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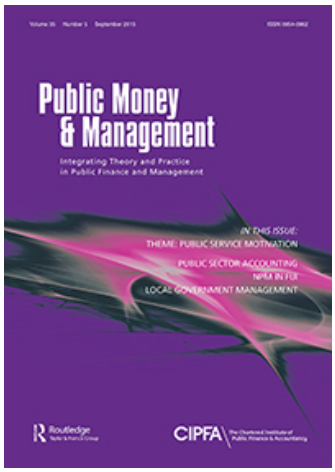

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On the bright and dark side of public service motivation: the relationship between PSM and employee wellbeing

Nina Mari van Loon, Wouter Vandenabeele and Peter Leisink

This paper reveals that the relationship between public service motivation (PSM) and employee wellbeing depends on the societal impact potential (SIP) through the job and organizational type. In people-changing organizations, PSM relates to higher burnout and lower job satisfaction when SIP is high: employees sacrifice themselves too much for society. However, in people-processing organizations, low SIP relates to higher burnout and lower job satisfaction: employees experience frustration if they cannot contribute. This shows that whether PSM relates positively depends on institutional logics.

Keywords: Burnout; job satisfaction; public service motivation (PSM); societal impact potential (SIP); type of public organization.

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For public organizations, having a satisfied and healthy workforce is important for the delivery of high-quality services because employee wellbeing is related to performance, organizational commitment, vigour and lower absenteeism (Grant, 2008; Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2008; Vandenabeele, 2009). Wellbeing can be seen as positive and negative employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction, happiness, stress, overload, strain and burnout (Bakker and Demerouti, 2006). Unfortunately, employees in public organizations that are characterized by role ambiguity, high work pressure and emotional demands seem particularly prone to low wellbeing (Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Grant and Campbell, 2007).

A possible buffering force against these circumstances could be public service motivation (PSM), i.e. the motivation to contribute to society, since previous research has found PSM to be positively related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Crewson, 1997; Naff and Crum, 1999; Bright, 2008; Vandenabeele, 2009). Based on this, it seems that public organizations should be recruiting new employees that have PSM and should also encourage it in employees already in post.

However, recent studies have pointed out that there may also be a dark side to PSM. Giauque *et al.* (2012) found PSM was related to 'resigned satisfaction', i.e. employees did not care about their work but felt satisfied (2012), and work stress (Giauque *et al.*, 2013), possibly due to frustration due to low societal impact (Grant and Campbell, 2007; Taylor, 2013). Thus, theory offers two contradictory expectations: PSM is related to positive outcomes such as satisfaction, and that can lead to disappointment and frustration.

Given these contradictory expectations, is PSM a bright or dark force? Employees' attitudes are not only determined by themselves but also by the environment (Scott, 2001). The institutional logic of the organization may matter for the relationship between PSM and employee wellbeing since not all public organizations have the same aim. Hasenfeld (1972) distinguishes between organizations aimed at behavioural changes (such as a school) and people-processing organizations where the aim is to classify or redistribute (for instance city administrators). Whereas people-changing requires intensive personal contact, in people-processing organizations sufficient distance is essential to be able to distribute fairly. This can influence wellbeing as intensive contacts have been related to burnout (Bakker and Demerouti, 2006).

Moreover, according to Scott (2001), these institutional logics are also present in institutional 'carriers' such as jobs. It is assumed that each organization has a predominant logic which is communicated to, and influences, the employees and their jobs. Previous research on PSM has shown that the positive relationship between PSM and employee wellbeing depends on whether it is possible to have an impact on society through the job (Bright, 2008; Leisink and Steijn, 2009; Taylor, 2013). However having many

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possibilities to contribute and thus often going 'above and beyond', may also lead to overreaching resources or burnout (Maslach *et al*., 2001).

To increase understanding, we simultaneously investigated PSM's possible 'dark' (burnout) and 'bright' (job satisfaction) consequences, and at the same time explored the circumstances under which PSM is a bright or dark force. Using survey data from people-changing (N = 459) and people-processing organizations (N = 465), illustrated with insights from 50 interviews, we were able to show how PSM is related to job satisfaction and burnout, and whether societal impact potential (SIP) and organizational type moderate these relationships.

Public service motivation (PSM)

Perry and Wise (1990) defined PSM as 'an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public organizations' (p. 368). Perry (1996) distinguished three types of motives—rational, normative and affective—on which he based his four-dimensional measurement scale (attraction to public policy, commitment to public interest, compassion and self-sacrifice). PSM has since been redefined as the motivation to contribute to society through work in order to recognize its applicability beyond the public sector—to public service providers in both public and private sectors (Steen, 2008). Some studies have also used other dimensions or adapted Perry's scale (Kim *et al*., 2013).

PSM and employee outcomes: both bright and dark sides?

Studies on PSM and employee outcomes have mostly confirmed PSM as a 'bright force' by finding that the more someone is motivated to serve society, the more they are satisfied with the job (Vandenabeele, 2009; Wright and Pandey, 2010) and the more they are committed to the organization (Crewson, 1997). Recently, however, researchers have started to explore the 'dark side' of PSM and prosocial motivation (Grant and Campbell, 2007; Giauque *et al.*, 2013). It has been argued that the motivation to serve society, and sacrifice yourself, might have negative effects on wellbeing because employees go 'above and beyond' what is asked of them and thus overreach their own resources (DiIulio, 1994; Bakker and Demerouti, 2006).

People who are highly motivated to serve society might experience a reality shock when they see that their ideals cannot be easily executed in real life (Blau, 1960). Employees can become discouraged and frustrated when they find that they cannot have an impact on society due to red-tape, an excessive workload or difficult clients, or a lack of positive feedback (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007; Kjeldsen and Jacobsen, 2012; Giauque *et al*., 2013).

Kjeldsen and Jacobsen (2012) found that PSM dropped after employees first entered the workforce, and Giauque *et al*. (2013) found that PSM related positively to perceived work stress. Burnout research similarly found that basic needs satisfaction, derived from self-determination theory, acted as a moderator between job demands and burnout (Van Den Broeck *et al*., 2008). Hence, an initially high PSM may be either adapted or lowered, or lead to a state of resigned satisfaction (Giauque *et al*., 2012) or even burnout when employees cannot act on their 'need' to contribute to society. Whether PSM is a dark or bright force may depend on contextual factors.

In this paper employee outcome is conceptualized in two ways. First, job satisfaction is taken as a positive outcome as research suggests PSM is positively related to job satisfaction (Bright, 2008). Burnout is taken as a negative employee outcome since it refers to a state of emotional exhaustion (Maslach *et al*., 2001). We argue in this paper that a contextualized understanding of PSM is required to gain further insight in whether PSM has dark or bright employee outcomes.

Institutional logics: type of organization and societal impact potential (SIP)

From an institutional perspective the context in which an employee works is seen as influencing work attitudes and behaviour on multiple levels (Scott, 2001). Do institutional logics, through the organization's aim and carrying through in the job, influence the relationship between PSM, job satisfaction and burnout?

First, whether an organization is aimed at people-changing or people-processing may influence the relationship between PSM and employee outcomes. According to Hasenfeld (1972), the product of people-changing organizations is behavioural change, for instance in schools where students become competent, and this type of work requires employees to socialize, interact and build a relationship with users. Those working in people-processing organizations have fewer opportunities to see a direct impact of their job on society because their clients leave the organization 'unchanged'.

Second, several studies have found that the fit between an employee and the work they do influences work outcomes. Kristof-Brown *et al.* (2005) defined person-environment fit as 'the compatibility between an individual and a work

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environment that occurs when their characteristics are well matched'. Studies using fit argue that PSM can be a bright force when there are opportunities to contribute to society because the individual feels a match between the tasks and personal values (Bright, 2008; Perry and Vandenabeele, 2008). If a job does not contribute to society, employees can become frustrated and dissatisfied (Blau, 1960). Moreover, Maslach *et al.* (2001) found that high expectations increase burnout risk.

This suggests that it is not the motivation itself, but its fit with a job in which there is a SIP that determines the relationship with employee wellbeing. On the other hand, since employees with a high PSM are motivated to go 'above and beyond the call of duty' (DiIulio, 1994, p. 281), and are willing to sacrifice their self-interest for the sake of society, it is possible that too many opportunities to contribute to society can be detrimental to job satisfaction and increase risk of burnout. Thus, both the organizational logic and the SIP may matter for the relationship between PSM, job satisfaction and burnout.

In people-changing organizations, organizational logic is focused on intensive, personal interactions with users. However, employees have high risks of burnout in these contact-intensive organizations (Maslach *et al*., 2001). This could be because opportunities to have a societal impact *through the job* are paramount, encouraging employees to overreach their mental and physical resources, for instance in a school in a disadvantaged area when an employee helps students beyond what is asked (Maslach *et al*., 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2006; Bakker *et al*., 2008). Thus, we expect that PSM will not contribute positively to employee outcomes when the job allows for many opportunities to contribute to society, since it drives employees to do too much. Job satisfaction is not only based on the balance of mental and physical resources, but also on enjoyment of the work and the work content and thus higher SIP may lead to higher satisfaction. However, following a resource depletion line of thought, we would expect that employees with too much to do will not be satisfied:

H1: In people-changing organizations, PSM is related to lower employee outcomes when the SIP is high.

In people-processing organizations, such as municipalities, the product is an altered client status. This requires classification and largely impersonal contacts with clients in order for employees to remain objective (Hasenfeld, 1972). For instance, a police officer can change the status of a citizen to that of a suspect but will then hand them over to other organizations (courts, prisons). As such, the SIP may be less visible as the police officer does not work on changes but merely 'classifies' and 'moves' clients. Thus, a reversed working of PSM might be expected when the SIP is low—the motivation to contribute may lead to frustration and consequently lower job satisfaction and a higher risk of burnout:

H2: In people-processing organizations, PSM is related to higher job satisfaction and a lower risk of burnout when the SIP is high.

Methods

Data collection

The data for this study were collected through 50 interviews and a web-based survey among employees in people-processing (police and city hall municipalities), and people-changing (schools, hospital, prisons) Dutch organizations in 2012. The distinction between people-changing and people-processing organizations was derived from the interviews (see Van Loon *et al.*, 2013), but was reconfirmed through coding all job descriptions of the survey respondents by three researchers independently and then comparing the coding. This analysis confirmed the categorization of the organizations.

The interviews were conducted before the survey—the aim was to get more insight into the dynamics within the organizations, the expressions of PSM, person-environment fit, and how this related to work outcomes. A survey was emailed to all members of the identified organizations. There are many advantages to using web-based surveys such as ease-of-use and low costs, but an important drawback is that response rates are generally low. Several techniques were used to boost responses, such as a user-friendly design, having the email sent out by senior officials, offering a chance to win a 25 euro voucher, guaranteeing anonymity and sending reminders (Couper, 2008). Moreover, it was not compulsory to answer all of the questions, which increased the response rate and reduced social bias (Couper, 2008). In total, 1138 surveys were returned (38.7%).

After checking for missing data and rejecting incomplete responses, we had a total of 465 people-processing and 459 people-changing employee responses. The average age was 43 years and the average tenure was 11 years; 51.4% were female, 40.1% male (8.5% missing). There were 152 respondents in a supervisory position (14.7%, 7.5% missing). To check for representativeness, we analysed whether the subsamples from the different domains were

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significantly different from the national statistics on gender and age. The analysis showed the samples were representative, except for the average age of the police respondents (slightly lower in this sample, although it was similar to the region's average) and the percentage of women in the schools which was higher than national.

Measures

We used a statistical method (confirmatory factor analysis: CFA) to ensure that the multiple item constructs measured what we intended to measure. Because each CFA fit index, showing model fit, has some (dis)advantages, it is recommended to study several. The fit indices CFI and TLI indicated a good fit above 0.90, RMSEA indicated a good fit below 0.10 (Kline 2010). To ensure the items were also reliable (i.e. that they were consistent in their measuring of the construct), composite reliabilities were calculated using Raykov's rho.

PSM was measured using an international scale (Kim *et al*., 2013) which measures attraction to public service; commitment to the public interest; compassion; and self-sacrifice. Two items from each dimension were selected to form an aggregate or global measure (Moynihan *et al*., 2013). *SIP* was measured using four items inspired by Leisink and Steijn's (2009) PSM-fit and Grant's (2008) prosocial impact. An example is 'Someone with a job like mine can contribute to solving social problems'. The scale fitted the data well, with only the RMSEA proving unsatisfactory due to one negatively worded item. *Burnout* was measured with five items relating to emotional exhaustion using a scale from 1 to 7. This was an adaptation of a validated Dutch burnout scale (Schaufeli and Van Dierendonk, 2000) and, after deleting one item, the scale was a good fit to our data. *Job satisfaction* was measured with a single overall job satisfaction item on a scale of 1 to 5. This one-item measure has been found to be as reliable as multiple item scales (Wanous *et al*., 1997).

Table 1 presents the fit indices in each sample and shows that the measures were valid and reliable (RR above 0.70).

Data analysis

We used structural equation modeling in Mplus Version 7.11 to answer our research questions. This technique is similar to regression in which the shared variance between constructs is analysed, but with the advantage of being able to study two outcomes (in our case, burnout and job satisfaction) simultaneously (Kline, 2010). We used MLR estimation, because our outcome variables (burnout and job satisfaction) were skewed.

Since common source bias can be an issue when using mono-method data (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), we loaded all the items onto one common factor and compared the fit indices. The fit was significantly worse (CFI 0.955 to 0.262; TLI 0.945 to 0.139; RMSEA 0.042 to 0.169), indicating that our results were not severely affected by common source bias (Podsakoff *et al*., 2003).

We controlled for gender, age, education and supervisory position. Three models were estimated. In the first, we analysed the relationship between PSM and employee wellbeing. In the second model, SIP was included as moderator. In the third model, we tested whether both SIP and type of organization moderated the relationship by including a three-way interaction. The factor scores used for the interaction were standardized to reduce multicollinearity.

Findings

Our correlation analysis demonstrated that, in both samples, PSM and SIP were unrelated to burnout but were positively related to job satisfaction. Burnout and job satisfaction were negatively related in both samples. We used regression analyses to examine the interaction between PSM and SIP.

People-changing organizations

Table 2 provides the results for the people-changing sample. The bullet points indicate the estimated path from the independent to the dependent burnout or job satisfaction. In model 1, PSM was not related to burnout but was positively related to job satisfaction. Adding SIP (model 2) as a moderator shows that SIP matters at the 0.1 significance level for burnout. The interaction shows that PSM had a positive relationship to risk of burnout (i.e. highly-motivated employees had a higher risk of burnout) when SIP was high, but negative when

Table 1. Fit measures and reliabilities for the constructs by sample (Raykov's rho).

	People-changing				*People-processing*			
	CFI	*TLI*	*RMSEA*	*Rho*	*CFI*	*TLI*	*RMSEA*	*Rho*
PSM	.964	.946	.055	.760	.972	.957	.047	.752
PSI	.993	.978	.123	.888	.998	.994	.062	.896
Burnout	.998	.993	.051	.918	.996	.987	.056	.856

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Table 2. Unstandardized estimates for people-changing organizations.

Regression paths	*Model 1 Estimate*	*SE*	*Model 2 Estimate*	*SE*
Burnout				
•Gender (1 = female)	-.297 (-.117)*	.128	-.278*	.129
•Age	-.010 (-.101)*	.005	-.009	.005
•Supervisory role (1 = yes)	-.321 (-.102)*	.140	-.368**	.143
•Education	.035 (.028)	.064	.024	.067
•PSM	-.006 (-.001)	.287	-.068	.295
•PSI	-	-	.090	.100
•PSM x SIP	-	-	.761	.463
Job satisfaction				
•Gender (1 = female)	.170 (.111)*	.074	.212**	.075
•Age	.004 (.059)	.003	.004	.003
•Supervisory role (1 = yes)	.130 (.068)	.094	.115	.094
•Education	-.066 (-.086)	.035	.094**	.033
•PSM	.371 (.133)*	.176	-.170	.173
•SIP	-	-	.190***	.060
•PSM x SIP	-	-	-.220	.216
R^2 burnout	.032		-	
R^2 job satisfaction	.042		-	
CFI	.951		-	
TLI	.939		-	
RMSEA	.042		-	
N	442		452	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

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SIP was low.

The interviews with employees in a people-changing organization provided further insights into these dynamics. For instance, hospital employees would stay after hours to solve patients' problems. In the prison, employees said they sometimes take problems home with them. The following quotation illustrates how high PSM may increase burnout among these employees:

> *If you look at our absenteeism, the numbers are very low, which says something about our work ethos. But the other side of the coin is that if we have absenteeism, it is always psychological. It has to do with the basis of our education, in which you have to build a relationship with students and thus [it is] always personal. Employees are very engaged. Colleagues just go on and on and on. It is a power, but also a risk* (R5, school director).

People-processing organizations

Table 3 shows the results of the analysis for the people-processing organizations. In model 1, PSM was found not to be significantly related to burnout but positively related to job satisfaction. In model 2, SIP was added as moderator, and interaction for burnout was significant: an employee with high PSM was more likely to burnout when SIP was low.

Again, our interviews helped to interpret these results. Employees from city hall and police spoke of feeling frustrated if their work was not contributing positively to society:

> *You know who they [criminals dealing drugs] are and how they are doing it. But we are not doing anything because we have other priorities and too many cases. We cannot do it all…I can understand this…but it is just so frustrating* (R33, police officer).

SIP moderated the relationship between PSM and wellbeing, but in different ways in people-changing and people-processing organizations. So a final test was done to see whether there was a three-way interaction between PSM, SIP and type of organization. Both interactions were significant:
$B_{burnout} = -1.425; p < 0.05$; $B_{jobset} = 0.478; p < 0.1$.

To better understand these interactions, both were plotted taking the unstandardized estimates and plotting one standard deviation below and above the mean (see www.jeremydawson.com/slopes.htm)—see figure 1. Those with low opportunities in their job to contribute to society and high PSM were more prone to burnout than those with high opportunities to contribute. The pattern for the people-changing organizations was the opposite: employees with high PSM and many opportunities to contribute were more prone to risk of burnout.

In the case of job satisfaction (see figure 2) in the people-processing organizations, PSM was only positively related to job satisfaction if the

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employees perceived that they had opportunities to contribute to society; if not, there was no relationship. In the people-changing organizations the opposite was true.

Discussion and lessons for practice

Our findings show that the relationship between PSM, burnout and job satisfaction depend on institutional logics. In comparing people-changing and people-processing organizations, the exact *opposite* interactions were found for burnout and job satisfaction. In people-changing organizations it appears, in line with hypothesis 1, that when there are ample opportunities to contribute, a high PSM is more likely to result in overreaching one's resources and capabilities, leading eventually to burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001; Bakker and Demerouti, 2006; Bakker *et al.*, 2008). In people-processing organizations, our findings indicated 'frustration' rather than 'overstretching'. Those who were highly motivated to serve society but had a job that did not contribute to society were frustrated and disappointed, resulting in higher burnout (Maslach *et al.*, 2001), in line with hypothesis 2.

Management influences how employees experience their work and how much effort they put in, and our study demonstrated that it is worth paying attention to aspects such as motivation and the job's impact on society as a means of improving public services. Previous research on prosocial motivation (Grant and Campbell, 2007) found that employees who perceived a prosocial impact were less likely to burnout—a finding that we support for those working in people-processing organizations. It may be that the SIP is not obvious to employees in such organizations. For these employees, one way to increase wellbeing could be to invite users to speak about how their work has helped (Grant, 2008).

Conversely employees in people-changing organizations may be too involved with their beneficiaries. Perry and Wise (1990) distinguished rational, normative and affective motives, and it could be that excessive affective motivation leads to employees so emotionally involved with their target group that they put in too much time and effort and overreach their resources. Here, employees may benefit from discussing how far they should go, for instance in trying to get a troubled student back on track.

Naturally, there are limitations to this study. Since we use cross-sectional data we cannot be certain about the causal direction between PSM, job satisfaction and burnout. The literature used here, however, suggests placing motivation before employee wellbeing (Bakker and Demerouti, 2006; Bakker *et al.*, 2008; Bright, 2008; Vandenabeele, 2009). Also, PSM and SIP only partly explained the risk of burnout. Other factors, such as personal characteristics, skills, goal ambiguity, red-tape and client contact may well also explain the wellbeing of public employees. Finally, the categorization in people-changing and people-

Table 3. Unstandardized estimates for people-processing organizations.

Regression paths	*Model 1* *Estimate*	*SE*	*Model 2* *Estimate*	*SE*
Burnout				
•Gender (1 = female)	.244 (.113)*	.114	.263*	.114
•Age	-.001 (-.013)	.005	.001	.005
•Supervisory role (1 = yes)	.117 (.039)	.143	-.099	.140
•Education	.017 (.016)	.059	.018	.058
•PSM	.228 (.072)	.232	.193	.241
•PSI				
•PSM x PSI				
	-	-	-.740*	.372
Job satisfaction				
•Gender (1 = female)	-.110(-.080)	.067	-.094	.070
•Age	.008(.127)**	.003	.009**	.003
•Supervisory role (1 = yes)	.113(.060)	.092	.106	.091
-•Education	.007(.010)	.029	.006	.029
•PSM	.345(.172)*	.145	.277	.149
•PSI	-	-	.109*	.055
•PSM x PSI	-	-	.263	.170
R^2 burnout	.019		-	
R^2 job satisfaction	.060		-	
CFI	.924		-	
TLI	.906		-	
RMSEA	.045		-	
N	467		467	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

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Figure 1. Three-way interaction for burnout.

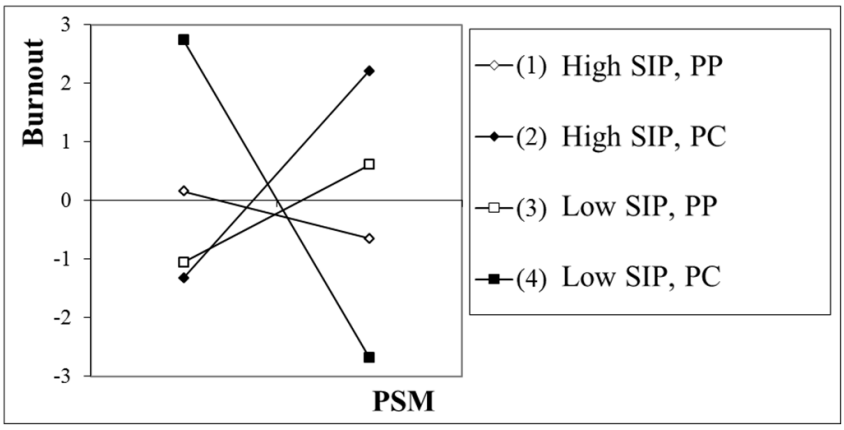
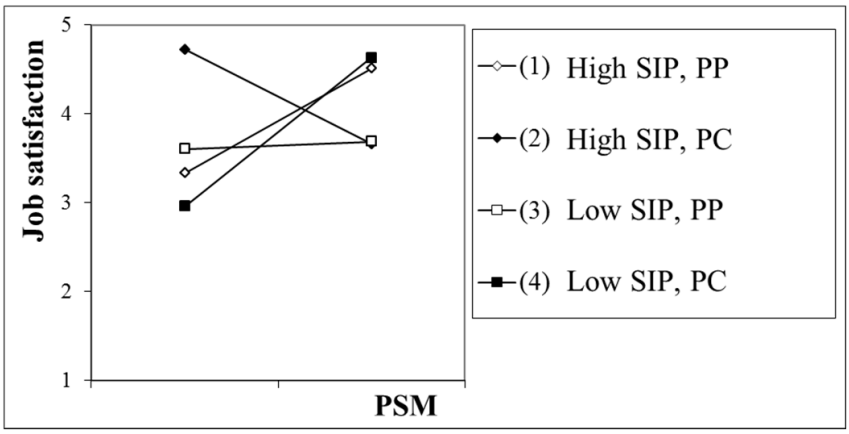


Figure 2. Three-way interaction for job satisfaction.



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processing organizations was done by the researchers whereas individual employees may perceive their jobs as the other category. This study contributes to the field by showing that contextualization is vital—the relationship between PSM and employee wellbeing depended strongly on the working environment. Previous studies have tended to treat public organizations as alike, whereas there are many differences between public organizations which matter when it comes to the relationship between PSM and outcomes.

Conclusion

We have shown that whether PSM positively or negatively relates to job satisfaction and burnout depends on institutional settings: the organizational logic (people-processing versus people-changing) and the SIP. Our findings indicate that a contextualized approach to PSM is necessary to understand the dynamics of employee motivation and behaviour. Future research could pay closer attention to how context co-determines whether PSM is a dark or a bright force, for instance by looking at institutional barriers, the types of tasks and classic public organization characteristics such as role ambiguity.

In terms of management, this study has shown that there is no 'one-size-fits-all', but that public managers should be aware of the message and logic their organization is communicating to the employees and how this influences their wellbeing. In people-processing organizations it could benefit the organizations to bring employees into closer contact with beneficiaries for instance through citizen participation and on-site visits. In people-changing organizations, customer focus and empathy can also turn against the organization because it can drive highly-motivated employees over the edge of their abilities. Management can point out the short versus the long run, and emphasize the general welfare as opposed to the individual, in which the general welfare is only helped if employees stay healthy.

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