

# **COPING OF REGULATORY FRONTLINE WORKERS: THE EXPLANATORY POWER OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS**

NOORTJE DE BOER

## **ABSTRACT**

Frontline coping behavior is extensively studied but conceptual confusion remains. This article contributes to clarity by using three coping families (moving *towards* clients, moving *away from* clients and moving *against* clients) to investigate ways regulatory frontline workers cope. On top of that, studies have been successful in identifying rather than explaining coping due to the dominant focus on situational characteristics (e.g. role conflicts). This article, however, breaks new theoretical ground by exploring the role of *individual* characteristics, specifically personality traits and demographics, for explaining frontline coping behavior. Using a multi-source – and multi-method single case study, evidence for coping instances in all coping families as well as sector-specific applications were revealed. More importantly, three personality traits (urge for certainty, rule-obedience and dependability) and one demographic (individual professional background) that play an explanatory role in regulatory frontline coping behavior are presented. This study highlights the importance of future research taking an individual approach when studying frontline coping.

## **PRACTITIONERS POINTS:**

- Accounting for personality traits and demographics, practitioners can better grasp what happens at the frontlines generally but, more importantly, how individual frontline workers deal with pressures specifically.
- Including individual characteristics in management steering can minimize differences in (1) frontline coping behavior as well as (2) client perceptions of individual frontline workers during face-to-face client-worker interactions.
- Including personality traits and demographics in management strategies can enhance a cooperative relation with clients, bureaucratic reputation and accountability.

## **KEY WORDS**

Frontline workers; coping; individual characteristics; personality; demographics

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars agree, the professionals implementing public policies are important for effective policy delivery (Hill & Hupe, 2008; Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). These so-called ‘frontline workers’ deliver policies during interactions with citizens. They are, however, prone to pressures which are deeply embedded in their profession and daily tasks. Frontline workers deal with these pressures through coping which helps them to continue executing their day-to-day tasks (Lipsky, 1980).

Situational characteristics – the environmental and contextual determinants of coping - have been the dominant focus for studying coping, for example, in studies on frontline behavior (e.g. Lipsky, 1980). Situational characteristics constitute, for instance, new institutional arrangement (Majone, 1944), increasingly skeptical citizens (Ossewaarde, 2007) and limited resources (Lipsky, 1980; Noordegraaf, 2011). Moreover, the way policymakers envision rules never fully matches the context in which frontline workers operate (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). These situational pressures result in conflicting demands for frontline workers (Tummers, Bekkers, Vink & Musheno, 2015). Investigating situational characteristics is important but primarily facilitates identification rather than explanations of coping (Winter, 2002).

Therefore, Tummers et al. (2015) argue for a focus on individual characteristics of frontline workers, such as personality traits (e.g. rule-obedience) and demographics (e.g. year of experience). The little attention given to individual characteristics for understanding coping of frontline workers is surprising since other fields of study, such as psychology and business management, have long made that connection (e.g. Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Suls, David, & Harvey, 1999). There is promising evidence that individual characteristics could play a role in coping of *public* frontline workers (Bal, Lange, Jansen, & Van der Velde, 2013; Bishop, Tong, Diong, Enkelman, & Why, 2001; Gillespie, Chaboyer, & Wallis, 2009). However, results are mixed on the way and the extent to which individual characteristics play a role (O’Driscoll & Cooper, 2002). Therefore, further research is needed.

On top of that, scholars have extensively studied coping of public frontline workers like police officers, teachers and healthcare workers, but *regulatory* frontline workers remain largely unexplored (Tummers et al., 2015; Winter, 2002). This is surprising since their behavior is increasingly studied in terms of sanctioning style (e.g. Mascini & van Wijk, 2009; May & Wood, 2003) and interactions with clients (e.g. Etienne, 2015; Paultz & Wamsley,

2012). Using a multi-source and multi-method approach, this research investigates: *How do regulatory frontline workers cope with client-worker interactions during on-site visits and what is the role of individual characteristics?*

This study builds on Tummers et al.'s (2015) theoretical model of behavioral coping of frontline workers during on-site client-worker interactions. Their behavior towards clients while coping with pressures is crucial for the legitimacy of public institutions. Combining Tummers et al.'s (2015) coping model with insights regarding individual characteristics allows this study to not only to explore ways of coping of regulatory frontline workers, but also reveal which individual characteristics are of importance and in what way.

This article will first elaborate on the theoretical notions that have facilitated the conceptual model and the case study selection. Secondly, the case and methodological considerations will be presented followed by the results and discussion. Finally, concluding remarks and future research suggestions will be highlighted.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Frontline workers**

Public frontline workers are key actors in delivering policies (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Scott, 1997). Lipsky (1980) emphasizes the importance of taking a frontline worker approach to understanding the implementation of public policies since it is through the behavior and daily interactions with citizens that frontline workers make and deliver public policy. More specifically, “the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures effectively become the public policies they carry out” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 7).

It is primarily due to discretion that there is a frequent mismatch between policy intention by the administration and policy delivery by frontline workers during interactions with clients (Hupe & Hill, 2008; Lipsky, 1980). Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) argue that the rules frontline workers have to adhere to only provide constraints and not clear-cut codes of conduct. Frontline workers have to make judgments, using their discretion, when faced with citizens about the application of rules. More specifically, “discretion can be squeezed in by oversight and rules but never eliminated; it will shift and reemerge in some other form in some other place. This is a fact of life in the modern state” (Maynard-Moody &

Musheno, 2003, p. 10). Frontline workers thus have to use their discretion to develop ways to cope with the pressures in order to find ways to deliver public policies (Lipsky, 1980).

### **Defining coping**

Coping has been studied across disciplines resulting in a wide array of definitions (Antonovsky, 1979; Lazarus, 1966). Especially Lazarus (1966) has been influential across disciplines by defining coping as “the cognitive and behavioral efforts made to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them” (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, p. 223). Building on Lazarus, Lipsky (1980) introduced coping decades ago as a way for frontline workers to relieve psychological stress and make their tasks manageable. There is, however, considerable conceptual confusion (Tummers et al., 2015) and numerous typologies of ways of coping exist (e.g. Anshel, 2000; Newton, 2002).

Both Lazarus (1966) and Lipsky (1980) emphasize behavioral and cognitive dimensions of coping. This study focuses on the behavioral dimension, specifically during client-worker interactions, since the quality of service delivered by frontline workers is closely related to the manners in which they deal with pressures and interact with clients (Hill & Hupe, 2008). Behavioral coping outside of interactions with clients during on-site visits (e.g. support seeking from colleagues) as well as cognitive ways of coping (e.g. cynicism) are thus excluded (Lazarus, 1966; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Hence, coping is defined as the “behavioral efforts frontline workers employ when interacting with clients, in order to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis” (Tummers et al., 2015, p. 4).

### **Identifying coping**

Numerous typologies for coping exist (e.g. Skinner et al., 2003; Tummers et al., 2015). Lazarus (1966) initially coined two types of behaviors, namely emotion-focused and problem-focused. Emotion-focused coping behavior concerns the reduction and release of emotional stress. This coping behavior is often executed through diminishing the importance of the pressures and is aimed to limit negative responses, such as depressions (Lazarus, 1966). Individuals adhering to emotion-focused coping are often not able to adapt positively to pressures since the cause is not addressed. Problem-focused coping behavior, on the other hand, aims to address the cause of the pressures in order to reduce stress. By finding a solution to the cause, individuals adhering to problem-focused coping are often better able to adapt to pressures (Lazarus, 1966). The emotional- and problem-focused differentiation has

been criticized because the categories are vague and not mutually exclusive. Skinner et al. (2003) emphasize that the explicit focus on that typology has led to an oversimplification of coping.

Like Lazarus, Lipsky (1980) provides another classic typology but more tailored to *public* frontline workers specifically, which consists of three ways of coping. First, the modification of client demand – limiting client demand through authority symbols (such as waiting rooms which are too crowded) in order to obtain compliance and maximize the utilization of resources at hand. Second, the modification of objectives of the job – using their discretionary space in a flexible way by either decreasing their discretion (not helping clients since it is not in their job description) or increasing their discretion (helping clients while they are not required to). Finally, the modification of perception of the client – through favoring some clients over others. Vink, Tummers, Bekkers and Musheno (2015) are skeptical about this classification since the categories are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive.

The lack of mutually exclusiveness and exhaustion in both classic typologies has created conceptual vagueness regarding coping (Tummers et al., 2015). Skinner et al. (2003) set the first steps towards clarity by proposing a typology that starts with *instances* – specific coping actions aimed to deal and relieve stress from pressures. Coping instances make up *ways of coping* which are identifiable behavioral groups. These ways of coping can be clustered into *coping families* according to their aim. These, in turn, make up *adaptive processes* in which the families can be classified that influence the overall functioning of the person coping with pressures (Skinner et al., 2003).

Tummers et al. (2015) translated this typology specifically for behavioral coping of public frontline workers. Using a systematic review, three coping families are identified, namely moving *towards* clients, moving *against* clients and moving *away from* clients and nine ways of coping (see table 1). The first benefits the client, while the others benefit the frontline worker more. To illustrate, a teacher may work around the system to some extent to help children in class (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). This coping instance of ‘tweaking the rules’ fits under the way of coping of rule bending which, in turn, belongs to the coping family moving *towards* clients.

**Table 1: Coping typology (taken from Tummers et al. (2015))**

COPING FAMILY	WAYS OF COPING	DESCRIPTION
<b>Moving towards clients</b>	Rule bending	Adjusting the rules to meet a client's demand
	Rule breaking	Neglecting or deliberately obstructing the rules to meet a client's demand
	Instrumental action	Executing long-lasting solutions to overcome stressful situations and meet client's demands
	Prioritizing among clients	Giving certain clients more time, resources, or energy
	Use personal resources	Use one's own time, money, or energy to benefit the client
<b>Moving away from clients</b>	Routinizing	Dealing with citizens in a standard way, making it a matter of routine
	Rationing	Decreasing service availability, attractiveness, or expectations to clients or client groups
<b>Moving against clients</b>	Rigid rule following	Sticking to rules in an inflexible way that may go against the client's demand
	Aggression	Confronting clients in a hostile manner

### Explaining coping

Many influential scholars studying coping have looked at situational characteristics, such as new institutional and policy arrangements (e.g. Baldwin, Cave & Lodge, 2011; Majone, 1944), changing client demands (e.g. Bannink, 2013; Ossewaarde, 2007) and professional pressures (e.g. Noordegraaf, 2011). Situational characteristics are indeed important for understanding the way frontline workers behave and cope accordingly since many are universal and chronically embedded in the execution of daily tasks (Winter, 2002). More importantly, due to situational pressures frontline workers “experience conflicting demands from policy rules, their client's needs, their professional codes, and own personal values” (Tummers et al., 2015, p. 1). These role conflicts influence ways of coping (Hill & Hupe, 2008; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

First, societal developments result in new responsibilities which may trigger conflicting responsibilities for frontline workers. Due to rapidly increasing globalization and technological innovations, societal borders are diminishing and relations between societal

actors are becoming horizontal rather than vertical (Castells, 2000; Giddens, 2000). Frontline workers, therefore, deal with pressures not by holding on to rules (vertical) but use their relations (horizontal) with, for instance, clients and their colleagues (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; 2003). Moreover, new institutional arrangements and policy styles appeared in which the state is increasingly a regulator - which is accompanied with bureaucratic downsizing and privatization (Majone, 1994) – in a deregulated world (Baldwin, Cave & Lodge, 2011). Brodtkin (2011) highlights, “these approaches implicitly accept discretion as an inherent – at times even necessary – feature of implementation in a devolved and decentralized policy world” (p. 254). Frontline workers thus need autonomy and have to use their discretion to decide how to implement policies and cope with delivering them most appropriately (Brodtkin, 2011).

Second, frontline workers are responsible to an increasingly distrusting public, which is also related to technological advancements and globalization (Castells, 2000). This has important implications for their professional role during policy delivery. The reflexive citizens are more skeptical and have higher demands, are better informed, have more freedom to choose and are, in turn, activated (Bannink, 2013; Ossewaarde, 2007). Citizens are becoming legitimate actors in society (Noordegraaf, 2011). Frontline workers face role conflicts since they have to deal with client-specific situations but also implement policies (Lipsky, 1980). This change in citizenship is another pressure frontline workers must deal with.

Finally, Noordegraaf (2011) highlights “because public service organizations adopt new public management and are turned into businesslike organizations, it is argued frequently [...] that professional work is embedded within cost- and customer-oriented managerial frameworks” (p. 4). Due to the rise of new managerialism, frontline workers have to adhere to, for example, competences. Performance competences pressure frontline workers to achieve a certain production quota such as the number of publications in academia. Moreover, decisions of frontline workers are prone to time and limited information pressures during interactions with clients (Lipsky, 1980). To sum up, situational characteristics like changing organizational rules, client demands, professional responsibilities and their own personal values result in conflicting roles which influence frontline behavior and, in turn, ways of coping (Vink et al., 2015).

Regardless, a situational-approach mainly helps to identify coping and relations among them rather than provide an explanation (Winter, 2002). Clarifying coping behavior is

complicated and Lipsky (1980) also did not aim to explain but rather identify patterns across behaviors of frontline workers. Winter (2002) sets the first step to a more explanatory approach and reveals that individual attitudes such as policy preferences of frontline workers are important for understanding coping and that they hold “a more individual, value-based role in policy-making than was claimed by Lipsky” (p. 1). In this line of reasoning, Tummers et al. (2015) argue for the inclusion of individual characteristics in coping studies since they could hold explanatory power. Individual characteristics are antecedents that are specific to an individual as opposed to a group, community or organization.

Limited studies have explored this relation so far (Winter, 2002). This is surprising since there is a substantive body of scholars in other fields that have investigated that relation, such as business and psychology (e.g. Suls et al., 1996; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Regardless, Dewe, O’Driscoll and Cooper (2010) emphasize that although the role of individual characteristics has been explored in relation to individual handling of stress, explicit examination on coping strategies and mechanisms remain rare and, so far, empirical support is mixed. Therefore, this study explores the role of two individual characteristics which are understood across disciplines to be of importance to understand coping, namely personality traits and demographics (Nonis & Sager, 2003; Tummers et al., 2015; Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000)

Personality traits are often studied in psychology using the ‘Big Five’, better known as individual differences in terms of neuroticism (emotionality, insecurity, anger), agreeableness (empathy, kindness), extraversion (assertive, sociable), conscientiousness (dependability and volition) and openness (intelligence, creativity) (e.g. Kim, Shin & Umbreit, 2007). These dimensions are understood to play an indirect role “by influencing the type, frequency, and intensity of the stressors experienced or coping effectiveness” and direct role “by restricting or assisting the use of specific coping strategies” (Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000, p. 63). It is especially the latter which can be associated with behavioral coping of frontline workers. The ‘Big Five’ are broad dimensions and results vary. For instance, Vollrath and Torgersen (2000) studied the effect of a combination of the ‘Big Five’ but reveal that the effect on coping of extraversion is ambiguous.

Studies have also investigated specific personality traits. To illustrate, Srivasta and Sager (1999) use locus of control, self-efficacy and continuance commitment to study frontline worker coping. Locus of control conceptualizes frontline workers as either internals – those who believe that pressures are controllable by themselves – and externals – those who



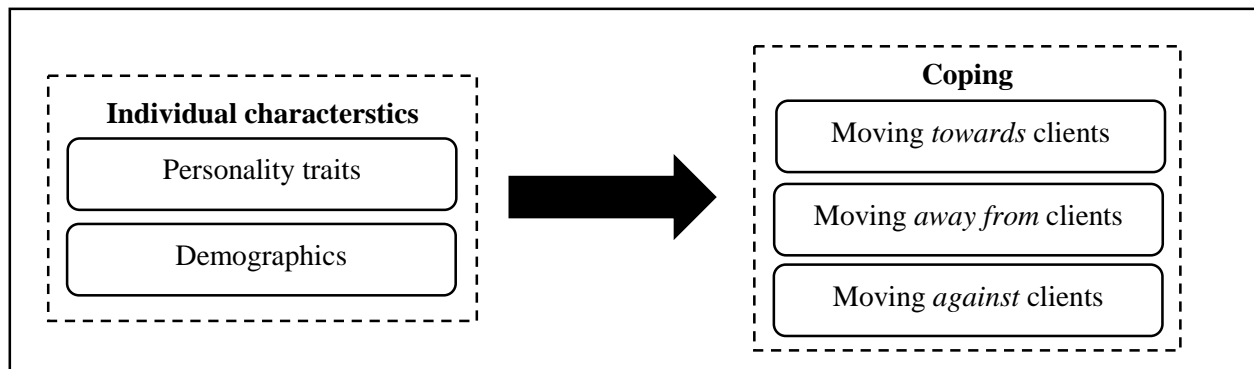
feel they cannot control pressures themselves but need situational factors, such as institutional arrangements. Self-efficacy entails a “judgement of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations” (Srivasta & Sager, 1999, p. 50).

Continuance commitment is behavior based on a cost-benefit analysis of continuing in a certain manner. Frontline workers deliberate about decision to cope with pressures because the eventual benefits are higher (e.g. keeping income by not quitting) thus have a higher continuance commitment. Srivasta and Sager (1999) show that locus of control, self-efficacy and continuance commitment play a role in coping of frontline salespeople. Regardless, such relations have also been disproven (e.g. Dewe et al., 2010).

On top of that, demographics include a wide array of quantifiable characteristics, such as gender, age, education level and country of birth (e.g. Phinney & Haas, 2003). There are substantive studies revealing that such demographic characteristics are important for coping of frontline workers. To illustrate, gender of private frontline workers influenced a preference for an emotional-approach to coping (e.g. Nonis & Sager, 2003). Phinney and Haas (2003), on the other hand, find no differences between demographics – including gender – in coping of ethnic minority students with life challenges.

Exploring personality traits and demographics for *public* frontline workers can be especially fruitful since there is promising evidence that they may help explain coping behavior. Studies have identified that some of the ‘Big Five’ personality dimensions can be linked to ways of coping of police officers (Bisschop et al. 2001; Lau et al., 2006), but in which combinations and how remains unclear. Concerning demographics, Bal et al. (2013) reveal that age influences the way a negative experience, such as stress, is experienced. Moreover, Gillespie et al. (2009) show that age does not help to understand resilience of operating room nurses, but operating room experience does.

All in all, there is a lack of coherent scientific knowledge on the relation between specific individual characteristics and frontline coping (Dewe et al., 2010). Figure 1 shows the conceptual model that guides the investigation of ways of coping of regulatory frontline workers and the role individual characteristics play. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, two individual characteristics are specified and studied, namely personality traits and demographics. This model is a simplification of reality. Notably, a relation could be added between personality and demographics (e.g. Soubelet & Salthouse, 2011). Also, the coping families may not be as mutually exclusive and may overlap (Tummers et al., 2015).

**Figure 1: Conceptual model**

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Case

The purpose of this study is to describe ways of coping and explore the role of individual characteristics. An in-depth approach single case study is appropriate since thick descriptions can be generated, which enhances rich and detailed sense making regarding the role of individual characteristics (Berg, 2001; Boeije, 2009). A representative case is selected, namely coping of regulatory frontline workers of the Inspectorate of the Ministry of Education of The Netherlands during interactions with clients on school visits. Regulatory frontline workers across sectors and nations deal with client-worker interactions during such on-site visits (Boyne, Day & Walker, 2002). This case is thus instrumental and aims to be insightful for the perceptions and experiences of frontline worker across regulation domains (Yin, 2010).

The Inspectorate supervises all pre-schools, primary, secondary and tertiary schools. According to the *Wet op het onderwijstoezicht* [Education Regulation Law] the tasks of the Inspectorate is two-folded, namely (1) regulate the quality and (2) ensure compliance with laws and regulations (Tweede Kamer, 2015). Using desk-based information the Inspectorate creates risk analyses for each school upon which the allocation resources is determined. All primary and secondary schools are visited every four years regardless of the outcome of such analyses. Regulatory frontline workers responsible for the primary education quality, mainly conduct school visits alone but sometimes work in pairs. During the visit quality protocols are used. School visits include class observations, talks with school staff (e.g. school director) and a feedback session (Onderwijs Inspectie, 2015).

## Data collection and analysis

A multi-source and multi-method triangulation was used to enhance the validity of the findings (Berg, 2001; Yin, 2010). Specifically, a triangulation of sources from three types of respondents employed at the primary education department of the Inspection were included. Both interviews and participant-observations were conducted between May and June 2015. Respondents were purposively sampled. Though this harms external validity, it ensures the selection of knowledgeable respondents and allows for a thick description which is suitable for this exploratory study (Yin, 2010). The interviewees were selected to ensure that differences in terms of gender, age, years of experience, professional background and geographical location were accounted for. The participant-observations were selected due to ranges in personality and demographics which were identified with the help of team leaders. The recruiting of interviewees ended late June since the researcher felt data saturation was reached and no new information was generated (Boeije, 2009).

In total 20 interviews were conducted with regulatory frontline workers (14), analysts (2) – who facilitate the preparation of school visits–, and managers (4). The interviews were semi-structured and guided by the conceptual model. The respondents were asked to describe themselves followed by probes (Boeije, 2009) about the role of individual characteristics in that description. The critical incident technique was used to identify coping, “which focuses on specific events or incidents and asks the individual how he or she behaved in each situation, and the results (outcomes) of their behavior” (Dewe et al., 2010, p. 110). For each incident the influence of the self-identified individual characteristics were asked. The interviews lasted 43 minutes on average, were audio-recorded and transcribed accordingly.

In addition, during two school visits, which lasted around 8 hours each, three participant-observations were conducted. The first visit was executed by two frontline workers and the second was executed by only one frontline worker. Descriptive field notes of events, including the researchers in-between interpretations in brackets, were produced close to the field in a notebook. Notes were jotted down openly since “by adopting this practice from the very first contract with those studied, the ethnographer can establish a ‘note-taker’ role and thus increase the likelihood that writing at the scene will be accepted” (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001, p. 356).

In order to establish scientific rigor, particular attention was paid to coding. Initial holistic and process coding followed a familiarization of the data through extensive reading

(Boeije, 2009). Guided by the conceptual model, a theoretical thematic analysis allowed the researcher to move beyond initial coding and make sense of themes and patterns across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A within-case comparative approach was used to provide rich descriptions and analysis of the identified patterns across the different respondents (Berg, 2001; Yin, 2010). Analytical memo writing was used to reflect on the coding process and the researcher's role (Boeije, 2009).

## RESULTS

In this section, ways of coping will be described according to their coping family. Each way of coping will be elaborated on first by highlighting if and how they are applied. This is followed by an explanation of the role of personality traits and demographics for each identified way of coping.

### **Moving towards clients**

Coping instances of rule bending, instrumental action and use of personal resources were found, while rule breaking and prioritizing among clients were not. Personality traits as well as demographics played a role in two ways of coping (see table 2).

**Table 2: Summary of results in moving towards clients**

WAY OF COPING	IDENTIFIED PERSONALITY TRAITS	EXPLANATION PERCEIVED ROLE PERSONALITY TRAIT	IDENTIFIED DEMOGRAPHICS	EXPLANATION PERCEIVED ROLE DEMOGRAPHIC
<b>Moving towards clients</b>				
Rule bending	Self-efficacy	Influences whether rules are bend or not	-	-
	Rule-obedience	Influences whether rules are bend at all or not	-	-
	Dependability	Influences the way rules are bend	-	-
Instrumental action	Urge for relational distance	Influences frontline worker attitude (formal or informal)	Nationality	Influences communication differences (direct or indirect)
	Urge for certainty	Influences whether frontline worker can trust others or not	Individual professional background	Influences the ways relations are established (empathizing with staff) and communication (direct or indirect)
Personal resources			Individual possessed knowledge	Influences the extent to which frontline workers give advice or not

### ***Rule bending, no breaking***

Rule bending refers to the *'beredeneerd afwijken'* [reasoned deviation] which is a tool regulatory frontline workers use to deflect from strict interpretations of protocols when this is deemed necessary for the context at hand. For example, during the school visit which regulatory frontline worker A<sup>1</sup> and B executed together they discussed the verdict for one indicator. They agreed, when strictly following the rules, it should be scored as weak. A consensus, however, was reached quickly to not score it weak since this meant the school would get an end verdict of weak (some indicators weigh more than others in the overall quality assessment). A and B agreed this would not do the school justice. They decided to communicate their verdict critically to ensure the school director understood that this indicator required considerable improvement.

For this type of rule bending, personality traits are important. As manager 1 described that there are differences between regulatory frontline workers whether or not they are comfortable to deviate from rules. This difference was described to be due to the personality traits self-efficacy and rule-obedience. Manager 1 explained that deviating from rules happens in exceptional situations and have to be justified. Regulatory frontline workers thus have to have substantive self-efficacy, meaning confidence in one's own skills and professionalism. On top of that, rule-obedience played a role in whether or not a regulatory frontline worker deviates at all.

“There are inspectors who find it hard to deviate from them, because they think that when they do they do not stick to the protocols. Those are inspectors that find it really important, that adhere to those rules and regulations” (Manager 1)

Lastly, reasoned deviation can be done on individual indicators but also on the overall end verdict. Deviating on indicators is not documented but merely informally agreed upon. Deviating based on the end-verdict, however, is documented in the end report. Regulatory frontline workers indicated that the personality trait dependability facilitates the understanding of whether rules are bend on the indicator-level or end verdict-level.

To illustrate, regulatory frontline worker 2 explained that she finds dependability, in the sense of being reliable and accountable, an important personality trait of herself. This

---

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, the three observed frontline workers are referred to with capital letters while the interviewed respondents are referred to with numbers.

dependability trait is why she always deviates on the end verdict and not on individual indicators. She described this a more responsible way of deviating since it is documented and therefore more reliable. It was identified by herself that there are colleagues who do not possess this dependability trait to the same extent and that may be a reason why they deviate on the indicator-level. Other interviewees confirmed the dependability for deviating on indicators. However, no clear explanation was found for personality traits influencing why frontline workers deviate on indicators.

### ***Instrumental action***

Overcoming and preventing stressful situations through long-term solutions were found but, interestingly, were relational in nature. Two relational instrumental actions were identified, namely (1) establishing relations and (2) trust. First, client demands were set out to be met better by establishing relations during visits with school staff and the board. Both relations were used to make the client feel more heard in the end verdict. The relation building starts the moment the frontline worker arrives and continues throughout the visit.

“I think that you have to work on that all day. From the moment you walk in, internally we call that *bejegening* [treatment], you try to form a bond with the person you have to deal with all day which is usually the school director. So, that you can say anything to each other and that it is clear that I just want to get to know you. I do have a judgment by the end of the day, but I also enjoy getting to know your school.” (Regulatory frontline worker 6)

Frontline workers use relations to be able to give off hints throughout the day about the verdict. In this way, resistance at the end of the day is avoided since consensus is built. To illustrate, regulatory frontline worker B shared with the school director that something did not feel right and was not in order after the first class observations. This observation was confirmed in the interviews.

“During a visit I try to take them along. If I see something which is not good or not right, then I immediately say that. Then I can also account for the way they look at it. In this way, at the end of the day the message is not new for the director.” (Regulatory frontline worker 10)

Second, trust was identified as a long-term solution to pressures and thus, instrumental action. Trust is used both short- and long-term to avoid stressful situations. The former applies to trust in school staff during visits while the latter applies to the school board, with whom frontline workers interact annually. Regulatory frontline worker C said during the visit that one requirement of the Inspection was not met in their paperwork and had to be added.

The school director immediately did and wanted to print the page as evidence, but C said that was not necessary since she trusted that he did. Trust in the school board is also used as instrumental action. Regulatory frontline worker 9 explained trusting the board entails that the points for improvement that are observed during a school visit are communicated to the school board and they are hold responsible to make sure the school tackles those.

“The members of the school board we know, we see them annually and they are responsible. If you know the school board can be trusted, that they are on top of things and have a solid grip on the quality, then you can give trust to that board” (Regulatory frontline worker 9)

The personality traits urge for relational distance and certainty and demographics namely nationality and individual professional background are important for understanding the use of instrumental action. Regulatory frontline workers identified that some need relational distance to communicate a critical verdict, while others do not. This need for distance prevails, for instance, in a formal or informal attitude. This finding was verified by analysts.

“There is mainly a difference in communication, the way someone interacts and states a certain message. For instance, someone can just be very business-like or someone is just not like that. There are differences. That is that little bit of personality.” (Analyst 2).

The result of relational distance and attitude of the regulatory frontline worker played a contextual role in the relation. Regulatory frontline worker 4 explained that as soon as you make contact with the client you know whether or not there is a connection. If there is a match in terms of attitude and relational distance than it can benefit the relation.

Finally, the personality trait of need for certainty influences the use of trust. Regulatory worker 2 and 12 explained how by stating it is hard to trust people one interacts with during school visits when one is not familiar with them. Both indicated their need for certainty as a reason why they find it hard to trust. Regulatory frontline worker 12, for instance, explained that if a school director she does now know states that they have measures in place, but she cannot find this anywhere in policy documents she does not believe that they indeed have them.

Individual professional background is also important for understanding the use of instrumental action. Regulatory frontline workers with a background in education explained they understand responses of school staff better than colleagues who have a different background, because they relate to them more. Individual professional background also

played a role in communication differences with the staff was considered crucial for establishing relations. Regulatory frontline worker 12 worked as a teacher for many years and stated:

“There are people that are very formal and to-the-point. I know that I often am way too elaborate. That I take on the role of educator too much in trying to explain how I reached a verdict”. (Regulatory frontline worker 12)

Respondents indicated that the demographic nationality also relates to such communication differences. Regulatory frontline worker 3 identified that while certain nationalities are more direct and to the point, others, like his, need more words and are more elaborative in nature.

### *Personal resources*

Regulatory frontline workers use personal resources, like giving advice, to help school staff. Regulatory frontline worker A and B explained to one member of the school management how to analyze and track individual student performances more effectively. Other frontline workers also used personal resources. Regulatory frontline worker 4 described that, after giving a school the verdict weak, he worked closely with the director afterwards to improve the quality. He visited the school multiple times.

One demographic, individual possessed knowledge played a role in the amount of investment of personal resources. Manager 4 highlighted the difference in the extent to which frontline workers give advice concerning a challenge a school faces. This difference can be explained by variations in the possessed knowledge and skills of frontline workers. He identified that some frontline workers do give advice since they possess knowledge concerning a specific topic (like teaching or management) while others do not.

In this line of reasoning, regulatory frontline worker 3 indicates he has substantive knowledge on numerical models and statistical analyses. Throughout school visits he pays particular attention to the numerical results in documents and models school staff use to track the performance of students. More importantly, this knowledge influences the extent to which he gives advice. Regulatory frontline workers thus advices using his own individual knowledge and does not to the same extent on other topics.

“I developed a whole model. I saw that this school was unable to bring the results up. So I explained to the school director that I have a certain way of working and I’ll point you to it. I pointed him to it and he asked for a copy of the model, so I left it there. Then he can apply and use it.” (Regulatory frontline worker 3)



### ***Moving away from clients***

Coping instances of routinizing but not rationing were identified. Especially personality traits but also one demographic are important for understanding how frontline workers use routinizing of work as well as dealing with emotions of school staff (see table 3).

**Table 3: Summary of results in moving away from clients**

WAY OF COPING	IDENTIFIED <i>PERSONALITY TRAITS</i>	EXPLANATION PERCEIVED ROLE <i>PERSONALITY TRAIT</i>	IDENTIFIED <i>DEMOGRAPHIC</i>	EXPLANATION PERCEIVED ROLE <i>DEMOGRAPHICS</i>
<b><i>Moving away from clients</i></b>				
Routinizing	Dependability	Influences approach (top-down or bottom-up) and communication styles (closed or open-ended questions)	Individual professional background	Influences the ways in which interaction with school staff are executed
	Urge for certainty	Influences whether approach (top-down or bottom-up) and communication styles (closed or open-ended questions)		
	Flexibility	Influences whether approach (top-down or bottom-up) and communication styles (closed or open-ended questions)		

### ***Routinizing***

Routinizing was identified as the standardization of work-related tasks during visits. Work-related tasks during visits are standardized in two different ways, namely top-down or bottom-up. As regulatory frontline worker 7 explained:

“I think there are two kinds of inspectors. Inspectors that simply look at the situation and have a more holistic approach and then reflect on their findings and construct an end verdict with the protocols in the back of their mind (*top-down*). And you have people that add up, who start

with the protocols which leads to their end verdict. They build it up from the protocols (*bottom-up*).” (Regulatory frontline worker 7)

Both demographics and personality traits provided explanatory power. The standardization of work-related tasks as either top-down or bottom-up was identified by respondents to be related to three personality traits, urge for certainty, dependability and flexibility. The frontline workers using a bottom-up approach were perceived to have a strong urge for certainty and dependability. In client-worker conversations, these frontline workers were described as going into detail content-wise and ask closed-ended questions. The top-down frontline workers, on the other hand, were perceived to not have a strong urge for consistency and certainty but, rather, for flexibility and improvisation. During interactions they are understood to ask more open-ended questions.

The demographic individual professional background was also identified as important for the standardization of work-related tasks. Manager 4 explained that regulatory frontline workers working for the Inspection have very different professional backgrounds. For instance, some have worked in education policy while others have come from more advising professions such as education consultants. There are also a substantive number of regulatory frontline workers who do not have a background in education whatsoever. Manager 4 highlighted that when a regulatory frontline worker has a consulting background he or she has substantive advice giving skills. It is therefore easier to standardize the task of advising school staff to do better on specific topics, for instance, tracking student progress.

### **Moving *against* clients**

Both coping instances for rigid rule following and aggression were identified, but only by a small portion of the respondents. Only personality traits and no demographic characteristics were perceived to be of relevance for understanding rigid rule following and aggression (see table 4).

**Table 4: Summary of results in moving *against* clients**

WAY OF COPING	IDENTIFIED <i>PERSONALITY TRAIT</i>	EXPLANATION PERCEIVED ROLE <i>PERSONALITY TRAITS</i>	IDENTIFIED <i>DEMOGRAPHIC</i>	EXPLANATION PERCEIVED ROLE <i>DEMOGRAPHICS</i>
<b>Moving <i>against</i> clients</b>				
Rigid rule following	Urge for certainty	Influences the ways rules are rigidly followed	-	-
	Rule-obedience	Influences whether or not rules are strictly followed	-	-
Aggression	Comfort level confrontations	Influences whether or not confrontations are started	-	-

***Rigid rule following***

Rigid rule following was understood to be related to following the scheduled program as well as quality protocols during on-site visits in a fixed manner. For this way of coping, students – the clients’ client – were found to be of particular importance. Rigid rule following is thus applied to benefit the students – the clients’ client – by moving against the school staff – the client. As regulatory frontline worker 8 explained:

“That is sometimes hard, because you have the tendency to say but the teacher or the school they work so hard and try their best, but yea that is not the most important. The most important is that the children profit” (Regulatory frontline worker 8).

The personality traits need for certainty and rule-obedience facilitate the explanation of this way of coping. Two regulatory frontline workers indicated that some people are more rule obedient than others. Likewise, some colleagues are perceived as more consistently strict because they assign more importance to obeying rules than others. In this line of reasoning, analyst 2 revealed that the difference in strictness and rule-obedience is closely related to the personality trait urge for certainty. This urge results in a need to obtain as much information as possible in order to have perceived control.

“Some want to know everything. They try to figure very last detail out from the documents they already have or which they find during the school visit. That is how big the differences

are. The one is more of a control freak while the others are just very relaxed. That has to do with their personalities.” (Analyst 2)

### ***Aggression for the clients’ client***

Aggression towards clients was identified as verbal rather than physical aggression. Confronting clients in a hostile manner was only mentioned by two frontline workers. It was identified as being closely related to the regulatory frontline workers perception of the way the students – the clients’ client – were treated. When frontline workers described that they saw a student mistreated in one way or the other, they would become hostile towards the school staff – the client – in their confrontation. Treating the students in a justified manner thus played a crucial role in the use of aggression.

“I saw a child and then I really got angry at the teacher and I do not get mad easily. This girl of around 8 years old could not count till 10, literally, and she was making calculation exercises of above 100. Piss off. That really makes me angry. Then my colleague, who I ran into in the hallway, said yea [name] steam was coming out of your ears, I have never seen you like that.” (Regulatory frontline worker 4)

Particularly the personality trait of comfort level concerning confrontations was perceived influential. Regulatory frontline worker 3 explained that confrontation is never his starting point, while for other colleagues it is, simply because that is not in his personality. Likewise, regulatory frontline worker 9 stated:

“Confronting has to do with personality. Do you have the guts to confront someone or not. Do you like confrontations or not. Such differences exist” (Regulatory frontline worker 9)

In sum, both the participant-observations and interviews revealed substantive coping instances for moving *towards* clients, moving *away from* clients and moving *against* clients (Tummers et al., 2015). More important, in all coping families individual characteristics were perceived to influence frontline workers’ coping with stress during client-worker interactions. Personality traits were found to be more prevalent than demographics. The personality traits dependability, rule-obedience, urge for certainty as well as the demographic individual professional background played a role in multiple coping families. The personality traits self-efficacy, urge for relational distance, flexibility and comfort level with confrontations played a role in only one coping family. Likewise, the demographics nationality and individual possessed knowledge also were only identified in one coping family (see appendix A).

## CONCLUSION

Individual characteristics are important for understanding behavioral coping of frontline workers delivering public policies. The research question – *How do regulatory frontline workers cope with client-worker interactions during school visits and what is the role of individual characteristics?* – can be answered as follows. The findings reveal that regulatory frontline coping takes place in three ways (families): moving *towards* clients, moving *away from* clients and moving *against* clients. This fits with the classifications developed by Tummers et al (2015). Individual characteristics play a role in the form of personality traits and demographics. In all three coping families personality traits have a high perceived importance. Demographic characteristics play a role in moving *towards* clients and moving *away from* clients.

Taking a closer look at how personality traits play a role in frontline coping behavior, the urge for certainty appears to be the most important trait since it influences all three families of coping. In moving *towards* clients, urge for certainty influences whether frontline workers use trust (school staff or the school board) as a long-term solution to prevent stressful situations. Frontline workers with a weaker urge are better able to trust others and use it more frequently. In moving *away from* clients urge for certainty plays a role in communication styles. Frontline workers with a stronger urge were perceived to ask more closed-ended questions aimed to achieve certainty. Finally, urge for certainty in moving *against* clients is related to whether frontline workers strictly interpreted and adhered to rules. When frontline workers need certainty, they were perceived to follow rules more rigid.

Two other important personality traits are rule-obedience and dependability. These personality traits influence two coping families. On the one hand, rule-obedience is important in moving *towards* clients and moving *against* clients. Rule-obedience plays a role in whether frontline workers cope using rule-bending and rigid rule following. Frontline workers with higher rule-obedience are perceived to bend rules less likely and follow rules more strictly. Dependability, on the other hand, is identified in moving *towards* clients and moving *away from* clients. High dependability relates to bending rules on the overall verdict as opposed to the indicator level as well as standardizing work in a bottom-up manner.

Individual professional background is identified as the key demographic. Individual professional background influences routinizing of tasks and the way instrumental action is applied. First, individual professional background influences the ways relations are

established (instrumental action). To illustrate, frontline workers with an education background were perceived to establish relations differently since they could better understand the position of the school staff. Second, individual professional background plays a role in standardizing work-related tasks (routinizing). Regulatory frontline workers with a background in consulting, for instance, standardize the tasks of stimulating school staff to perform better differently by giving advice, while colleagues with a different background may choose a different approach.

This study contributes to a better understanding of frontline coping behavior by moving beyond the growing body of scholarship investigating the relation between individual characteristics and coping of frontline workers (Bisschop et al., 2001; Gillespie et al., 2009; Lau et al., 2006; Tummers et al., 2015). Using a multi-source and multi-method triangulation, specific personality and demographic characteristics are identified. This research is thus – to the researcher’s knowledge – the first to reveal that differences in specific personality traits (urge for certainty, rule-obedience and dependability) and a demographic characteristic (individual professional background) result in varying ways of coping by public frontline workers.

## **DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This research identifies personality traits of frontline workers that could be used to advance scholarship on differences in styles during on-site visits (e.g. Mascini & Van Wijk, 2009). The findings in moving *away from* clients reveal that routinizing of work-related tasks during on-site visits can be classified as either top-down or bottom-up. Both approaches are influenced by differences in the personality traits dependability, urge for certainty and flexibility. Frontline workers with a stronger urge for certainty, for instance, standardize work during on-site visits in a bottom-up manner aimed to look for assurance. Frontline workers with a weaker urge for certainty and adhering to a top-down approach are better able to improvise during the visits. Likewise, in moving *towards* clients the results showed that the frontline workers attitude is perceived to be influenced by the trait urge for relational distance. A strong need for relational distance is perceived to be related to formal attitudes and interactions with clients, while a weak need is with informal way of interacting.

Both results can be linked to the substantive scholarship on variations in styles of regulatory frontline workers (Baldwin et al., 2012; Mascini & Van Wijk, 2009; Pautz, 2010; May & Wood, 2003). More specifically, May and Wood (2003) reveal connections between

formal or coercive enforcement styles during on-site visits of Danish frontline workers. Likewise, Mascini and Van Wijk (2009) show that Dutch regulatory frontline workers use different enforcement styles in identical on-site visits. However, neither provide a clear explanation why such differences exist. This research shows that personality traits could contribute to an explanation of style differences.

Sector-specific adaptations of Tummers et al. (2015) typology were found. Findings indicate that instrumental actions were relational in nature. This is interesting since it can be linked to scholars investigating regulatory client-worker relations. They show that frontline workers in regulatory domains behave in a way that facilitates a cooperative relationship with their clients, because this enhances the likelihood of influencing client behavior towards more compliance (e.g. Etienne, 2013; Paulz & Wamsley, 2012).

The lack of rule breaking, prioritizing among clients and rationing can also be seen as sector-specific behavioral coping. Lack of rule breaking can be explained since regulatory frontline workers are less likely to break rules due to the nature of their profession, ensuring compliance (Baldwin et al., 2012). Tummers et al.'s (2015) findings show that police officers break less rules than teachers. The absence of rationing can be linked to the lack of power regulatory frontline workers have over services unlike, for instance, social workers (Evans & Harris, 2004). The decreasing of service availability and prioritizing among clients, therefore, would not be a coping option for regulatory frontline workers during on-site visits (Baldwin et al., 2012; Boyne et al., 2002). Hence, this study shows that sector-specific applications of frontline coping are worth further investigating.

There are notable limitations to this research. Theoretically, this study did not account for potential overlap between behavioral and cognitive coping in the three coping families. A connection between the two, however, was found in the role of trust as an instrumental action. Trust is, on the one hand, a cognitive state of mind of a person who accepts a certain degree of vulnerability when trusting another person but, on the other hand, trust is based on the way the other person behaves and can be expected to behave (Paul & Wamsley, 2012). In other words, trust has a cognitive and behavioral component which was taken into account during the interpretation of the results.

Indeed, Skinner et al. (2003) dismiss such topological categories because coping is not unidimensional. The cognitive and behavioral distinction is not mutually exclusive and some coping behavior could be classified as both or neither. Tummers et al.'s (2015) classification

could thus be advanced by not solely focusing on behavioral coping since its boundaries with cognitive coping overlap (Skinner et al., 2013). Including cognitive coping aspects, such as trust, may help to further develop Tummers et al.'s (2015) coping families and better understand how they work exactly. This ultimately leads to a better understanding of frontline coping.

Methodologically, the external validity is limited, because regulatory frontline workers working at Inspectorate of the Ministry of Education of The Netherlands do not have a sole purpose of enforcing compliance. They also regulate the quality of education. Frontline workers only regulating compliance may cope differently with client-worker interactions (Paulz & Wamsley, 2012). Although the external validity is limited, this study does serve its exploratory and instrumental aim of determining how personal characteristics influence frontline coping by studying client-worker interactions during on-site visits. On-site visits are a core component across regulatory domains (Boyne et al., 2002).

Furthermore, although it was aimed to include respondents with diverse individual characteristics there is a bias towards one geographical location. Concerning the regulatory frontline workers this could have led to biased results in terms of ways of coping and the perceived role of individual characteristics. Due to the small total population of primary education regulatory frontline workers of the Inspection, this bias could not be avoided. The triangulation of sources and methods was used to minimize this bias. Likewise, this allowed for the reduction of single-source bias enhancing the overall reliability and validity of the findings (Berg, 2001; Boeije, 2009; Yin, 2010).

Future studies could further explore Tummers et al.'s (2015) classification appropriateness for establishing clarity regarding behavioral coping, especially by incorporating aspects of cognitive coping, such as trust. Likewise, cross-sector comparisons could be insightful for exploring whether coping differs across regulatory frontline workers nationally as well as internationally. Moreover, public coping scholars benefit from drawing on psychology literature regarding the 'Big Five' or other personality traits which could advance explanations for coping of public frontline workers (e.g. Vollrath & Torgersen, 2000). Studies investigating the role of the personality traits urge for certainty, rule-obedience and dependability can be particularly fruitful for understanding coping.

Notably, this study does identify the importance of the demographic individual professional background but fails to reveal the role of, for instance, age and gender. There is,



however, growing evidence that they do influence coping (Bal et al., 2012; Gillespie et al., 2009). A further exploration of the role of demographics for frontline coping behavior is needed. Quantitative studies, such as experiments, could be useful for determining causal relations. In sum, this study has started to scratch the surface of the explanatory power of individual characteristics for behavioral coping of frontline workers and shows their promising potential for future research.

---

**END NOTE**

This article serves as my thesis for the Research Master Public Administration and Organizational Science. I want to thank my supervisor, Jasper Eshuis, second reader, Lars Tummers, Marian Hulshof and Martin Uunk from the Inspectorate of the Ministry of Education of The Netherlands for their invaluable guidance and helpful feedback. Last but not least, I am grateful to all frontline workers, analysts and managers from the Inspectorate who were willing to take me along or sit down with me for insightful talks.

## REFERENCES

- Antonovsky, A. (1979). *Health, stress, and coping*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Anshel, M. H. (2000). A conceptual model and implications for coping with stressful events in police work. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 27(3), 375-400.
- Bal, P. M., Lange, A. H., Jansen, P. G., & Velde, M. E. (2013). A longitudinal study of Age-Related differences in reactions to psychological contract breach. *Applied Psychology*, 62(1), 157-181.
- Baldwin, R., Cave, M., & Lodge, M. (2011). *Understanding regulation: theory, strategy, and practice*. Oxford University Press.
- Bannink, D. (2013). Localized Crafting. Management Tools Responding to a Double Management Challenge, in: D. Bannink, H. Bosselaar & W. Trommel (eds.), *Crafting Local Welfare Landscapes*, The Hague: Eleven, 79-94.
- Berg, B. L. (2001). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon
- Bishop, G. D., Tong, E. M., Diong, S. M., Enkelmann, H. C., Why, Y. P., Khader, M., & Ang, J. C. (2001). The relationship between coping and personality among police officers in Singapore. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 35(3), 353-374
- Boeije, H. (2009). *Analysis in qualitative research*. Sage publications.
- Boyne, G., Day, P., & Walker, R. (2002). The evaluation of public service inspection: A theoretical framework. *Urban Studies*, 39(7), 1197-1212.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.
- Brodkin, E. Z. (2011). Policy work: Street-level organizations under new managerialism. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 21(suppl 2), i253-i277
- Castells, M. (2000). Toward a sociology of the network society, *Contemporary Sociology*, 29 (5), 693-699.
- Dewe, P. J., O'Driscoll, M. P., & Cooper, C. L. (2010). *Coping with work stress: A review and critique*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2001). Participant observation and fieldnotes. *Handbook of ethnography*, 352-368.

- Etienne, J. (2015). The Politics of Detection in Business Regulation. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 25(1), 257-284.
- Evans, T., & Harris, J. (2004). Street-level bureaucracy, social work and the (exaggerated) death of discretion. *British journal of social work*, 34(6), 871-895.
- Ferguson, E., & Cox, T. (1997). The functional dimensions of coping scale: Theory, reliability and validity. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 2(2), 109-129.
- Folkman, S., & Lazarus, R. S. (1980). An analysis of coping in a middle-aged community sample. *Journal of health and social behavior*, 219-239.
- Giddens, A. (2002). 'Tradition,' in: *Runaway world. How globalisation is shaping our lives*. New York: Routledge.
- Gillespie, B. M., Chaboyer, W., & Wallis, M. (2009). The influence of personal characteristics on the resilience of operating room nurses: A predictor study. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 46(7), 968-976.
- Hill, M., & Hupe, P. (2008). *Implementing public policy: An introduction to the study of operational governance*. Sage.
- Kim, H. J., Shin, K. H., & Umbreit, W. T. (2007). Hotel job burnout: The role of personality characteristics. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 26(2), 421-434.
- Lau, B., Hem, E., Berg, A. M., Ekeberg, Ø., & Torgersen, S. (2006). Personality types, coping, and stress in the Norwegian police service. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 41(5), 971-982.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1966). Psychological stress and the coping process.
- Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-Level bureaucracy, 30th Ann. Ed.: Dilemmas of the individual in Public Service*. Russell Sage Foundation.
- Majone, G. (1994). The Rise of the Regulatory State in Europe. *West European Politics*, 17, 77-101.
- Mascini, P., & Wijk, E. V. (2009). Responsive regulation at the Dutch food and consumer product safety authority: an empirical assessment of assumptions underlying the theory. *Regulation & Governance*, 3(1), 27-47.
- May, P. J., & Wood, R. S. (2003). At the regulatory front lines: Inspectors' enforcement styles and regulatory compliance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 13(2), 117-139.
- Maynard-Moody, S. & Musheno, M. (2000). State Agent or citizen agent: Two narratives of discretion. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, 10(2), 329.

- Maynard-Moody, S. W., & Musheno, M. C. (2003). *Cops, teachers, counselors: Stories from the front lines of public service*. University of Michigan Press.
- Newton, J. (2002). Views from below: academics coping with quality. *Quality in higher education*, 8(1), 39-61.
- Nonis, S. A., & Sager, J. K. (2003). Coping strategy profiles used by salespeople: Their relationships with personal characteristics and work outcomes. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 23(2), 139-150.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2011). Risky business: How professionals and professional fields (must) deal with organizational issues. *Organization Studies*, 32(10), 1349-1371.
- Onderwijs Inspectie (2015). *Hoe gaat de inspectie te werk?* Retrieved from: [www.onderwijsinspectie.nl](http://www.onderwijsinspectie.nl).
- Ossewaarde, R. (2007). The new social contract and the struggle for sovereignty in the Netherlands. *Government and Opposition*, 42 (4), 491-512.
- Pautz, M. C., & Wamsley, C. S. (2011). Pursuing trust in environmental regulatory interactions: The significance of inspectors' interactions with the regulated community. *Administration & Society*, 0095399711429108.
- Phinney, J. S., & Haas, K. (2003). The process of coping among ethnic minority first-generation college freshmen: A narrative approach. *The Journal of social psychology*, 143(6), 707-726.
- Sequet, J. B. (2010). Drawing the line: how inspectors enact deviant behaviors. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 24(6), 468-475.
- Skinner, E. A., Edge, K., Altman, J., & Sherwood, H. (2003). Searching for the structure of coping: a review and critique of category systems for classifying ways of coping. *Psychological bulletin*, 129(2), 216.
- Soubelet, A., & Salthouse, T. A. (2011). Influence of social desirability on age differences in self-reports of mood and personality. *Journal of personality*, 79(4), 741-762.
- Srivastava, R., & Sager, J. K. (1999). Influence of personal characteristics on salespeople's coping style. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 19(2), 47-57.
- Suls, J., David, J. P., & Harvey, J. H. (1996). Personality and coping: Three generations of research. *Journal of personality*, 64(4), 711-735.

- Tummers, L. G., Bekkers, V., Vink, E. & Musheno, M. (2015). Coping during public service delivery: A conceptualization and systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Public Administration and Theory*, muu056.
- Tweede Kamer. (2015, June 25). *Rol onderwijsinspectie moet beperker*. Retrieved from: [www.tweedekamer.nl](http://www.tweedekamer.nl).
- Vink, E., Tummers, L. G., Bekkers, V. J. J. M., & Musheno, M. (2015). Decision-Making at the Frontline: Exploring Coping with Moral Conflicts During Public Service Delivery. *Making public policy decisions*, 112-128.
- Vollrath, M., & Torgersen, S. (2000). Personality types and coping. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 29(2), 367-378.
- Winter, S. (2002). Explaining street-level bureaucratic behavior in social and regulatory policies. APSA, Boston, MA, August 29–September 1, 2002.
- Yin, R. K. (2010). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford Press.

## Appendix A: Summary of the results

WAY OF COPING	IDENTIFIED <i>PERSONALITY</i>	EXPLANATION PERCEIVED ROLE <i>PERSONALITY</i>	IDENTIFIED <i>DEMOGRAPHIC</i>	EXPLANATION PERCEIVED ROLE <i>DEMOGRAPHICS</i>
<b>Moving towards clients</b>				
Rule bending	Self-efficacy	Influences whether rules are bend at all or not	-	-
	Rule-obedience	Influences whether rules are bend at all or not	-	-
	Dependability	Influences the way rules are bend (indicator-level or overall verdict level)	-	-
Instrumental action	Urge for relational distance	Influences frontline worker attitude (formal or informal)	Nationality	Influences communication differences (direct or indirect)
	Urge for certainty	Influences whether frontline worker can trust others or not	Individual professional background	Influences the ways relations are established (empathizing with school staff) and communication differences (direct or indirect)
Personal resources			Individual possessed knowledge	Influences the extent to which frontline workers give advice or not
<b>Moving away from clients</b>				
Routinizing	Dependability	Influences whether approach (top-down or bottom-up) and communication styles (closed or open-ended questions)	Individual professional background	Influences the ways in which interaction with school staff are executed
	Urge for certainty	Influences whether approach (top-down or bottom-up) and communication styles (closed or open-ended questions)		
	Flexibility	Influences whether approach (top-down or bottom-up) and communication styles (closed or open-ended questions)		
<b>Moving against clients</b>				
Rigid rule following	Urge for certainty	Influences the ways rules are rigidly followed	-	-
	Rule-obedience	Influences whether or not rules are strictly followed	-	-
Aggression	Comfort level confrontations	Influences whether or not confrontations are started	-	-