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Bureaucracy and Policy Alienation

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Synonyms

[Anomie](#); [Change cynicism](#); [Identification](#); [Resistance to change](#)

Definition

Policy alienation can be defined as a cognitive state of psychological disconnection from the policy program to be implemented.

Introduction

Public service workers often have problems with new policies. This ranges from teachers striking against school reforms, professors protesting against cost-cutting in higher education, and physicians feeling overwhelmed by a constant flow of policy changes, resulting in conflicts and burn-outs.

An illuminating quote – cited in a leading Dutch newspaper – comes from an insurance physician who had to implement stricter rules for work disability insurance, causing many former citizens

classified as work disabled to lose their benefits, while nothing substantially changed in the situation of these citizens:

The UWV [Dutch organization for employees' insurance] is nowadays called the Lourdes of the North: you visit the agency as work-disabled, you leave able to work... It is becoming extremely controversial. I cannot reconcile it with my conscience anymore.

When public service workers cannot identify with a policy, this can have severe consequences. It can negatively influence policy effectiveness, as public service workers do not execute the policy or even try to sabotage it. Furthermore, public service workers themselves can become dissatisfied with their work. Some public service workers even experience burn-out or quit their jobs entirely.

Although identification problems have been acknowledged by public administration scholars (see, for instance, Lipsky 1980), there was no coherent, theoretical framework for analyzing this topic. Therefore, Tummers et al. (2009) developed the “policy alienation” model, building on the concept of work alienation developed in the field of sociology. Policy alienation can be broadly defined as a general cognitive state of psychological disconnection from the policy program to be implemented. Tummers et al. (2009) developed five dimensions in the policy alienation model, which can serve as explanations for low compliance with policies. This focus on attitudes of public service workers fits within a new

direction for public administration research, where a shift is being witnessed from a focus on structures, through processes, to a focus on attitudes and behavior of public service workers (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017).

Various scholars have used this model or particular policy alienation dimensions (for instance, Loyens 2016; Thomann 2015; Van der Voet et al. 2017). In general, they showed that the policy alienation model can be useful for studying public administration topics. It has been shown that effects of high policy alienation include reduced change willingness (Tummers 2011) or commitment (Van der Voet et al. 2017) and even clear resistance and rule breaking of policies (Tonkens et al. 2013). More generally, Thomann (2015) showed that policy alienation can lead to lower policy performance. Loyens (2014, 2016) shows various effective and ineffective ways to cope with policy alienation. Next to this, Van Engen et al. (2016) studied the concept of “general” policy alienation. Instead of alienation from a specific policy, the “general” policy alienation concept can be used to study identification problems with governmental policies in general.

This essay in the *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance* has three goals. First, it aims to discuss the background and development of the policy alienation model. Second, it shows how policy alienation can be measured via surveys or interviews. Third, this essay has the goal to indicate valuable future theoretical, methodological, and empirical research directions for scholars interested in further developing this line of research. To achieve this, this essay connects the study of policy alienation with core debates and concepts in public administration, including Public Service Motivation and red tape. By pursuing these three goals, this essay aims to help practitioners who are interested in using the policy alienation model to understand and improve policy implementation in their organizations. Next to this, it aims to provide scholars with a clear overview of the policy alienation model and lacunas in the field, which they can use when designing new studies.

The Policy Alienation Model

Alienation broadly refers to a sense of social estrangement, an absence of social support or meaningful social connection. Its use in scientific literature can be traced directly to Hegel and Marx, who both saw capitalism as the main cause of alienation. Karl Marx concentrated on objective work alienation: workers are alienated when they do not own the means of production or the resulting product.

Sociologists, public administration scholars, and other social scientists have since used the alienation concept in various studies, thereby building upon Marx. However, these scholars differ in one important aspect from Marx. While Marx looked at objective work alienation, contemporary scholars examine *subjective* work alienation: alienation as *perceived* by the worker. Scholars have used the subjective alienation term in various analyses, and a number of meanings have been attributed to the term. In an attempt to provide clarity, Seeman (1959) – in a landmark article – broke these meanings down into five alienation dimensions: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement.

In line with Seeman, policy alienation can also be considered as multidimensional, consisting of powerlessness and meaninglessness dimensions. In essence, powerlessness is a person’s lack of control over events in their life. Meaninglessness, on the other hand, is the inability to comprehend the relationship of one’s contribution to a larger purpose. Public service workers can feel powerless while implementing a policy. For instance, a police officer might be required by his superiors to issue a minimal amount of tickets each day, with no room to deviate from this. Linked to this, it is also evident that public service workers can feel that implementing a policy is meaningless if, for example, it does not deliver any apparent beneficial outcomes for society, such as decreasing the number of burglaries in your neighborhood. In making the dimensions more specific to the situation under study, the policy alienation model distinguishes between strategic, tactical, and operational powerlessness and between societal and client meaninglessness. The definitions of

these dimensions – including examples – are shown in Table 1.

Next to focusing on alienation from a specific policy, public service workers can also be alienated from governmental policies in general. Public service workers are often confronted with various policies over time, intended to adapt, replace, or complement existing policies. Based hereon, public service workers will have a certain predisposition toward governmental policies in general, just like predispositions toward the public sector. To conceptualize this predisposition, Van Engen et al. (2016) introduced the term *general policy alienation*, which can be defined as a cognitive state of psychological disconnection from policy programs to be implemented in general. Hence, next to alienation from a specific policy (see Table 1), public service workers can also be alienated from policies in general (Table 2).

To illustrate the importance of general policy alienation, Van Engen et al. use an example of a month long strike of 5000 Norwegian teachers. This strike did start as a reaction to the introduction of a new controversial government proposal that orders teachers to spend 7.5 h of working time at school each day. However, the strike was about

more than that. Months before the strike started, the Norwegian teachers voted against another government proposal because they perceived it as a threat to their professional autonomy and their ability to deliver high-quality education. The President of the Union of Education of Norway therefore also stated that “This strike is about much more than the compulsory seven and a half hours teachers should spend daily at school.” This statement is in line with the conceptualization of general policy alienation as a state of mind reflecting accumulated past policy experiences.

Based hereon, Van Engen et al. show how the policy alienation framework can be used to study *general* experiences with public policies, instead of experiences with a specific policy. Do public service workers have the impression that they can, in general, influence the shaping of government policies? Furthermore, do they have the impression that government policies are, in general, meaningful and add value for society as a whole and for their own clients? This is shown in Table 2.

Bureaucracy and Policy Alienation, Table 1 Defining the five dimensions of policy alienation (Based on Tummers 2011)

Dimension	Definition	Examples of high scores
Strategic powerlessness	The lack of perceived influence by public service workers on decisions concerning the content of the policy, as is captured in rules and regulations	A public service worker feeling that the policy is drafted without the help of implementing public service workers or their associations
Tactical powerlessness	The workers' perceived lack of influence on decisions concerning the way policy is implemented within their own organization	Public service workers stating that the managers in the organization did not consult them or their colleagues when designing the implementation process for the policy
Operational powerlessness	The perceived lack of freedom in making choices concerning the sort, quantity, and quality of sanctions and rewards on offer when implementing the policy	Answering “fully agree” to a survey question on whether the public service worker felt that their autonomy during the implementation process was lower than it should be
Societal meaninglessness	The perception of public service workers concerning the lack of value of the policy to socially relevant goals	Stating in an interview that “I agree with the policy goal of enhancing transparency, but I do not see how this policy helps in achieving this goal”
Client meaninglessness	The workers' perceptions of the lack of added value for their own clients in them implementing a policy	A public service worker who argues that a particular policy seriously impinges on their clients' privacy

Bureaucracy and Policy Alienation, Table 2 Defining the five dimensions of general policy alienation (Based on Van Engen et al. 2016)

Dimension	Definition	Examples of high scores
Strategic powerlessness	The influence that public service workers usually perceive themselves as having on decisions concerning the content of government policies as captured in rules and regulations	A teacher feeling that the government drafts education policies without involving teachers
Tactical powerlessness	The influence that public service workers usually perceive themselves as having on decisions concerning the way (new) government policies are implemented within their organization	A teacher stating that the school leader does not involve teachers structurally in designing the implementation of government policies within the school
Operational powerlessness	The influence that public service workers usually perceive themselves as having during the actual implementation of government policies	A social worker answering “totally agree” to a survey question asking if autonomy during the implementation of government policies is usually lower than it should be
Societal meaningfulness	The perception of public service workers concerning the added value of contemporary policy to socially relevant goals	A physician stating in an interview that contemporary health policy is, in her opinion, not contributing to a healthier society
Client meaningfulness	The perception of public service workers concerning the added value of contemporary policy for their own clients	A police officer noting that, overall, contemporary education policy has detrimental effects on the safety in their assigned neighborhood

Measuring Policy Alienation

For both (specific) policy alienation and general policy alienation, measurement instruments have been developed. Sound measurement is crucial in each empirical study. We will first discuss measuring policy alienation via questionnaires. Hereafter, we show how policy alienation can be measured when conducting interviews.

Scales have been developed for the dimensions of both policy alienation and general policy alienation. To specify these scales to the context, “template” words are used. Templates allow researchers to adapt items to their specific situation by replacing general phrases with more specific ones: ones that fit the context of their research. For example, instead of using the terms “the policy,” “organization,” and “public service workers,” the researcher can rephrase these items to suit the specific situation, for example, replacing them with “the new financial policy Alpha,” “institution,” and “mental healthcare professionals.” As an example, one of the template items for tactical powerlessness was:

In my *organization*, *public service workers* could take part in conversations regarding the execution of the *policy*.

In an example, this becomes:

In my *institution*, *mental healthcare professionals* could take part in conversations regarding the execution of the *new financial policy* called “*Alpha*.”

Scholars and practitioners who want to use the policy alienation items in a survey should decide which template terms are appropriate. All items use a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, through disagree, neutral, and agree to strongly agree.

In Table 3, we show the items for one dimension (societal meaningfulness) for both policy alienation and general policy alienation. In this way, the reader can get an idea on how to measure policy alienation dimensions. For all scales, please see Tummers (2012) for policy alienation and Van Engen et al. (2016) for general policy alienation. For instance, in a recent study in *Public Management Review* Van der Voet et al. showed that societal and client meaningfulness were highly negatively related to commitment to change.

Bureaucracy and Policy Alienation, Table 3 Measurement of client meaninglessness for policy alienation and general policy alienation

Client meaninglessness – Policy alienation (for studying attitudes toward a specific policy)
1. With <u>government policy X</u> I can better solve the problems of my <u>clients</u> (R)
2. The <u>government policy X</u> is contributing to the welfare of my <u>clients</u> (R)
3. Because of <u>government policy X</u> , I can help <u>clients</u> more efficiently than before (R)
4. I think that <u>government policy X</u> is ultimately favorable for my <u>clients</u> (R)
Client meaninglessness – General policy alienation (for studying attitudes toward government policies in general)
1. In general, <u>government policy</u> enables me to better solve the problems of my <u>clients</u> (R)
2. In general, <u>government policy</u> contributes to the welfare of my <u>clients</u> (R)
3. In general, <u>government policy</u> enables me to help <u>clients</u> more efficiently (R)
4. Overall, I think <u>government policy</u> is ultimately favorable for my <u>clients</u> (R)

Note:

Answer categories: Likert scale (fully disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, fully agree)

Template terms are underlined, these can be adapted to fit the research context, for instance, replacing “clients” by “patients” in a healthcare setting

Next to developing specific measures for the different dimensions, Van Engen (2017) also developed a *short* measure of general policy alienation. Here, she follows the guidelines for general scale development. Multidimensional measures – like the ones developed by Tummers (2012) and Van Engen et al. (2016) – are usually seen as yielding a more nuanced understanding of the different origins or forms of a concept. However, short scales can also be valuable. The first reason for developing a short measure of policy alienation is that the current multidimensional scales (5 scales of each around 5 items) take up survey time that researchers could otherwise use to measure additional variables. Second, the length of the measure may prohibit its application to other fields of public administration where policy alienation is not the core subject matter, but could form a relevant antecedent, effect, or moderator. In sum, the advantage of a short measure is that it allows researchers to use just a few items to assess frontline workers’ overall level of general policy alienation. They do not have to include the full range of policy alienation dimensions.

Based on two studies in the education sector, Van Engen developed a short scale of general policy alienation, which is shown below and can be used in future studies. This is shown in Table 4.

Next to quantitative survey studies, qualitative studies have been conducted to study the degree of policy alienation, its antecedents, its effects,

and how to cope with policy alienation (Loyens 2014; Loyens 2016; Tummers et al. 2012; Thomann 2014). For instance, Loyens (2014) studied how public service workers cope with the tensions and frustrations that result from policy alienation. This is an interesting study, as it shows how public service workers can effectively deal with policy alienation. She uses a comparative case study design of labor inspectors and police officers in Belgium. She showed that labor inspectors and police officers use five coping styles to deal with the alienation they experience from implementing the Belgian asylum and migration policy. The first two are acquiescence (for instance, accepting that you can’t really make a difference) and emotional habituation (for instance, noting that you just have to “get tougher” to deal with difficult policies). These ways of coping are forms of “positive feedback”: they keep the often high degree of policy alienation intact. The other three are forms of “negative feedback”: they *lower* the degree of policy alienation. One example is “bonding with the victim”: public service workers bend rules and try to work together with the citizens to work out solutions.

Loyens and others measured policy alienation via interviews. When conducting interviews, a semi-structured interview protocol can be used. As with a structured interview, a set of themes is selected in advance. However, unlike a structured

Bureaucracy and Policy Alienation, Table 4 Short measure of general policy alienation (Based on Van Engen 2017)

Item template	Item applied in education setting	Item drawn from dimension
1. <i>Public service workers</i> cannot influence the development of <i>policies</i> at the national level (Minister and Ministry of <i>X</i> , National Government)	School leaders and teachers cannot influence the development of education policies at the national level (Minister and Ministry of Education, National Government)	Strategic powerlessness
2. Generally, I have freedom to decide how to use government <i>policies</i> (R)	Generally, I have freedom to decide how to use government education policies	Operational powerlessness
3. Overall, I think that government <i>policy</i> leads to <i>socially relevant goal A</i> (R)	Overall, I think that government education policy leads to higher educational quality	Societal meaninglessness (1)
4. In general, I think that government <i>policy</i> in the long term will lead to <i>socially relevant goal A</i> (R)	In general, I think that government education policy in the long term will lead to higher educational quality	Societal meaninglessness (2)
5. In general, <i>government policy</i> enables me to better solve the problems of my <i>clients</i> (R)	In general, government education policy enables me to better solve the problems of my students	Client meaninglessness

interview, a semi-structured interview is flexible, allowing new questions to be raised during the interview based on the answers from a respondent. The exact content of the interview will depend, among other things, on the research question, the policy and the sector involved, and on the individual characteristics of the interviewer and interviewee. Below I show some example questions from the semi-structured interview protocol for policy alienation, with a focus on the degree of policy alienation and its influencing factors. For the elaborate guidelines, readers can consult Tummers (2013, pp. 157–167, Table 5).

Conclusion and Future Research Suggestions

The previous two sections discussed, respectively, the background of the policy alienation model and the way it can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively. The goal of this final section is to show future theoretical, methodological, and empirical research directions for scholars interested in further developing this line of research.

A first area for future research is the relationship between policy alienation and important concepts in the field of public administration, such as *Public Service Motivation*, red tape and policy performance. For instance, Public Service

Motivation can be connected to the meaninglessness dimensions of policy alienation. PSM can be described as the motivational force that stimulates people to perform meaningful public service. It is conceivable that PSM moderates the relationship between meaninglessness and willingness to implement (see also Van der Voet et al. 2017). For example, if public service workers feel that a policy does not contribute to society (a high societal meaninglessness) while they have a high commitment to serving this public interest, they might be less willing to implement such a policy. However, if they do not have a strong commitment to serving the public interest, this relationship might not hold. Then, other factors may be more influential in explaining their willingness to implement. Combining the policy alienation and PSM concept can be a worthwhile topic for public administration scholars to address.

Next to this, researchers could further analyze the relationship between policy alienation and the policy performance. It has been shown that policy alienation has a negative influence on behavioral support for that policy. Related to this, it would be interesting to investigate the effect of policy alienation on actual policy performance (see also Thomann 2014). A multimethod approach could be fruitful here. Researchers could use interviews or survey techniques to determine the public service workers' level of policy alienation. Using

Bureaucracy and Policy Alienation, Table 5 Sample questions for studying policy alienation and its antecedents using an interview

Strategic powerlessness

Do you think you, as a group of public service workers, could influence decisions concerning the content of *policy X*, as is captured in national rules and regulations?
 What do you think are the main reasons for this?

Tactical powerlessness

Do you think you, as a group of *public service workers*, could influence decisions concerning the way *policy X* is implemented within your own organization?
 What do you think are the main reasons for this?

Operational powerlessness

Do you feel that, when implementing *policy X*, you have sufficient autonomy?
 What do you think are the main reasons for this?

Societal meaningfulness

What do you think are the goals of *policy X*?
 To what extent do you agree with these goals?
 Do you feel that *policy X* contributes to achieving these goals?
 What do you think are the main reasons for this?

Client meaningfulness

Do you feel that you can help your own *clients* better as a result of *policy X*?
 What do you think are the main reasons for this?

another source, researchers could then examine the actual policy performance of these public service workers when implementing the policy. This observed policy performance could then be related to the level of policy alienation. Alongside being of theoretical interest, this could also be very relevant for policymakers who need knowledge on the factors that affect policy performance.

The second suggestion for future research addresses methodological issues. The current literature is dominated by studies relying on cross-sectional studies and interviews. The value of these methods is that they are located in real organizational environments. However, these methods do not allow scholars to truly determine the causal direction of the relationships. Longitudinal studies and especially experiments – in the lab or in the field – can be useful here. A future study could for instance develop an experiment showing how policy alienation can be reduced via extensive communication or granting more autonomy to public service workers. More in general, future studies can conduct such studies to address the concerns about causality. Scholars can follow guidelines on the use of experiments in the public administration discipline (for instance, Jilke et al. 2016).

The final suggestion for future research is empirical. Most policy alienation studies have been focused on Western countries, including the United States, Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands. Almost no studies have been conducted in developing countries or Eastern countries. It would be valuable to study the measurement of policy alienation, its antecedents, and its effects in such different settings. Does the measurement scale hold when applying it to other countries? Are the same effects found? Are effect sizes comparable? In this way, the generalizability of the policy alienation model would be tested further. More in general, scholars can conduct replication studies (also in Western countries). Replication is one of the core tasks of science and is increasingly valued in the last years.

Concluding, it is of paramount importance to understand why public service workers are reluctant to implement new policies. Embracing and further researching the attitudes of these public service workers toward new policies should prove to be a timely and productive endeavor for both scholars and practitioners alike.

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