselves as professionals (Noordegraaf & De Wit, 2012). Still, it may be that trust amongst managers is higher than amongst street-level bureaucrats, due to their 'loyalty' and role for which they need a good relationship with their principals.

Third, individuals look at the credible commitment, benevolence, honesty, competency and fairness (Kim, 2005) of the government by judging the policies they are asked to execute, and this may even be a more important factor for public professionals as they have to work within the system. The public professional stands at the intersection at which government policies and citizen realities meet (Gofen, 2014; Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003) and therefore have a first-hand view on how the government's policies work out in practice. If they perceive these policies in the field as not benefiting the services they can provide to their clients, their trust in the government may decrease. Research on policy alienation, describing a feeling of disconnectedness of public professionals with the policy they have to implement, indicates that such a state may indeed have detrimental effects on employee attitudes (Tummers, Bekkers & Steijn, 2009).

Using survey data from professionals working in two policy fields - education (n=1,183) and healthcare (n=1,723) - in the Netherlands we aim to provide more knowledge on trust in government amongst those who have to execute the policies. By including two different policy areas, we can see whether similar factors apply to public professionals' trust in government in different fields. We conduct structural equation modeling in Mplus to investigate levels and factors related to trust of

public professionals. This study can thus contribute to knowledge on trust of public professionals, and whether this is shaped by their personal characteristics, professional position, or whether the policy is perceived as beneficial for their clients. In the following, we first discuss trust in government and identify factors which may influence the trust of public professionals. Then, we present findings on the level of trust in our two samples (education and healthcare), followed by an analysis of what factors relate to trust. We end with a discussion of the findings and implications for practice and future research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Trust in government

The concept of trust has been studied in different academic disciplines and this has resulted in many different definitions. Many studies, however, use the general definition offered by Rousseau et al. (1998), who defined trust as "a psychological state comprising the intention and action to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions and behaviour of another" (p. 395). This definition emphasizes that trust is relational; someone else or something is seen as trustworthy by the individual. Trust is however called an 'umbrella' term which can be about different political and administrative institutions. This makes it hard to compare studies. According to Bovens and Wille (2008) trust is sometimes conceptualized as the performance of government, whereas others focus on the degree of 'trustworthiness', globally or on different dimensions (Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012; Kim, 2005).

Within the public sector, Bouckaert (2012) distinguishes three types of trust relationships: citizens' and organizations' trust in government and the public sector, government and public sector trust in citizens and organizations, and trust within the government and the public sector. Two subtypes of trust relationships can be distinguished within this last realm, namely the trust the government has in the public sector and public professionals and the trust that the public sector has in the government. It is the latter type of trust relationship that is of central focus in this study. Hence, we study to what extent public professionals trust the government. In general, trust between actors in collaborative arrangements has been associated with positive outcomes, as, for example, more exchange of knowledge and information (Becerra, Lunnan & Huemer, 2008), higher performance (Steijn, Klijn & Edelenbos, 2010), and good conflict resolution (Das & Teng, 1998).

Public professionals can be regarded as a specific group of citizens and therefore similar dynamics may be at hand for their trust in government as have been found by studies on citizens. However, although citizen trust is important for the legitimacy of the government, and matter for whether citizens follow directions from the government, public professionals can be seen as part of

the system: they need to carry out policies and often form the policy in their interactions with citizens (Lipsky, 1980). They are the embodiment of the government and its policies for citizens, since citizens interact with them. For instance, teachers need to implement policies concerning tests, whereas students and their parents will perceive these tests as conducted by the teacher. Trust of public professionals in the government is essential for the execution of policies.

Ideas on what influences trust in government can be found in several studies. Regarding the characteristics of government that influence perceptions of trust, Grimmelikhuijsen (2012), for instance, argues that the more citizens have the impression that a government is acting competent, benevolent and honest, the higher trust in government. However, other studies show that not only not only characteristics of the government and its actions, but also characteristics of the individual who assesses the governments' trustworthiness can influence the level of trust. For instance, Christensen and Lagreid (2005) found that demographic, social position and political-cultural factors influence trust perceptions. We follow this logic and argue that the trust of public professionals is influenced by three broad categories: their personal characteristics, their professional position, and their perception of whether the governmental policies are beneficial for their clients (policy alienation).

Personal characteristics and trust in government

The first category of factors is personal characteristics. Here, we incorporate three common ones: gender, age and education level.

Regarding the first, gender, some studies have shown that women support the public sector more than men do (see, for instance, Laegreid, 1993). One can therefore presuppose that female public professionals will trust the government more than their male counterparts (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005). The second demographic variable incorporated in this study is age. In general, one would expect trust in government to increase with age, as older people tend to be more collectively oriented (Christensen & Laegreid, 2005) and are more trusting of democratic institutions (Espinal, Hartlyn & Kelly, 2006). Thirdly, education level seems related to trust in government. It has been found that the higher a person's level of education, the more he is willing to trust the government. The

main reason suggested for this is the cognitive factor, meaning that higher educated people tend to have more knowledge about the political-administrative system (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2001). The more knowledge individuals have about public services, the higher their trust in government (Cook, Jacobs & Dukhong, 2010). As a consequence, the higher educated are more able to distinguish between its various components, and at the same time see their interrelatedness. Summarizing, regarding the relationship between personal characteristics and trust in government, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H1A: Female respondents have higher trust in government than male respondents

H1B: The older respondents, the higher their trust in government

H1C: The higher respondents' education level, the higher their trust in government

Professional position and trust in government

The second category of factors is related to professional position. The first characteristic of professional position that is relevant in relation to trust is organizational tenure, which is the number of years a professional is working. Professionals with longer tenure, may have more experience with the government behaving as an unreliable policy partner, and therefore have less trust in the government as compared to colleagues that have less years of experience. Zaheer, McEvily and Perrone (1998) consider three elements especially relevant for gaining trust, namely being reliable in fulfilling obligations (reliability), predictable in behaviors under uncertain circumstances (predictability) and fair in negotiating when the possibility for opportunism is present (fairness). From previous studies, we know that the government cannot always be regarded as a reliable, predictable and fair policy partner. For instance, policies are often introduced top-down, without consulting the field (Barrett, 2004). The sectors under study here – education and healthcare – have been subject to several major reforms in the last decades. Likewise, Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2014) showed that better insight in the results of government do not always increase trust. Therefore we expect that those who have been working in the public sector for a long time, and have more experience with the

government behaving as an unreliable policy partner have lower trust in government. Thus, tenure will be negatively related to trust.

Secondly, the position or role of the public employee may matter for trust in government (Christensen & Lagreid, 2005). In the literature on professionals often emphasis is placed on the differences between street-level professionals and their managers. Some even speak of a 'clash' since the latter are inclined to choose side with their (political) principal (Ackroyd, 1996). Others nuance this picture by arguing that this clash is exaggerated since managers often side with their professionals and still identify strongly with the role of a professional (Noordegraaf & De Wit, 2012). Still, managers are closer to the political debate and are the first to feel the consequences of a bad relationship with the principal. Moreover, their ambiguous role standing between street-level professionals and the principal makes it important to uphold a good relationship with both. In order for them to achieve something with their principal, a good relationship – based on trust – is essential, and therefore it may be that trust amongst managers is higher than amongst street-level bureaucrats.

Summarizing, regarding the relationship between professional position and trust in government, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H2A: The longer professionals' organizational tenure, the lower their trust in government

H2B: Professionals with managing responsibilities have higher trust in government than respondents without managing responsibilities

Policy alienation and trust in government

A final factor determining the trust of individuals in government is the functioning of the government itself. As opposed to citizens, public professionals are asked to refrain from thinking about their own self-interest, but to think about the interests of society at large. Research on public service motivation has also found that public professionals feel a strong drive to do something for society and help others (Perry & Wise, 1990). They are therefore likely to place emphasis on whether the policies of the government are beneficial for their clients.

Public professionals stand at the intersection at which government policies and citizen realities meet and therefore have a first-hand view on how the government's policies work out in practice. In order to analyze how public professionals perceive policies, we draw on the policy alienation framework developed by Tummers, Bekkers and Steijn (2009). They define policy alienation (p.688) as "a general cognitive state of psychological disconnection from the policy program being implemented by a public professional who, on a regular basis, interacts directly with clients". Policy alienation consists of two main dimensions, policy powerlessness and policy meaninglessness. The meaninglessness dimension focuses on the added value of policies. Previous studies show that professionals, who perceive policies as meaningless for their own clients, are less willing to implement these policies (Tummers, 2011; Tummers, Steijn & Bekkers, 2012). What we expect is that policy alienation also has detrimental effects on public professionals degree of trust in government. Professionals expect their government to formulate policies that are of added value for citizens and enable them to better help their clients. If government policies fail to contribute to these goals, and do not benefit the services professionals can provide to their clients, this may negatively affect professionals trust in the government.

Summarizing, regarding the relationship between policy alienation and trust, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3: The higher professionals' perceived degree of policy alienation (client meaninglessness), the lower their trust in government

3. METHOD

Case description

We investigate the relationship between personal characteristics, professional position and policy alienation and trust in government in the Netherlands in both education and healthcare. Here, we briefly introduce these fields and discuss the most relevant policy developments in relation to our study.

Education

The education system in the Netherlands features many different types of schools, both publicly and privately run, all funded by the central government. Decentralization has been a general tendency in the Dutch education policy of the last decade, as more and more topics are being left to the institutions (school boards and schools) to arrange – within the confinements of the regulations laid down by the government. Also the negotiations of salaries and conditions of labor are largely decentralized. OECD comparative statistics (PISA 2012) indeed show that the degree of autonomy for Dutch schools is relatively high.

The subsector under study is secondary education, where Dutch students from their twelfth year onwards receive (compulsory) education right after they finished primary school. Two policy changes were most prominent during the survey. The first is a renewed focus on basic subjects: reading, writing and mathematics. The government has placed these subjects as number one priority. This was combined with emphasis on a culture of continuous improvement: Schools should continuously strive to improve their education (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2011). This is, for instance, stimulated by a change in the organization of the Inspectorate of Education. They used to carry out risk-based inspections of schools, but are about to move towards continuous monitoring. Moreover, they aim to shift from control towards an improvement and support-based approach. Second, in 2012 a transformation towards inclusive education (in Dutch: *passend onderwijs*) was started as a result of the rapidly increasing number of students attending expensive

special education schools. Inclusive education is, ass the name suggests, focused on inclusion; whenever it is possible, children with extra needs should receive their education at normal schools. Regional clusters consisting of school boards, schools, youth care and local authorities are responsible for the provision of appropriate education together. Both these changes lead to extra demands placed on teachers, uncertainties and a higher workload.

Healthcare

The healthcare system in the Netherlands consists of a highly regulated market in which insurance companies play a central role. Due to the continuous rise in costs of the healthcare system (up to 30% of the total government expenditures; PM), the government decided to reform the sector in 2006. Market forces were introduced such as competition between hospitals and a new role for health insurance companies (PM). Insurance companies offer healthcare packages for citizens who differ in what care covered by the insurance, price and choice of healthcare provider (free choice versus contracts with specific providers). On the other side insurance companies are expected to improve healthcare delivery by closing contracts with healthcare suppliers and through these contracts probing them to become more efficient and effective. The government provides strict regulations in terms of safety procedures, budgets and service provision.

Two policy changes were most prominent during the survey. First, in 2012 the cabinet decided 5 billion euro needed to be cut from the healthcare budget. Home care was cut back to 60% of the current budget. Second, it was decided (and preparations were implemented) that the care function within healthcare (as opposed to 'cure') will be decentralized to the local government level. This reform, also intends to cut costs by placing more responsibility on citizens themselves and their network of family and friends. More care should be provided by family and friends, and only if this is really not possible, clients will be entitled to government-based care. Both these changes lead to uncertainty for many professionals in healthcare organizations about whether they can keep their job, but also about the content of their job in the future since many tasks are no longer seen as the job of care-providers.

Sample and procedures

Education

Data was collected in June 2013. A representative sample of 3,126 employees working in schools for secondary education all across the Netherlands were invited by e-mail. A reminder was sent one week after. A total of 1,183 filled in the survey, a response rate of 38 percent, of which 60% was female. The average age of the respondents was 52, and the average tenure was 23 years. When these statistics are compared with the overall Dutch secondary education personnel in 2013, our sample is sufficiently representative of overall secondary education personnel in the Netherlands (DUO, 2014).

Healthcare

Data was collected in December 2013. 5,067 employees of one large healthcare organization 'chain'/conglomerate (including multiple elderly care homes, home care and mental healthcare departments) were invited by e-mail. Reminders were sent one week and two weeks after. A total of 1,723 respondents filled in the survey, a response rate of 34 percent, of which over 90 percent was female. The average age of the respondents was 43, and the average tenure ten years. Characteristics are representative of overall population in the organization, and overall population of employees working in the 'care' domain in the Netherlands (National average age 43.3 and % of women 90.5%; PM).

Measures

Here, we report the measurement of variables. For most items, we used templates as they allowed us to specify the items by replacing general phrases with more specific ones. For instance, instead of stating 'policy' or 'professionals', we rephrased these items with 'education policy' / 'healthcare policy' and 'education professionals' / 'healthcare professionals'. The main advantage of using templates is that it makes it easier for respondents to understand the items, as they better fit with their professional context and this, in turn, increases reliability and content validity (DeVellis, 2003).

Trust in government

To measure professionals' degree of trust in the government, we asked respondents the following question, based on the World Value Survey questionnaire (wave 6, 2010-2014, questions V108-V126): 'For each of the following institutions and organizations, could you tell me how much trust you have in them?' They had to answer this question for (1) the Minister and State Secretary of Education/Healthcare, (2) the Ministry of Education/Healthcare and (3) politics in general, together forming the latent variable trust in government. Answer options were 'a great deal', 'quite a lot', 'not very much' and 'not at all'.

Personal characteristics

The personal characteristics that we included were gender, age and highest completed level of education. The latter was measured using options from 1 till 8 with answer options varying from respectively primary school to master's degree.

Professional position

We included organizational tenure, and asked respondents to indicate whether or not they had managing responsibilities (0=no managing responsibility; 1=managing responsibility).

Policy alienation

To measure professionals' experienced degree of policy alienation, we used the client meaninglessness dimension of the policy alienation measurement scale developed by Tummers (2012). Client meaninglessness is the perception of professionals about the benefits of policies for their own clients, measured by four items on a five-point measurement scale. Two sample items were 'In general, current education/healthcare policy is contributing to the welfare of my students/clients' and 'In general, current education/healthcare policy makes that I can help my students/clients better than before'.

Statistical analysis plan

We tested our hypotheses via structural equation modeling (SEM) using the program Mplus (version 5)[1]. The program Mplus is suited for handling non-normally distributed data, which is often the case when employing surveys. Since our data was (slightly) non-normally distributed, this was an advantage. Model parameters were estimated using full information likelihood estimation (FIML), so that all cases with data on at least one of the variables were included in the analyses.

First, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) in order to achieve optimal model fit. A CFA is theory-driven and analyzes the validity of the measurement model specified, based on validated measurement scales and prior research experience (Brown, 2006). It shows how the items (indicators) we asked to measure respondents' degree of perceived client meaninglessness and trust in government relate to their latent constructs. To assess the model fit, we used the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). The latter two test the absolute fit of the specified model. According to an analysis of the reporting of structural equation modeling and confirmatory factor analysis for one-time analyses, as in the present study, these are the fit indexes most authors prefer to report (Schreiber et al., 2006). Generally accepted cutoff criteria for these indexes are respectively CFI and TLI ≥ .95 good fit and ≥ .90 moderate fit, RMSEA ≤ .06 good fit and ≤ .08 moderate fit (Brown, 2006), and SRMR ≤ .08 good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Second, once the optimal model was achieved, we added the structural paths. All above described analyses were conducted separately for the education and healthcare sector. Given the large sample sizes (education $n = 1,183$; healthcare $n = 1,723$), we used $p < .01$ as the minimum criterion for statistical significance of the estimated parameters.

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[1] All Mplus syntax is available upon request from the first author.

4. RESULTS

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 shows the means for all items in the present study for the education and healthcare sample separately. A number of differences exist. First, table 1 shows that respondents working in education have slightly more trust in their Minister and State Secretary, Ministry and politics in general than professionals working in healthcare. Regarding the personal characteristics table 1 shows that education professionals are on average older and have a higher education level than healthcare professionals. Besides that, we see that the majority of respondents working in the healthcare, 93 percent, is female, whereas in education only 40 percent of the respondents is female. On average, respondents in education work more than twice as long in their organization as respondents in healthcare do. The number of respondents with managing responsibilities is reasonably comparable in both sectors (10 versus 15 percent); the same is true for the perceived degree of client meaninglessness.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics

	Education	**Healthcare**
Trust in the government (scale 1-4)		
Trust in Minister and State Secretary	2.20	2.16
Trust in Ministry	2.32	2.17
Trust in politics	2.03	1.94
Trust in government *latent variable*	2.18	2.09
Personal characteristics		
Gender	60% male	7% male
Age	51.63	43.77
Education level	6.75	4.49
Professional position		
Organizational tenure	23.32 years	10.12 years
Managing responsibility	15% manager	10% manager
Policy alienation (scale 1-5)		
Client meaninglessness item 1	3.86	3.65
Client meaninglessness item 2	3.57	3.69
Client meaninglessness item 3	3.81	3.69
Client meaninglessness item 4	3.45	3.76
Client meaninglessness *latent variable*	3.67	3.71

Subsequently, a confirmatory analysis was conducted. A model was specified with latent variables for both client meaninglessness and trust in government. The CFA results show that the model fitted the data well, for both education (CFI=.97; TLI=.95; RMSEA=.08; SRMR=.02) and healthcare (CFI=.98; TLI=.97; RMSEA=.06; SRMR=.03). Hence, no modifications were necessary.

Structural equation modeling

Starting with the CFA model described above, we added the structural paths between the personal characteristics, professional position variables, client meaninglessness and trust in government. The results of the SEM analyses are reported in the first column of table 2 ('Trust in government', on the next page). Overall, the structural model proved to be a good fit of the data, for both education (CFI=.96; TLI=.94; RMSEA=.06; SRMR=.03) and healthcare (CFI=.98; TLI=.97; RMSEA=.03; SRMR=.02).

The results of the SEM firstly show that demographics and professional position were far less important than expected. This is true for both professionals working in education and healthcare. Regarding the personal characteristics, we see that both gender and age are only marginally related to professionals trust in government. Education level seems only related to trust in government for professionals working in the healthcare sector. Still, the effect size we found for education level and trust in government is only small ($\beta = .11$; $p < .001$). Also professional position is not strongly related to trust in government. Managing position is, as expected, positively related to trust in government. However, these results fail to receive significance. Thus, for trust in government, it apparently does not matter how many years of experience a professional has or whether or not the respondent has managing responsibilities.

In this study, the factor most strongly related to trust in government was whether public professionals experienced that governmental policies were meaningful for their clients. The more alienated professionals felt from policies, the lower their trust in government (for education $\beta = -.49$; $p < .001$ and for healthcare $\beta = -.48$; $p < .001$). These findings suggest that professionals' perceptions of the added value of policies for their clients are linked to their degree of trust in the government. The large effect sizes show the relative importance of client meaninglessness in relation to trust as compared to the other factors incorporated in the SEM analysis.

In order to determine whether the above described relationships differ per subtype of government, we ran the SEM analysis with all three indicators of trust in government - trust in the Minister and State Secretary, the Ministry and politics - as the outcome (dependent) variable. The results of this analysis are reported in the last three columns of table 2 ('Trust in Minister and State Secretary, Ministry, and politics', on the next page). Overall, this second structural model also proved to be a good fit of the data, for both education (CFI=.97; TLI=.94; RMSEA=.06; SRMR=.02) and healthcare (CFI=.99; TLI=.97; RMSEA=.04; SRMR=.02).

Table 2 Results of structural equation modeling

	Trust in		Trust in					
	government		Minister and State Secretary		Ministry		Politics	
	Education	Healthcare	Education	Healthcare	Education	Healthcare	Education	Healthcare
Personal characteristics								
Gender (female=ref.)	0.10	0.25	0.04	0.16	0.10	0.18	0.04	-0.02
Age	-0.01*	-0.006	-0.003	-0.003	-0.01*	-0.004	-0.02**	-0.01*
Education level	0.04	0.11**	0.03	0.06**	0.01	0.07**	0.03	0.07**
Professional position								
Organization tenure	0.002	-0.005	0.001	-0.004	0.001	-0.003	0.002	0.002
Managing responsibility (no=ref.)	0.09	0.05	0.05	0.02	0.09	0.03	-0.001	0.03
Policy alienation								
Client meaninglessness	-0.49**	-0.48**	-0.34**	-0.30**	-0.33**	-0.30**	-0.22**	-0.25**
R^2	0.25	0.29	0.19	0.26	0.20	0.27	0.13	0.21

Note. $* < 0.01$; $** < 0.001$. Standardized scores are presented.

The results of the second SEM analysis are comparable with the results of the first SEM analysis. Again we see that the relationship between policy alienation (client meaninglessness) and trust in government is most strong. What the effect sizes found show is that the negative relationship between policy alienation and trust in government seems stronger for the Minister and State Secretary Secretary (education and healthcare respectively β = -.34 and -.30; $p < .001$), and the Ministry (β = -.33 and -.30; $p < .001$), than for politics in general (β = -.22 and -.25; $p < .001$). Analysis of the 95% confidence intervals of the standardized effect sizes shows that this difference is statistically significant for education, but not for healthcare.

Finally, we highlight an important result from our analyses. Namely that the above presented findings are robust: They were found in both education and healthcare samples, and the impact of the various dimensions was comparable. This suggests that the relationships we found in this sector might be relevant for all public professionals, irrespective of which subsector of the public sector they work in.

Qualitative support for SEM findings

In the surveys, we provided our respondents with the opportunity to comment on (the questions asked in) the questionnaire. Numerous voluntarily given quotes underscored the findings from the quantitative data analyses. We present a selection of exemplary quotes here and discuss their possible implications in order to deepen our understanding of the empirical results presented above.

What the comments of our respondents firstly demonstrated is that they indeed consider trust a crucial prerequisite of their own and their sector's performance. The following quote of an education professional illustrates this: *"Trust is a must! Trust in each other is and will be the basis of good education."* And it is not only trust between colleague professionals that respondents refer to, as the majority of the respondents specifically refers to the trust between actors operating at the different public sector levels: *"Start with trust at and between all levels"*. What these two quotes underscore is the importance of trust between government and public professionals, and thereby the importance of this study, which attempts to better understand what factors influence professionals' trust in government.

According to our quantitative analyses the content of a policy is most strongly related to professionals' trust in government – as compared to their personal characteristics and professional position. The following two quotes illustrate how professionals connect their opinion on policies to their opinion about the government:

"You see: my trust in the ministry, politics and the educational organizations has, after years of top-down decisions about educational policies in which policies such as [...] are

implemented in the whole educational system as a one-size-fits-all, dropped below zero." (education professional)

"I am proud to work for this organization, and that we are constantly looking for improvements. [...] But what I have negative experiences with, is the cutbacks from the ministry on personnel. I have no problem with cutbacks in healthcare, but no more on the work floor!!! The continuity and safety are no longer safeguarded this way, leading to bad publicity about problems on the work floor. Let us work together in searching for other ways to cut back. Personnel on the work floor is just such an easy target for getting money. They do not strike because patients are the ones who suffer from it." (healthcare professional)

In this study we argued that for professionals' opinion on policies their perceptions on the added value of these policies for their own clients was a crucial factor, as professionals feel a strong drive to do something for others (Perry & Wise, 1990). The following two quotes support this point of view, as they show two education professionals strongly link their evaluation of policies to the interests of their students: *"Too little trust. Too much focus on test scores. Too little awareness that you can't measure each child's performance along the same standards"* and *"There is no trust. Everything should be documented and that costs an awful lot of time that we could better invest in students"*.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this study we investigated the trust public professionals, which form the linking pin between a government and its citizens, have in the government - a relatively understudied topic in the trust in government and public sector domain. Despite the apparent importance of a stable trust relationship between government and public professionals, in this study we found quite low levels of trust in the government among Dutch public professionals working in both education and healthcare (mean respectively 2.18 and 2.09 on a four-point scale). Most recent Dutch data of the World Value Survey (WVS 2012) shows that the mean degree of trust in government of a representative sample of Dutch citizens over 18 is 2.22 (on a four-point scale). Despite the fact that our data and the WVS data are not fully comparable, this finding suggests that public professionals might have lower trust in the national government than citizens in general do. This is undesirable, as this may result in professionals to become runaway agents, sabotage and shirking, that may ultimately undermine the functioning of governments.

In order to increase the understanding of why professionals do or do not trust the government – relevant knowledge if the aim for governments is to increase their degree of trust - we investigated the relationship between personal characteristics, professional position, policy alienation (client meaninglessness) and trust in government. We thus took into consideration factors at the micro, meso and macro level. What the results of our analyses firstly showed is that, contrary to our expectations, personal characteristics (gender, age and education level) and professional position (organization tenure and managing responsibility) were not strongly related to professionals' trust in government. Especially the lack of relationship between organization tenure and trust is remarkable. Longer tenured public professionals are sometimes being accused of cynicism towards the government, accompanied by the suggestion that employees working in the public sector should be 'refreshed' every now and then. Our results do not support this view as we found that organization tenure does not matter for trust in government.

What *does* matter strongly for public professionals trust in government is their experienced degree of policy alienation. This study shows that education and healthcare professionals, both with and without managing responsibilities, that experience policies as meaningless for their own clients have lower trust in the government. This finding is in line with earlier studies on the detrimental effects of policy alienation, namely that it makes professionals less willing to implement (new) policies (Tummers, 2011; Tummers, Steijn & Bekkers, 2012). What the negative relation between policy alienation and trust in government found suggests is that professionals' find it very important that governments formulate policies that enable them to better help their clients. If governments fail to achieve this, this affects the trust professionals have in the government. Professionals focus strongly on whether policies enable them to help their clients better, allowing them to go 'above and beyond'

to help others (DiLulio, 1994). It is important that governments clearly show why new policies are necessary and what the consequences for clients (citizens) are.

Like all studies, this study has its limitations. Two important limitations are discussed below, followed by suggestions how future research could address these limitations.

A first limitation is that we tested the relationship between policy alienation (client meaninglessness) and trust in government only in one country. Although the study's generalizability was improved by the fact that our findings were robust in the education and healthcare sector, one should be cautious in generalizing the findings to other domains. A logical direction for further research would be to test this model using a comparative approach, examining different sectors within different countries. It would be very interesting to analyze the model in countries where the (trust) relationship between the government and professionals working in a specific public sector is known to be different than in the Netherlands. For instance, with respect to the education sector, OECD comparative research shows that the Finnish system is based on trust rather than control. Do Finnish professionals working in education have more trust in their government *and* experience lower policy alienation?

A second limitation of this study lies in it cross-sectional nature. Despite the fact that this study established the relevance of investigating the relationship between policy content and the degree of trust in government of implementing professionals, correlational analyses were used to analyze the relationship between policy alienation and trust. Cross-sectional designs cannot establish causality or identify long term effects. In this study we argued that professionals that perceive policies as meaningless for their own clients have lower trust in the government. However, it could be that *because* professionals have lower trust in the government - for instance because of their earlier negative experiences with government (behavior) - they are more likely to perceive policies introduced by this government as meaningless. Hence, it would be interesting to use longitudinal designs to analyze the relationship between policy alienation and trust more in-depth. This would enable us to make more definite statements about the direction of causality.

Concluding, the results of this study underscore the importance of trust between public sector actors, operating at all levels. Further investigating the trust relationship of national government and implementing public professionals, both professionals' trust in government *and* vice versa governments' officials trust in professionals, seems a promising line of research. Furthermore, our study shows that professionals' experiences of policy alienation are closely related to their trust in government. Policies that professionals do not consider as meaningful for their own clients are less likely to be successfully implemented, but also have negative consequences for these professionals' trust in the government. This is not only relevant information from a theoretical point of view, but also for governments. They should, simultaneously, invest in formulating meaningful policies that public professionals can identify with and strengthening their (trust) relationship with public professionals, which are crucial partners for successful policy implementation.

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