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To cite this article: Vidar Bakkeli (2022): Handling Tensions in Frontline Policy Implementation: Legitimizing, Interpreting, and Shielding a Disruptive Intervention, International Journal of Public Administration, DOI: [10.1080/01900692.2021.2009856](https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2021.2009856)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2021.2009856>



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Published online: 05 Jan 2022.



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Handling Tensions in Frontline Policy Implementation: Legitimizing, Interpreting, and Shielding a Disruptive Intervention

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ABSTRACT

Policy implementation in public frontline service organizations is characterized by tensions between old and new institutional configurations. This study explores how frontline supervisors handled tensions when implementing a disruptive activation service intervention in local Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration agencies. The empirical analysis is based on in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in two frontline organizations from 2017 to 2018. The study identifies three main strategies that supervisors enacted to handle tensions surrounding the intervention: legitimizing, interpreting, and shielding. The findings highlight the specific activities through which frontline supervisors contribute to policymaking in the frontline.

KEYWORDS

Frontline supervisors; institutional change; activation; managers; street-level bureaucracy

Introduction



Implementation of new policies and reforms continues to be a central topic in public administration and management (Christensen & Laegreid, 2017; Hill & Hupe, 2014). Evidence-based standards, guidelines, policy pilots and interventions are increasingly introduced in these organizations, contributing to pluralism and complexity (Boaz et al., 2019; Denis et al., 2015). Seen from an institutional perspective, managing policy implementation in these pluralistic contexts involves “effort in the face of resistance” (Cloutier et al., 2015, p. 262), as interventions and reforms can create tensions between established institutional rules, norms, and practices, and the new solutions (Hupe & Hill, 2016; Lowndes, 2005; Rice, 2013).


Moving beyond views of policy implementation as top-down “a-political administrative activity” (Hupe & Hill, 2016, p. 104), there is an emerging literature focusing on the influence of public managers as policymakers and institutional change agents in public frontline service organizations (Cloutier et al., 2015; Cooper & Kitchener, 2019; Howlett, 2011; McDermott et al., 2013; Meza & Moreno-Jaimes, 2020; Saguin & Palotti, 2020; Wimmelman et al., 2018). For example, McDermott et al. (2013) argued that managers, when translating policy interventions into service delivery, adapt and add to policies. While several studies have focused on office managers (i.e., chief executive officers of frontline organizations; Gassner & Gofen, 2018) and

middle managers (Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016), there is a need for in-depth studies exploring the role of *frontline supervisors* in policy implementation, i.e. “the lowest tier of management” (Gassner & Gofen, 2018, p. 554). There is still a limited understanding of the actual work these non-elite organizational actors do when translating, embedding, interpreting, and stabilizing new policies and interventions in the local organizational context (Bjerregaard & Jonasson, 2014; Gestel et al., 2020; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016).

To add to this literature, this article explores how frontline supervisors handle tensions between old and new institutional configurations when implementing a disruptive intervention in two public frontline service organizations. Drawing on institutional theory, the article explores how they navigate contradictions and ambiguities when implementing the intervention in daily service delivery (Bjerregaard & Jonasson, 2014; Cloutier et al., 2015; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). The focus on tensions is useful for exploring policymaking, agency, and change from a bottom-up, institutional perspective. The study poses the following research question: How do frontline supervisors handle tensions when implementing a policy intervention?

To understand this, the article draws on an in-depth, inductive, and explorative case study from two Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration (NAV) offices, where frontline supervisors within the program “In-house Follow-up” implemented an evidence-based

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 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2021.2009856>

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activation service intervention called Individual Placement and Support (IPS) (Drake et al., 2012). Activation work involves practices to motivate, assist, broker, negotiate, and compel clients with diverse problems into the labor market. The intervention introduced comprehensive, resource-intensive employment follow-up services for vulnerable clients with complex needs. The study includes interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2018.

The study contributes to the literature on policy implementation in frontline service organizations by centering on the “doings” of embedding new policies and interventions in frontline practice. Although the frontline supervisors implemented a rigid, standardized intervention, they were active actors who interpreted and added to policy goals and mandates while drawing on contextual and professional knowledge. Three specific strategies that the supervisors used to handle tensions were identified: legitimating, interpreting, and shielding. The findings also suggest that increasing legitimacy surrounding the intervention also strengthened their position, as the most knowledgeable actor regarding the specific method. Overall, the findings highlight the importance of the bi-directional, situated, and local organizational dynamics involved in frontline policy implementation.

Policy implementation and frontline supervisors

In the practice fields and in the scholarly literature, there is a widespread view of policy implementation as a largely rational, linear process (Hupe & Hill, 2016). For example, implementation of guidelines and evidence-based standards is mainly understood as linear, top-down, and mechanistic knowledge-to-action processes (Hjelmar & Møller, 2016; Wimmelman et al., 2018). In contrast, the street-level bureaucracy literature views policy implementation from a bottom-up perspective, highlighting how policies become realities on the ground through street-level workers’ discretionary decision-making when interacting with clients, in organizational contexts with multiple demands, organizational constraints, and limited resources (Lipsky, 1980/2010).

While managers were until recently mainly considered as loyal “transmitters” and administrators of top-down organizational policy and goals (Evans, 2010, 2016; Sabatier, 1986), an emerging literature – mainly focusing on top and mid-level managers – explore how managers enact active roles, contributing to policymaking, institutional change, and influencing service delivery (Cooper & Kitchener, 2019; Gassner & Gofen, 2018; McDermott et al., 2013; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). Examining the institutional work of managers

implementing reforms, Cloutier et al. (2015) highlighted how they actively navigate tensions and contradictions by developing shared understandings with stakeholders and collaborators, connecting policy visions to concrete service practices, and developing new capabilities and procedures in the frontline. Other studies have underlined how different professional orientations and framings influence the ways local “policy workers” translate and implement guideline interventions (Wimmelman et al., 2018), and how middle managers assess and rework policy goals in everyday activities when embedding interventions and new practices in teams (Cooper & Kitchener, 2019).

Moving a step down the managerial ladder, this article focuses on frontline supervisors, situated between top and middle managers above and frontline staff below. Central tasks include supervising frontline workers, prioritizing tasks, staff motivation, monitoring performance, and improving communication in the organization. They can have strong professional identity, similar professional backgrounds as frontline staff, and personal frontline experience working with clients. Several studies have underlined their central role in policy implementation, e.g., by influencing frontline staff to identify with organizational goals and policies (Brewer, 2005; Sandfort, 2000), and as role models influencing staff attitudes towards clients (Keulemans & Groeneveld, 2019).

Based on a review of public management and street-level literature on frontline supervisors, Hupe and Keiser (2019) conceptualized three mechanisms by which supervisors contribute to policymaking in frontline organizations. First, frontline supervisors influence policy in the organization by creating “implementation patterns” as they filter and interpret rules (i.e., “action prescriptions” or norms that guide behavior) downward to frontline staff, upward to office managers, and outward by channeling information from outside actors and networks. Supervisors filter rules down to frontline staff in five ways: (1) passing, in which formal rules are conveyed to subordinates; (2) strengthening, in which the supervisor adds rules before conveying them to staff; (3) translating, in which certain rules are prioritized more than others; (4) buffering, in which the supervisor blocks certain rules by not conveying them; and (5) countering, in which the supervisor takes an active stance and speaks up to organizational superiors (i.e., when disagreeing with rules).

The literature provides valuable insights into the active policymaking roles of managers in frontline public service organizations, but it is not without limitations. While several studies have explored higher level and middle managers, few have examined frontline supervisors and their activities when implementing policies in frontline

public service organizations. In particular, less is known about how organizational actors stabilize new solutions within organizations (Gestel et al., 2020; Radaelli & Sitton-Kent, 2016). To contribute to this literature, we focus on the situated practices of frontline supervisors implementing an evidence-based intervention in public frontline service organizations.

An institutional perspective

The article draws on institutional theory combined with a practice perspective to examine the practical activities of frontline supervisors implementing a policy intervention promoting individualized activation practices (Bjerregaard & Jonasson, 2014; Cloutier et al., 2015; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Institutions can be defined as “a relatively stable collection of rules and practices, embedded in structures of resources that make action possible [...] and structures of meaning that explain and justify behavior-roles, identities and belongings, common purposes, and causal and normative beliefs” (March & Olsen, 2008, p. 691). In simplified terms, institutions are the “rules of the game” (Kraatz & Block, 2008, p. 243) that direct organizational behavior, where new interventions represent a new set of rules.

A central turn within institutional theory was centering attention away from institutions per se toward the “purposive action” involved in creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), emphasizing the role of actors and agency in institutional change processes (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). This involves examining how institutionalized meanings and practices are sustained, reproduced, translated, and transformed through the activities of individuals and organizations in local situations (Barley, 2008; Bjerregaard & Jonasson, 2014; Cloutier et al., 2015; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Specifically, the practice perspective allows centering the level of analysis on the everyday work of actors, as well as the actions, interactions, and negotiations between multiple local actors (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Implementing new policies and interventions can be understood as “deliberate institutional change” (Cloutier et al., 2015, p. 261), aimed at changing the rules, practices, and structures of meaning within a field of activity (e.g., a public frontline service organization). Through specific activities and strategies, organizational actors translate policy ideas into frontline practice, actively interpreting ideas and policies when embedding these in their organizational contexts (Boxenbaum, 2006; Cloutier et al., 2015).

Organizations that are characterized by institutional pluralism (i.e., multiple objectives, diffuse power, and knowledge-based work processes; Denis et al., 2007, p. 180) participate in several “games” at the same time. This creates tensions and contradictions between the different rule sets (Lowndes, 2005). The work of implementing theoretical policy templates into concrete frontline actions and practices is “fragmented, localized, and contingent” (Cloutier et al., 2015, p. 269); it involves confrontations with existing values, interests, and structures and resistance from stakeholders with other preferences.

In sum, this study draws on institutional theory from organization studies, following calls to incorporate organizational perspectives in public administration research, particularly when studying implementation (Denis et al., 2015). This conceptual grounding, combining institutional and the practice perspective, enables attentiveness to the more mundane, everyday activities that organizational actors perform when implementing policies. Organizational tensions and contradictions are conceptualized as ruptures between different rule sets, encompassing identities, norms, regulations, and meanings.

Research setting

The Norwegian frontline NAV offices provide an ideal context to investigate the activities of supervisors implementing a disruptive policy intervention in a complex, pluralistic organizational environment. They are integrated one-stop shops, providing social assistance, social security, employment services, and various other social services (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2011; Klemsdal & Kjekshus, 2021). They are situated within a layered, hierarchical government organization, and structured as a local partnership between the state and municipalities (Fossestøl et al., 2015). Due to a municipal reform and intermunicipal collaboration, the number of offices was reduced from 423 to 326 offices from 2017 to 2019 (Fossestøl et al., 2020).

The intervention implemented in the case offices was a part of the government-initiated program “In-house Follow-up”. The main policy goals with the program was to strengthen user involvement, develop experience with in-house services, improve work-oriented services, and enhance frontline work practices (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015, 2016). The intervention introduced a new frontline worker role called “employment specialist”. They provide intensive, individualized, flexible, and personal employment support to clients with complex needs while developing direct relationships

with employers and providing workplace support for clients according to Supported Employment (SE) principles (European Union of Supported Employment [EUSE], 2010). The services were structured by fidelity-scale frameworks — either the IPS fidelity scale (Drake et al., 2012) or a modified scale developed centrally in the NAV, based on a combination of IPS and SE principles. The evidence-based IPS fidelity scale has 25 points that defines many features of the service at different levels, including organization, team, and frontline work practices. By the end of 2019, employment specialists had been introduced in approximately 110 of 326 NAV offices (Bakkeli et al., 2020). The offices had autonomy to decide whether to implement these services.

Frontline supervisors responsible for implementation faced contradictions between the intervention and existing organizational frameworks, procedures, norms, and beliefs, see also table included in the Appendix. The intervention introduced a set of new rules, as employment specialists did not follow standardized procedures, ICT-systems, and tools, but adhered to the distinct fidelity scale guidelines. The new frontline role represented a shift from generalist counsellors with broad tasks and large caseloads (between 45 and 130 clients in the two case offices) to a specialized role with low caseloads (max 20 clients). The content of the work differed significantly, shifting from nationally standardized procedural tools and client classification schemes to new boundary-spanning and brokerage practices involving employer engagement (Ingold, 2018). The intervention entailed a radical shift away from the standard workflow in the organization, from a purchase-provider model where counsellors referred clients to external service providers, to an integrated, in-house service involving comprehensive, long-term client follow-up. The intervention also introduced a set of new policy ideals that challenged existing beliefs and norms among staff and managers, moving towards strong individualization, user centeredness, and empowerment.

Methods and data

Qualitative research combining ethnographic fieldwork and interviews was used to inductively study policy implementation in the NAV offices. The data were derived from interviews from a period of almost 2 years (January 2017 to December 2018), as well as short-term ethnographic fieldwork carried out by the author. The two case organizations were selected based on expectations that they would have rich experiences with service development and innovation processes. At the time of the fieldwork, both organizations also had several years of experience implementing SE and IPS as

part of their services. This study focused particularly on implementation of the In-house Follow-up team in the offices, from 2017 and onwards. Office A was located in a rural municipality with below 60 employees, while Office B was in an urban municipality with under 200 employees. Both offices had two employment specialist teams. The IPS team had clients with mental health problems who were referred from municipal and specialist mental health services outside NAV, while the “In-house Follow-up” team worked with broader target groups, including immigrants, youth, and people with health problems and/or substance abuse issues. Approval for the research project was granted by the Norwegian Ombudsman for Research at the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

Semi-structured interviews (a total of 69 interviews with 51 informants) were conducted with office managers, middle managers, supervisors, other team leaders, counsellors, and employment specialists. In this article, the main focus is on the four frontline supervisors responsible for implementing the intervention in the two organizations. Key informants such as frontline supervisors were interviewed several times throughout the fieldwork period, some of them up to four times. The purpose of these repeated interviews was to gather data about organizational development processes over time, gain a rich understanding of informants’ situated experiences and viewpoints, and revisit topics from earlier interviews in greater detail. Interviews with other actors were used to identify organizational tensions and contradictions. Interviews with managers and supervisors focused on their role, work tasks, experiences with implementing SE and IPS and concrete experiences with other organizational change processes (e.g., digitalization, reorganization). Interviews with frontline staff focused on experiences in their roles as counsellors and employment specialists, how they solved work tasks, experienced everyday life in the organization, and views on service development (Table 1).

The fieldwork comprised a total of 30 days in the two case offices. The author spent 15 days in office A in late autumn 2017 and 15 days in office B in spring 2018. Fieldwork included observing daily life in the organizations, participating in team meetings, and following employment specialists as they traveled to the local community and met with employers and clients.

Data analysis

Fieldwork, interviews, and subsequent data analyses were done within an interpretivist approach (i.e., focusing on the situated understandings of the actors

Table 1. Interviews.

Status	Office A (# informants)	# Interviews	Office B (# informants)	# Interviews
Management	Top managers (2)	4	Top managers (2)	5
	Middle managers (3)	3	Middle managers (1)	1
	Supervisors (3)	6	Supervisors, team leaders (4)	8
Frontline staff	Counsellors (8)	10	Counsellors (11)	11
	Employment specialists (8)	8	Employment specialists (9)	13
Total	24	31	27	38

in the field; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011). The analysis initially focused on service development and the use of manuals in the services. The focus on tensions in the organization and the situated work practices of frontline supervisors became clearer throughout the research process. An inductive research strategy that lets theory emerge from data is consistent with persuasive use of case studies.

The first step of the analysis involved coding the interviews in NVivo software, mainly working from detailed codes to broader, thematic categories through several iterative rounds (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The second step was within-case analysis, and an extensive report was written for each case. Third, using approaches from Miles et al. (2014), two within-case tables were made (case dynamics matrix) that focused on tensions in the offices and how supervisors approached these tensions. These tables were combined in a cross-case table that laid out similarities and differences between the cases. The final step of the analysis involved incorporating thematic categories, case reports, cross-case tables, and perspectives from prior literature. This led to the development of three categories of supervisor strategies: legitimating, interpreting, and shielding. Simplified tables presenting tensions and strategies with illustrative quotes are included in the Appendix. A strategy is understood as “a pattern, in a stream of actions” (Touati et al., 2019, p. 471), focusing on the specific activities of actors. The main emphasis when presenting results is on commonalities across the two cases, although key differences are also noted. The aim of the study was primarily to contribute to new theoretical insights through the analysis of rich, contextualized data, rather than drawing conclusions from these cases as representative of policy implementation processes elsewhere.

Findings

Legitimizing

One of the main organizational tensions in both offices was related to the intervention’s clashing with existing procedures, routines, and workflows. While existing

workflows were structured around larger client portfolios and client referrals to external activation providers, the intervention involved individualized, in-house follow-up. Actors at the local and regional levels in NAV were critical of the resource-intensive nature of the intervention, arguing that working in the usual standardized way (i.e., larger client groups and higher volumes) was more efficient: “There is discontent on the house about all the focus on Supported Employment, forgetting the others. Most here work with ‘the great mass’ right, have many clients” (Team leader, office B). In office B, redirecting staff and resources to the intervention created tensions in other teams, since those teams experienced increased workloads.

Faced with these tensions, the supervisors enacted legitimating strategies to increase support for the intervention, to counter skepticism among local actors, and to move past contradictions between the intervention and the organization. A central legitimating strategy by frontline supervisors was to promote certain problem understandings in the organization and connect these problems with the intervention as a solution. They characterized NAV as a bureaucratic, rigid system, “a mastodont organization, huge, slow and bureaucratic” (Supervisor, office B) with “really weird management rules” (Supervisor, office A). Drawing on personal frontline experience, they criticized the standard, one-size-fits-all service model towards large client target groups, and emphasized problems caused by outsourcing services to external providers. They were critical of lacking attention to (evidence-based) knowledge: “Everybody really wants to do as they feel like [...] It’s been like this in NAV, there’s a lot of enthusiasts and happy-go-lucky projects, but do they have any effect? No one actually asks for this, that’s quite scary” (Supervisor, office A). These problem framings resonated among other actors in the organization, as many managers, team leaders, and counsellors were also frustrated by bureaucratic proceduralism, the lack of client involvement, and problems with external activation providers.

To solve these problems, supervisors argued for the importance of moving towards more radical forms of service individualization in order to provide substantial help to clients with complex needs. As

participants in different organizational arenas and processes (e.g., office manager group meetings, weekly team meetings, work groups), they channeled views and connected problems with solutions. They highlighted the importance of focusing on “what works,” emphasizing the importance of evidence-based knowledge, results, and outcomes in service development. Since considerable research showed positive effects of the intervention, it was vital to implement the intervention according to guidelines in order to reach high fidelity to the model. Ensuring appropriate work practices was central: “We know that if you work well and professionally, follow the method, you will get results” (Supervisor, office B).

A related legitimization strategy found in both cases was to communicate that the intervention worked in the local context. This was important because the services claimed considerable resources, and if they did not deliver, office managers could shut them down and use resources elsewhere: “You need to get results, without results there’s no point” (Supervisor, office A). One way of doing this was to promote circulation of “success stories” in the offices. For example, employment specialists participating in counsellor team meetings told stories. The “barista story” appeared in several interviews in office A: “You heard about the coffee roaster? It’s really a success story. The young man who sat within the four walls of his house, on disability pension, and didn’t dare to go out. But he was genuinely interested in burning coffee at home, and the employment specialist said: ‘Let’s take a trip to the city’. And then he got a job, [...] it’s really great.” (Counsellor, office A). These narratives underlined how the new way of working related to the intervention was particularly successful in helping clients with complex problems.

A different tension in the two offices arose from the intervention clashing with existing beliefs and mindsets among staff. Supervisors framed beliefs and assumptions counsellors had about clients as a problem: “[Counsellors] walk around in the same ‘porridge,’ the large caseload you never get through, all the complaints, so it’s easy to become negative” (Supervisor, office B). The solution in both offices was to “work with attitudes” in order to legitimate the new way of working: “We need to keep focusing on attitudes, like almost weekly, what attitudes do we have towards each other, what attitudes do we have towards clients [...] this needs to be kept up all the time” (Supervisor, office A). In office B, a strategy to “turn attitudes around” involved inserting one employment specialist in each team: “We distribute them in the teams, and work actively to keep them there, this can change the mindset about who actually can succeed and who can’t, to use such terms.” (Supervisor,

office B). The goal of these efforts was to influence counsellor attitudes and strengthen policy ideals of service individualization (e.g., client-centeredness and empowerment).

Interpreting

The second way supervisors handled policy implementation tensions was through rule interpretation. Interpreting involves translating abstract guidelines into concrete frontline practices, e.g., when supervising, and channeling frontline experiences and concerns to office managers. There were significant tensions surrounding the new professional frontline role in both cases. To illustrate, we explore one central tension in office B more in detail. Supervisors and employment specialists had clashing views about how work should be done within the intervention. Supervisors argued that staff engaged too deeply in client cases, worked too broadly and performed too many NAV tasks (e.g., handling administrative issues). In contrast, the employment specialists emphasized how the role enabled them to work more comprehensively with each client and that this was central for achieving results. Nearly all had prior NAV experience and professional education in social and welfare work, and used professional resources and perspectives. This also involved working more holistically than the standard prescribed: “You really do a lot of things that are not counted, that you’re not supposed to do, but you see that you have to do them, right.” (Employment specialist, office B).

Here, supervisors influenced frontline practices through active and close supervision: “I need to get employment specialist to lay NAV things away. [...] let someone else take care of the noise. And then we can focus on employment” (Supervisor, office B). Based on their own knowledge and experience, they interpreted the intervention and translated this into local supervision practices. However, although the supervisors had a central role shaping frontline practice, there continued to be tensions between supervisors and staff in office B.

Another tension in both offices was difficulties with defining client intake criteria, a tension intensified by rising demand, lack of service capacity, and growing waiting lists. The in-house follow-up intervention had broad target groups, with youth and immigrants being prioritized. Counsellors on other teams referred different clients than the supervisors preferred. While counsellors in office A referred too many clients with lighter service needs and too few clients with complex service needs, counsellors in office B referred too many state clients (i.e., those receiving state-funded benefits) and

too few municipal clients (i.e., those receiving municipal social assistance). In office B, this was a problem since funding for the intervention mainly came from the municipal budget, and in order to maintain financial support, more municipal clients needed to be referred.

To alleviate these tensions, supervisors were engaged in discussions and organizational processes with other managers and teams, promoting their preferred solutions regarding intake criteria and routines: “The main point is that those who come in, should be people who need comprehensive follow-up, who actually have a need and struggle – either with mental health or other things. So we don’t use a lot of resources on those who really can manage on their own”. (Supervisor, office A). Their views centered around the ideal service for clients with complex service needs, as it was resource-intensive. In office B, office politics also entered into play, as supervisors needed to develop intake policies that underpinned further financial support from the municipality. Defining target groups and designing routines for accessing the service was a form of frontline policymaking where supervisors played a central role.

Supervisors also channeled interpretations, views, and experience from the frontline up to office managers: “They [office managers] listen to our advice, the advisory function we’ve had in the office has been appreciated all the time, they’re good at bringing in competency before making a decision” (Supervisor, case B). Office managers also trusted their expertise and professional knowledge, particularly regarding the intervention: “I’m not really close-up concerning what they need to do in order to follow the method. [The supervisor] has that role” (Office manager, office A). This support was likely an important condition for supervisors’ relatively autonomous position in the organizations, which enabled their influential role: “We have support that makes us able to create changes” (Supervisor, office B).

Shielding

A third central strategy among supervisors was handling tensions through shielding (i.e., efforts to protect the intervention, increase specialization, and buffer rules from the surrounding organization). In office A, there were tensions related to difficulties of establishing new roles and work practices within an environment characterized by existing identities and an institutionalized way of working. Initially, employment specialists were integrated into regular counsellor teams. According to the supervisor, they struggled to develop the new work tasks and role within the teams, being disturbed by

colleagues and the normal ways of doing things in the organization. Hence, the supervisor formed a specialized team: “Now all employment specialists will belong to the employment specialist team [...] this is based on the experience we’ve had” (Supervisor, office A). This shielding move separated the team from the wider organization and strengthened the boundaries around the intervention.

A related shielding strategy in office A was supervisors enacting a radical new hiring policy, specifically to avoid NAV influence on the new practices. Supervisors viewed earlier attempts at transforming NAV counsellors into employment specialists as problematic: “I think people here enjoy being counsellors, they don’t necessarily fit to be employment specialists [...] many who work in NAV have no understanding of the employer perspective” (Supervisor, office A). As a response, the supervisors started to only hire people with private sector backgrounds, prioritizing experience from business, recruitment, sales, and service, as well as personal abilities. These people had strong employer and work-life skills, and no NAV experience. This specific shielding strategy was only present in office A, as supervisors in office B aimed to integrate the service into other teams and mainly recruited former counsellors. With this move, supervisors in office A avoided the “NAV sickness” influencing the new practices that supervisors struggled with in office B. Hiring policies can be an important form of policymaking affecting frontline practices, e.g., by defining what competencies and skills are relevant (Rice, 2013).

Another tension involved pressure from office managers to rapidly increase service capacity in order to avoid waitlists and create better statistics from the intervention. This clashed with the view of supervisors who emphasized service quality and the importance of sticking to intervention principles. This tension was particularly visible in office B. Frontline supervisors argued that too rapid increase of workload would degrade service quality, negatively affect learning and performance, and clashed with the intervention: “My professional recommendation is to start with four and four users, otherwise you can’t do all the things you should, with time outside and so on.” (Supervisor, office B). The arguments supervisors used in these ongoing discussions referred to intervention rules and their own professional frontline experience. After several rounds, the supervisors mainly succeeded in maintaining the gradual approach to increasing caseloads, as top managers accepted the supervisors’ reasoning.

A tension present in both offices was contradictions between NAV procedural requirements and intervention guidelines. A specific example involves production of

documentation in client cases. There was frustration among counsellors about lack of documentation and reports for clients who received follow-up from employment specialists. Normally, counsellors referred clients to external activation providers who produced extensive individual reports to document activity and progress in each client case (e.g., regarding client work ability and need assessments; Gjersøe, 2020). However, intervention guidelines specified that employment specialists should concentrate on employment services and not documentation: “We should use 96% of our time on work-related things, so this means that 4% of our work week should be about reporting. Then, it’s kind of limited what you report” (Employment specialist, office A).

When handling these tensions, a central concern for the supervisors was avoiding excessive documentation tasks in the new service, as this would reduce the focus on core tasks. A supervisor in office B performed shielding by shifting the focus from lacking documentation practice within the intervention, to a matter of changing the mindset among other counsellors, emphasizing how integration and close collaboration would solve documentation challenges:

We need to think all new. [...] Need to “de-learn” the whole outsourcing mindset, right. Counsellors ask, ‘Will we get written feedback and reports?’ Then we say, no, we sit together with you. That’s so unfamiliar in NAV. We’re so used to buying a lot of services (Supervisor, office B)

Supervisors continuously navigated the needs of counsellors and the other teams while protecting employment specialists from NAV requirements. However, these tensions continued to exist over time and were experienced by both employment specialists and counsellors as added work pressure.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examines how frontline supervisors handled tensions when implementing a policy intervention in two frontline service organizations in Norway and discusses implications for understanding the roles of supervisors in frontline policy implementation in complex frontline organizations. The findings suggest that frontline supervisors handle tensions by enacting three main strategies: legitimating, interpreting, and shielding. Legitimating involves framing problems and solutions in specific ways, both downward to staff and upward to managers. Interpreting entails drawing on professional and local knowledge to interpret and translate rules into frontline service practices and channel frontline experience upward in the organization. Shielding involves prioritizing some rules over others, thereby protecting the intervention and staff from the

requirements, norms, and procedures of the wider organization. These strategies can overlap and influence one another.

This study joins a stream of literature exploring the local and contextualized nature of frontline policy implementation, focusing on change actors and their activities (Cloutier et al., 2015; P. Hupe & Keiser, 2019; McDermott et al., 2013; Saguin & Palotti, 2020; Wimmelmann et al., 2018). The present study adds to the literature by nuancing the activities of frontline supervisors in pluralistic organizational contexts. The article specifically highlights legitimating strategies as an important form of policymaking. Supervisors actively frame understandings of problems and solutions within their organizational environments. Legitimation have commonalities with conceptual work (Cloutier et al., 2015) and theorization (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) from institutional theory, as processes where field actors rework new concepts and practices into legitimate solutions.

An implication of the findings is that in increasingly plural and ambiguous environments, frontline supervisors’ navigation between multiple rules, goals, and mandates can increase their opportunities to interpret and maneuver, hence increasing their influence on both policymaking and institutional change in frontline organizations. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the legitimacy surrounding the intervention also influence the status and influence of the supervisors themselves. Although this study involved actors implementing a standardized intervention, their strategies and activities have commonalities with social and institutional entrepreneurs, e.g., the focus is on working towards stakeholders, being attentive to problem framing, building teams, and leading by example (Arnold, 2021; Lowndes, 2005).

The study presented here is specific with regards to the context, organizational environment, actors, type of intervention and services involved. To expand knowledge on the role of frontline supervisors and managers in public frontline service organizations, future research should explore a wider range of change actors and settings. For example, studies can benefit from including more supervisors who are neutral or critical to the intervention they implement. They may enact other strategies, such as subversion or resistance to policy goals and interventions. To assess and improve transferability of the findings, there is a need for more comparative research designs spanning different contexts, organizations, and sectors. Overall, with increasingly complex, pluralist, and ambiguous public services, it is important to continue exploring the ways supervisors and managers influence policy implementation from a bottom-

up perspective, both to nuance theoretical understandings and to improve public service delivery.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank the editor and the anonymous referees, as well as Tone Alm Andreassen, Eric Breit, Rik van Berkel, Nicolette van Gestel, Helle Alsted Soendergaard, Mai Skjoett Linneberg and Aliona Ignatieva for comments on earlier versions of the paper. Also thank you to all the participants in the study.

Funding

The study was financed by the project "Front line innovations in the welfare services" (INNOWEL), funded by the Research Council of Norway (project no. 256706).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Table 1. Transformation from old to new activation service provision model

	Standard service model (Old)	In-house follow-up (New)
Organizing principles	National directives, standardized ICT-systems and procedural tools, performance management	Adherence to intervention fidelity scale principles, including performance management
Main frontline role	Generalist counselors	Specialist employment-oriented role, collaborating with NAV counselors
Objectives	Labor market participation assistance, income security	Labor market participation assistance
Frontline work content	Emphasis on standardized production, assessment and categorization of clients with reduced work capacity	Individualized, comprehensive in-house follow-up of clients and employers. Involves boundary-spanning and brokerage tasks, employer engagement and continuous workplace support.
External/internal service provision	Standardized referrals to external service providers (e.g., sheltered work enterprises, contracted providers)	Build in-house service capacity for comprehensive, individualized follow-up
Caseload per frontline worker	45-130	15-20