Playing a role - but which one? : how public service motivation and professionalism affect decision-making in dilemma situations

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Chapter 3

OVERALL EMPIRICAL RESEARCH DESIGN

In this chapter I explain the overall research setup of the empirical part of this study, which is a mixed-methods design (3.1). I also describe the case of this study – veterinary inspectors working at the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority – and answer the question why this case is interesting in the context of this research (3.2). More detailed information about the qualitative and quantitative methods involved will be provided in Chapters 4 and 6.

3.1 Research design: mixed-methods research

According to Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004, p. 17) mixed-methods research is seen "as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches and concepts into one study". In other words, different techniques build upon each other in order to expand our understanding of the topic in question. The results of the quantitative analysis, therefore, go beyond just double-checking the results of the qualitative analysis (or vice versa) or providing an additional perspective - which would have been the case in a multiple methods design.

I decided to use a mixed-methods research design since it offers the best chances to obtain useful answers to the research questions. The key concepts of this study – PSM, public interest, professionalism and conflicting values/demands – are highly intangible. This provides a challenge for an empirical approach, which however can be overcome by the use of a blend of methods. Here, I follow the approach taken earlier by, for example, Jørgensen (2007), who studied values in public organizations through a combination of systematic investigation of values mentioned in the relevant literature, identification of values embedded in formal rules, formal value statements from public organizations, a structured questionnaire, case studies observing behaviour, and interviews. In doing so I reject the critique from purists, who claim that quantitative and qualitative research paradigms cannot be mixed (cf. the incompatibility thesis (Howe, 1988)). Rather, I follow a great number of other scholars (e.g., Coppedge, 1999; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Sechrest & Sidani, 1995) and argue that in many cases mixing methods is superior because such an approach can incorporate the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms. Qualitative research is well-suited to developing complex concepts and making inferences about causations for a limited number of cases. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, are much stronger when it comes to testing generalizations and complex relationships or models (Coppedge, 1999). In this study, qualitative methods were used to investigate the meaning and behavioural consequences of the concepts of PSM and professionalism in dilemma situations, and to learn more about the causal mechanism underlying the development of PSM over time. In

a second part of this study, I used a questionnaire to test the combined effect of PSM and professionalism on public service professionals' decision-making in dilemma situations. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods means that stronger conclusions can be drawn, resulting in "more complete knowledge to inform theory and practice" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 21).

Two different setups of mixed-methods research can generally be distinguished: large-N questionnaire research followed by, for example, a small number of in-depth interviews, or small-N analysis followed by a large-N approach. The former setup makes it possible to learn more about the mechanisms that underlie the relationships between two or more concepts found in quantitative research. The second type helps to improve the generalizability (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) of small-N analyses which are intended, for example, to develop or check concepts, or discern potentially relevant causes. In this study the second type of mixed-method approach was applied: from small-N qualitative research to large-N quantitative research. I first probed the key concepts of this study, and on the basis of the qualitative data found first answers to the five secondary research questions. After that, the results of the qualitative analysis were combined with existing measurement instruments for quantitative research (e.g., the PSM measurement instrument by Kim et al. (2013)), to develop a questionnaire which enabled us to further develop answers to the secondary research questions, check for generalizability and answer the primary research question. (Table 1 in Chapter 2 summarizes which parts of the qualitative and quantitative chapters address which secondary research question). For a schematic overview of the mixed-methods research design applied in this study, see Figure 2.

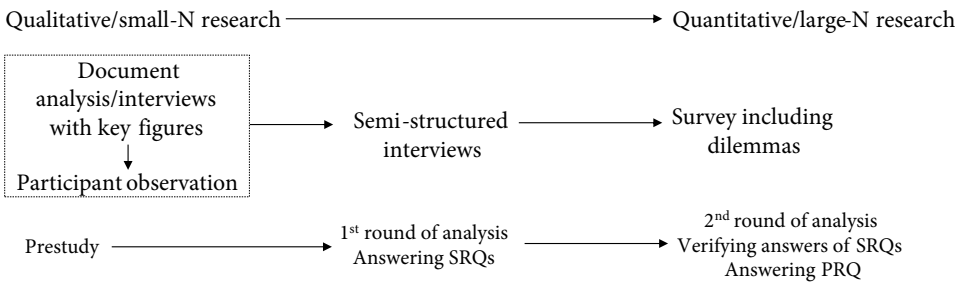
The methods used in the qualitative study were document analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with actors in the case – veterinary inspectors – and key figures: the three team leaders, one top manager, and one quality management officer. The three qualitative methods build upon each other: the document analysis helped to be better prepared for approximately ten days of participant observation, during which I – together with my colleague Daphne van Kleef – followed six veterinary inspectors. For the document analysis, we primarily focused on the policy document 'Reform of enforcement policy and modernization activities living animals and products' (VWA, 2007), the research reports of the committee Vanthemsche (2008, 2011), which led to major reforms in the organization, and texts used to advertise for future veterinary inspectors. To complete our picture of the NVWA, I used general information, such as documents on the organizational structure and mission of the NVWA and the interviews with key figures. According to Macionis and Plummer (1997), participant observation is "a data collection method by which researchers systematically observe people while joining in their routine activities"

(p. 48). The inspectors were observed at various work places in order for us to become acquainted with all facets of their work. For example, I went to small and large abattoirs, abattoirs for cattle and for chickens, turkey and pig farms, but also to cold storages in which processed food is stored that needs to be controlled by veterinary inspectors. Before the work shift, we asked the employees to 'think aloud' about what was happening and to tell us why they did as they did. During observations we took field notes describing the veterinary inspectors' actions and the explanations they gave of the reasons for and consequences of their actions. The participant observation, in combination with the document analysis, provided the context for developing interview guidelines (De Walt & De Walt, 2002). In other words, the observation period can be seen as a pre-study that helped us to formulate relevant interview topics and to become better interviewers.

The work of veterinary inspectors is very specific and complex, and was rather new to us. Seeing the inspectors' actual work places, knowing what tasks they have and what problems they encounter on a daily basis, made it easier to proceed directly to relevant interview topics. We did not need to spend any additional time collecting information about the content and contextual circumstances of veterinary inspectors' work, an essential basis for being able to ask questions about the research topics I was actually interested in and, beyond that, for a correct interpretation of the answers given. As mentioned earlier, previous empirical research on PSM and professionalism (at an individual level) has been primarily of a quantitative nature. Because it was one of the aims of this study to increase our knowledge of the meaning and consequences of these two concepts, it seems obvious that qualitative techniques should be used to complement the large body of existing questionnaire research. Detailed information on semi-structured interviews, the qualitative method primarily used in this study, is provided in Chapter 4.

In the second phase of the mixed-method study, I combined the results of our qualitative analysis with existing measurement instruments, and developed a questionnaire which we tested by conducting two pilot studies. This made it possible to include highly realistic dilemma scenarios requiring respondents to make a specific decision. The questionnaire is intended to test for the generalizability of the qualitative findings and provide an answer to the primary research question. More information on the questionnaire can be found in Chapter 6.

Figure 3 Schematic overview of mixed methods-research design



3.2 Case selection and description

As mentioned earlier, veterinary inspectors employed by the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (*Nederlandse Voedsel- en Warenautoriteit*, NVWA) provide an interesting case. In this chapter I will elaborate on this claim and provide information about the NVWA organization in general (3.3.1) and the profession of veterinary inspectors in particular (3.3.2).

3.2.1 The case: Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority

The outbreaks of animal diseases such as BSE and foot-and-mouth disease in the 1990s, bird flu in the beginning of the 20th century, the dioxin-contaminated eggs from Germany ten years later, and most recently, the scandal of undeclared horse meat in convenience products show that there is a strong need for systematic surveillance of the food chain. Another cause of continuing concern are bacteria such as *E. coli* and *Salmonella* in meat products (Sofos, 2008). The necessity to act upon these challenges is exacerbated by an increase in international trade (Staerk et al., 2006) and changing consumer expectations. A growing number of today's consumers, for example, have a strong preference for minimally processed food (Sofos, 2008).

In the Netherlands it is the task of the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (*Nederlandse Voedsel en Warenautoriteit*, NVWA), an independent agency (*agentschap*) in the Ministry of Economic Affairs and a delivery agency for the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, to prevent and act upon these crises by monitoring food and consumer products in order to protect human and animal health, and animal welfare. The authority does so by a) supervising the entire production chain, from raw materials and processing aids to end products, b) providing risk assessment, and c) communicating these among all stakeholders. Other important activities of the NVWA are providing

policy advice for the Ministry of Economic Affairs and other ministries, and maintaining international contacts, because most food safety policies are regulated at European level. One important partner, for example, is the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) which was established in 2002. The EFSA co-ordinates the activities of all European food safety authorities and advises the European Commission about issues related to risk assessment and risk communication associated with the food chain. The NVWA itself consists of seven parts: five divisions (Customer service & Contact, Veterinary & Import, Agriculture & Nature, Consumer & Safety, Criminal Investigation Department), the Risk management & research department, and the Board of Directors headed by Inspector General Harry Paul. The NVWA as we know it today has gone through a number of major reorganizations reflecting the general trend towards improved cooperation between public agencies in order to increase efficiency. In 2002, the Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (*Voedsel- en Warenautoriteit*, VWA) was set up integrating the Food and Inspection Department (*Keuringsdienst van Waren*) and the Cattle and Meat Inspection Department (*Rijksdienst voor de Keuring van Vee en Vlees*). However, it was not until 2006 that the two departments merged into one national organization. In 2009 another large merger project started under the working title 'New Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority' (*nieuwe Voedsel- en Warenautoriteit*, nVWA) affecting the General Inspection Service (*Algemene Inspectie Dienst*), the Phytopathology Service (*Plantenziektenkundige Dienst*), and the Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (VWA). In January 2012 the merger was completed and the three formerly independent organizations now operate as the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (*Nederlandse Voedsel- en Warenautoriteit*, NVWA).

However, it is not only the formal structure of the NVWA that has changed over the last decade; their surveillance philosophy changed as well. According to Mertens (2011), the NVWA has developed from a surveillance agency providing direct and constant surveillance to a meta-surveillant using self-regulation and responsibility shared with the private sectors as basis. In this context, the NVWA introduced reduced surveillance (*inspectievakantie*) for organizations that can provide proof of solid self-regulation, and concluded 17 covenants in 2012 (Yearbook NVWA, 2012). The final responsibility, however, remains with the Minister of Economic Affairs.

3.2.2 The profession: veterinary inspectors

This study focusses on veterinary inspectors work at three subdivisions of the Veterinary & Import division (Livestock, Abattoirs, and Import), since they constitute a test case *par excellence* for this research. Veterinary inspectors are in permanent contact with living

and dying animals. They are involved in face-to-face interactions with different types of inspectees (large abattoirs, small family farms, truck drivers, etc.) who have strong economic interests. It is their primary task to enforce European law (e.g., Regulation EC 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport), national law, and rules set by the organization directed at safeguarding public and animal health and animal welfare. Because these different aspects of the work of veterinary inspectors are not always compatible, the inspectors are frequently confronted with situations characterized by dilemmas. These dilemmas are exacerbated by the ambiguity inherent in their work. NVWA guidelines encourage employees to 'inspect with mind and heart' and to enforce 'softly where possible and strictly where necessary', which already indicates the complexity of their work and the wide discretion they have (Yearbook NVWA, 2012). Beyond that, especially if scandals occur, many different parties such as the (Dutch) animal protection society, (Dutch) consumer protection agency, political parties, as well as various trade unions of cattle farmers also pipe up. This results in a close scrutiny of the work of veterinary inspectors (Mertens, 2011).

Veterinary inspectors are organized in teams consisting of 20 members on average. These teams include one or two senior veterinary inspectors and a team leader. The Livestock subdivision consists of about six teams; Abattoirs has about ten, and Import about four. The configurations of the teams undergo frequent changes. Therefore, the exact numbers of teams in the subdivisions cannot be given.

Next to regular veterinary inspectors, the NVWA also employs so-called *practitioners*. Practitioners have job responsibilities comparable to those of the regular veterinary inspectors. What makes this group of employees different is their type of employment contract. Most practitioners have two different sources of income: they are on call for the NVWA, and next also hold positions as independent veterinarians in private practices or in other jobs. In this book the term 'veterinary inspector' refers to both types of employees, practitioners and permanently employed veterinary inspectors. In situations in which I explicitly want to distinguish between these profiles, I refer to practitioners and 'regular' veterinary inspectors, respectively.

Traditionally, human medicine and law are examples of occupations with a high degree of professionalism. Veterinary medicine also fits into this type, because it includes several elements which, according to Rainey (2009), occur in many definitions of professionalism. First, veterinary medicine creates and transmits practical skills and theoretical knowledge through professional training institutions which, in turn, confer authority and autonomy.

Second, the number of students who gain access to the study of veterinary medicine is strongly regulated (*numerus clausus*). Third, all veterinarians are "part of one single profession that is governed by - at least on a national level - a central professional body that sets down the codes of ethics and professional conduct to which all veterinarians are expected to adhere" (Swaabe, 1999, p. 113). And finally, there is professional peer control. Colleagues keep a close eye on each other (De Graaf, 2003).

On top of their academic education in veterinary medicine, veterinary inspectors are also educated within the NVWA. The NVWA offers different pre- and post-entry courses and options for work placement. Depending on the year they started employment, inspectors enjoyed different types of trainings: it was not until 2001 that the NVWA introduced an obligatory basic training for all newcomers. In 2008, Vanthemsche et al. published a highly critical evaluation rapport about the functioning of the NVWA. They concluded that the authority was neglecting its tasks in terms of enforcing rules and regulations consistently and strictly. As a result, the basic training was expanded by introducing an assessment centre for newcomers and intensive courses focusing on the theory and practice of rule enforcement and behavioural skills. The primary aim of these trainings is to establish a more uniform policy of rule enforcement among veterinary inspectors (Vanthemsche, 2011). In contrast, during their academic education veterinarians follow lectures on mainly animal diseases, their prevention and treatment, and natural sciences. Next to this, they also have courses on, for example, the economic aspects of farming and the social responsibility of veterinarians.

However, it is not only the education of veterinarian that is double-tracked; so is the nature of their work. The job tasks and responsibilities of veterinary inspectors working at the NVWA are quite different from those of veterinarians working in private practices. As De Graaf (2003) puts it, "veterinarians are businesspeople: they make a living out of their practice, they are in charge of several employees and they compete with each other" (p. 86). They are service-oriented, used to sort things out right away, and to consider to consider economic aspects of animal farming in their work. The work of inspectors, on the other hand, is highly regulated, because it is important that inspectors should behave consistently towards the individuals they are inspecting; that they work transparently and independently (Mertens, 2011). Rule enforcement as a means to protect the core values of the NVWA - public health, animal health, and animal welfare - and managing potential risks for society is the key task of every inspector. In relation to this, the service logic is very different for veterinarians than for veterinary inspectors. According to Patterson (1998), "as a customer one is typically in a voluntary relation. But dealings with bureaucracies are often non-voluntary". Rather than creating values for their clients (or inspectees), the inspectors' (regulators') job also entails negative and unwanted services (Alford & Speed, 2006). It is

the inspectors' task to enforce laws and regulations even though they encounter resistance. In contrast, animal owners contact veterinarians voluntarily and are often willing to pay large amounts of money for their animals' heath care. This means that inspectors often experience resistance and low appreciation, while veterinarians enjoy a high social standing and much interest in their work.

Conclusion

The fact that veterinary inspectors are trained by two different institutions – the university and the NVWA (in the form of pre- and post-entry trainings) – and the fact that many of the veterinary inspectors also have (previous) working experience in private practices support my claim that veterinary inspectors are an ideal case for this study. Veterinary inspectors are both classic professionals with strong professional norms, internalized during their long academic education, and public servants working for a large public organization and holding a function that requires them to enforce organizational objectives. This combination, and the fact that ambiguity is inherent in their work, means that veterinary inspectors are often confronted with situations in which different values and demands are in conflict and trade-offs have to be made. In particular, situations occur in which the (economic) interests of stakeholders conflict with both international law and with rules set by the organization responsible for safeguarding animal welfare and public health. It is interesting then to study where veterinary inspectors' loyalties lie in such situations. Do they, for example, stick to the organizational objective or do they comply with their professional veterinary norms? And, most important in our study, are PSM and professionalism useful concepts by which to predict what decisions they will make in complex real-life situations?