Ambiguity within the field of street-level bureaucrats: a blessing and a curse? An explorative study of how street-level bureaucrats with differing role conceptions experience ambiguity and act in response to it.

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Master thesis

Ambiguity within the work of street-level bureaucrats: a blessing and a curse?

An explorative study of how street-level bureaucrats with differing role conceptions experience ambiguity and act in response to it.

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Abstract

This study explores the relationship between street-level bureaucrats' role conceptions and the ambiguity inherent to their work. Street-level bureaucrats are not neutral servants of the states, but have their own perceptions of what their work entails, *i.e.* role conceptions. As a result, they occupy their role differently even if they, technically, have the same job description. The perspective of street-level bureaucrats is adopted to explore whether they experience ambiguity differently due to difference in role conception. Additionally, it is explored how the street-level bureaucrats act in response to their experience of ambiguity. To ensure a theoretical foundation, broad expectations are formulated on the basis of existing literature. By means of a qualitative interview study, 10 street-level bureaucrats are interviewed. The street-level bureaucrats mostly experience ambiguity as expected from their role conceptions. Some experience ambiguity as undesirable and aim to minimalize it, while others experience ambiguity as desirable and want to make good use of it. Regarding the acts in response to ambiguity, it can be cautiously said that street-level bureaucrats acts in response to ambiguity in line with their role conception. Recommendations are made for future research, to eventually contribute to better coordination between organizations and street-level bureaucrats, which would ultimately also benefit citizens.

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1. Introduction

Bureaucrats are no longer solely viewed as neutral servants of the state. In 1980, Lipsky contributed to this change of perspective by analyzing the behavior of specifically street-level bureaucrats (2010). Street-level bureaucrats are the public service workers who interact directly with citizens (Lipsky, 2010, p.3). Typical examples of these bureaucrats are social workers, teachers and police officers. They implement policy at the street-level and by doing so also constitute policy. Policies guide individuals implementing them, but can never be completely applicable to every unique situation a street-level bureaucrat is faced with (Lipsky, 2010, p.xii; De Graaf, Huberts & Smulders, 2016, p.1106). Bureaucrats have to make choices within their work, as they are continuously faced with dilemmas in their day-to-day work.

In light of this change of perspective, scholars continued to look into the dilemmas street-level bureaucrats are challenged with. Recently, the value conflicts within a street-level bureaucrats' work were scrutinized. Characteristics of a street-level bureaucrats' work are values such as efficiency, fairness, responsiveness and respect (Zacka, 2017, p.21). These values, however, can pull a bureaucrat into different directions. An efficient solution for fighting crime might be to punish every criminal equally, regardless of whether it is for a minor offense or a serious crime. However, the solution of punishing every criminal equally, by for example fining every criminal the same large sum of money, would not be considered fair to the criminals who committed minor offenses. In this example the value of efficiency is conflicting with fairness, but conflict can also arise concerning a single value. For instance, to treat someone with respect can either amount to being treated in a way that is not insulting or to being treated according to fair standards (ibid., p.100). As such, street-level bureaucrats are faced with several value conflicts within their work they are expected to deal with.

Within a profession or policy domain there might be a shared understanding of these sometimes conflicting values, but the interpretation and actual action following from them remains context dependent (Paanakker & Reynaers, 2020, p.245). Street-level bureaucrats' values do not arise in isolation from personal characteristics, but are actually shaped by personal interpretative repertoires (ibid.). In other words, the interpretation of values and actual action following from them is dependent on the personal characteristics of a street-level bureaucrat. As a result, bureaucrats occupy their role differently even if they, technically, have the same job description and implement the same policies, since they deal differently with certain values. To find out in what way street-level bureaucrats occupy their role, identifying their role conceptions is beneficial. Role conceptions are the conceptions of street-level bureaucrats of what their role is about in general (Zacka, 2017, p.79). This results in a first person account of the role a street-level bureaucrat is occupying. By understanding the role conception of a street-level bureaucrat, more light can be shed on the way street-level bureaucrats deal with, sometimes conflicting, values and carry out their job.

The manner in which street-levels bureaucrats occupy their role has an impact on the day-to-day activities and thereby the handling of other dilemmas and conflicts within their work. The street-level bureaucracy literature mainly focuses on how discretion, the room for maneuver within policy implementation, is used (Lipsky, 2010; Harrits & Møller, 2014). While in fact, studies within this branch of literature also often point to the ambiguity and uncertainty within street-level bureaucrats' work (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Dubois, 2014; Raaphorst, 2018). This results in a persistent lack of understanding of different types, contributing factors, and consequences of ambiguity and uncertainty within the street-level bureaucrats' work. Recently, street-level bureaucrats' experience and response to uncertainty have been examined (Raaphorst, 2018). In an effort to complement this, this research turns

to the street-level bureaucrats' experience and response to ambiguity within their work. As personal characteristics and differing role conceptions have an impact on how street-level bureaucrats carry out their job overall, it is likely these matter in experiencing and responding to ambiguity as well.

Therefore, this research aims to explore a possible relationship between street-level bureaucrats' personal characteristics, in this case differing role conceptions, and their experience of and acts in response to ambiguity inherent to street-level work. The notion that there are differences between street-level bureaucrats' role conceptions is still fairly new and ambiguity has been researched to a lesser extent than, for example, discretion within street-level bureaucracy literature. This research serves as a step in making the connection. It seems likely that street-level bureaucrats with different role conceptions, *i.e.* which have different ideas about how their work should be done, experience ambiguity differently. From this, the following research question is formulated:

How do street-level bureaucrats with differing role conceptions experience ambiguity

and how do they act in response to this?

1.2. Academic relevance

As the street-level bureaucracy literature moves forward, embracing the agency of street-level bureaucrats is on the research agenda (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010, p.271). As agency is an element of social structures, appreciating street-level workers' own understandings of their roles is essential to understanding governing (ibid.). Previous research into street-level bureaucrats' role conceptions starts with the work of Dubois, originally published in 1999, who looked into interactions of street-level bureaucrats (2016). The roles, identities and experiences of street-level bureaucrats were examined, after which Dubois stated that impersonal bureaucrats do not exist, as they are only individual personalities who happen to play the role of the impersonal bureaucrat (ibid., p.3). In addition, March and Olsen shifted the focus of decisions to dispositions by suggesting that street-level bureaucrats' decisions are based on their interpretation of the situation and their identities (March, 1994; March & Olsen, 2004). Inspired by these authors, Zacka developed three moral dispositions that serve as archetypes explaining how street-level bureaucrats inhabit their role (2017).

This research builds on these findings by going beyond pure description and actually employing the three moral dispositions. Instead of viewing the moral dispositions as only theoretical concepts, they are used here to typify actual street-level bureaucrats and to find out whether they are useful in searching for patterns. In addition, this research explores the connection between street-level bureaucrats' role conceptions and their experience of and response to ambiguity. If it turns out street-level bureaucrats' role conceptions can indeed be connected to a particular experience of and response to ambiguity, the explanatory power of role conceptions appears to be greater than previously thought.

Before Dubois examined the street-level bureaucrats' encounters, Lipsky actually coined the term street-level bureaucracy. Several aspects described in the seminal work of Lipsky have been researched extensively, such as discretion and autonomy (Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2016; Hjörne, Juhila & Van Nijnatten, 2010; Prottas, 1978). In comparison to these concepts, the concept of ambiguity has received less attention. Within the broader scope of policy implementation literature, ambiguity is often discussed as a factor explaining the discrepancy between policy as intended and policy as implemented (Baier, March & Saetren, 1986). Likewise, ambiguity is often mentioned as a factor relating to discretion (Hill, 2006; Gofen, 2014; Zacka, 2017). Here, ambiguity is the main concept being studied, albeit without denying that is interrelated to other concepts. With this research, it is examined whether the experience of

ambiguity can be explained on the basis of role conceptions to advance the overall understanding of the underexposed concept of ambiguity within the street-level bureaucracy literature.

The aim of advancing the understanding of ambiguity goes hand in hand with the aim to also further the understanding of street-level bureaucrats' experiences. Only recently have scholars been shifting the focus of conceptualizing of 'what happens' in street-level bureaucracy to conceptualizing person-bound characteristics (Hupe & Hill, 2019, p.23). For example, Tummers and Bekkers have analyzed the experiences of psychologists, psychiatrists and psychotherapists with regards to the effects of discretion in their work (2012). Later on, Raaphorst examined the experiences of uncertainty of street-level tax officials (2018). As this research focuses on examining the experience of ambiguity of street-level bureaucrats, it falls in line with the focus on person-bound characteristics. However, this research also provides a first step in exploring the street-level bureaucrats' acts in response to ambiguity, which falls within the previous focus of 'what happens'. This is an attempt to initiate a possible conceptualization of acts in response to ambiguity, next to the attempt of explaining the experience of ambiguity by means of role conceptions.

1.3. Societal relevance

By contributing to a better understanding of practices at the street-level the findings are also of societal relevance. This research gives more insight into street-level work and is relevant for three different aspects: formulation of policy, socialization of the street-level bureaucrat and the implications for citizens.

Firstly, policy-makers in charge of formulating policies will benefit from more information regarding the actual implementation and effects of policy. This research provides more insight into the implementation of policy at the street-level and, more importantly, the ambiguity of policy. As mentioned earlier, there is considerable room for interpretation on certain aspects of policy, maybe more than sometimes desirable by policy-makers. With more information regarding the implementation of ambiguous policy by the street-level bureaucrat, a policy-maker can judge if the policy is implemented at least as much as possible as intended. If not, the formulation of the policy can be adapted as a result. In this way, uncertainty in policy implementation can be better dealt with.

Secondly, this research contributes to the understanding of the role differences of street-level bureaucrats. Obtaining more knowledge regarding the socialization of street-level bureaucrats is necessary for building a responsive and accountable public workforce (Oberfield, 2014, p.2). This research provides insight into how street-level bureaucrats with certain role conceptions experience ambiguity. If a certain type of bureaucrat apparently experiences ambiguity as undesirable, while ambiguity is very present and inherent to a certain job, there is a role for socialization. For instance, recruitment or the intraorganizational dynamic can be adapted to the type of bureaucrat an organizations wants to attract. In addition, as this research focuses on the street-level bureaucrats' perspective, more insight is gained regarding the feasibility of ambiguous policy. It could be that strict policy is more feasible for a bureaucrat with a role conception dedicated to staying as true as possible to certain rules. By aiming attention at the experience of street-level bureaucrats themselves more becomes clear regarding the considerations of street-level bureaucrats with different role conceptions while implementing policy.

Thirdly, more knowledge regarding the implementation of policy indirectly has implications for the citizens at the end of the policy cycle. If more insight into the implementation of policy and the role conceptions of street-level bureaucrats is obtained, this contributes to better coordination between

policy-makers and street-level bureaucrats and therefore hopefully leads to better implementation of policy. After all, policy is formulated in order to help citizens. New insights and thereafter better policy implementation together lead to better assistance of citizens. This way, citizens would experience a positive interaction with the government as a whole more often.

2. Theoretical Frame

This chapter will provide the theoretical grounds this research is based upon. Within the policy implementation literature, the concepts discretion, ambiguity and uncertainty are interrelated in several ways. To prevent ambivalence regarding these concepts, they need to be distinguished from each other first. In order to do so, discretion is touched upon first by discussing the value trade-offs present within the discretionary space. Thereafter, the concept of ambiguity is set apart from uncertainty. Ambiguity is then defined and split up into vague and conflicting goals. Later on, the role conceptions of the indifferent, the caregiver and the enforcer are set out. These role conceptions are used to theorize the expected ways of experiencing ambiguity. As there is no previous research regarding acts in response to ambiguity, it is not discussed within the theoretical framework. This part will become apparent from empirical research.

2.1 Discretion and uncertainty

Street-level bureaucrats often find themselves in complicated situations for which policy implementation is not straightforward. It would be impossible to formulate policy which is applicable to every unique situation that might occur (Matland, 1995, p.148; Lipsky, 2010, p.15). Since policy cannot dictate exactly what a street-level bureaucrat should act on in every situation, there remains a gap between policy as intended and the actual way policy is implemented (Hill, 2006, p.265). As a result, street-level bureaucrats are the ones ultimately constituting the policy (Lipsky, 2010, p.13; Gofen, 2014, p.473). In this sense, it is even necessary for policies to leave some room for maneuver in order to tailor to the individual case, as street-level work demands responses to the human dimension of a situation (Lipsky, 2010, p.13). This room for maneuver is called discretion (Lipsky, 2010, p.13). More specifically, discretion is defined as "the power of a public official or employee to act and make decisions based on his or her own judgment or conscience within the bounds of reason and the law" (Zacka, 2017, p.33). This does not mean, however, that a street-level bureaucrat can do as one pleases and can get away with it. The power to choose between a range of alternatives is still constrained by the law, as the exercise of power is expected to be legitimate or authorized (Zacka, 2017, p.34).

While discretion is the room for maneuver a street-level bureaucrat has, uncertainty is a condition under which decisions are made. Policies can never dictate a line of action suitable for every situation, which results in a degree of uncertainty for the street-level bureaucrat in their decision-making (Dubois, 2014, p.42). In this way, uncertainty is intertwined with discretion, as the degree of uncertainty gives way for discretion (Raaphorst, 2018, p.485). The sources of uncertainty inherent to policy implementation are diverse. For instance, uncertainty can arise from the lack of information regarding a situation the street-level bureaucrat needs to act on, making uncertainty an information problem (Raaphorst, 2018, p.487). Uncertainty can also be perceived as a problem of interpretation, as knowledge is not undisputed, but needs to be interpreted in order to apply it in practice (ibid.). In this way, uncertainty can contribute to the degree of discretion and shape the discretionary practices. While shining light on these two kinds of uncertainty, the street-level bureaucrats' experience of uncertainty was examined as well, revealing that uncertainty is experienced differently by street-level bureaucrats. Though different sources underlying these kinds of uncertainties were identified, the possible explanations are still unclear.

The decision-making of the street-level bureaucrat is based on their judgment or conscience, as the definition of discretion states. This exercise of discretion is always characterized by the limited resources a street-level bureaucrat has to deal with (Lipsky, 2010, p.29; Zacka, 2017, p.52). Within their decision-making, they have to decide where and when to allocate time, money, attention, and empathy, and

because of these limited resources conflicts arise. Values conflicting with each other, such as the conflict between following general rules and creating customized solutions for a client (De Graaf, Hubers & Smulders, 2016, p.1106). An important note is that in considering different values, these are oftentimes incommensurable (ibid., p.1105). Conflicting values cannot be measured along the same ruler, complicating the decision-making process for the street-level bureaucrat. For instance, process values, such as efficiency and effectiveness, can be in conflict with a value like fairness. However, no rationally appeal can be made that will solve a conflict between them, as neither value is superior to each other nor equal in value (ibid.). As a result, the exercise of discretion always involves the consideration of value trade-offs.

2.2 Ambiguity

"The less clear the goals and the less accurate the feedback, the more will individuals in a bureaucracy be on their own." (Lipsky, 2010, p.40)

From the early beginnings of street-level bureaucracy research, ambiguity has been a known aspect inherent to the street-level bureaucrats' work. Lipsky already touched upon the ambiguity and unclarity of goals being of fundamental importance to bureaucrats' job experience (ibid.). At the same time, it was acknowledged that goal clarification is not always desirable, as goal clarification as an ultimate end can result in disregard of the actual scope and mission of a public service (ibid., p.164). However, Lipsky never defined ambiguity. In its broadest sense, ambiguity refers to 'not clearly defined' or 'admitting of more than one interpretation' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021). Ambiguity can also be defined as 'a state of having many ways of thinking about the same circumstances or phenomena' (Zahariadis, 2003). Here, it holds that there is leeway for interpretation regarding the goal of a policy and how to achieve this goal. When viewing ambiguity in the broader field of street-level bureaucracy, ambiguity is related to the concepts of uncertainty and discretion. For instance, the aforementioned interpretation problems can arise because of conflicting or vague policies and standards street-level bureaucrats have to use (Raaphorst, 2018, p.491). Likewise, ambiguity is associated with higher levels of discretion and often seen as a source of discretion (Bastien, 2009, p.680; Zacka, 2017, p.48).

Recently, the concept of ambiguity became more nuanced. Zacka identifies two types of ambiguity within the work of a street-level bureaucrat: vague and conflicting goals (2017, p.48). Firstly, vague goals are goals that give leeway to street-level bureaucrats in giving countenance to the ends they pursue (ibid., p.50). More specifically, goal ambiguity refers to the "extent to which a goal or set of goals allows leeway for interpretation, when the organizational goal represents the desired future state of the organization" (Chun & Rainey, 2006, p.94). For example, a police officer has to make sure that citizens are abiding by the law, but the exact way of achieving this goal remains unclear. At the same time, the goals that street-level bureaucrats are to achieve are sometimes conflicting. Street-level bureaucrats find themselves at the level where conflicts need to be resolved, as they are occupying the client-facing position and they cannot shift the conflict to another level anymore. In resolving these conflicts, bureaucrats must take into account multiple competing objectives and try to balance these to come to the best decision available (Zacka, 2017, p.51). To get back to the example of police officers, they are not only expected to make sure that citizens are abiding by the law but also that they are in good contact with the community who they work with. These objectives can end up being in conflict with each other, as arresting a citizen as a result of them breaking the law will not end up in fostering the community ties.

2.3 Role conceptions and moral dispositions

Street-level bureaucrats' jobs are characterized by the contradictory expectations that shape their role (Lipsky, 2010, p.45). While Lipsky already noted that street-level bureaucrats are faced with conflicting role expectations, it was not until recently that the street-level bureaucracy literature started conceptualizing person-bound characteristics instead of solely conceptualizing 'what happens' (Hupe & Hill, 2019, p.23). In light of this development, Zacka created a framework for thinking about how street-level bureaucrats take on their role (2017). Here, role conceptions and moral dispositions will be discussed.

Depending on the combination of moral dispositions a street-level bureaucrat assumes, the bureaucrats' role conception, or the core of beliefs as to what it means to perform one's role well, is shaped (Zacka, 2017, p.90). The three moral dispositions identified are the indifferent, the enforcer and the caregiver. These are useful as interpretive devices, in order to learn more about what street-level bureaucrats base their role conception and decision-making on (Zacka, 2017, p.87). Moral dispositions are comprised of three interconnected elements: the hermeneutic grid, a mode of affective attunement and a normative sensibility (Zacka, 2017, p.85). The hermeneutic grid a street-level bureaucrat has is their way of interpreting a situation. The mode of affective attunement essentially concerns the following reaction after interpreting the situation. Then, the normative sensibility is about the way factors are 'weighed', i.e. which considerations have priority over others. Together, these elements form a disposition (ibid., p.86).

The moral dispositions of the indifferent, the enforcer and the caregiver are long lasting dispositions, which street-level bureaucrats attain over time. These are enduring professional identities, which do not differ across encounters (ibid., p.87). Other dispositions are the modes of appraisal, which are more flexible and provide information about the manner of conduct of bureaucrats in a single encounter (ibid.). When looking at the interaction between a street-level bureaucrat and a client within a single encounter, modes of appraisal would be best as an interpretive lens. However, when looking at street-level bureaucrats over the course of multiple encounters during their career, which is the case within this study, long lasting moral dispositions are most useful. By focusing on the moral dispositions a better idea is obtained of the street-level bureaucrat's role conception, surpassing single encounters.

As mentioned, it is expected that the differing role conceptions of street-level bureaucrats lead to a certain experience of ambiguity. For instance, the street-level bureaucrat with a role conception mainly corresponding to the characteristics of the indifferent is expected to experience ambiguity differently than the bureaucrat gravitating towards the archetype of the enforcer. The three moral dispositions and their expected experience of ambiguity will be discussed in a way in which the street-level bureaucrat's role conception is entirely based on one of the three moral dispositions. In reality, it is highly unlikely a bureaucrat completely exhibits characteristics of only one moral disposition. Since there are few indications about possible combinations of moral dispositions resulting in a certain role conception, the use of the archetypes is maintained here. With regards to the acts in response to ambiguity, no expectations will be set. As there is no previous work on street-level bureaucrats' acts in response to ambiguity, this part will only take shape as the research progresses.

2.3.1. The Indifferent

The archetype of the indifferent fulfills the expectation of street-level bureaucrats behaving in a person-neutral way (Zacka, 2017, p.101). In practice, this means that the bureaucrat should not let their own values, interests, commitments and relationships interfere with how they fulfill their role (ibid.). To achieve such behavior, withdrawal is the easiest way. By emotionally withdrawing, the street-level bureaucrat protects itself from emotional burnout and prevents decision fatigue from happening (ibid., p.102). An advantage to the indifferent bureaucrat is the efficiency they bring about, because of their impartiality. Gravitation towards the indifferent comes with other benefits, such as the prevention of emotional burnout, but hinders the work of the bureaucrat in other ways. As ambiguity is inherent to street-level bureaucrats' work, they are expected to apply rules to clients in a space that is left open precisely to make room for particularization and differential treatment (ibid., p.103). The capacity to remain attuned to differences among clients is difficult for the indifferent, which is a disadvantage of this role conception. Additionally, as the work demands the exercise of individual judgment, it becomes harder to behave in a completely person-neutral way. Overall, the indifferent bureaucrat focuses on people processing and displays a minimal level of involvement in their work, which comes with its own drawbacks.

An example of a bureaucrat mainly acting within the role of the indifferent is provided by Maynard-Moody and Musheno in their book 'Cops, teachers, counselors: stories from the front lines of public service' (2003). The story of an interaction between John and a counselor is set out. John is in need of attendant care, but is pushing the counselor to grant him more hours of attendant care (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, p.139). The following excerpts are from the story told by the counselor:

"John is always going to need attendant care. Period. But John pushes the wire, you know. If you give him two hours, he wants ten. So John gets what I think we can allow: twenty hours a week for attendants."

"So, John insists he has to have at least ten hours a day. Well, that is more than twenty hours a week, and the counselor says, "This is all that is allowed, period."

These excerpts embody the attitude of a street-level bureaucrat gravitating towards the role of the indifferent well. The counselor is trying to stick by the rules by not allowing John any more hours of attendant care than another client would be allowed. By ending the sentences with 'period', the counselor signals to John that there is no point in continuing to push and ask for more hours of attendant care. Clearly, the counselor tries to take care of this case as efficiently as possible. It seems that John is not going to get any preferential treatment from the counselor. At this point in time, the counselor seems to be closest to the indifferent, trying to be as minimally involved as possible.

How would a street-level bureaucrat mainly inhabiting the role of the indifferent experience ambiguity then? As discussed, ambiguity is viewed as the leeway for interpretation within a policy or standard. In a situation where there is considerable leeway for interpretation, the implementation of policy becomes less straightforward (Lipsky, 2010, p.40). In such a case, the street-level bureaucrat needs to put more time and effort into decision-making, eventually coming up with a suitable solution. The need of putting more resources to use is not desirable for the indifferent, as they would like to work as efficiently as possible.

Next to demanding more use of the already limited resources, increased leeway for interpretation would create more opportunity for values, interests, commitments and relationships to interfere with the street-

level bureaucrats' work. As stated earlier, the street-level bureaucrat has to consider multiple competing values and objectives within their work, but even more so with greater leeway for interpretation. After all, complete disengagement and person-neutrality is not possible nor desired (Zacka, 2017, p.101).

By looking at these characteristics and tendencies of the indifferent, a broad expectation can be composed. A typical indifferent street-level bureaucrat likes to work as efficiently as possible, due to their focus on people processing. When it is unclear to the indifferent what actions or decisions should be taken, they have to put more time and effort into decision-making which would complicate working efficiently. Additionally, the typical indifferent street-level bureaucrat wants to remain as person-neutral as possible, which can be complicated by more ambiguity within their work. With greater leeway for interpretation comes greater opportunity for subjective matters to interfere with work. The interference of subjective matters will be more likely to generate unequal treatment of clients. Taken together, this leads to the following broad expectation:

E1: Bureaucrats gravitating towards the role conception of the indifferent experiences ambiguity as undesirable and will aim to reduce it as much as possible.

2.3.2. The Caregiver

The moral disposition of caregiving is best to view in the context of street-level bureaucrats interacting with their clients (Zacka, 2017, p.104). Street-level bureaucrats are the face of the bureaucracy they represent. In this position, they often encounter clients that have no one else to turn to. This relationship between the bureaucrat and client results in caregiving being morally sensitively charged (ibid.). Unlike the indifferent, the caregiver is considerate of the individual clients' circumstances and particularities and tries to be responsive to them. Nonetheless, the moral disposition of caregiving also raises some concerns. For example, caregiving is resource intensive, as it takes time, effort and emotional energy (ibid., p.105). In order to be responsive, the caregiver tends to put more resources to use, which leads to the caregiver being likely to process clients slower than their peers. In addition, the act of caregiving rewards the clients for letting their despair be visible (ibid.). This may result in a paternalistic relationship between the bureaucrat and the client. The caregiver themselves, however, does not strive for an unequal relationship. Accordingly, the caregiver has to make careful choices of which cases need the tailored attention the most while maintaining enough impartiality to prevent an unequal relationship with the client.

The caregiver attends to the particularities and circumstances of a client's case. Oftentimes, this leads to the bureaucrat putting in more time and effort, such as in the following example:

> *"So we got creative. I wrote up enough money to cover insurance, car tags, and fees, and, you know, called them interview clothing and gas, knowing good and well that these are things she is going to need but the money is really for the car. So she went and bought her car."*

One of the clients of this vocational rehabilitation counselor landed a job, but had no car to get to this job nor could afford one (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, p.6-7). The counselor could grant some money to help with the purchase of this car, but without going outside of the rules could not grant enough money in order for the client to purchase this car. However, as the excerpt shows, the counselor got creative and wrote up money as means for other ends. The counselor did not have to go out of their way and go the extra mile for this client, but nevertheless did. This is exemplary of a street-level bureaucrat typically taking on a caregiving role. And while this is admirable, it is impossible for such a

counselor to do this for every client in need of more money, as it will most likely take up too much of the available resources.

Ambiguity, then, is likely to be highly appreciated by the caregiver. As a policy is less straightforward, the leeway for interpretation increases. The caregiving street-level bureaucrat is then presented with the opportunity to put in time and effort in a way they seem fit. This would allow them to better take into account the circumstances and particularities surrounding a case. Their caregiving characteristics, such as getting involved personally and creating an equal relationship with the client, are likely to be more prominently exhibited in situations with more ambiguity. One of the main goals of the caregiving street-level bureaucrats is to be responsive towards their clients' circumstances. As such, the caregiver is expected to use ambiguity within their work to the end of being more responsive towards their clients. Taken together, this leads to the following expectation of the caregiver's experience of ambiguity:

E2: Bureaucrats gravitating towards the role conception of the caregiver experience ambiguity as desirable and use it to be responsive towards their clients.

2.3.3. The Enforcer

Ultimately, street-level bureaucrats function as the agents of the state, the face of bureaucracy. Occupying this role, they need to uphold existing laws, program requirements and eligibility criteria, and cannot shy away from enforcing those when necessary (Zacka, 2017, p.107). Street-level bureaucrats inhabiting the characteristics of the enforcer are first and foremost focused on catching the frauds, the clients who deliberately break the rules (ibid.). A strong sense of justice is guiding these street-level bureaucrats. Within these role, as the face of the organization, the street-level bureaucrats have encounters with clients regularly, becoming acquainted with them on a personal level (ibid.). In the same way as the caregiver, the enforcing street-level bureaucrats are more personally involved with the clients than indifferent bureaucrats. This increases the difficulty of keeping enough distance from the client to uphold and enforce the laws more easily. In comparison to the caregivers, the enforcers are more suspicious of their clients, as they are always on the lookout for frauds. This could render them blind to considerations of need and distress (ibid., p.108). However, as is the case with caregivers, being an enforcing street-level bureaucrat is more resource intensive than indifferent street-level bureaucrats. Resources are limited and enforcers cannot follow their suspicion through in every case. In short, enforcers do not merely uphold existing rules and laws to the letter, such as the indifferent, but go beyond by feeling responsible for preserving and protecting its underlying spirit (ibid., p.107).

The story of 'Bad dealers, Good dealers, and Stray Bullets' provides an example where a street-level bureaucrat disregards a supervisor's order in order to apply the rules in such a way he feels is just (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003, p.99-101). In this case, the street-level bureaucrats decides on who is the proper recipient of a punishment:

> *"Ultimately, what happened was I didn't file a case against him. The other two went to prison, and I didn't file anything else. I thought personally that Francisco had been through enough… He was fearful for his life and he was just defending himself, period."*

In this story, two drug dealers confronted their partner, Francisco, in his house and tried taking him out. These two drug dealers had a history with local law enforcement, Francisco did not. During the confrontation, Francisco managed to grab the gun from one of the drug dealers and chase them away out of his house. This ended in Francisco running onto the street and shooting at their getaway car, causing disarray in the neighborhood. The police officer telling the story decided to file a case against the two drug dealers, but not against Francisco. Even though Francisco dealt small amounts of marijuana

and fired shots in the street, the police officer felt that Francisco had only been defending himself and did not deserve any consequences.

As agents of the state, it is important to preserve and protect the spirit of the laws, requirements and criteria the street-level bureaucrat is upholding (Zacka, 2017, p.107). When these are not clear cut, however, upholding them becomes more difficult. When the goals of these rules are vague or in conflict with each other, it is more difficult for the enforcer to identify their underlying spirit. As a result, the street-level bureaucrat remains in the dark regarding the underlying idea of the exact rules it is trying to uphold. This leads to more guesswork within the decision-making and implementation of policies. Similar to the indifferent, vague and conflicting goals is expected to end up confusing the street-level bureaucrat with what exactly to carry out and implement.

Nevertheless, as with the caregiver, more ambiguity allows for more room for maneuver in the enforcer's work. As the spirit of a rule is not as straightforward, this does grant the enforcer with the ability to interpret the rule they think is just. The enforcing street-level bureaucrat is then presented with the opportunity to put more time and effort into cases they think are likely to contain frauds. With this, they are able to follow their suspicion through, which may lead to a greater chance of catching frauds. At least, if their suspicions are justified.

Contrary to the previous expectations, it seems likely that the enforcer may experience ambiguity differently depending on the obstacles or opportunities it presents. If the underlying spirit of the policy is too unclear, this prevents the bureaucrat from upholding the legislation and regulation perceived as just. However, if it allows the enforcing street-level bureaucrat to follow through on their suspicion and possibly catch more frauds, it will be experienced more positively. Together, this results in the following expectation:

E3: Bureaucrats gravitating towards the role conception of the enforcer experience ambiguity as undesirable if it hinders them from understanding the spirit of policy, but experience ambiguity as desirable if it increases the chances of catching the frauds.

Moving away from the theoretical framework, the way street-level bureaucrats perceive their role will now be referred to as role conceptions instead of moral dispositions. As a role conception might also be constituted by a combination of moral dispositions. And as the expectations are broad and based on the theoretical archetypes of street-level bureaucrats' moral dispositions, the research is explorative in order to see if the expectations hold up in the empirical world. The research design and methods will now be discussed in more detail, clarifying how the research is conducted.

3. Research design and methods

Before the research question can be answered, data needs to be collected and analyzed. Firstly, the overall research design will be discussed, wherein choices are explained and substantiated. Thereafter, the cases this research will focus on is elaborated upon. After acquiring knowledge of the context this research takes place in, the concepts from the theoretical framework are operationalized in order to further clarify what is meant by them. Next, the method of data collection and method of analysis are covered. Lastly, the reliability and validity of this research as a whole are reflected upon.

3.1. Research design

By posing the question 'How do street-level bureaucrats with differing role conceptions experience ambiguity and how do they act in response to this?', this research becomes a positive and explanatory research. Positive research deals with the empirical world, i.e. what is instead of what ought to be (Toshkov, 2016, p.16). Likewise, this research is interested in the actual way street-level bureaucrats inhabit their role and experience ambiguity, not how they should inhabit their role or experience ambiguity. As the relationship between role conceptions and ambiguity is still little considered, the aim of this research is to explore a possible explanation of the experience of ambiguity by means of role conceptions. In addition, it is explored whether certain acts in response to ambiguity are typical for types of street-level bureaucrats with certain role conceptions.

As this research is interested in the experience of street-level bureaucrats' themselves, it takes shape in a qualitative interview study, which is in this case also a small-n study. By adhering to the qualitative mode of doing research it is possible to get more extensive accounts of street-level bureaucrats' experiences. Additionally, it allows for a more flexible method of conducting in-depth interviews. Within this qualitative mode of research, this research is partly committed to exploring the relationship between role conceptions and the experience of ambiguity and partly committed to taking the first step in examining street-level bureaucrats' acts in response to ambiguity. Moreover, by making use of the role conceptions and moral dispositions of Zacka the usefulness for explanation of these are considered. Regarding the acts in response the ambiguity, this part of the research question is answered on the basis of induction. There is no theory yet hypothesizing how street-level bureaucrats act in response to their experience of ambiguity. This research will provide a stepping stone to inductively generating ways street-level bureaucrats can respond to ambiguity.

3.2. Case selection

All street-level bureaucrats concerned with the implementation of policy, who inevitably have different role conceptions, make up the population of this research (Toshkov, 2016, p.111). Ambiguity is inherent to the work of a street-level bureaucrat, implying that every street-level bureaucrat within the population is somehow challenged with ambiguity in their work (Lipsky, 2010, p.40). However, as it is impossible to include every street-level bureaucrat out there in this research, a subset of the population is interviewed. In this research, the subset of the population consists of inspectors employed by Dutch independent government organizations. These inspectors have been strategically selected in order to obtain a subset most useful to gain insight into the relationship at hands. Inspectors of two different independent government organizations have been selected for two reasons. Firstly, inspector's work is expected to be fraught with ambiguity, as they are clearly in a face-to-face situation with clients where not every case can be handled the same. Secondly, to gain insight into differing role conceptions, interviews are conducted within two different organizational contexts. As such, hopefully more differing

role conceptions will be detected or at least more information regarding these role conceptions will be obtained.

Inspectors were actively approached through either LinkedIn, e-mail or telephone by giving a brief introduction of the subject of the research; the experience of an inspector during the implementation of policy. The first inspectors who were open to an interview have also helped in approaching colleagues for an interview. Now, a short description of the two Dutch independent government organizations will be given.

3.2.1. The NVWA

In this research, part of the interviews are conducted within the organization of the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority, in Dutch the 'Nederlandse Voedsel- en Warenautoriteit' (NVWA). The NVWA is an independent organization within the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (NVWA, 2018-a; Ministry of General Affairs, 2021). It is tasked with the monitoring of animal and plant health, animal welfare, and the safety of food and consumer products, as well as enforcing nature legislation (NVWA, 2018-a). In order to do so, they have subdivided their main task into supervision, risk assessment and risk communication. The Authority is made up of several directions, of which the Direction Inspection is assigned to all aspects of inspection, which is where the inspectors of the subset are employed. As became clear from previous research, the inspectors of the NVWA are regularly faced with ambiguity within their work (Mascini & Wijk, 2009).

During the inspection of, for example, livestock farmers, the inspectors can only inspect on the basis of existing legislation and regulation (NVWA, 2021). Otherwise, the inspector may not intervene in the possibly wrongful activities of such a livestock farmer. Therefore, the point of departure of an inspection is always the Dutch legislation and regulation for an inspector. Besides the national legislation and regulation, the NVWA has drawn up a general intervention policy (NVWA, 2017). Within this document, the NVWA describes the policy it applies to the encountered violations during supervision, testing, inspection and possible lines of action to prevent its recurrence (ibid., p.1). In addition, a specific intervention policy is formulated per domain, which describes the interventions (ibid.). The specific intervention policy is a practical interpretation of the general intervention policy by describing the interventions in more detail.

Previously, food and consumer product safety were mainly a national matter. Since the 1980s a series of food crises has taken place, food safety became an issue of cross-border public concern (Knowles, Moody & McEachern, 2007, p.44-56). As a result, the European Union has become more involved and present regarding food and consumer product safety. In practice, this has led to an increase in European directives and regulations within this area. Examples are the directives and regulations affecting the agricultural and food chain and the treatment, processing, preparation of fishery products (NVWA, 2020; NVWA, 2018-b). These additional directives and regulations further complicate the legislation and regulation inspectors of the NVWA have to base their decisions upon. It is expected that these additional European directives and regulations might have increased ambiguity within an inspector's work.

3.2.2. The UWV

The other organization of which inspectors were approached for in-depth interviews is the Dutch Employee Insurance Agency, in Dutch the 'Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemersverzekeringen' (UWV). Similar to the NVWA, the UWV is an autonomous organization commissioned by a ministry (UWV, n.d.-a). In this case, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has commissioned the UWV to

implement employee insurances and provide labor market and data services (ibid.). By carrying out this main task, UWV makes sure that people can participate in society by joining the workforce. If this is not possible, the UWV ensures unemployed people of income. The Direction Enforcement is responsible for the enforcement policy of UWV and employs inspectors in order to enforce this policy (ibid.). These inspectors check up on clients by telephone, workplace checks and home visits.

The inspector is tasked with the responsibility to inspect if a client is not following rules or is not fulfilling obligations. These rules and obligations are laid down in national legislation and regulation. Like the inspectors of the NVWA, the inspectors of the UWV their point of departure is this legislation and regulation. While the NVWA has chosen to give practical interpretations of their relevant legislation and regulation by drawing up general and specific intervention policies, the UWV does not provide a transparent categorization of interventions. This might result in more ambiguity within the work of UWV inspectors, as the policies might be formulated less clear. By any means, the policies of the UWV are at least less transparent. They do, however, publish their annual plan and their more specific enforcement annual plan (UWV, 2021). In comparison to the NVWA, this could indicate that either the UWV policies are more ambiguous or the organization is less transparent regarding their interpretation of legislation and regulation towards their clients.

The UWV is less affected by European directives and regulations, as it concerns a policy area less salient across borders than food and consumer product safety. Clients of the UWV, however, have the possibility of living in another country, in so called treaty countries. Internationally, the UWV has made agreements with countries about work and social security. The countries within the EU, EER and Switzerland have signed the same agreements (UWV, n.d.-b). Beyond this agreement, the UWV has bilateral treaties with several countries regarding work and social security (UWV, n.d.-c). Nevertheless, despite these international agreements, the UWV is less affected by directives and regulations from Europe than the NVWA. This could hold that they have to deal with ambiguous policies, without having to take into account an extra layer of legislation and regulation.

3.3. Method of data collection

The research question at hand provides a research context that goes well with qualitative research. One of the main methods of data collection in qualitative research is the use of in-depth interviews (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). Here, this main method of data collection is employed as well. The interviews will be based on the structure of the interview guide (Appendix 1). By conducting these interviews in a semi-structured manner by means of a interview guide the interview resembles more of a conversation between researcher and respondent. This presents the researcher with the option of using follow-up questions in order to obtain a deeper and fuller understanding of the interviewee's experience (Legard et al., 2003, p.141). In addition, the factors underpinning the answer can be further explored.

After approaching inspectors from both the NVWA and the UWV, a total of 10 in-depth interviews is conducted. The respondents of the NVWA are inspectors active within various policy domains, as becomes clear from the respondent overview. The fifth NVWA inspector, however, turned out to be a different kind of inspector. The researcher was under the impression that this respondent was also an inspector with face-to-face contact with clients, but this respondent is a senior inspector within the department of expertise. Still, the interview guide was the guideline for this interview, to also get an idea of their role conception and experience of ambiguity. Among the UWV inspectors, four respondents are inspectors within a local chapter, even though they carry out various side activities. The fifth UWV inspector works within the international team, meaning that the carried out inspections concern Dutch

citizens with benefits living abroad. The UWV inspectors do not carry out inspections in differing policy areas, as is the case with the NVWA inspectors. The respondents are also listed below:

Respondent	*Organization*	*Policy area*
R1	NVWA	Veterinary medicines
R2	NVWA	Fertilizers
R3	NVWA	Animal welfare
R4	NVWA	Animal welfare
R5	NVWA	Fertilizers & intervention policy
R6	UWV	N/A
R7	UWV	N/A
R8	UWV	N/A
R9	UWV	N/A
R10	UWV	N/A

Table 1. Respondent overview

As these interviews are conducted with individuals, the level of observation is individual (Toshkov, 2016, p.116). The interviews are conducted in Dutch, as this is the native language of the inspectors and they can express their experiences better in this language. As such, direct quotes are translated versions and every effort is made to stay as close as possible to the original meaning. And in order to interview these inspectors, it is important they give their consent for this interview in advance (Legard et al., 2003, p.147). In advance, it was emphasized that the respondents will remain anonymous, besides the policy domain or department they are concerned with. During the communication before the interviews, the subject of the interview was made clear, without revealing what results were expected on the basis of the theoretical framework. This way, steering the answers of respondents in a certain direction was avoided. At the beginning of the interviews, which have taken place in online meetings due to Covid-19 related measures, the respondent are asked again whether the interview could be recorded.

3.4. Operationalization concepts

The concepts from the theoretical framework cannot be automatically deduced from information about inspectors and their working methods. Therefore, the concepts of role conceptions and ambiguity are operationalized first. Operationalization is the clarification of concepts so that they can be detected in the empirical world (Toshkov, 2016, p.100). As the concepts in this qualitative research cannot be measured in a way that quantitative values can be, the concepts here are operationalized to possible clues that give substance to one's role conception and their experience of ambiguity.

3.4.1. Role conceptions

The inspectors' role conception is the core of beliefs as to what it means to perform their role well (Zacka, 2017, p.90). As role conceptions are comprised of a combination of dispositions, this means an inspector will never inhabit the role of, for instance, the caregiver completely. In practice, there will always be a combination of dispositions which together comprise the role conception of an inspector. Every interview started off by a short introduction of the inspector themselves, whereafter questions regarding ones role conception were asked. The question setting the tone in every interview is the following: 'At what point do you feel that you have done your job well?'. It is expected this question serves as a starting point for revealing inspectors' values and characteristics, hopefully already providing information about their role conception. Afterwards, questions are asked regarding every archetype according to the following conceptualization:

Role conception	*Characteristics*
The Indifferent	Behaving in a person-neutral way
	Withdrawing emotionally
	People processing/efficiency
The Caregiver	Considerate of the individual clients' circumstances and particularities
	Investing extra time into a case/client
	Equal relationship
The Enforcer	Upholding existing laws, program requirements and eligibility criteria
	Suspicious
	Preserving and protecting the spirit of the law

Table 2. Role conception characteristics

On the basis of these characteristics and tendencies, multiple questions are formulated that can be asked during the interviews, which can also be found in the interview guide. Nonetheless, some are highlighted here. For example, some questions about traits of the indifferent street-level bureaucrat are the following:

What is the role of clients' personal circumstances during an inspection?

Can you easily shake off any severe personal circumstances of your client?

Is there a high focus on efficiency within your work?

These questions give the opportunity to continue with follow-up questions, but also to ask questions regarding the opposite. For instance, if an inspector states that personal circumstances are important to take into consideration, a follow-up question can be along the lines of why these circumstances are important or in what way. Oftentimes, examples are requested to illustrate such statements. Although, when the inspector turns out to have hardly any characteristics of the indifferent, this allows for a turn towards the questions regarding the caregiver. Exemplary questions intended to question the caregiving characteristics are the following:

Do you ever take extra steps to help a client with difficult personal circumstances?

How would you describe the relationship with a client?

If the inspector appears to go out of his way frequently in order to help out a client, this would point to caregiving characteristics. Likewise, if the inspectors attach great importance to establishing an equal relationship with the client, this would point out to caregiving characteristics as well. Again, questions that give the opportunity of refutation are also asked here. For instance, when the inspector indeed puts extra resources to certain clients, they can be asked for what purpose they do this. In this way, too, more information is obtained about the inspectors' role conceptions.

Lastly, the characteristics of the enforcer are asked by means of questions like the following:

What role do rules, guidelines, laws and such play in your work?

Is there ever a feeling of suspicion in a case?

Do you ever feel a great sense of justice within a case?

The questions regarding the enforcing characteristics are mainly focused on finding out whether the inspector is focused on catching frauds and looks beyond purely enforcing the rules by attaching value to the underlying spirit. The first question offers a lot of opportunity for follow-up questions, such as what the inspector considers most important in upholding the rules, guidelines, laws and such. When the inspectors will talk quickly about catching crooks or wanting to catch the people who knowingly break the rules, this is an important indication of having enforcing characteristics.

As stated before, a role conception is not purely made up of characteristics of one archetype. To characterize inspectors, combinations can be made and elaborated upon. Types of inspectors are determined on the basis of their main role conception and their secondary role conception. The main role conception is the role conception that mainly reoccurs throughout the interview with the inspector. The inspector's view on what is the most important within their work determines the main role conception as well. The secondary role conception becomes clear by the inspector's characteristics that are also striking, but do not fit within their main role conception.

3.4.2. Experience of and acts in response to ambiguity

The ambiguity of policy is inherent to inspector's work, but that does not make it easier to detect it. Following the division into vague and conflicting, ambiguity is here operationalized as vague and conflicting policy. In the next figure, the characteristics of vague and conflicting policy are made clear.

Type of ambiguity	*Characteristics*
Vague policy	Leeway in giving countenance to the ends the goals pursue
	Multi-interpretable formulation of policy
Conflicting policy	Take into account multiple competing objectives
	Consideration of process values constraining the achievement of the actual goals

Table 3. Operationalization ambiguity

To first determine the presence of these types of ambiguity, attempts are made to get to know the inspector's work and possible ambiguities at play. The following questions are asked:

Is it clear from the formulation of the policies, regulations, rules and such what is expected from you in most cases?

Are there parts of policies that are more or less open to interpretation?

Is there a shared understanding among inspectors of what a policy allowing for interpretation entails?

These questions are used to first determine whether there are even any ambiguities experienced within the inspector's work. As there are several terms for policies, such as regulations, guidelines and instructions, the researcher can turn towards using these terms if an inspector indicates that they do not experience any vague or conflicting policy. Subsequently, to find out in what way the inspectors experience these types of ambiguity, questions such as the following are asked:

Do you think there is too little / too much room for customization per case within your work?

If there is any room for interpretation, are you happy to use it?

What do you think of the conflicting objectives of such policies?

With the help of these questions, it will become clear whether the inspectors experience ambiguity either desirable, undesirable or something in between. Questions like the last are follow-up questions, to give the inspector the opportunity to elaborate on previous statements. It is expected that the experience of ambiguity mainly becomes clear on the basis of given examples.

The questions regarding the acts in response to ambiguity are likely to be asked throughout the interview, when an experience of ambiguity is being talked about.

Could you give an example of such a situation wherein you have to determine a line of action yourself?

What can you, as an inspector, do in such a situation?

In the end, by means of the questions within the interview guide, all the relevant topics should have been discussed. In addition, the researcher is focusing on requesting as much examples as possible. This way, the statements of the inspectors become better illustrated, as it allows for the conversation to become more in-depth. An important note, however, remains that the interviews are set up as conversations, meaning that an interview is not likely to take place completely in this order. Likewise, it may be the case, for example, that the respondent starts talking about the experience of ambiguity before mentioning which types of ambiguity are actually present. The researcher will do their best to ensure that as many questions as possible from the interview guide are asked, even if it is with different wording.

3.5. Method of analysis

After the in-depth interviews have taken place, the audio recordings are turned into transcripts. By turning the audio recordings into transcripts, the researcher is able to analyze the interviews by means of coding. The transcripts are imported into the software program Atlas.ti, which makes coding easier. In this research, thematic coding is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). With thematic coding, the aim is to achieve a rich description of the notable patterns. As the main focus in this research is exploration, information is processed as completely as possible instead of highlighting only certain topics. More specifically, an inductive approach is taken on, meaning that the data is coded without trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame (ibid., p.83). This allows for new information to be included within the analysis, without any mention of it before in, for example, the theoretical framework.

The steps to be taken in this process of inductive thematic coding are as follows. First, every interview is looked through in order for the research to get familiarized with the data. In this first step, hunches or possible important clues can already be noted down. For example, if a respondent only states that his work is nothing more than their work to them and wants to work as efficiently as possible, it can be noted that this respondent might mainly identify as an indifferent street-level bureaucrat. Second, the first noticeable parts within interviews are coded as initial codes, such as vague policy. Why the policy is vague or what part of the policy is vague to the respondent still remains in the background. Practically, the interview is divided into initial themes, such as role conceptions and experiencing ambiguity as desirable. Third, the interviews are reviewed again and the codes will get more specific. For instance, a more specific code is the feeling of mistrust, which can fall under the initial code of the enforcer.

After this process of inductive thematic coding, the inspectors are first classified according to their role conceptions. An inspector mainly exhibiting enforcing characteristics, but at the same time is exhibiting some indifferent characteristics, can be classified as an indifferent enforcer. The inspector, then,

perceives his main task in correspondence with the typical enforcer, but might also exhibit indifferent characteristics. After identifying the respondents´ role conceptions, they are grouped together. With this, the experience of ambiguity can be examined. In this section, the focus is primarily on words or terms that hint at a positive or negative experience of ambiguity. For instance, if an inspector states something along the lines of ´luckily, I was able to make this decision based on what I thought is right´, a positive connotation of making use of multi-interpretable policy is detected. Afterwards, the acts in response to ambiguity can be discussed in relation to the types of main role conceptions. Whether there is any relationship between types of main role conceptions and acts in response to ambiguity will become clear within the results.

3.6. Reflection on the quality of research

Within qualitative research, it is less convenient to compare the research to the quantitative yardsticks of reliability and validity. Keeping this in mind, it is opted here to use the model of Guba to assess the quality of research, as presented by Krefting (1991). Acknowledging that the quantitative assessment criteria are not always applicable to qualitative research, the four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability have been devised.

Instead of reflecting on internal validity, credibility is reflected upon, meaning that the information obtained within qualitative research is from human experiences as they are lived and perceived by respondents (Krefting, 1991, p.215). To achieve credibility within a research, a research should present accurate descriptions or interpretations of the experiences shared by respondents. As this research's focus is on the respondents' experience of ambiguity, the gathered data is automatically of respondents' experiences as they are lived and perceived by them. Threatening credibility, however, is the tendency of respondents to reply with what they think is socially preferred (ibid., p.218). To prevent this from happening within this research, as little background information about the research topic and question has been given as possible. Additionally, the interview questions are formulated as neutrally as possible, to avoid directing the respondent. And to make sure that the data is presented as accurate as possible, the interview recordings are transcribed word by word in order to substantiate the findings with quotes of respondents. This way, the relationship between the raw data and the eventual findings becomes more clear.

Transferability, then, refers to the extent to which findings are transferable, *i.e.* they can be applied to other contexts, settings or with other groups (ibid., p.216). Characteristic of qualitative research, however, is that it is conducted in unique situations and therefore is less amenable to generalization (ibid.). It is difficult to state whether the findings in this research are directly transferable to other contexts or settings, as it is likely not the case. Other street-level bureaucrats, instead of inspectors of Dutch government organizations, or inspectors in other areas might experience ambiguity differently. Nonetheless, every effort is made to capture the course of the research as accurately and detailed as possible. In this way, the research could at least be replicated in different contexts, settings or with other groups.

The third criteria is dependability, referring to the consistency of the data. If the research would be replicated with the same subjects or in a similar contexts, it concerns whether the findings would be consistent (ibid.). As it is highly unlikely an interview will take place in exactly the same way a second time, consistency in qualitative research implies that variability can be ascribed to identified sources. One way in ensuring trackable variability is to provide a dense description of research methods, which is already aimed for. The other dependability strategies, however, could not be followed through in this research. For instance, a code-recode procedure, where the researcher revisits the raw data and codes

the data a second time in order to compare with the first round, was not feasible due to time restraints. As such, dependability applies the least to this research. However, this does not mean that the data would not be consistent at all if the research would be replicated, as dependability is still strived for through accurate description of all steps within the research.

The fourth and last criteria is confirmability, the qualitative equivalent of objectivity. Specifically, the data and interpretational confirmability is meant by this. In this research, confirmability is strived for by operationalizing the theoretical concepts and keeping record of all steps within the research. By operationalizing the theoretical concepts within this chapter, what is meant by each theoretical concept becomes clear. With this, it becomes easier to understand how the data is interpreted, as there is now a shared understanding of what information is relevant to the research. In addition, keeping record of all steps within the research enhances confirmability as well, such as the video recordings. If necessary, this information can be requested.

4. Results

In total 10 inspectors were questioned about their role conception, experience of ambiguity and their acts in response to types of ambiguity within their work. In this chapter, the findings are presented. First off, a descriptive overview of the types of ambiguity encountered is presented. Then, an overview is given of the types of inspectors and their detected main and secondary role conceptions. Each type is elaborated on by discussing the characteristics that became clear from the interviews. Differences between inspectors belonging to the same type are discussed as well. After the types of inspectors are clear, the chapter turns towards their experiences of ambiguity. Here, it becomes clear whether ambiguity is experienced as expected as set out in the theoretical frame. At last, it is identified how types of inspectors act in response to experienced ambiguity.

4.1. Types of ambiguity

In general, ambiguity holds that there is leeway for interpretation regarding the goal of a policy, which may also relate to the process of achieving this goal. Earlier, two types of ambiguity were set out: vague and conflicting goals. The NVWA and UWV inspectors brought up several examples of types of ambiguity within their work. The NVWA inspectors provided different examples than the UWV inspectors, but within the organization the inspectors often brought up the same examples.

4.1.1. Vague types of ambiguity

Among the NVWA inspectors the single most mentioned type of ambiguity was what they call ‘open standards’ (R1, R3, R4, R5). Open standards are standards they employ while inspecting for, for instance, the use of veterinary medicine, the transport of livestock or the use of fertilizers. These standards are called open, as they contain terms that are not quantifiable, such as ´sufficient´ and ´systematically´. This leaves room for interpretation in applying open standards, which is why they are understood here as a vague type of ambiguity. Other vague types of ambiguity appeared to be dealing with personal circumstances of a client (R2, R3, R4) and substantiating a claim of violation (R2). NVWA inspectors are responsible for drawing up a report containing all relevant facts and circumstances of an inspection. However, coming to the decision of which circumstances are relevant to the inspection appeared to be up for discussion among inspectors. They stated that it is often up to the inspector how they deal with personal circumstances of a client, indicating that there is certain leeway of interpretation present. Lastly, one NVWA inspector indicated that, for him, the only aspect remaining vague was the process of collecting all relevant facts and circumstances during inspections within the domain of fertilizers.

The UWV inspectors are committed to inspect their clients regarding employment and the payment of social benefits. The most mentioned example considered as unclear and allowing for interpretation was the difference between observing and discerning, which includes the matter of following or not following a client (R6, R7, R8, R9, R10). Officially, inspectors are not allowed to observe their clients, meaning that they are not allowed to, for example, wait for a longer period of time near the address of the client. Previously, inspectors would observe to determine whether their client was leaving their home at fixed times to, for example, work illegally. Now, inspectors are only allowed to discern. However, the exact difference between observing and discerning is not documented anywhere, resulting in different understandings and therefore implementation among inspectors. Related to this matter, inspectors were previously allowed to follow their client when they left the house to, for example, find out if they were on their way to a work address. Now, they are officially not allowed to follow their

client. In practice, they are still allowed to follow objects, such as cars, meaning that inspectors can still follow their client as long as they formulate it differently in their inspection report.

Other examples given by UWV inspectors of aspects unclear to them or open to interpretation are matters of privacy (R6, R7, R9, R10), the moment of calling the right to remain silent (R8) and the rules regarding archiving information (R10). Since the General Data Protection Regulation was adopted, inspectors are limited further in, for example, requesting personal data, run license plates, and requesting bank details. The rules regarding when this information may or may not be requested seem to be univocal, but in practice often depend on the inspector's judgement. Likewise, one inspector mentioned the haziness regarding the moment of calling the right to remain silent. This responsibility is inherently dependent on the inspector's interpretation, as the inspector has to decide on the spot when it is the right moment to call the right to remain silent. Lastly, the last respondent brought up the rules regarding the right way of archiving information. They felt that it was unclear when information should or should not be archived, as inspectors are dealing with it differently. All these rules, regulations and policies are causing confusion among the inspectors and still leave room for interpretation, which is why they are identified as vague types of ambiguity.

Organization	*Examples of vague types of ambiguity*
NVWA	Open standards
	Personal circumstances of a client
	Substantiating a claim of violation
UWV	Difference between observing and discerning
	Privacy matters
	Moment of calling the right to remain silent
	Archiving information

Table 4. Vague types of ambiguity

4.1.2. Conflicting types of ambiguity

Examples that count as conflicting occurred less often, but nevertheless are present within the work of NVWA inspectors. Two inspectors mentioned the difficulties the increasing amount of European regulations bring about (R1, R5). The European Union is increasingly formulating regulations within the field of food and consumer product safety. The inspectors indicate that some European regulations conflict either with each other or with national legislation. For example, livestock has to be transported as quickly as possible, but livestock may also be transferred between vehicles up to three times. This provision therefore effectively causes the first regulation to be nullified, as it is still allowed to transfer livestock up to three times. Another example is the conflict between legislation and scientific advice (R3). Scientific advice regarding the interpretation of certain policies or open standards is often published within the professional sector, by departments of universities or ministries. However, these advices are often not grounded in legislation. In the event of an inspector using such advice for substantiation of their findings, it is not accepted within the courtroom. Even though certain interpretations of policies may be best for, for instance, keeping livestock, it is still not accepted by the judge if it is not based on existing legislation.

As with the NVWA inspectors, there were less examples of conflicting types of ambiguity within the work of UWV inspectors than vague types. The only example that is considered as conflicting concerns the matter of following a client or an object as well. As explained, inspectors are not allowed to follow their clients anymore. The consequence of inspectors following objects instead was first and foremost recommended by the UWV legal advice department. On paper the inspectors are not allowed to follow,

but they have derived permission verbally from legal advice. As such, the matter of following a client or object is perceived as conflicting, as the inspectors are confronted with conflicting instructions.

Organization	*Examples of conflicting types of ambiguity*
NVWA	European regulations
	Discrepancy legislation and scientific advice
UWV	Difference between observing and discerning

Table 5. Conflicting types of ambiguity

4.2. Types of inspectors and their role conceptions

As explained within the theoretical framework, street-level bureaucrats are highly unlikely to completely fulfill one typical role conception. As expected, the inspectors are best classified by means of a main role conception and a secondary role conception. However, not every inspector could even be classified by a main and secondary role conception, two inspectors stood out by evenly displaying characteristics of all three role conceptions. In the table below each inspector is presented with their main and secondary role conception, resulting in their type.

Respondent	*Main role conception*	*Secondary role conception*	*Type*
R1	Enforcer	Indifferent	The Indifferent Enforcer
R2	Enforcer	Indifferent	The Indifferent Enforcer
R3	Indifferent	Caregiving	The Caregiving Indifferent
R4	-		The All at Once
R5	Enforcer	Indifferent	The Indifferent Enforcer
R6	Caregiver	Indifferent	The Indifferent Caregiver
R7	Caregiver	Enforcer	The Enforcing Caregiver
R8	Indifferent	Caregiving	The Caregiving Indifferent
R9	-		The All at Once
R10	Caregiver	Indifferent	The Indifferent Caregiver

Table 6. Respondents´ role conceptions

4.2.1. The Indifferent Enforcer

The most common type among the inspectors was the ‘indifferent enforcer’, referring to an inspector mainly inhabiting characteristics of an enforcer while also displaying some characteristics of the indifferent. Three respondents, R1, R2, and R5, fall within the type of the indifferent enforcer. These inspectors mostly replied to questions as a typical enforcer would, as they perceive their main purpose as inspector to bring about justice or to catch frauds. However, they sometimes also express themselves along the line of the indifferent, but still in order to work towards enforcing goals. Therefore, these inspectors are classified as an indifferent enforcer. First, the main role conception of these inspectors is discussed, after which the secondary role conception is considered.

The first respondent set the tone by explaining that the work of an NVWA inspector is defined by the law. Everything that is and is not allowed by the law is what shapes the work of an inspector, according to R1. Ensuring compliance with the letter of the law, however, is not his main goal. The respondent states that it is more important whether clients deliberately break the rules. This typically defines

enforcers, focusing on the underlying spirit of the law (Zacka, 2017, p.108). As such, he rather inspects cases in which, for example, a livestock farmer actually deserves it to be inspected and thereafter possibly fined (R1). The feeling and wording of the inspector that the client actually 'deserves' it to be inspected points to the enforcer's goals as well.

The second respondent perceives his role similarly. He talks about "punishing the ones that knowingly break the rules" (R2). In addition, R2 highlights the importance of creating a level playing field. He feels responsible to contribute to creating a level playing field among farmers. To bear this responsibility also points to the main role conception of the enforcer, going beyond simply upholding rules and laws (ibid.). By focusing on the compliance with rules and laws, enforcers are likely to become insensitive to considerations of need and distress, as is confirmed by the following quote of R1:

"And then I can say, yes I feel sorry for that man, or that woman, or that company. But all you can do is point out what's going on. You can record a statement and he gets an opportunity to express his views and all kinds of legal things are possible. But in the end only the assessor, or our team of administrative measures, can say well we impose a fine." (R1)

Both respondents, R1 and R2, demonstrate a sense of justice and fairness. So much even that R2 emphasizes that time and efficiency should not be a trade-off with quality in wrapping up a case. The last indifferent enforcer, as became clear from the respondent overview, fulfills a different role than the other inspectors. R5 previously worked as an inspector conducting on-site inspections, but has been committed to the policy side within the NVWA for some time now. He functions as a pivot between the shaping of intervention policies and the implementation by inspectors. He too stresses the importance of compliance with the rules, but that simply punishing their clients is not the goal of neither his work or the NVWA as a whole. Again, this goes beyond simply implementing policies, as he takes into account the underlying purpose.

All three inspectors are committed to clients' compliance with the rules with the aim of catching clients deliberately doing wrong, the frauds. At the same time, they value quality over efficiency, confirming the main role conception of the enforcer, as typical indifferents would rather be committed to client's compliance using fewer resources and with a focus on efficiency.

While the inspectors mainly perceive their roles as an enforcer, some statements suggest the presence of indifferent characteristics. One inspector plainly stated that it does not matter what he personally thinks, because ultimately "the rules are the rules and the clients have to comply with them" (R1). This corresponds to the indifferent, as the typical indifferent does not let values, interests, commitments and relationships interfere with how they fulfill their role (Zacka, 2017, p.101). The second respondent displays one indifferent characteristic by elaborating on the role of personal circumstances in an inspection. He explains that personal circumstances play an important role, because they influence the course of the inspection and possibly alter the final assessment (R2). As such, personal circumstances are important for the process of the inspection, corresponding to indifferent characteristics. R5 displays characteristics of the indifferent by attaching great importance to efficiency. After asking him if a focus on efficiency is at the expense of the quality of an inspector's work, the following is answered:

"No, it doesn't have to. Most people think of the administration around it as a hassle. So if they have more time for the inspection itself, although that is not the actual goal of course, I think everyone will benefit from that. They won't be pressured as much. In my opinion it can only get better." (R5)

Apparently, this inspector attaches great importance to efficiency, however, with the goal of leaving more time for the actual inspection. As such, he exhibits an indifferent value, efficiency, in order to

fulfill an enforcing goal, to improve the quality of inspections by inspectors being able to spend more time per case.

The indifferent enforcer goes beyond the letter of the law. It is more relevant whether clients deliberately break the rules, which is why these clients deserve repercussions according to the inspectors. They feel responsible for creating a level playing field and show a sense of justice. At the same time, however, they also exhibit some indifferent characteristics, but much less compared to enforcing characteristics. Lastly, the pursuit of efficiency is important as a means to achieve an enforcing goal.

4.2.2. The Caregiving Indifferent

The caregiving indifferent is a role conception inhabited by R3 and R8, respectively inspectors of the NVWA and the UWV. First, the main role conception of the indifferent is elaborated upon, then the secondary role conception of caregiving is discussed. The inspectors indicated that the main purpose of their work was to get the facts in every case as complete as possible in order to offer them to the assessor (R3, R8). While this is part of the job of every inspector, the way this task is perceived and handled can differ. The indifferent enforcer also had to present all relevant facts of a case, but indicated that catching frauds was the most important. These caregiving indifferents' goal was purely to substantiate their findings as clear as possible, without another underlying purpose. By completely focusing on objectively presenting the facts, these inspectors align themselves with the desire of the typical indifferent to remain person-neutral. By stating this, they consciously distance themselves from any interference with the assessment. This is achieved by emotional withdrawal, as becomes clear in the following statement:

"If there are personal circumstances or facts that say something about someone's negligence, that has to be included in the picture. Look, I can no longer reverse what is happening. We ensure a quick recovery and I have to keep an eye on facts and circumstances, because they are determinative for the person who has to assess. And that is the administrative body or the criminal court. I only have to paint the full picture." (R3)

Personal circumstances are treated objectively and only serve as substantiation for their findings. At no point in these interviews they indicate that they are worried for the client or feel a personal connection with them. When asked if the inspector really does not feel any empathy towards his client, R8 answers:

"Yes, a bit of empathy. I mean, if we have a conversation with each other and we are on the same frequency, the conversation goes a lot more smoothly. […] I go to those people that I want to get something from, but if I'm nice or if I present myself in a way that I think they'll like, they're much more likely to give me something." (R8)

This inspector only seemed to show empathy towards a client in order to achieve his goal of completing his findings. The characteristic of a caregiver then only comes forward as a means to an end. Later on, both inspectors turned out to be somewhat inclined towards caregiving then it appeared at first sight. R3 revealed that he regularly referred clients to authorities able to provide support when encountering clients with personal problems. Although, he quickly stated that he should not bear these problems on his own shoulders, keeping himself distanced from the client. R8 eventually admitted that he called a social worker involved in an emotionally charged case after some time to ask how the case ended. This case was the only time in his 35 years as an inspector he returned to a case.

These inspectors are classified as caregiving indifferent, as they aim for the indifferent goal of objectively presenting all facts, but they sometimes struggle with completely upholding this ideal and as a consequence their caregiving characteristics appear. The inspectors try to remain as person-neutral as possible and distance themselves from personal involvement. The caregiving characteristics come out when they either are useful in obtaining all relevant facts or when the inspector struggles with

holding up their ideal of the indifferent. Their main role conception is identified as the indifferent, as their main goals align with the typical indifferent, while they also exhibit caregiving characteristics, resulting in their secondary role conception being identified as caregiving.

4.2.3. The Indifferent Caregiver

The inspectors that are characterized as indifferent caregivers are both inspectors of the UWV. R6 is an inspector at the national level, while R10 is a member of the international team. All respondents were asked at what point they felt they had done their work well. These inspectors were the only ones who immediately started talking about their relationship with their clients. They stated that the most important part of their job was to have a normal conversation with the client, achieving an equal relationship. The act of caregiving may reward clients for letting their despair be visible, possibly resulting in a paternalistic relationship, but the typical caregiver tries to prevent an unequal relationship with the client (Zacka, 2017, p.105). Likewise, the typical caregiver is considerate and responsive of their clients' circumstances, trying to support the client if needed. R6 emphasized that being empathetic towards the client is crucial, which he often shows by always asking how the client is in general. These caregiving characteristics are clearly visible in the following fragment:

"What I try in a conversation... I just want to have a normal conversation with people, with the clients. It is not an interrogation what we do, we are in a conversation. We are not special investigative officers or police officers, we just have a conversation on an equal level." (R6)

Another caregiving characteristic is putting extra time and effort into clients and their cases. One of the inspectors regularly makes extra phone calls or decides to invite the client for another conversation at the office. Though, the other inspector, emphasizes the drawback of putting extra resources towards certain clients and cases. She explains that it is emotionally draining when she puts extra energy towards a certain client, but they still end up becoming repeat offenders. This aligns with the trade-off put forward by Zacka, who already stated that typical caregivers have to make careful choices of which cases need tailored attention.

While these inspectors' main role conceptions correspond to the caregiver, they also indicate that the limit of their abilities extend to what the rules allow and no further. It appears they would like to put extra time and effort in clients and cases more often, but that the rules are still important to follow closely. For instance, R6 underscores the fact that inspectors may not draw conclusions or offer advice. In combination with the statements that it is important to present all facts as completely as possible, their secondary role conception is closest to that of the indifferent. As discussed, all inspectors are expected to gather all relevant facts, but these emphasize it is important to present the facts for the sake of presenting the facts without an ulterior motive. However, R10 still speaks forgiving about clients who break the rules. She states that it does not have to be a big deal when a client makes a mistake, they only have to make sure to report the correct information. According to her, the rules are the rules, but a mistake is only a mistake. Apparently, the caregiving goals still prevail the indifferent characteristic traits.

4.2.4. The Enforcing Caregiver

Only one respondent is classified as an enforcing caregiver, R7. This inspector already worked as an inspector for 42 years. At first, he stated that he felt he had done his job well when his work led to ´results´, meaning that an extensive inspection can even follow from a report with unclear information. For him, it did not matter if such an inspection included fraud or not, as long as the inspection was well handled. The inspector went on to add that he does always looks at the human side of the case, whether

the client committed fraud or not. The consideration of the client across from him and their circumstances and particularities remained dominant throughout the entire interview, which is typical for a caregiver. Although the caregiving characteristics are present, they do not seem prevailing enough yet for caregiving to be the main role conception based on this information.

Remarkable throughout this interview, was the difference between the 'good clients' and the 'bad clients' for the inspector. The caregiving characteristics seem to function as a starting point for this inspector, being most notable when the inspector talks about the good clients. However, when talking about the bad clients, the inspector mostly displays enforcing characteristics. An example of talking about the good clients:

"Especially with the less fortunate. People who are having a really hard time. Yes, then I can imagine I get [that you're trying] it. But I always tell them it is not allowed and that they should have reported it or should have called. They should have consulted what the possibilities and impossibilities are. Then you can always bring it to a good end." (R7)

As becomes clear from this fragment, the inspector shows empathy towards the less fortunate. He rather has him and his client coming to a solution together, than the client deliberately breaking the rules. And even if clients break the rules, but they are in a less fortunate position, he is understanding. The inspector is, again, being considerate of the individual clients' circumstances and tries to be responsive to them. When talking about the bad clients, however, the inspector takes on a different tone:

"I try to treat everyone equally, but I do have problems with the rascals who know exactly how everything works. And they get away with it too. And the people who do their very best, they are punished more often. I struggle with that. For example, for the unemployment check you have to apply for a job four times a month. And then, when they apply only three times, they already receive a reduction on their unemployment check." (R7)

It bothers the inspector that the bad clients, calling them rascals, often get away with breaking the rules. This sense of justice is typical for enforcers. Later on, he emphasizes that these clients deserve to be confronted with harsh consequences. In the end, however, the caregiving characteristics appear to prevail. Oftentimes, the inspector includes detailed notes from his interaction with the client in his investigative reports, explaining how the client came across. If the client came across as sincere and honest, this is mentioned. This way, the assessor is able to take into account the personal aspects better, according to the inspector. In sum, the inspector assumes the good in people, which is when his caregiving nature proves itself, unless they prove them wrong. When it comes to the clients that deliberately break the rules, his enforcing characteristics surface, which is why the enforcer is identified as his secondary role conception.

4.2.5. The All at Once

The inspectors identified as the 'all at once' type display characteristics of all three archetypes of role conceptions. No role conception seems to be prevalent over the other. Throughout the interviews with R4 and R9, inspectors within different organizational contexts, characteristics of the different role conceptions alternated. For instance, R4 started out his interview by expressing that ensuring compliance of clients with the rules was most important. The focus on this underlying goal could indicate that this inspector gravitates towards the enforcer. Likewise, the inspector indicates that he regularly experiences a gut feeling and suspicion towards clients from the preparation of the case on paper. Later on, the inspector mentions the role of personal circumstances within his work. He feels it is important to take

these into account, which could hint to a caregiving characteristic, but states that there is a limit to this immediately afterwards, distancing himself from the client.

Then, in line with indifferent characteristics, the inspector expresses himself positively about efficiency, but emphasizes that efficiency is not always attainable. His last statement about his take on his work goes as follows:

"You are just an objective, an objective inspector concerned with facts and circumstances, the reason for these circumstances, you have to make a record of it and that's it. If it's necessary, that's a part of it. I don't have to make a decision or put a price tag on it. It really doesn't matter to me at all." (R4)

The conversation with the all at once inspector at UWV, R9, proceeds the same way, remarkably. At any point a clue is given regarding certain characteristics, it is countered by contradictory statements or statements which point to characteristics of the two other role conceptions. The UWV inspector's view on his work seems to correspond with caregiving, as he states that "they are in an industry where you directly touch your customer's wallet." He emphasizes that he always wants to walk away from a conversation with the client with a good feeling. But when asked about possible personal circumstances that play a role in an investigation, this is the answer:

"What it does to me personally? I think that varies from person to person. I can put it down pretty easily. Sometimes there is something going on, but there is nothing that I take home at the end of the day. I never think, gosh, what am I supposed to do with this? What did I experience today? And maybe it is because you've been through too much in the last 20 years." (R9)

This neutral way of talking about personal circumstances goes against the previous speculation and could hint towards indifferent characteristics. And while going back and forth between displaying caregiving and indifferent characteristics, the inspector indicated that it is also his task to ensure that the money ends up with those who desperately need it. Again, it is not clear to which role conception's characteristics this points. It could be an indicator of caregiving, as he focuses on those in need, but also on enforcing, as a sense of justice could be the basis for this. Even with follow-up questions, no role conception appeared to be dominant. In the end, these two inspectors could not be classified as having a main role conception and a secondary role conception.

4.3. Inspector's experience of ambiguity

In this part the inspectors are discussed in light of their main role conception and their experience with ambiguity by discussing the experiences of the given examples of types of ambiguities within their work. The inspectors are discussed by means of their main role conception in order to put these in contrast to the previously formulated expectations:

E1: Bureaucrats gravitating towards the role conception of the Indifferent experience ambiguity as undesirable and will aim to reduce it as much as possible.

E2: Bureaucrats gravitating towards the role conception of the caregiver experience ambiguity as desirable and use it to be responsive towards their clients

E3: Bureaucrats gravitating towards the role conception of the enforcer experience ambiguity as undesirable if it hinders them from understanding the spirit of policy, but experience ambiguity as desirable if it increases the chances of catching the frauds.

4.3.1. The Indifferents' experience of ambiguity

In total, two inspectors are identified with the main role conception of the indifferent. The NVWA inspector, as most NVWA inspectors, mentioned the example of open standards. He stated that these open standards are increasingly formulated more concrete and clear, but that the remaining open standards are still difficult to interpret. At the end of an inspection, a judge needs to look at the report of the inspector and decide whether to impose measures or not. For the inspector, the downside is that judges view his argumentation of the interpretation of the open standards as insufficient substantiation to impose measures. When the inspector substantiates his report with scientific evidence or advice, the judge states this scientific basis has not been democratically established nor is transparent for the client. The NVWA inspector experiences the open standards difficult to work with and therefore is in favor of anchoring down points of discussion clearly within policy:

"It doesn't match. See, if this has to be, then it has to be on record somehow. That way it is democratic, the sector knows where it stands and we can just use it. I think to myself, they should put this in regulations or in a policy rule. But then you often see the trend of fewer rules." (R3)

The fact that the open standards are too open for interpretation and that his argumentation is not seen as valid substantiation is discouraging the inspector. Although he still values open standards in some cases, policies should often be formulated stricter in his opinion. The discrepancy between the legislation and the scientific advice is one of the conflicting types of ambiguity, which the inspector clearly wants to minimalize. The inspector fits within the expectation, which was that ambiguity would be experienced as undesirable and therefore they would aim to reduce it as much as possible. The fact that he still values some open standards and does not want to completely board up the policies could be justified by his caregiving characteristics.

The UWV inspector, R8, quickly states that the working instructions he has to work with are a 100% 'waterproof'. He could not give any examples, as he felt these working instructions had become his second nature. After some follow-up questions, he admitted that there was one point of discussion among him and his colleagues; the right time to call the right to remain silent. Although, when asked how he estimates the moment to call this right, he gives a clear-cut answer:

"The moment the client starts saying things that are bad for him or that could lead to the imposition of a fine or measures." (R8)

Later, he continued talking about points of discussion among him and his colleagues. He stated that he is often surprised by the reaction of his colleagues to covid-19 measures. When he feels that the measures are univocal, he notices that colleagues are still interpreting these differently. Clearly, this inspector experiences any ambiguity as undesirable, as he has a fixed interpretation for the examples of types of ambiguity he encounters. It seems that this inspector internalized the rules over time and has developed standard practices for himself. At last, he concluded that inspectors should not be given more room for interpretation or abilities, as this would lead to KGB-like practices. This further confirms the expectation of the indifferent experiencing ambiguity as undesirable and aiming to reduce it as much as possible.

4.3.2. The Caregivers' experience of ambiguity

The inspectors with the main role conception of the caregiver are all UWV inspectors, though one is part of the international team. The most mentioned example of a vague type of ambiguity among UWV inspectors was the matter of observing or discerning, including the matter of following a client or an

object. One inspector states that this is one of the most unclear policies within his work. Though, this inspector experiences this opportunity to still follow clients as positive:

"No, I like it that you have room for it in that regard. As I said earlier, every case is a case in itself and eh, there are no standard boxes to tick, where you do A in this case and B in that case. It is largely based on, I think, what kind of report it is. Does the report say how often a person works and which days? What time he leaves? I got a notification of someone who was supposed to work 4 or 5 days a week. […] She left a quarter to nine and then you can already see that there is something wrong. And then I went after it with my folding bike and saw where she went inside." (R6)

For him, the uniqueness of every case justifies the ambiguity concerning the matter of following a client. He states that legal advice even recommends to be creative with discerning and following, by describing it as multiple discernments instead of one observation and as following a car instead of a person. This inspector even indicated he would like to enlarge the existing leeway for interpretation in his work, he would like to be allowed to cross the border into Germany. Oftentimes he has to interrupt his inspection when his client crosses the border, as the case then has to be transferred to the international team. This inspector matches up with the caregiver's expected experience of ambiguity, which was the expectation of experiencing ambiguity as desirable, as he could only speak positively about the granted leeway. However, there was no clue of this inspector viewing ambiguity as desirable in order to be more responsive towards his clients.

The next caregiving inspector, R7, stood out among the other inspectors. While the other inspectors had about the same amount of experience as inspector, this was the only inspector who immediately expressed that he often deviated from the rules:

"I think to myself, never mind, I'll do it my way. Let it be an appeal for once. Let it blow up for once. Unfortunate, but I tried. I always have the idea that a lot is decided behind a desk where people don't always know what we're actually doing." (R7)

This inspector mentioned the same considerations regarding observing or discerning and following a client or an object. He knows he is not allowed to, but still follows his clients or drives by several times in order to obtain the information he needs for his inspection. And while R6 stops at the German border, R7 bends his words in such a way that he happened to be on his way to grocery shopping in Germany and 'accidentally saw the place his client was on their way to'. This inspector experiences the vague type of ambiguity equally as desirable as R6, but R7 even makes more use of the granted leeway. Again, however, there is no sign of the inspector making use of this room for maneuver in order to be more responsive towards his clients.

While R6 and R7 experienced the granted leeway and the existing room for interpretation as desirable, R10 seemed to have mixed feelings about the ambiguities within her work. She indicates that the international team is often seen as an island within the UWV, but that the team members also behave in such a manner. For instance, new policies were treated as not applicable to them but only for the national team, while this was not the case. As such, the inspectors kept conducting internet research, while officially this should be outsourced to another department. As a consequence, it seems that the room for interpretation is forced even beyond the boundaries within the international team.

Within this context, R10 would like to see that she could make home visits and request tax returns without interference of the client. These aspects are often key factors within inspections, but house visits are not allowed anymore due to internal UWV policy. Besides, tax returns must first be requested from the client due to the General Data Protection Regulation. On the other hand, she would like to see stricter

policies regarding archiving. Right now, often unnecessary information is archived, which is viewed as redundant by the inspector. Likewise, she feels that information regarding license plates is too easy to request and obtain. The experience of types of ambiguities is more nuanced than the other inspectors. In some cases, where more leeway regarding, for example, requesting tax returns would be granted, ambiguity is experienced as desirable because it benefits the inspection. In other cases, where ambiguity leads to redundant archiving and privacy violation, ambiguity is experienced as undesirable. In the end, no unequivocal experience of ambiguity could be identified.

4.3.3. The Enforcers' experience of ambiguity

The inspectors with the main role conception of the enforcer are all NVWA inspectors. Regarding the open standards within the intervention policies, R1 states that interpreting such an open standard can be difficult at times, but that having no room for interpretation in such a case is worse. The difficult part of interpreting open standards is that substantiating a violation in the report becomes complicated, as the inspector has to argue credibly that there is a violation at hands. Though, overall R1 feels that leaving such open standards open for interpretation is necessary for the work as an inspector. As such, R1 experiences this vague type of ambiguity as desirable and even necessary:

> *"You have to go and see if the animal is bothered by the fact that is has no water. Well, then you get the tricky stuff. On the one hand, the moment you establish a standard and you say there must be 25 liters of water, you limit everything and everyone. There is no room for tailor-made inspections. On the other hand, interpreting the open standard does make the inspection a lot more difficult." (R1)*

This inspector also mentioned the conflicting type of ambiguity of European regulations, as European regulations sometimes conflict with each other or with national regulations. While he acknowledges that these conflicting regulations can be difficult to work with, there is no sign of the inspector experiencing this as undesirable. He adds that the national regulations often are already stricter than European regulations regarding veterinary medicines, which is why it does not cause any major implementation problems.

The other two enforcers, R2 and R5, feel stronger about, in their case, negative experience of ambiguity. Both feel that it is desirable to minimalize the room for interpretation in order to promote uniformity in the work of inspectors. R2 is an inspector concerned with the field of fertilizers. Early on in the conversation he states that there are no open standards nor room for interpretation within his work. When asked whether there is there is room for tailor-made approaches, this is his answer:

> *"Yes, that room exists. However, that room is established by all those protocols and intervention policies that also exist behind it. Yes, that makes it more difficult. And makes it less easy to give it your own twist. But that's something good." (R2)*

The inspector emphasizes that decreasing possibilities for customization is important, in order to ensure uniformity among inspectors. He does mention that it can be distressing at times when a hobby farmer is fined the same amount of money as a large company. Nevertheless, he quickly states that the rules are still determinative. Later, the inspector dropped into the conversation that there is still one often discussed topic, namely that of the retrieval of information in order for them to inspect their client. The policies fail to mention in what way this information should be gathered, but this inspector sees that as what makes his work challenging. He mentions that it would be impossible to make a manual for that and this should not be strived for. The types of ambiguity within his work are experienced as undesirable insofar it jeopardizes the uniformity, which corresponds somewhat to the expectation of the enforcer experiencing ambiguity as undesirable if it hinders them from understanding the spirit of the policy. In

this case, however, is hinders the inspector from living up to the spirit of the policy. Ambiguity is experienced as desirable with regards to the gathering of relevant information, which leads to increasing the chances of catching the frauds, as it allows the inspector more leeway in gathering the relevant information in order to identify the frauds better.

The inspector agreeing with R2, R5, is the inspector who is involved with shaping the internal policies at the NVWA. The inspector stresses that room for interpretation is minimalized as much as possible, precisely because every inspector interprets policies differently:

"It is difficult because of uniformity. Like I said, some [inspectors] are stricter than others. One is more inclined to say with such an open standard that it is sufficient. The other one says no immediate [transportation of animals] is within an hour. By letting inspectors interpret open standards, you get different interpretations and different interventions. This is very difficult for the client as they cannot prepare for it. They do not know when they will receive which intervention, if there would be a deviation. So that makes the legal certainty for the client very difficult." (R5)

This inspector experiences ambiguity as undesirable for the same reason as R2, in order to maintain uniformity, i.e. to live up to the spirit of the policies. There is no indication that he experiences ambiguity as desirable if it increases the chances of catching the frauds, which could be due to him not being an actual inspector at the time being, but being concerned with the formulation of policies. Overall, these enforcers match up reasonably with the expectations. Ambiguity is experienced as undesirable when it hinders living up to the spirit of policies, in these cases uniformity, instead of hindering the inspectors in understanding the spirit of policies. And some ambiguity, in the shape of open standards or the process of gathering information, is experienced as desirable if it increases the chances of catching the frauds.

4.3.4. The All at Once's experience of ambiguity

While there was no expectation set out for the all at once inspectors, it is still a type experiencing ambiguity. These inspectors were nuanced in their role conception and appeared to be equally as nuanced in their experience of ambiguity. The all at once NVWA inspector quickly stated that open standards were necessary for his work and that they are left open for a reason. For him, the open standards are part of the inspector's professionalism. Even though, as he acknowledges, it sometimes further complicates matters or may jeopardize uniformity, he would not want to minimalize these open standards. After further questioning, the inspector does not provide more detailed information. In the end, the inspector does not seem to have strong feelings about the open standards like some of his colleagues, but does appreciate them. As this inspector favors open standards over no open standards, it seems he slightly tends to experience ambiguity as desirable, but not convincingly.

The other inspector is somewhat more vocal regarding his experience of ambiguity within his work:

"Look, I'm just trying to look at where the possibilities are. And yes, sometimes you are told off, you shouldn't have done it that way, but it was a nice try. […] Unless you really go above and beyond all limits, naturally you will be whistled back at some point, but if you give it a try once in a while to find out how far you can go. And then just take one or two steps beyond, to see what happens. In that respect, we have plenty of opportunities to give your own interpretation to your work." (R9)

This inspector indicates that he appreciates the given room for interpretation as well and even pushes against the limits thereof. At the same time, he feels one should not be surprised to be told off when going above and beyond all limits. More than once he emphasizes the importance of common sense. He feels it should be clear when leeway is granted or not. In the case of following a client, he finds it terrible

that the following of a client needs to be described as following the car. In the end, this inspector seems to be gravitating towards experiencing ambiguity as desirable, as he is still looking to push against the limits of the given room for interpretation. Overall, these inspectors tend to carefully lean towards experiencing ambiguity as desirable.

4.4. Acts in response to ambiguity

Within this the street-level bureaucracy literature, acts in response to ambiguity have not been researched before. This part provides a first overview of the encountered acts in response to ambiguity on the basis of the inspectors' main role conceptions. Remarkably, all inspectors turned out to give the same answer at first, namely that of deliberation. Deliberation was most often referred to and was mentioned by inspectors who all hold different main role conceptions. Therefore, deliberation with either peers, a supervisor or an expert seems to be a common act in response to ambiguity, regardless of one's main role conception. Some acts, however, are characteristic for the types of inspectors:

Main role conception	*Acts in response to ambiguity*
The Indifferents	Search for additional information, such as scientific evidence or jurisprudence
	Implement ambiguous policy based on previous experiences
The Caregivers	Consult the legal advice department
	Deliberately push against the policy's boundary or cross it
The Enforcers	Search for additional information, such as scientific evidence
	Further board up the work instructions and policies
The All at Once's	Use common sense
	Deliberately push against the policy's boundary

Table 7. Acts in response to ambiguity per main role conception

The indifferents experienced ambiguity overall as undesirable and fit within the expectation of them aiming to reduce it as much as possible. The acts in response of ambiguity of deliberation with peers, supervisors and experts and searching for additional information fit well with their experience of ambiguity. As the indifferent aims to reduce ambiguity, the search for a better delineation from either deliberation or additional information is a way to do so. The act of implementing the ambiguous policy based on previous experience is also an act in search of stability. The indifferent may feel compelled to rely on previous experiences, hoping this leads to the best result.

The caregivers mostly experienced ambiguity as desirable, though R10 displayed mixed feelings about different types of ambiguities, corresponding reasonably to the expectation. Though, the caregivers did not experience ambiguity as desirable in order to be able to be more responsive towards their clients. Nonetheless, their acts in response to ambiguity seem to correspond with the caregiving characteristics. Often, they are consulting their legal advice department to make sure what they want to do is allowed. This could be justified by the fact that typical caregivers tend to exploit more resources when they feel it is needed, though a possible cause of the act of consulting with legal advice is not yet apparent from these interviews. The act of deliberately pushing against the boundaries or even crossing them, corresponds better with the typical caregivers' characteristics. As caregivers experience ambiguity as

desirable, they will want to make the best use of the granted leeway within their work. Pushing against the boundaries and sometimes even crossing them fits this line of argumentation well.

The enforcers experienced ambiguity as undesirable when it hindered living up to the spirit of policies, and some types of ambiguity as desirable if it increased the chances of catching the frauds. While it was expected that the enforcer could either experience ambiguity as undesirable and desirable, the reason for this differed from the expectation. The search for additional information, like the indifferent, could arise from the need for better delineation in order to better live up to the spirit of policies. However, the cause for this act in response to ambiguity also remained unclear. And the act of further boarding up policies was only mentioned by R5, who is also in the position of affecting policies as he is no longer a NVWA inspector like the other inspectors. Though, it fits with the part of the typical enforcer experiencing ambiguity as undesirable, leading to the inspector wanting to minimalize ambiguity.

The all at once's were the most moderate in their experience of ambiguity among all inspectors. They do, however, slightly experience ambiguity as desirable and tend to favor this above boarded up policies. In line with their moderate attitude by nature, both inspectors replied to types of ambiguity that inspectors "should just use their common sense". What exactly this meant for these inspectors, remained below the surface. It appeared to be that as long inspectors act within the set borders of policies, there is no need to worry at all. In line with this, one inspector stated that pushing against the policy's boundaries is the best way to act in response to types of ambiguity, because it allows you to sense what is and what is not accepted by supervisors. This way, an inspector is not at risk of breaking the rules.

5. Conclusion and discussion

The aim of this study was to explore how street-level bureaucrats with differing role conceptions experience ambiguity and act in response to this experienced ambiguity. In order to answer this question, broad expectations regarding three archetypes of role conceptions had been drawn up. Subsequently, 10 in-depth interviews with street-level bureaucrats were conducted regarding their role conceptions, experiences with ambiguity and their acts in response to this. Inspectors from two different organizations, the NVWA and the UWV, were selected as respondents to ensure a more extensive collection of qualitative data. In addition to the exploration of street-level bureaucrats' role conceptions and their experience of ambiguity, this study has attempted to provide a stepping stone for future research regarding the acts of street-level bureaucrats in response to experienced ambiguity.

It has become evident that street-level bureaucrats fulfill their duties in different ways, depending on their personal characteristics. In this research, the role conceptions of street-level bureaucrats were the starting point. It appeared that street-level bureaucrats experienced ambiguity mostly in line with their role conception as expected. It says mostly, as the set expectations were not fulfilled in every respect. For instance, the street-level bureaucrats with the main role conception of the caregiver indeed experienced ambiguity as desirable, but gave no clues that this was in order to be more responsive towards their clients. Likewise, the street-level bureaucrats with the main role conception of the enforcer indeed sometimes experienced ambiguity as undesirable, but only when it hindered them in living up to the spirit of the policy instead of hindering them in understanding the spirit of the policy. These deviations from the expectations may be related to, for instance, the street-level bureaucrats' secondary role conception or the way of arriving at the broad expectations within the theoretical framework. The street-level bureaucrats with the main role conception of the indifferent did meet the expectation of them experiencing ambiguity as undesirable and aiming to reduce it.

The different types of ambiguity set out, vague and conflicting policy, appear to make little to no difference in the street-level bureaucrats' experience of ambiguity. Overall, the street-level bureaucrats mostly gave examples of vague policy. It might be that conflicting policies are indeed less present within the work of street-level bureaucrats. However, as this research was dependent on the first-person accounts of street-level bureaucrats, it might also be that conflicting policies actually are present, but were not worth mentioning by the street-level bureaucrats. To find out whether it makes a difference in the street-level bureaucrats' experience of ambiguity whether a policy is vague or conflicting, further research would be needed. In addition, some respondents claimed there were no signs of ambiguity within their work. It could be the case they indeed find themselves within areas with minimal ambiguity, but it could also be that at this point they have already internalized their ways of dealing with ambiguity. For this reason, it would be valuable to also conduct research not based on the first-person accounts of street-level bureaucrats.

Regarding the last part of the research question, one act turned out to be a response to ambiguity of every inspector within the study. Deliberation with peers, supervisors or experts appeared to be an act in response to experienced ambiguity, regardless of the street-level bureaucrats' role conception. Other acts seemed to be in line with the characteristics of the street-level bureaucrats' differing role conceptions, although it needs further research whether the acts are actually typical of these street-level bureaucrats and their main role conception. After all, this research could only include ten in-depth interviews, which could mean that these acts happen to belong to these certain street-level bureaucrats.

As is the case with every research, this research is faced with some limitations. First, the respondents have been selected as a matter of convenience. As a result, the respondents within each organization were direct colleagues from each other, male, middle-aged and have been working for more than ten years within their organization. As street-level bureaucrats go through various socialization processes when entering and working within an organization, seniority is likely to have an impact on the way street-level bureaucrats experience ambiguity and act in response to it. For instance, it seems plausible that a street-level bureaucrat who has recently joined the workforce is less likely to push against or cross the boundaries of policies. More elaborate research connecting street-level bureaucrats and their role conceptions to the experience of ambiguity, including more diverse respondents, could provide for this.

Second, while the street-level bureaucrats' role conceptions have an impact on the way ambiguity is experienced, other aspects will undoubtedly also have an impact. The core task a street-level bureaucrat is expected to carry out also matters for the decision-making of street-level bureaucrats. Along these lines, it could be that the experience of ambiguity of street-level bureaucrats differs as they are tasked with different core tasks. Within this research, all of the street-level bureaucrats with the main role conception of the enforcer were NVWA inspectors. And all of the bureaucrats with the main role conception of the caregiver were UWV inspectors. Their experience of ambiguity could be co-dependent on the core task the street-level bureaucrat is carrying out. In line with this, the type of knowledge relevant in a street-level bureaucrats' work might matter as well. Whether it is most important to have people skills or technical knowledge within a field of work might make a difference in how ambiguity is experienced as well.

In sum, the street-level bureaucrats with differing role conceptions experience ambiguity mostly as expected and their acts in response to ambiguity seem to also be related to the street-level bureaucrats' role conceptions. As a result of this explorative study, it is likely that further research into these relationships is going to be meaningful. There are several important lines of future research. First, it is valuable to further look into the explanatory power of role conceptions, especially combinations of main and secondary role conceptions. Second, regarding the experience of ambiguity, it should be examined whether the distinction between vague and conflicting types of ambiguity should even be made or whether this distinction is negligible. Third, it is necessary to further explore patterns in acts in response to ambiguity by means of a more diverse group of respondents and other organizational contexts. With more research regarding these concepts, eventually better coordination between organization and street-level bureaucrat can be obtained, which ultimately would benefit the clients.

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Appendix I – Interview Guide

Introduction

- Introduction of myself and thank them for taking time out of their day
- Explain I am conducting this interview for my thesis
- Emphasize again that their identity and everything said is kept anonymous confidential
- Ask again if it is okay whether the interview may be recorded
- Ask the respondent whether they can give a short introduction of themselves

General questions

- How would you describe the overall goal of NVWA / UWV?
- What do you find most important in your work?
- At what point do you feel that you have done your job well?

Role conceptions

- Do you treat every case equally?
- What is the role of clients' personal circumstances during an inspection?
- Can you easily shake off any severe personal circumstances of your client?
- Is there a high focus on efficiency within your work?
- Are there certain targets that must be met?
- Do you have a specific time frame within which you must wrap up a case?

- Do you feel a personal connection with the client in a case?
- Do you ever take extra steps to help a client with difficult personal circumstances?
- Do situations arise where you have to spend extra time on a case? If so, can you give an example?
- How would you describe the relationship with a client?
- Do you have enough resources, such as time, to pay attention to a case the way you want?

- What role do rules, guidelines, laws and such play in your work?
- Do you feel responsible to enforce the rules as closely as possible? Why?
- Do you ever deviate from the rules and such because something else would better embody the idea behind the rule?
- Is there ever a feeling of suspicion in a case?
- Do you feel a great sense of justice while working a case?

Types of ambiguity

- Can you tell me more about the types of policies, regulations, rules and such that are leading you in your work?
- Is it clear from the formulation of the policies, regulations, rules and such what is expected from you in most cases?
- Is there opportunity for tailor-made approaches while working a case?
- Are there parts of policies that are more or less open to interpretation?

- Is there a shared understanding among inspectors of what a policy allowing for interpretation entails?
- Do you have the feeling that you are weighing different rules against each other during your work?

Experience of ambiguity

- Is there room to interpret policies, rules, guidelines and such in a way that you think the goal is best achieved?
- Do you think there is too little / too much room for customization per case within your work?
- How do you feel about having to interpret the ‘letters on paper’ yourself in such a situation?
- If there is any room for interpretation, are you happy to use it?
- Do you feel that this room for interpretation jeopardizes other goals?
- What do you think of the conflicting objectives of such policies?

Acts in response to ambiguity

- Could you give an example of such a situation wherein you have to determine a line of action yourself?
- What can you, as an inspector, do in such a situation?
- How do you resolve such conflicts within your work?
- What do you do in such a situation?

Wrapping up

- Indicate that I think I have enough information
- Ask them if they still have any questions or want to elaborate on something
- Thank them for their cooperation and time again