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Performing as a professional: shaping migrant integration policy in adverse times

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ABSTRACT

Migrant integration policies in the Netherlands have become increasingly restrictive over the past two decades. This development has been prompted chiefly by the strong politicization of the subject of integration and, as a consequence, a growing political interference with policymaking. Policy design and construction is predominantly carried out by policy officials in state bureaucracies. Some of these actors, however, have great difficulties with the restrictive turn in integration policies and the associated political discourse. Policy officials use the concept of professionalism to describe how they cope with the ambiguity between their personal convictions and the professional role they are expected to play. Thus, professionalism symbolizes cultural orientations, norms and values that are important in the bureaucratic organization. In this paper, we argue that the discourse of professionalism functions as a disciplinary logic that controls policy officials, but that simultaneously endows their work with meaning and creates a feeling of belonging.

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It was really controversial to revoke a temporary residence permit as part of the latest reform of the Civic Integration Act [in 2013]. At the Directorate, you noticed, of course, that some people were more enthusiastic than others... that some people were struggling more with some issues than others. But I think everyone knows that if you cannot separate it, then you should leave... (Senior coordinating policy official)

Over the past 35 years, national policies aiming at the ‘integration’ of migrants and their descendants in the Netherlands have changed from a more inclusive Ethnic Minorities Policy to an assimilationist type of Integration Policy (Duyvendak and Scholten 2012; Entzinger 2014). In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, the assassination of the populist politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, the murder of the provocative filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 and other incidents, integration rose high on the political agenda. As a consequence, a ‘new realist’ political discourse has become dominant in which ‘ordinary Dutch people’ are reclaiming the right to speak up and problematize the ‘leftist,’ so-called multicultural policies regarding migration, integration issues and the increasing cultural diversity that has emerged since the 1980s and 1990s (Prins 2002). After all, these were not considered to protect the interests of the white majority. Integration policies have been made more restrictive accordingly.

The actual shaping and reshaping of policies is done by civil servants working in the state bureaucracy. What is currently described as ‘integration policy’ has been coordinated at the national level in the Netherlands by one Directorate since the early 1980s. When interviewed about the question how recent political developments affect their work, policy officials working at the Directorate indicate...
they have to accept it as a distinctive part of their job. Routinely, they make a distinction between their personal convictions and their ‘duty of office,’ as described by Max Weber ([1922] 1978) in the beginning of the twentieth century. According to Weber, policy officials are expected to do their work sine ira et studio, without anger and fondness, which in practice implies they are expected to contribute to shaping policies they might not personally endorse. Individuals who are working in state bureaucracies have no option but to find a way to cope with this ambiguity.

In this paper, we analyze how policy officials deal with this tension in order to enhance the received understanding of both the organization of state bureaucracies and their relation to political developments. According to Weber ([1922] 1978, 975), ‘bureaucracy develops more perfectly, the more it is “dehumanized.”’ In practice, however, civil servants do not work as completely objective and politically neutral automatons, but they have also emotions and ideas about what is right and wrong (Hoag and Hull 2017, 13). Heyman (1995) and Fuglerud (2004), for example, have described how bureaucratic work is internally conflictive to the extent that political goals and rules may differ from professional and personal values and ideas. These and other studies of everyday practices of state functionaries have described how individual civil servants develop systems of meaning to navigate the indeterminacy of their working context (see also, Lipsky 1980; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Hoag 2010; Gupta 2012; Hull 2012). Rather than mechanically applying rules, state officials are socialized in a specific code of conduct that is characteristic of bureaucracies.

A distinctive feature of bureaucratic organizations is the inherent tension between the autonomy of policy officials, based on their expertise and personal motivation, and the overarching hierarchy that controls the entire process of policymaking (Heyman 1995; Page and Jenkins 2005). Most research on civil servants has focused on street level bureaucrats, who interact with citizens and make decisions about individual cases that appear on their desks. Much less is known about bureaucratic procedures and processes in higher ranks of the national administration where policies are actually created (Hoag and Hull 2017, 9; for exceptions, see Page and Jenkins 2005; Rhodes, ’t Hart, and Noordegraaf 2007; Feldman 2008; Nyqvist 2011). In this paper, we therefore focus on the reflections and perceptions of civil servants, thus humanizing state bureaucracies in order to understand how state power is constituted in everyday work routines and practices.

Focusing on the question how civil servants in state bureaucracies negotiate tensions inherent to their work adds a crucial perspective on how restrictive policies are made possible and on macro political developments at large. It also deepens our understanding of how civil servants are controlled in the bureaucratic organization of a ministry. In this paper, we focus specifically on civic integration (or inburgering) as an important yet controversial aspect of Netherlands integration policies aimed at migrants and their descendants. Over the years, this policy of inburgering has been transformed from a relatively liberal approach aimed at facilitating integration into rather restrictive measures aimed at enforcing the ‘integration’ of primarily ‘non-Western’ migrants into the imagined national community (Van Houdt, Suvarierol, and Schinkel 2011).

The shift in civic integration policies has regularly conflicted with personal beliefs and expert convictions of policy officials working at the Directorate, making it difficult to give preference to the duty of office to execute political decisions above what officials themselves think is advantageous for society. When confronted with this tension, policy officials often characterize themselves as ‘professionals.’ For that reason, we analyze professionalism as an emic concept used by policy officials to describe strategies applied to cope with ambiguities in their work. As such, professionalism symbolizes cultural orientations, norms and values that are important in bureaucratic organizations. We argue that professionalism functions as a disciplinary logic that controls policy officials, but that simultaneously endows their work with meaning and creates a feeling of belonging.

Our analysis is based on 40 expert interviews with policy officials currently working at the Directorate, former employees who are retired or have changed jobs, and with people who have worked closely with officials from the Directorate. It goes without saying that their anonymity has been secured in this article and quotes are not traceable to individuals. In view of the sensitivity of the work of civil servants, it is also impossible to provide too much detail of specific cases. The interviews
were conducted between 2013 and 2015; their duration varied from 45 minutes up to 3 hours. In addition, informal conversations with important actors have been held, a content analysis of public documents has been conducted and a study of the Directorate’s internal archives has been made. These data also endorse the importance of professionalism in the Netherlands state bureaucracy.

In the next section, we offer a more detailed description of the objectives of the Directorate and a short overview of who works there and what they do. Subsequently, we provide a more detailed account of how the Netherlands integration policy has been developing and how civic integration laws have changed under the impact of growing political concern and involvement. After explaining the different ways in which policy officials respond to the tensions resulting from these developments, we analyze the meanings and effects of defining oneself as a professional.

The directorate and its civil servants

Originally, the Directorate was set up to develop policies aimed at emancipating migrant minorities in the Netherlands, especially in the fields of employment, education, housing, legal position and welfare, and to coordinate these between different administrative levels (Bruquetas-Callejo et al. 2011). In the course of the years, the Directorate developed more legislation that focused primarily on socioeconomic participation. Nowadays, the official objectives of the Directorate are formulated in rather broad terms of ‘preventing social tension’ and creating a ‘stable society’ in which ‘migrants and their children are economically self-reliant’ and in which people are able to ‘deal with diversity.’ The main focus, however, is on sociocultural integration, which is defined in terms of speaking the Dutch language, internalizing central Dutch norms and values, and by ‘active participation in society’ (Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment 2013). The Directorate is also responsible for civic integration and remigration legislation, and various ‘integration’ projects and programs that are all aimed at raising awareness about problematized cultural practices and discrimination. In this article, we focus on a range of Civic Integration Acts, mainly because over time these have been made more restrictive in response to political developments. As such, they are rather controversial.

Since its establishment in the 1980s, many different people have been employed at the Directorate. Various informants who have been working in it for a long time recalled how during the first decade a relatively large number of policy officials felt some sort of social engagement with ethnic minorities. Their expertise consisted of knowledge of and contacts with migrant communities. In the course of the 1990s, when more restrictive legislation was developed, a more generalist type of policy official was attracted, with expertise on policy development at large, which made others leave the Directorate. The trend of more ‘career officials’ in the office and a more frequent alternation of personnel was reinforced by various relocations of the Directorate during the 2000s (see note 1). It has supported the development of a ‘new realist’ political discourse, since for the more generalist servants policy work per se is more important than the subject matter. Nowadays, the Directorate is rather homogenous in terms of the background of people working there: all are university educated (mostly in the social sciences), they tend to live in the large cities in the western part of the country, they are between 30 and 60 years of age and they typically vote for political mainstream parties. Several people ‘with a migration background’ are working at the Directorate, as has always been the case, and most officials feel a certain commitment to the topic.

Civil servants have various tasks. A policy official or advisor is often responsible for one or a few subtopics, in this case specific aspects of civic integration legislation. These experts are charged with developing specific policy measures based on political priorities. In terms of practices, this entails advising the minister on policy options, which involves consultation with other actors in the field, organizing meetings, reading studies and reports and monitoring the implementation of policies. It may also include writing policy papers and other official documents. These actors are expected to have expert knowledge of a topic and of current affairs related to it. In case of civic
integration, important tasks also are tendering for the development and implementation of courses and exams, supervising the process and cooperating with non-state parties offering the programs.

Some of the officials are promoted to a senior position, thus becoming responsible for coordinating a group of officials working on the same topic. A strategic policy official approximates the domain of politics to the extent that s/he becomes responsible for the overall rationale and strategy of a policy field, reflecting on how the various topics are connected in an overarching narrative that is rather similar to the political views of a minister. Within the Directorate there are three managers responsible for a section in terms of policy and employees, and one director, who is closest to a minister. The latter has less expertise on a specific topic, but he is more concerned with the wider relationship between the policy field and politics.

When a new government takes office in the Netherlands, civil servants are generally not replaced as they normally stay in function for a long time. For that reason, too, civil servants must be able to work with governments of various political colors, but it also places them in a vintage position to monitor policy programs over longer periods of time. However, recent amendments of the Civic Integration Act making it more restrictive, were rather difficult for some officials working at the Directorate. In the next section, we elaborate on a range of trends that may be discerned in the relation between the position of officials in the bureaucratic hierarchy and their response to the so-called ‘new realist’ discourse about civic integration.

The development of civic integration laws

The Ethnic Minorities Policy in the 1980s aimed at facilitating the socioeconomic and cultural emancipation of migrants and other minorities who were thought to be at risk of deprivation (Bruquetas-Callejo et al. 2011; Entzinger 2014). They were targeted as a group, primarily on the basis of their ethnic background. When in the early 1990s it was finally acknowledged that migration had become a permanent phenomenon, the focus in policies shifted to socioeconomic participation of both new migrants and all citizens ‘with a migration background.’ Inburgering, or ‘civic integration,’ is the most salient and concrete policy measure of the integration policy domain, aiming to turn migrants not only into participating citizens, but also into ‘good’ citizens.

By stimulating migrants to learn Dutch and to acquire knowledge – practical, social, cultural and historical – of Netherlands society, the goal was to create active, self-reliable citizens who would independently participate in the labor market or the educational system (Bruquetas-Callejo et al. 2011; Van Houdt, Suvarierol, and Schinkel 2011). From 1998 onwards, ‘inburgering’ was enforced with the help of the Civic Integration Newcomer Act, the first of its kind ever. Civic integration courses became obligatory, but the result of the exam that migrants had to sit in order to demonstrate their so-called integration had no real consequences.

Since the subject of integration became highly politicized around the turn of the millennium, more and more politicians have been arguing that as a consequence of migration the Netherlands society has changed culturally. Accordingly, they have been advocating to resolve this ‘problem’ by enforcing social-cultural assimilation of ‘non-Western immigrants,’ often a proxy for Muslims, and by being tough on ‘non-adapted Dutch of migrant descent’ (Van Houdt, Suvarierol, and Schinkel 2011). This development has, in turn, become an important drive behind the introduction of increasingly restrictive measures. Crucial changes were initiated by Rita Verdonk, a member of the Liberal Party (VVD), who was Minister of Alien Affairs and Integration from 2003 through 2006. She became well-known for her stern language, tough stance and the introduction of very strict measures of assimilation.

In 2007, the Civic Integration Newcomer Act was replaced by the Civic Integration Act. In 2006, moreover, a Civic Integration Abroad Act had come into force, obliging prospective migrants to pass a pre-entry test in their country of origin before granted permission to enter the Netherlands, where they still have to pass the regular civic integration exam. In both laws, migrants themselves were made responsible for enrollment in the integration courses and registration for the exam(s),
both of which had to be paid for by migrants as well. The requirements for passing the exam were made more difficult and the sanctions upon not passing were reinforced by imposing a fine and making obtainment of a permanent residence permit dependent upon passing the exam.

A few years later, a coalition government of the Liberal Party (VVD) and the Christian Democrats (CDA) was in office, led by Prime Minister Rutte (2010–2012). This coalition was supported in parliament by the Party for Freedom (PVV), led by the populist politician Geert Wilders, who is extremely critical of ‘soft, multicultural’ integration policies and advocates consistently for harsher policies. This government, therefore, decided to reinforce requirements for passing civic integration exams even more and also strengthened sanctions again by making it possible to revoke a temporary residence permit of someone who has not passed the inburgering exam within three years upon arrival in the Netherlands (Regeerakkoord VVD-CDA 2010, 21).

**Working in politically adverse times**

Indeed, new political desires and plans introduced during the first decade of the new millennium caused discontent among a significant number of policy officials working at the Directorate. Some officials expressed their concern about the increasing responsibilization of migrants to pass the civic integration exam and to participate in the labor market, especially because politicians blame the increasing marginalization of migrants on themselves. The sanction of revoking a temporary residence permit was especially controversial. As a strategic policy official described:

> From the beginning onwards the Directorate has been very committed – some have been working here for a very long time, others have a migration background themselves. This stems from the idea that we have to work toward a better position of migrants in society. … When you read the coalition agreement [of the government led by Rutte] for the first time, you are shocked [as a civil servant], although in the end it turns out things are not so bad. But we did have to switch …

She continued to explain that it was a challenge for many policy officials when politicians began proclaiming that it was no longer important to be sensitive to the personal circumstances of people, including their ethnic background, and that it is not relevant for policymakers to consult with people for whom policies are made.

Besides the harsh sanctions and decreasing sensitivity toward vulnerable groups, policy officials explained that the post-2002 political climate had some other difficult consequences for their work. Both more engaged officials and those in favor of stricter sanctions felt, for example, uncomfortable with the assimilationist discourse and its polarizing effects. Some officials also described how they were struggling with the fact that the Civic Integration Act has been changed so often over the past decade, only because of what they identified as ‘political impatience.’ Not only did they think that successive amendments have a negative impact on the goal of facilitating the participation of migrants in Netherlands society, it also left them with the feeling as though years of hard working were not appreciated and results of measures not seriously awaited.²

These feelings of discontent, however, are not representative for all civil servants working at the Directorate as a variety of views was expressed during interviews. Some informants, often themselves with ‘a migration background,’ stressed that they were rather satisfied when the government ‘finally’ began to act more tough on integration, because they thought that policies had been far too lenient in the 1980s and 1990s. However, they took issue with the discourse in which an increasing number of politicians frames its views of migrants and their descendants. Others emphasized they attempt to make the best of it, doing what they think is good within the constraints of political circumstances. Yet another group defined itself more as technocratic, indicating that changing political views of integration did not bother them all that much, although some emphasized they still have affinity with integration as a policy domain.

At the same time, several outsiders who have collaborated closely with policy officials at the Directorate stressed the general disappointment, lack of motivation, loss of inspiration and even
resentment among its employees. ‘The only reason some of them are still there is because they have a mortgage to pay,’ a non-state actor explained. In sum, then, it may be argued that although there are multiple ways in which policy officials respond to a changing political context, discontent has been rather widespread.

In response to the new era characterized by political harshness, the management of the Directorate organized special meetings to help civil servants dealing with difficult political circumstances, to which some referred as a kind of ‘bereavement counseling.’ Indeed, many policy officials were struggling with the challenge to balance personal convictions, motivations and individual autonomy with work in a hierarchical context demanding them to elaborate political decisions with which one disagrees. In the next section, we discuss how they attempt to do so.

Navigating tensions

When asked how they deal with tensions between what politicians demand and what they themselves think needs to be done to resolve social problems, the response of most civil servants was very similar: you either accept the conditions under which you work or you go and search for another job. During interviews, most policy officials indicated that in their job you need to be able to set aside personal opinions in order to serve ministers with whom you do not always agree. But what keeps them motivated when political demands conflict with their personal and expert convictions? We found three strategies of response to tensions: staying true to personal beliefs, relying on the gatekeeper’s position and receiving returns from ‘playing the game’ properly. Naturally, these do not correspond one-on-one with individual positions, but most informants identified, to a greater or lesser extent, with one or more of these reactions. Accordingly, this section does not include detailed descriptions of how individuals cope, but rather how these more general reflections relate to a narrative of professionalism in a bureaucratic organization.

First, many officials mentioned they find an outlet in talking to colleagues about developments they find difficult to accept. Especially lunch, when a large group of employees of the Directorate sits together, is mentioned as a time-out during which the ‘mask of a policy official’ can be temporarily removed and personal opinions may be expressed. The ‘bereavement counseling’ mentioned earlier must be interpreted in a similar fashion: personal emotions are to be channeled one way or another, especially when asked to do things to which you object morally, practically or even conceptually.

Some policy officials also indicated they have enough space to try and stay true to their own beliefs during work. This strategy was mentioned especially by more senior, strategic officials. A former member of the management team of the Directorate emphasized that, although a minister cannot have civil servants who are unwilling to execute what he asks, ‘this does not mean that there is no discussion. There are very tough discussions … And I cannot imagine that your own opinion doesn’t influence your work.’ A strategic policy advisor explained that if politicians want to establish a certain frame, he is willing to deliver the necessary arguments, as long as the reasoning does not become too wild and too far off ‘reality.’ At the same time, however, he stressed the importance for a civil servant to stay true to his or her own principles and try to fit them in, if possible, in your daily work.

Rather than confirming personal influences on policymaking, these remarks may be interpreted as a justification of the work of policy officials who do not see themselves as mere cogs in a machine who docilely do what they are asked. At the same time, they express a need to feel some affinity with the policies they are requested to develop. They attempt to convince themselves that their work does not entirely contradict their views of what is good for society. After all, an important aspect of their work is to take into account the ‘general interest,’ i.e. developing policies which they think are good for society at large.

As politicians have been adding new requirements to the Civic Integration Act, for example, civil servants are responsible for realizing the necessary adjustments. Several informants explained further
restrictions in terms of providing immigrants with extra facilities supporting their participation in the education system and the labor market. Thus, policy officials attempted to reframe political decisions, attempting to stay loyal to their personal beliefs within the dominant political frame. Thus, they justified their work by pointing to the potentially positive effects of more restrictive policy measures.

This relates to the second strategy of response to our questions about tensions in the work of civil servants, which is the gatekeeper’s position. A number of policy officials, especially those working as experts on the topic of civic integration, explained how they take every opportunity to provide stability and mitigate political developments that are frequently considered as rather volatile. We distinguish three types of opportunities. The first type is related to the fact that in the Netherlands civil servants tend to stay in the same office for a long time. Some informants remarked that ‘ministers are a passing phenomenon in the life of policy officials.’ Others compared the nature of a policy field with an oil tanker, because it is rather difficult to change its direction during the relatively short period that a minister holds office. A former manager of the Directorate explained, ‘on the one hand, you are here for the minister and, on the other hand, you are here for what I call the long run … to provide continuity.’ Thus, he defined his role as countervailing volatile politics, doing work beyond the negative discourse of the day and providing stability.

The second type of opportunity associated with the gatekeeper’s position relates to the fact that political decisions are often formulated in a rather broad and abstract way, leaving policy officials with the task to translate sketchy ideas into concrete plans. A remark of a young policy official in this context is linked to the idea that good arguments always prevail. She recalled that when she started with her job she thought initially that she had to set aside her personal opinions, but soon she found out that policy officials are usually requested to think decisions through, because they are expected to have expert knowledge on certain topics, to have a sense of society’s perspective, to be sensitive to media attention for the subject, and to have contact with scholars about it. ‘Because of this we can form an opinion about a topic that someone else might not have and we say something about the desirability and feasibility of a plan.’ This actor reflected on her expert knowledge as something that offers her an advantage in relation to politicians and, by the same token, an opportunity to influence decision-making.

In addition to their expertise on content, experienced policy officials manage to find their way in policy development processes and in the bureaucracy around it. This is a type of expertise related to a specific form of policy work, which we distinguish as a third type of opportunity that is associated with the gatekeeper’s position occupied by policy officials. In general, policy officials are charged with aligning different interests and actors to arrive at a collectively shared policy outcome (Hull 2003; Maybin 2014). This is especially important for a topic such as integration, which requires sensitivity and demands consultation and coordination with other departments, cities, implementing agencies, civic organizations and other stakeholders.

In sum, then, policy officials explain that their so-called gatekeeper’s position offers them opportunities to co-shape policies and sometimes even the possibility to adjust or even mitigate political decisions in the general interest of society. At the same time, they clearly indicate that their influence on policymaking should not be overestimated since they are also expected to be loyal and execute political decisions made by democratically elected representatives. For that reason, too, their narratives may also be interpreted as justifying for themselves why they contribute to shaping policies based on assumptions and goals that are not necessarily in line with their personal views. They do maintain, however, that by cooperating with politicians they have at least some influence on policy measures and therefore, too, they stress the importance of their work.

The third strategy of response of policy officials to tensions between their personal views and volatile political developments is by making an effort to distinguish themselves through contributing critically yet constructively to policymaking. This strategy is expressed primarily by relatively early career officials who do not, or only partly, support restrictive policies. In their own words: they enjoy ‘playing the game,’ especially playing it well. Although this response may be similar to the function of gatekeeper, it is slightly different because the main incentive for this strategy is related to personal
returns, more than being concerned with developing good policies per se. One policy official clarified that normally he has no inhibitions to advise his superiors or even the minister in case he thinks political plans are not feasible, but he also emphasized that if a minister insists on implementing something that runs counter to his own views, he enjoys employing his expertise to the best of his abilities.

In that case, it pleases me to succeed in opening closed doors and to achieve something, to realign parties for my minister. Then, I can really get a good feeling from the entire process.

Only in extreme circumstances, some speak of ‘Second World War conditions,’ moral objections to political demands might incite policy officials to request for other tasks or projects from their superiors. Most informants mention this to be a very final option, and nobody admitted to have resorted to this possibility. Most civil servants explained they appreciate how and why political decisions are made and also that symbolic measures are extremely important for some politicians. Policy officials involved in the latest reforms of the Civic Integration Act, for example, pointed out that although it was legally uncertain whether residence permits could be revoked, both because of international treaties and practical difficulties, the relevance of the restricting amendment was situated in the political message it conveyed.

In this way, informants prioritized the form of their work over the content of the policies they were shaping, placing responsibility on politicians and justifying their own involvement by claiming that ‘after all, it is my job to do what politicians decide.’ Notwithstanding their moral skepticism about some political decisions and the limited possibilities they have to obstruct processes of law reform, most policy officials regard their work as ‘a game they have to play.’ Developing and shaping policies within constraints is considered stimulating because it involves resolving social problems, creating support and playing a pivotal role behind the scenes. As mentioned earlier, the process of substantiating controversial decisions also requires them to persuade other skeptical policy actors.

In this context informants use the Dutch expression ‘weten hoe de hazen lopen,’ to be translated as ‘knowing how the hares are running,’ meaning having inside knowledge of how things are run in national administrative circles, being familiar with informal bureaucratic rules, the balance of power between state ministries and having a compelling intuition for political trends, which all help to accumulate leverage. Moreover, one has to be able to think strategically, a skill which is often described as ‘political-administrative sensitivity.’

As a former member of the management team of the Directorate explains: ‘you have to position the minister, know when and how he has to respond to events, know how others will react and anticipate the effects of some studies.’ Playing this game well, informants explain, may be rewarding in several ways. Succeeding in it provides not only satisfaction since you are able to put your skills into practice, but it also brings recognition and enhances your status among colleagues and superiors. Furthermore, it may be beneficial for advancing your career and obtaining an increase in salary. An additional motivation is derived from the pressure brought along by incidents, because attention from politics and media for the topic of integration demands politics and policy officials to react promptly and accurately when something makes the headlines. This is considered a challenge that makes their job even more attractive.

The three strategies of response by policy officials to political developments discussed in this section are related to means of aligning personal values with the political climate and the policies they produce. By emphasizing how they stay true to their own beliefs, use their gatekeeper’s position or enjoy playing the game, policy officials navigate tensions related to giving substance to political demands and desires they do not necessarily support. It is a way of coming to terms with tensions between politics, the civil service and personal beliefs, and of convincing oneself that at least part of what you are doing is not contradictory to what you think is right. Bottom line, however, is that you accept the conditions of work, otherwise you should search for another job. As some informants pointed out ‘not everyone is suited to become a policy official.’ Naturally, this implies that civil servants need to have certain characteristics and skills in order to be successful. Many informants frame this feature of their work in a narrative of professionalism.
The notion of professionalism is traditionally associated with occupations that consist of highly specialized and complex, but codifiable, mental labor, such as medicine and law (Noordegraaf 2007, 765). These occupations form professional associations that regulate occupational practices by selecting members, setting educational standards, providing training and ethical guidelines, and by supervising daily conduct. Professions are granted formalized freedom to manage their group (Schinkel and Noordegraaf 2011, 69). Although part of this typology can also be applied to bureaucracy, the work of policy officials is usually contrasted with the civil service because the autonomy of policy officials is controlled through bureaucratic hierarchy. In the final section of this article, we explore the notion of professionalism in the discourse of policy officials in order to increase insights in their role in the operation of bureaucratic organizations. First, we interpret what professionalism means, after which we analyze the question how it determines the behavior of civil servants.

Performing as a professional: loyalty, craftsmanship, objectivity

The explanations of how civil servants respond to tensions in their work in the context of an adverse political climate are indeed related to important aspects of their work: personal engagement with working for the public cause (in this case migrants), expertise related to good policies and knowing how to play the game, or doing your work well. As professional civil servants, they are expected to be committed to specific subjects, such as integration, but at the same time, they should be able to detach themselves from the contents of the subject matter in order to focus exclusively on the policy process. It is your professionalism as a civil servant that unites both aspects in your work.

Three features stand out in descriptions of informants about what characterizes them as professionals: loyalty, craftsmanship and objectivity. First, loyalty means that civil servants respect the authority of their superiors, especially the minister. ‘The minister cannot have civil servants who do not execute what he or she says,’ one official explains. From the strategies discussed above, it may be derived that notwithstanding personal convictions and the occasional opportunity to advise against political plans, ‘in the end we do what a minister wants.’ Professional policy officials are working in a bureaucratic organization, which is based on principles of hierarchy that clearly define the tasks and autonomy of policy officials, implying that their work is invariably scrutinized by superiors (cf. Weber [1922] 1978). Policy officials are expected to be dedicated to their employer in the sense that they continue their work regardless of some disagreement. One also has to be trustworthy in the eyes of colleagues.

Complying with this code of conduct not only provides job security and a regular income, but it may also help to advance your career in the bureaucratic hierarchy. ‘[T]hose who as workers act like “professionals,” are self-controlled and self-motivated to perform in ways the organization defines as appropriate. In return, those who achieve the targets will be rewarded with career promotion and progress’ (Evetts 2003, 408). In this sense, professionalism may be considered a form of symbolic capital that reflects dominant values in bureaucracy (Schinkel and Noordegraaf 2011). It is an environment in which ‘professional qualities’ are valued and rewarded and therefore not everyone can advance successfully. Some informants explained, for example, that not everyone is suited to be a civil servant and that one needs to possess the so-called ‘intrinsic values’ of a professional.

Acting as a professional indeed requires having specific competencies, explained by informants in terms of craftsmanship, which we distinguish as the second meaning of professionalism. In the analysis of the various strategies of response to tensions emerging from discrepancies between politics and policy we have touched upon several competencies that policy officials are required to possess. A former director of integration policy summarizes it as follows: ‘your professionalism as a policy official entails having affinity with society, following developments in politics, society and academia, acting proactively and being able to inform the minister.’ At the same time, policy officials should also know their way around the national bureaucracy, be capable to act under pressure, to set aside personal preferences and know how to support the minister.
Informants indicated that keeping ‘your’ minister out of trouble is an important aspect of their job. The minister responsible for integration is often asked to take a stance in public debates or respond to incidents concerning, for example, discrimination, religious orthodoxy or juvenile crime. Debates and incidents are potential causes of trouble for ministers if their response comes too late or is premature, inadequate or controversial. Many informants consider their ability to support the minister in difficult times as evidence of their qualities as a civil servant, which come to light especially in what some call ‘political handwork.’ In this sense, interviewees frame their work as policy official as a craft. They indicate to obtain satisfaction from supporting ‘their’ minister, making policy happen, or executing other tasks to the best of their ability. This may be interpreted as a dedicated attitude toward work and pride in their profession (cf. Evetts 2003; Noordegraaf 2007).

Both craftsmanship and the bureaucratic code of conduct are also related to the third and final meaning of professionalism that we distinguish, which concerns impartiality. After all, for policy officials it is imperative to be as ‘neutral as possible’ by taking into account multiple points of view and different arguments. Policy officials must be able to provide the minister with ‘objective’ advice, regardless of political discourses. They do so by spelling out the pros and cons of policy alternatives, the various consequences for society, taking into account both the general interest, their own expertise (related to the gatekeeper’s position as discussed above) and political desires. As one senior policy advisor remarked, ‘the main point, of course, continues to be that you have to advise the minister … Yes, that is your professionalism …’ Interpreting professionalism as impartially advising entails that the work of policy officials is to be based on relatively objective knowledge and independent, reliable expertise.

At the same time, however, most policy officials do acknowledge that their position in the bureaucracy is highly ambiguous. One official, for example, hastened to add to his note about impartiality that one’s background, i.e. training, social network, ‘culture’ and other factors, determine how civil servants view society. Above we also quoted an official who explicitly acknowledged that his personal background and opinions always play a role. Indeed, there is no view from nowhere (Haraway in Hoag 2011, 84) and decisions based on supposedly objective knowledge and scientific insights are always also political (cf. Nyqvist 2011; Shore 2011). Some officials even explain they substantiate policy briefs selectively on research that supports the current political agenda. In the field of integration policies especially, expertise has been mostly one-sided, favoring the majority population by categorizing migrants and minorities as cultural Others (Essed and Nimako 2006; Schinkel 2007; Ghorashi 2009). As a consequence, it may be argued that it is not possible to be fully impartial.

The normative ideal of ‘impartiality’ can also be interpreted as a strategy to demarcate boundaries around a bureaucratic organization. In the context of the political debate around integration, for example, ‘impartial’ implies not acting like a member of a lobby organization for immigrants, as the Directorate has been labeled in the past. By the same token, it is not acceptable to follow the line of a specific political party. Some informants defined themselves as professionals in opposition to colleagues who were thought to be too involved with migrants and for that reason they were believed not to act as professionals. From their point of view, that is an important reason why not everyone is suited to become a professional bureaucrat.

For the civil service as a whole, a traineeship has therefore become a hard selection criterion, alongside the regulation of career planning and the standardization of job requirements (cf. Fournier 1999, 293). A general trend towards ‘professionalization’ is also emerging by stimulating the rotation and mobility of policy officials. At the same time, this explains the increasing popularity of the concept of professionalism to describe the culture of bureaucratic organizations. In the final section, we analyze the specific connotations that this trope evokes in the Directorate, its disciplinary effects and how it also creates belonging.

**Disciplining and belonging**

Policy officials use the concept of professionalism to describe their attitude towards work in a bureaucratic organization. As such, professionalism may be considered a key symbol of the civil service
By classifying themselves as a specific group following designated programs for social action, policy officials are enacting, reifying and responding to the structures at work and by doing so they re-construct themselves as a special community. Within this group variety does exist, but from diverging opinions and values a seemingly homogeneous community is created (cf. Turner 1967, 75). Thus, different aspects of the work of policy officials are collapsed and condensed in the trope of professionalism.

Professionalism provides a central orientation for civil servants at a ministry with specific guidelines for becoming a ‘good’ policy official (cf. Ortner 1974, 1340). The classification of policy officials as part of the civil service simultaneously entails a strict conception of behavior that is considered appropriate for this group. Serving the minister and offering ‘impartial’ advice is essential for policy officials, even if they themselves are not personally convinced of the use or desirability of political plans. In other words, professionalism embodies the ‘ethos of bureaucratic office’ (Weber [1922] 1978), while it constitutes and structures ‘the domain of possibility for action and subjectivity’ by delineating the ‘thinkable’ (Fournier 1999, 282). It is simply unthinkable to act contrary to orders of a minister or to give preference to specific interests above those of the minister’s or the ‘general interest,’ even though there is some space for cushioning the impact of political volatility.

Professionalism may be regarded as a road map for action in the civil service or a program for ‘orderly social action in relation to culturally defined goals’ (Ortner 1974, 1340). For that reason, too, it plays an important part in the disciplinary dimension of the bureaucratic organization. The appeal to professionalism serves to make the conduct of individual policy officials accountable ‘by delineating the “competence” of the “professional employee”, by instilling “professional like” norms and work ethics which govern not simply productive behavior but more fundamentally employees’ subjectivities’ (Fournier 1999, 293). As a consequence of these ‘technologies of the self’ (Fournier 1999, 293), ‘professional’ policy officials are self-controlled and self-motivated to perform (see also Evetts 2003). Thus, professionalism symbolically represents both the ‘obligatory’ and the ‘desirable’ (Turner 1967; Shore 2007). It aligns moral and social norms imposed by the bureaucratic structure with personal desires and feelings of doing the right thing, being of importance and personal development. The trope of professionalism facilitates the internalization of institutional norms and enables a performance on the basis of internal incentives and not just external orders. By performing as a professional, policy officials re-construct bureaucratic norms and structures that also shape their attitude and actions.

As institutional norms are aligned with personal preferences, professionalism is also a powerful representation of the identity of policy officials as employees in the civil service. Professionalism not only represents cognitive and even emotional categories that are important to them (Ortner 1974, 1340), but it also symbolizes loyalty, craftsmanship and objectivity as important aspects of their work, which all relate to their ‘professional’ honor and pride. These are powerful subjectivities that stimulate policy officials to feel committed to their job and how they manage it. Performance as a professional thus creates a sense of belonging in the bureaucracy as it pertains to emotional attachment and identity construction.

Professionalism makes the work of policy officials meaningful because it symbolizes not only that they take their work seriously but also that they play an important role in policymaking processes. Thus, it embraces the significance of their occupation as well as the various ways they relate to different types of knowledge and associated policies, and to other important actors in the wider context of the Netherlands constitutional structure.

At the same time, by classifying themselves as professionals, policy officials define their community vis-à-vis other groups, such as migrants, politicians, academics and civilians, or, as some informants would phrase it, ‘the outside world.’ By constructing boundaries around their professional community they make their work not only meaningful in relation to others, but it also designates them a place in the order of things and contributes to their sense of belonging and professional identity. Classifying themselves as part of a community of professionals for which a special work ethos is
required also provides policy officials with a justification to continue working in adverse political times.

When stating in interviews that they are acting as they are expected to do as professionals, policy officials put on a mask that disconnects them emotionally from political values, but also from concrete incidents at work to which they might have objected on personal grounds. It enables them to cope with tensions. Professionalism encapsulates, moreover, all important aspects of their work, including those that potentially conflict. It provides a sense of belonging and gives meaning to bureaucratic work to the extent that being able to cope with difficult situations is evidence of your skills as a civil servant and therefore also a source of professional honor and pride.

Conclusion

Policy officials working in state bureaucracies have not often been the subject of academic inquiry. An analysis of individuals working in the higher echelons of government institutions enhances, however, the understanding of how the public sector operates and consequently how processes of policymaking may be interpreted: as the work of individual human beings. This article elucidates the tension in bureaucratic organizations between the individual and the collective in which policy is created. The analysis of the trope of professionalism helps to understand the position of individuals in the bureaucratic context of a national ministry in which civic integration policies are designed and constructed.

Notwithstanding personal reservations, policy officials contribute to reshaping controversial civic integration laws and in so doing transform contested political values into policies which have far-reaching consequences for migrants. Although policy officials keep themselves motivated through several strategies of response to tension in their work and a range of different types of justifications for acting as a professional, the bottom line is that they have to accept the conditions that shape their work context. Paradoxically, however, the disciplinary structure of the bureaucracy also makes their work as policy official meaningful. Much like Foucault’s (1977) embodied disciplinary logic it is a mode of being that constrains, enables, and gives meaning to action all at once.

The disciplinary effects of the trope of professionalism thus also draw attention to the operation of bureaucratic organizations. These are not simply characterized by a strict hierarchical structure of command and control, but they are constituted by a complex interplay between policy officials and a minister, in which individuals may negotiate their space to maneuver and intertwine personal motivations and convictions with institutional goals. Thus, professionalism symbolizes the values that policy officials have internalized as well as the ethos of office that exists alongside their personal preferences and beliefs.

Notes

1. Since 2015, the Directorate is labelled Society and Integration. In 1980, the Directorate was established as Coordination Minorities Policy, while in 1994 it was rebranded as Coordination Integration Policy for Minorities. It used to be part of the Ministry of the Interior until 2002, when it was relocated to the Ministry of Justice. In 2007, the Directorate was moved to the Ministry of Public Housing and Spatial Planning and renamed Inburgering and Integration, but in 2011 it was moved back again to the Ministry of the Interior. The final relocation (so far) has been to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment in 2012, when it was also redubbed Integration and Society. In light of these changes initiated by successive governments, we refer to it as “the Directorate.”
2. This also relates to the widespread concern among policy officials about the decreasing budgets for integration policies, which to some extent implies that earlier efforts seem to have been for nothing. In this context, many policy officials also commented on the internal struggle with the numerous relocations of the Directorate, which is time-consuming because new networks need to be established among civil servants in order to make the new environment workable.
3. See https://www.functiegebouwrijksoverheid.nl/functiegebouw for a detailed description of tasks, results, competencies and qualities per job type; conditions for promotion, etc.
Disclosure statement

The first author is currently employed at the Ministry of Justice and Security. This article has been written in a personal capacity, however, and as such it does not necessarily represent the view of the Ministry.

References


