

# LOOKING AT A JOB'S SOCIAL IMPACT THROUGH PSM-TINTED LENSES: PROBING THE MOTIVATION–PERCEPTION RELATIONSHIP

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We explore here the relationship between employees' public service motives and the way they perceive the social impact of their work. Our purpose is twofold. First, while past researchers have examined part of this relationship, largely from the opposite causal direction, we seek to supplement the field's current understanding of the organizational consequences of public service motivation (PSM), especially its potential impact on an employee's perceived social impact. Together with a cross-sectional study, we assess several theoretical frameworks that support the possibility of an additional causal link between PSM and perceived social impact. Second, we seek to begin identifying moderators that potentially condition PSM's relationship with employee perceptions of social impact. Using a sample of municipal employees from a large city in the United States, we focus on organization identity. We find that PSM strongly predicts employees' perceptions of the social impact of their jobs, and that PSM's influence is conditioned by an employee's organization identity.

## INTRODUCTION

What you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing; it also depends on what sort of person you are. (C.S. Lewis 2005, p. 125)

As research on public service and prosocial motivation<sup>1</sup> continues to expand, there are increasing opportunities to fill in critical gaps that would both nuance and deepen our understanding of the organizational consequences of an employee's public service motives (Wright 2007). One important question that has only partially been explored in the literature is the relationship between an employee's public service motivation (PSM) and her perception of the social impact of her work.

The concept of job impact stems from earlier work on task significance, a concept central to job satisfaction and job performance (Grant 2007). Hackman and Oldham (1976, p. 257) defined task significance as 'the degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people, whether in the immediate organization or in the external environment'. More recently, researchers have focused on the latter aspect of task significance as it pertains to job impact on the external environment – particularly an employee's positive impact on society through her work.

While task significance and perception of social impact occupy shared conceptual space, the distinction is important. To illustrate, Grant differentiates perceived prosocial impact from task significance as follows: 'whereas task significance describes the extent to which a job provides opportunities to improve the welfare of others, perceived social impact describes the extent to which employees feel that their own actions improve the welfare of others' (Grant 2008b, p. 110). This more personalized perspective and link to others' welfare is important for a host of reasons, some of which were underscored by the early PSM literature (e.g. Perry and Wise 1990). Indeed, Perry *et al.* (2010, p. 684) reflect that an individual's public service motivation may be related to how one perceives certain

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types of work: ‘public jobs would be intrinsically motivating for individuals with high public service motivation because these individuals would embrace work characterized by attributes such as high task significance’. Moynihan *et al.* (2012) further observe that ‘perceived social impact implies that public service motivation not only exists among individual employees, but that employees are seeing it fulfilled in their role’.

## PERCEPTION OF JOB IMPACT AND PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION

The question at hand concerns the relationship between employee public/prosocial motivation and how the employee views the social impact of her work. While scholars have evidenced that perception of social impact can shape public service motives, to our knowledge, no one has explored – either theoretically or empirically – whether PSM can shape employee perception of their social impact through work.

Speaking to the former causal direction (figure 1), several scholars have researched the impact that task significance and perception of social impact can have on one’s public or prosocial motivation. For example, using Belgian civil servant data, Vandenabeele *et al.* (2004a, p. 54) confirmed their hypothesis that high ‘task significance will cause a high level of employee motivation, through a critical psychological state of meaningfulness of the work’. Grant (2007, p. 400) similarly proposed, and later confirmed (Grant 2008a), that ‘the stronger the employee’s perception of impact on beneficiaries, the stronger the employee’s motivation to make a prosocial difference’. Using longitudinal data from fundraisers at a public university to test job design theory, Grant (2008a) found that fundraisers who had met the beneficiaries of their work exhibited higher levels of motivation (a month later) than fundraisers who had not met the beneficiaries of their work.

Implicit in this body of work is the assumption that PSM is a dynamic trait that is shaped by one’s environment – including how one perceives the environment (for a related conversation on causality and motivation, attitudes and performance, see Ritz 2009). For example, Jacobsen *et al.* (2013) find that employee motivation can be ‘crowded’ by negative perceptions of command systems in one’s workplace. More specifically, in developing a theory of prosocial values to explain why public employees aware of their work’s social impact are more likely to comply with expectations to use performance-based data, Moynihan *et al.* (2012) observe that ‘employees with high prosocial motivation may become turned off by their environment if they perceive low social impact’. In other words, there have been several scholars who have suggested a link between how an employee perceives the social impact of their work and the employee’s public service motivation, including motivation to perform specific tasks. However, as we explain below, we believe that more theoretical work is necessary to more fully specify the nature of this relationship.

Recognizing the utility of studies that establish the causal path of perception driving motivation, our purpose in this study is to offer a more comprehensive theoretical review that raises the possibility of an alternative causality that may operate iteratively, if not simultaneously, with the causality illustrated in figure 1. Our argument is motivated by a review of several psychology-based theories and quantitative evidence from a recent survey of municipal employees. As a consequence, we raise the possibility that PSM is not only shaped by one’s environment but can also shape how an employee perceives her environment. In more common terms, not only is seeing believing, but believing is also seeing.

The former causality (see figure 1), which has been tested (Vandenabeele *et al.* 2004b; Grant 2008a), is that PSM is the product of how an employee perceives her job’s social impact. The second causality (figure 2), which has not been tested, is that an employee’s



FIGURE 1 *Causality of extant evidence on PSM and perception of prosocial impact*



FIGURE 2 *Alternative causality concerning PSM and perception of prosocial impact*

PSM shapes how she perceives the social impact of her job. Both causalities were generally recognized early on by Hochberg and Gleitman (1949, p. 183), who observed that ‘perceptual processes can be subsumed under motivational ones in the sense that they can be described and predicted by motivational laws. Motivational processes can be subsumed under perceptual ones in the sense that they can be described and predicted by perceptual laws.’

Assessing a causality that flows from employee PSM to employee perception has several potential implications for PSM research. First, while some recent studies have sought to address the trait versus state question (Wright and Christensen 2007; Kjeldsen and Jacobsen 2012), our current line of inquiry raises the prospect that an employee’s PSM – whether as a steady trait or dynamic state – can shape an employee’s cognition and sensemaking (e.g. Weick 1995). More specifically, we are interested in the possibility that individual public service motivation may shape perceptual dynamics in assessing a job’s social impact. Second, if substantiated, PSM may play a role not only as the product of organizational stimuli (e.g. Camilleri and Van Der Heijden 2007), but also as an attribute that can shape how employees perceive organization stimuli and perform within organizational settings (Brewer and Selden 2000). This, in turn, can deepen our understanding of the relationship between employees’ identity, behaviour, and their institutional context (Vandenabeele 2007).

Our approach is twofold. We begin with a meaningful review and summary of theoretical work that informs the possibility of an alternative, if not simultaneous, causality. Second, we conduct an empirical study that, while not without limitations, supports the theories raised below.

## MOTIVATION AND PERCEPTION

At the outset of this review, we clarify that our goal is not to suggest that studies following the perception→motivation causality are incorrect, but to simply suggest that a more complicated relationship and causality may exist as we consider PSM and employee perceptions of their job’s social impact. In doing so, we feel that the following theories or frameworks might serve as good starting points for exploring the motivation→perception relationship. For accessibility we summarize some of the illustrative theories in table 1, including how they might bear on the PSM–perception of social impact relationship. We recognize the conceptual overlap among certain aspects of these disparate theories, many having evolved conterminously if not contemporaneously. However, we choose to present each ‘separately’ in order to avoid confusion among readers who are not familiar with each theory. Figure 3 is our effort to visually recognize the overlap and common mechanisms that these theories bring to bear on the motivation→perception relationship.

TABLE 1 *Theories and frameworks informing the motivation–perception relationship*

Theory/ framework	Association	Theory/framework	The motivation–perception relationship
New Look	Bruner and Goodman 1947; Postman 1953	The framework suggests individuals remain unaware that their fears and desires affect how they view themselves and the world around them, often engaging in subconscious wishful thinking.	Individuals who are more highly motivated to serve the public may engage in a subconscious process that drives their perception of a higher level of social significance of their job-related activities.
Perceptual Set Theory	Allport 1955	The theory suggests that individuals have a group of expectations or biases that shape their experience by causing them to perceive a stimulus in a certain way.	Individuals who expect or want to perform meaningful public service will perceive their job as allowing them to do so and, thus, perceive a higher level of social significance in their work.
Functional Projection Theory	Freud 1957; Maner <i>et al.</i> 2005	The theory suggests that individuals project their emotions and desires onto someone/something other than themselves. Additionally, activating particular emotions and goals can cause people to over-perceive the same emotions and goals in others. Finally, the theory has been used in research finding that the more important the goal, the greater the perceived physical size of an instrument used to achieve the goal.	In the case of the relationship between PSM and a task’s social significance, it stands to reason that individuals who are highly motivated to fulfil the goals of public service might assign increased prosocial task significance to their work.
Cognitive Dissonance Theory	Festinger 1957	The theory of cognitive dissonance proposes that people have a motivation to reduce dissonance by altering existing cognitions, adding new ones to create a consistent belief system, or alternatively by reducing the importance of any one of the dissonant elements.	Individuals who have high levels of public service motivation and a strong desire to do prosocial work, but do not have work that allows them to completely fulfil this desire, may reduce the cognitive dissonance by assigning more importance to their task or job.
Self-Affirmation (Attribution) Theory	Baumeister and Newman 1994	This type of motivation has several names, such as <i>motivated reasoning</i> , <i>self-affirmation</i> , and <i>defensive processing</i> . The theory has shown self-affirmation to have a widespread influence in shaping how people think about their world, that is, how they interpret information of which they are consciously aware. This motive has been shown to influence such higher-order tasks as judging other people, evaluating the self, predicting the future, and making sense of the past.	When task significance is seen as a vital part of fulfilling an attribute, individuals may assign increased social significance to the task. For an individual whose self-image is related to being able to serve the public, they might assign a higher level of social importance to their job to defend that self-image.

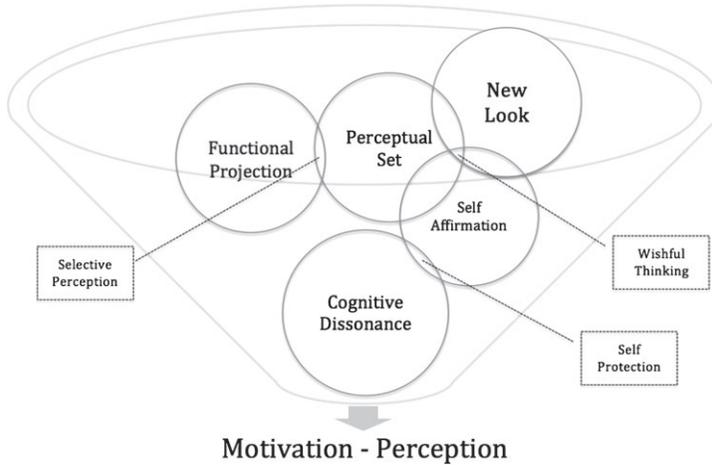


FIGURE 3 Theories and mechanisms informing the motivation–perception causality

Early work on the general relationship between motivation and perception offers some clues about a causal direction that flows from motivation to perception. In general, and as we shall detail below, scholars such as Postman (1953, p. 17, emphasis added) observed early on that ‘experiment has followed upon experiment in support of the proposition that perceptual discrimination may be influenced systematically by the *motivation of the perceiver* – his physiological drives, his social values and interests, his lasting beliefs and momentary expectancies’.

This motivation–perception link is most closely associated with the *New Look* psychology of the mid-twentieth century (Bruner and Goodman 1947; Postman 1953). Although hindered early on by methodological and theoretical challenges (see Eriksen 1958), today ‘psychologists uniformly agree with the *New Look* tenet that much of cognition occurs non-consciously and, therefore, outside a person’s awareness and control’ (Balcetis and Dunning 2006, p. 613). In particular, the issue of ‘wishful thinking’ has remained relevant and many scholars have found that individuals remain unaware that their fears and desires affect how they view themselves and the world around them (for example, see Ehrlinger *et al.* 2005). The fact that people engage in ‘wishful thinking’ is one of the lasting insights of the *New Look* psychology and a phenomenon from which we extend the proposition that individuals *could* be engaging in when asked about the social significance of their job.

How might *New Look* theories explain the relationship between PSM and perception? One possibility raised by *New Look* psychology would seem to be that one’s implicit motivations shape how one wishes, or perceives, their work to impact society. Those individuals high in PSM and motivated to respond to others’ needs and/or those of a collective community (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999) may engage in some implicit wishful thinking that their motivations are, in fact, realized as making a perceptible impact on society.

A second theory that might be used to explain the link between perception and motivation is *perceptual set theory*. According to Allport (1955), a perceptual set is a ‘perceptual bias or predisposition or readiness to perceive particular features of a stimulus’. The theory suggests that individuals have a group of expectations that shape experiences by causing them to perceive experiences in a certain way. Individuals who want, or are motivated,

to serve the public might have work experiences that are more significant in their nature, based on the expectations driven by their motivations. According to Balcetis and Dunning (2007), ‘people’s desires for a particular outcome bias their perceptual set, such that they are more prepared to see what they hope for rather than what they fear’ (p. 622).

How might perceptual set theory explain the relationship between PSM and perception? Similar to wishful thinking, individuals with higher levels of public service motivation might hold a set of views or ethos that creates a bias towards identifying the public value, social impact, or prosocial significance of their job (i.e. the stimulus). As a consequence, when they are asked about the social significance of their job, they perceive higher levels of social significance in the tasks they perform.

*Functional projection theory* illustrates another way of understanding how motivation might affect perception. The theory was first articulated by Freud (1957) in relation to individuals projecting their emotions and desires onto other individuals. However, scholars have also used this to understand how an individual’s own emotions and goals might cause them to overperceive these emotions and goals in others as well. Maner *et al.* (2005) observe ‘that many different types of motivation can influence cognition’, further noting that ‘there is overwhelming evidence that the detection of other people’s emotions may be biased by various kinds of top-down influences, including the affective state of the perceiver’ (p. 64). While the original theory specifically relates to how individuals might project their emotions, goals, or feelings onto others, we might reasonably extrapolate that the affective and motivational state of the perceiver might influence how they perceive, or detect, a number of environments or situations – including perception of social impact in the workplace environment.

Indeed, a second application of *functional projection theory* more directly suggests that individual goal states affect how they see their environment. This type of projection even contemplates a visual bias in objects needed to obtain a functional goal – such as seeing them as closer, larger, or more accessible. With respect to the PSM–perception relationship, individuals with high levels of public service motivation may be more likely to perceive the social impact of their work in order to meet a personal goal of performing public service. In other words, individual motivation may shape the perception/assignment of social significance to a job. How might functional projection theory explain the link between PSM and perception?

As an illustration, teachers who have high levels of PSM, and a strong desire to make a positive difference in the lives of the children they teach, may project, or assign, increased social importance upon their job, thinking about the ‘good’ they do when asked about the significance of their work as opposed to thinking about the more mundane administrative aspects of their job. This selective recall may be a consequence of PSM driving a memory or recall of the prosocial aspects of the job.

*Self-affirmation* is yet another motivational theory that sheds further light on the role of motivation and perception in wishful thinking (Baumeister and Newman 1994). Self-affirmation considers the top-down motivational process to think of one’s self and one’s prospects in a favourable light and avoid aversive or undesirable thoughts of him- or herself. The result is an enhancement of self-worth and self-esteem that ultimately shapes how individuals process information and think about their world; the need for self-affirmation affects how we perceive others, evaluate ourselves, predict the future, and make sense of the past (Balcetis and Dunning 2006, pp. 612–13). Individuals who are deeply concerned about the good of society may be predisposed to affirm the social significance of the work in which they engage.

How might self-affirmation explain the linkage between PSM and perception of task significance? Individuals who are highly motivated to serve the public might be more likely to perceive that their job affords them the opportunity to make a social impact in order to reaffirm an image they might have of themselves as being engaged in important and socially significant tasks. The motivation drives a perception of her job to help her maintain her sense of worth and provides a sense of self-efficacy.

Finally, *cognitive dissonance theory* also seems to affirm the role of individual motivation in shaping perceptions. According to Harmon-Jones and Mills (1999), cognitive dissonance theory specifically clarifies how 'behavior and motivation influence perception and cognition' (p. 1). The original theory is attributed to Festinger (1957), who theorized that when an individual holds two competing and conflicting sources of knowledge, a state of discomfort or 'dissonance' is created. In such a state of psychological discomfort, individuals seek to reduce dissonance by engaging in 'psychological work' (Harmon-Jones 1999, pp. 1–2), for example, dieters subtracting dissonant cognitions (e.g. 'fattening foods are not very tasty') to avoid tempting desserts (Harmon-Jones *et al.* 2009, p. 121). Festinger (1957) explained the nature of this type of work in observing that 'the existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance' (p. 3). In short, a common way to overcome the discomfort of dissonance is to exert psychological effort or 'work' to change attitudes or perceptions.

Utilizing the framework to explore the motivation–perception link, Balci et al. and Dunning (2007) found that 'the motivation to resolve cognitive dissonance influenced perception of natural environments... motivational pressures, including higher-order intrapsychic motivations can have influence on perceptual processes' (p. 920). The authors conclude that 'biased perceptions may have occurred to regulate away the aversive intrapsychic state of dissonance. When experiencing dissonance, perceivers may take advantage of an opportunity to "push" around perceptual experiences' in order to return to a state of psychological comfort – or reduced dissonance (pp. 920–21).

How might cognitive dissonance theory explain the link between PSM and perception? First, if we assume that there is an individual who exhibits a high level of public service motivation, this person may seek or desire to find a job that fulfils this motivational need or desire. If she does not find one that allows her to fulfil her public service motivation, a degree of cognitive dissonance will be the result. Like the motivated dieter who engages in psychological work to downplay dissonant cognitions and emphasize consonant cognitions, an employee with high levels of PSM may assign or perceive a greater degree of task significance to the work they currently perform. By assigning significance to her task (or job) to create consonance between her prosocial motivations and her actual work, her motivation shapes her perception.

Taken as a whole, the preceding review constitutes a more comprehensive effort to conceptually inform, even with somewhat disparate theories, the motivation–perception relationship than has previously been offered. We find in these various theories support – both directly and by extension – for the notion that causality may flow from individual motivation to perception.

In summary, there are several theoretical mechanisms that may explain PSM's influence on perception of social impact, and that underscore the overlap in the preceding theories. We have depicted these mechanisms in figure 3, highlighting the overlaps from which we have derived the mechanism. First, new look, perceptual set, and self-affirmation theories all share wishful thinking as a mechanism that determines how individual motivation may

shape perception. Second, the theories of perceptual set and functional projection suggest a selective perception, or memory recall mechanism, driving the motivation→perception relationship. It is through this mechanism that PSM might make individuals more aware of, or more likely to remember, aspects of their job that illustrate or highlight the social impact of their work, over other aspects of their work, such as administrative tasks, that might not have any recognizable social impact.

A third possible mechanism driving the relationship between an individual's motivation and perception is provided to us by both cognitive dissonance and self-affirmation theories. A self-protection mechanism may cause employees with high levels of PSM to be more likely to reinterpret their environment, and in this case the social significance of their work, as a means through which they can preserve their self-image, feel better about themselves, fulfil personal goals, and avoid feelings of failure.

We see in the preceding theories sufficient reason to empirically explore motivation→perception causality with respect to PSM as a potential complement to perception→motivation causality established in prior studies. An important implication of these theories is that managers need to understand that high-PSM employees are not only a product of their environment, but that they may also perceive their environment differently because of their PSM. As researchers, we need to better understand the nature of PSM (steady trait vs. dynamic trait) and we need to entertain more complex conceptual models that recognize multiple causalities. In the following section we begin an empirical investigation into the PSM→perception of task significance link.

## DATA AND METHODS

To test the PSM→perception of social impact causality, we use survey data from a large southeastern city in the United States. An electronic survey was administered in Spring 2010 to 3,120 city employees. We received 843 responses, providing a response rate of approximately 27 per cent of those employees with email. The city required that we omit certain demographic variables – like gender and position – to ensure anonymity in smaller departments. Using a dataset reporting demographic information for all city employees, including those without email, our sample fairly represents the ages of all city employees, while being more white – 80 percent (our sample) vs. 67 percent (entire city profile).

Our data facilitate the following measures of interest. We provide basic descriptive and correlation information in table 2.

### Perception of social impact

Following Grant (2008b), we use three questions<sup>2</sup> to capture the extent to which an employee feels that their job has societal importance and impact. The questions ask respondents to provide a response on a 7-point Likert-scale. The three Likert-scale responses are added together for each respondent to create an additive index. The measure has a scale reliability coefficient of 0.90 and ranges in value from 3 to 21, with a mean of 17.49.

### Public service motivation

PSM is operationalized unidimensionally using an index score based on survey responses for five PSM questions<sup>3</sup> (Wright *et al.* forthcoming). The questions ask respondents to provide a response on a 7-point Likert-scale. The five Likert-scale responses are added together for each respondent to create an additive index. The PSM score ranges from 5 to 35 with a mean of 26.78. The scale reliability coefficient is 0.81.

TABLE 2 *Descriptive statistics and correlations among interval-level variables*

		Mean	S.D.	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	PSM	26.79	5.906	5	35	1					
2	Social impact	17.50	4.136	3	21	0.601	1				
3	Org. identity	11.37	2.701	2	14	0.576	0.626	1			
4	Age	6.46	2.025	3	11	-0.002	0.046	0.034	1		
5	Org. tenure	3.75	1.686	2	9	0.067	0.084	0.013	0.486	1	
6	Education	2.55	1.141	0	4	-0.035	-0.001	-0.003	-0.158	-0.113	1

### Organizational identification

We also recognize the possibility that an employee's perception of social impact may be shaped by how they identify with their employing organization. As suggested by the discussion of motivation and perception in the literature, an individual's affective relationship with their organization may shape how they perceive themselves as well as their tasks. In fact, some observe that '[o]rganizational identity has been said to define, at least in part, the employee's view of himself or herself. In other words, at least a part of an employee's self-image is said to result from the organizations that person chooses to identify with' (Norman *et al.* 2010, p. 384). We therefore explore, as has been done in analogous settings, the possibility that an employee's organizational identification may act as a moderator (Crewson 1997; Tangirala and Ramanujam 2008; Norman *et al.* 2010) that conditions PSM's impact on perception of social impact.

Following Mowday *et al.* (1979), we use two questions<sup>4</sup> to measure organizational identification. The questions ask respondents to provide a response on a 7-point Likert-scale. The responses are added together for each respondent to create an additive index. The measure ranges from 2 to 14 and has a mean value of 11.37. The scale reliability coefficient is 0.67.

### Controls

We control for an employee's race, educational attainment, age, tenure, and department in all of the models. Type of workspace (e.g. fieldwork, private office, reception) within the department is also a potentially interesting control variable relative to perception of social impact, and we use it to capture the extent to which an employee may have opportunities to interact with the public. For example, we expect those in reception to have more interaction with the public than those who spend most of their time in private cubicles.<sup>5</sup>

## RESULTS

We ran three models to probe the alternative causal relationship between PSM and perception of social impact (see table 3). Our first model suggests that PSM is a statistically significant predictor of an employee believing that her job makes a positive social impact. Model 2 includes an employee's organization identity (OI) and suggests that the more an employee identifies with her organization, the more she perceives her job to have a positive social impact. While the direct influence of OI is slightly larger than PSM in this relationship – all else equal – OI does not eclipse the impact of PSM. We found little else of interest in our controls, suggesting that individual attributes (employee PSM and

TABLE 3 OLS estimates of factors influencing employee perceptions of social impact

<i>Dependent variable</i>									
<b>Perceived social impact</b>	<i>Model 1</i>			<i>Model 2</i>			<i>Model 3</i>		
	<i>b</i>	$\beta$	S.E.	<i>b</i>	$\beta$	S.E.	<i>b</i>	$\beta$	S.E.
<i>Independent variables</i>									
Public service motivation	0.39**	0.56**	(0.03)	0.23**	0.34**	(0.03)	0.52**	0.74**	(0.07)
Organization identity				0.61**	0.42**	(0.07)	1.30**	0.88**	(0.15)
PSM $\times$ org ident.							-0.03**	-0.78**	(0.01)
Tenure (5 yr increments)	0.02	0.01	(0.11)	0.08	0.04	(0.09)	0.10	0.05	(0.09)
Race (1 = black)	-0.26	-0.03	(0.36)	0.15	0.02	(0.32)	0.23	0.02	(0.31)
Age (6 yr increments)	0.12	0.06	(0.09)	0.08	0.04	(0.08)	0.07	0.04	(0.08)
Education level	0.13	0.04	(0.15)	0.16	0.05	(0.14)	0.13	0.04	(0.14)
<i>Workspace (cubicle omitted)</i>									
Field	0.00	0.00	(0.70)	0.39	0.03	(0.67)	0.39	0.03	(0.67)
Private office	0.56	0.07	(0.39)	0.35	0.05	(0.36)	0.45	0.06	(0.35)
Reception desk	1.3	0.03	(1.14)	1.45	0.03	(0.76)	1.54*	0.04*	(0.67)
Shared office	0.25	0.03	(0.51)	0.52	0.05	(0.47)	0.50	0.05	(0.47)
<i>Department (Atty's office omitted)</i>									
Business support services	0.47	0.02	(0.91)	0.66	0.03	(0.84)	0.61	0.02	(0.87)
Bus/rail	0.89	0.06	(0.97)	0.83	0.05	(0.83)	0.81	0.05	(0.83)
Dept of transportation	1.08	0.06	(0.92)	0.88	0.05	(0.77)	0.99	0.06	(0.78)
City manager's office	0.11	0.01	(1.04)	0.11	0.01	(0.87)	0.08	0.00	(0.87)
Engineering and property mgt	0.17	0.02	(0.81)	0.58	0.05	(0.68)	0.64	0.06	(0.69)
Finance	-1.62	-0.07	(1.08)	-1.15	-0.05	(0.95)	-1.27	-0.06	(0.97)
Fire	1.24	0.15	(0.83)	1.05	0.13	(0.70)	1.18	0.14	(0.72)
Human resources	0.77	0.03	(0.95)	0.79	0.03	(0.76)	0.79	0.03	(0.77)
Nbrhood and business services	1.16	0.06	(0.92)	1.88*	0.10*	(0.81)	1.98*	0.10*	(0.79)
Planning	-2.71	-0.10	(2.05)	-1.73	-0.06	(1.32)	-1.69	-0.06	(1.39)
Police	-0.17	-0.01	(1.14)	0.21	0.01	(0.98)	0.19	0.01	(1.00)
Solid waste	0.90	0.04	(1.03)	0.99	0.04	(0.85)	0.96	0.04	(0.86)
Utilities	0.98	0.10	(0.81)	1.10	0.11	(0.67)	1.07	0.11	(0.68)
Constant	5.19**		(1.33)	2.02		(1.28)	-4.90**		(1.74)
N	522			522			522		
R-sq	0.37	0.37		0.49	0.49		0.50	0.50	

Note: S.E. = robust standard errors; \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01.

OI) are more important than organizational attributes (workspace or department type) in shaping how an employee perceives the social impact of her work.

We further tested the relationship between PSM and OI by running a moderated model. Model 3 reports these results, indicating that the multiplicative effect of an employee's PSM and OI is statistically significant (PSM  $\times$  Org Ident). Following a technique used by others (e.g. Dawson and Richter 2006; Grant and Sumanth 2009; Christensen and Wright 2011) to help interpret the interaction, we graphed the moderated relationship. Figure 4 displays how employee OI conditions PSM's effects on how employees perceive the social impact of their work. Employees' PSM, which is split at the mean to parsimoniously indicate two groups, is displayed on the x-axis. This allows us to compare two groups of employees that are, respectively, low and high in PSM. The y-axis displays the degree to which an employee is likely to perceive their job as having a positive social impact.

We begin by noting that the slopes are not only visually, but also statistically (p < 0.01), different from each other. Employees with higher levels of PSM are significantly more

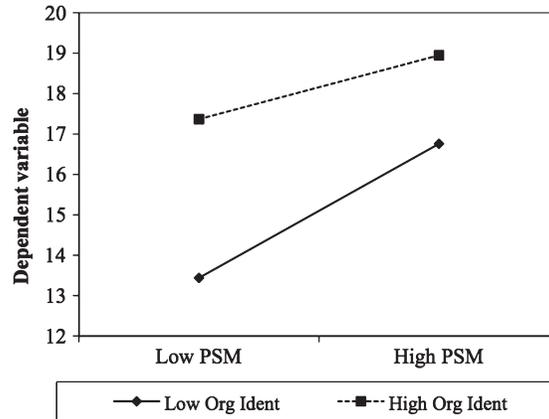


FIGURE 4 PSM's impact on perception of social impact moderated by OI (organization identity)

likely to perceive their jobs as having a positive social impact when those employees also have higher levels of OI. Conversely, those employees least likely to view their jobs as having a positive social impact are those with low levels of both PSM and OI. We further note that OI has a larger moderating impact on employees with lower levels of PSM than on employees with higher levels of PSM. This raises the possibility that higher levels of PSM may counteract lower levels of OI when it comes to how employees view the social impact of their jobs.

## DISCUSSION

How an employee perceives the significance of their work is important for a multitude of reasons (Grant 2008a, 2008b). We examined here several factors that might shape how municipal employees view the social impact of their jobs. While researchers have explored how perception of task significance can shape factors like PSM, we argue that an alternative causality was worth exploring both theoretically and empirically. An examination of the literature supplied us with ample justification to articulate such a directional link between PSM and perceived social impact.

We do not argue that one causality is either more important or more clearly warranted than another. Indeed, because we agree that 'it is difficult to conceptualize the common ground upon which "perception" and "motivation" can meet and interact' (Hochberg and Gleitman 1949, p. 180), multiple causalities should be considered. However, we agree with Judge *et al.* (2001) that understanding multiple causal paths can guide researchers to build more integrated frameworks of the relationships among variables of interest. As such, our findings – that PSM increases the likelihood of perceiving social impact – actually complement research suggesting that task significance can encourage PSM. Taken together we raise the possibility that the relationship between motivation and perception may be less directional, and more contemporaneous and iterative (see figure 5). From this perspective, we extend older work that draws upon Gestalt theory to suggest that 'motivation is neither superimposed from above nor injected in from below, but is an attribute of the total field situation' (Hochberg and Gleitman 1949, p. 187).

We also feel the need to provide some context for our present exploration of alternative motivation–perception causalities based on research from other fields. For example, Judge

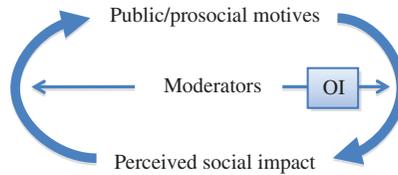


FIGURE 5 *Motivation–perception relationship*

*et al.* (2001) observed at least seven distinct models of the job performance–job satisfaction relationship. In part, these multiple causal models evolved because researchers were looking at individual parts of a more complicated relationship among the key variables. Judge *et al.* (2001) used quantitative and qualitative meta-analyses of the proposed causal paths between performance and satisfaction to generate an integrative, unified framework where the multiple models can co-exist (pp. 389–90). The work demonstrates how exploring alternative and multiple causal paths can similarly help public administration scholars move from single studies of micro-theory to more unified frameworks for analysis.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations that future research may better address. In this article, we raise the possibility of a simultaneous causality, which suggests an alternative causality relative to Grant's proposal that the social significance of a task will increase an individual's PSM. While this was largely an exercise in theory building with an illustrative quantitative study, we are quick to note that our use of cross-sectional data in the analysis falls short of meeting the criteria needed to definitively establish either an alternative or simultaneous causality. While cross-sectional data allowed us to explore our proposed theoretical relationships, analyses of cross-sectional data fail to give scholars the evidence necessary for *true* causal inference (see Wright 2008).

The greatest challenges posed by the use of cross-sectional data are the temporal sequencing and the spuriousness of the proposed causal mechanisms (Vandenabeele forthcoming). However, Vandenabeele (forthcoming) argues that both research design strategies and statistical procedures can be used to mitigate these threats. For instance, using recall questions on surveys can help establish the temporal sequence of events on a cross-sectional survey (for example, see Perry *et al.* 2008). Additionally, exploring the effect of multiple mediator and moderator variables in statistical models can help mitigate the possibility of spuriousness (Wright 2008; Vandenabeele forthcoming). Future cross-sectional research needs to take these factors into consideration when designing future cross-sectional surveys and conducting analyses.

In our present effort we can only bolster these cross-sectional findings through theoretical means. Our reviews of theories that inform the motivation–perception relation does, however, amply support the possibility of a PSM→perception causality, which is consistent with our empirical findings. We also note that our findings are neither artefacts of – nor limited to – our own dataset. A questionnaire measuring similar constructs was administered to a different municipal employee population in a nearby county. In that cross-sectional survey, PSM was also a significantly positive correlate of an employee's perception of social impact (Wright *et al.* 2011). We nevertheless note several data limitations beyond the cross-sectional nature of our collection. First, we were unable to collect

certain variables that would allow us to conduct a careful analysis of representation. Second, we were only able to focus on those employees with city email accounts.

Beyond these limitations, we recognize that more work is needed that is longitudinal in nature. Our rather modest claims within this study were only to suggest that the causal connection between motives and perceptions may indeed be reciprocal. Second, we are cautious in suggesting that findings from our single-city survey are generalizable to all public employees. Our sample represents a wide variety of employees in terms of education, tenure, race, and organizational contexts such as departmental function and workspace. Nevertheless, we do not know whether our findings are limited to a US context. Future studies may seek not only to replicate these findings in other contexts longitudinally, but also to explore other potential moderators – particularly along the left-hand side of the perception–motive reciprocal relationship (see figure 5).

### **Future experimental and qualitative work**

Because our current data do not allow us to do so, we feel compelled to outline how future quantitative and qualitative work could explore alternative relationships – including the temporal sequencing of causality – between PSM and social importance. From a quantitative perspective, we suggest extending Grant's (2008a) study to examine the true relationship between PSM and task significance. While Grant envisioned the behavioural outcomes as PSM, he did not have a measure of PSM in his study. Grant (2008a) clearly states that 'it is not yet clear whether and how the prosocial impact intervention affects, or is affected by, public service motivation. In future research, it will be critical for scholars to measure public service motivation directly as a potential mediator that explains – and as a potential moderator that alters – the behavioral effects of connecting employees to their prosocial impact' (p. 57).

Theoretically, there are reasons to believe that individuals with higher levels of PSM will see a greater social significance in their work than those with lower levels of PSM. Empirically, there is recent evidence (Taylor 2013) beyond the present study that pursues this idea.<sup>6</sup> Building on Grant's (2008a) work, we now propose an experimental design that could capture the motivation→perception dynamic.

A simple pre-test/post-test design might be used to help sort out the causal relationship between PSM and perception of task significance. For example, we might identify a randomly selected group of students. In a pre-test, we might measure the level of PSM for all individuals. Then, we might assign a relatively simple, yet mundane task – such as coding data on a spreadsheet – and then tell the treatment group of students that the work will benefit an organization with a prosocial mission. Following a period of time, we would ask the students about the social significance of the job they are doing and reassess their PSM. If students who are initially higher in PSM report a higher level of task significance following the intervention than those low in PSM, this might provide evidence that individuals higher in PSM are more able to discern or identify with task significance. By measuring PSM both before and after the intervention, we could also assess task significance as a moderator of PSM. In addition to the present study, such an experiment could provide insights into Brewer and Brewer's (2011) experimental findings that task performance increased when the individual thought they were acting on behalf of a public organization.

In addition to the experimental quantitative procedures described above, qualitative research methodologies might also provide insights into the causal sequencing of the cognitive processes in question. One particular tool that might prove useful is *process*

*tracing* (see Beach and Pedersen 2012). According to Collier (2011), ‘process tracing is an analytic tool for drawing descriptive and causal inferences from diagnostic pieces of evidence – often understood as part of a temporal sequence of events or phenomena’ (p. 824). For example, interviews with pre-career individuals could be conducted on their prosocial values and work attitudes – specifically aimed at understanding the social significance of their future work and how they perceive that it will drive their career choices.

The individuals could be followed in a number of public and private sector careers that vary greatly with respect to their social impact and contact with beneficiaries, and asked questions about their prosocial attitudes and values and how they feel their work has shaped their values and how they feel their values have shaped the way they approach their work. Rigorous process tracing of a small number of individuals could be used in conjunction with large-n empirical analyses of cross-sectional data to help rule out spuriousness and establish temporal sequencing of causal events. In our case, the method would be useful in evaluating previous hypotheses as well as elucidating new causal mechanisms. Furthermore, this method might provide an alternative means of addressing issues of reciprocal causation – as opposed to conventional regression analyses (p. 824). While resource intensive, a major strength of this approach is its ability to unpack causal relationships over time.

### **Practical implications**

For public managers, regardless of opportunities to interact with beneficiaries of their work, certain employees are more likely to perceive their job as having a positive social impact. In essence, some of the perception is attributable to an employee’s existing level of public service motives. Just as optimists may be more likely to view the glass as ‘half full’, employees with higher levels of PSM appear more likely to perceive their jobs as having a positive social impact. This finding seems to be in keeping with related research suggesting that individual PSM shapes the job attraction–selection–attrition process (Vandenabeele 2008; Wright and Christensen 2010). More specifically, our findings indicate one mechanism that may explain why certain employees with higher levels of PSM tend to have lower intentions of job turnover (Bright 2008): they are more likely to perceive positive social impact in their work and may derive satisfaction from that perception. This certainly warrants future exploration.

We also recognize that PSM not only precipitates positive perceptions of job impact, but is precipitated by task significance. Opportunities to interact with beneficiaries may therefore cultivate an employee’s public service motives (see also Taylor 2013). We further recognize that individual characteristics are not the only factors shaping the relationship between motives and perceptions. Organizational characteristics that touch upon how employees identify with their organizations directly influence how employees perceive the social impact of their work. OI also moderates the influence that PSM has on perception of social impact, and is particularly important for employees with lower levels of PSM. Managers may consider not only ways for employees to interact with beneficiaries but also what might improve how employees identify with their organizations.

Yet managers should also be aware of the potential for employees high in PSM to overemphasize certain aspects of the job. A consequence that needs to be explored in subsequent research is the degree to which high-PSM employees might spend their time exclusively on the facets of the job that have a clearer immediate social impact, while neglecting aspects of the job that are perceived to be less directly socially important (e.g. paperwork,

group meetings, reporting). While this might appear to be a positive consequence, it might be short-sighted, and the consequences of neglecting 'less important' aspects of the job might – ultimately – undermine the organization's ability to serve the public.

A second consequence of 'believing leading to seeing', and the relationship between motivation and perception, is the fact that managers high in PSM might have a subjective bias towards information that seems to suggest that certain prosocial goals are being met – even when more objective information suggesting otherwise exists. Such a bias can hinder the organization's ability to learn and adapt and, potentially, undermine the prosocial mission of the organization. Certainly, further investigation is needed to fully understand how public service motivation shapes and is shaped by the perception of a job's prosocial impact. However, perceptual biases and PSM most certainly shape how individuals process work-related information and the organizational dynamic. By identifying the potential contemporaneous nature of the motivation–perception relationship, managers can more fully recognize and engage those facets of work life that shape how employees perceive the significance of their tasks.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Based on recent evidence of their empirical equivalence (Wright *et al.* forthcoming), in this article we do not distinguish between the concepts of *public service motivation* and *prosocial motivation*.

<sup>2</sup> 'I feel that my work makes a positive difference in other people's lives'; 'I am very aware of the ways in which my work is benefiting others'; 'I am very conscious of the positive impact that my work has on others.'

<sup>3</sup> 'Meaningful public service is very important to me'; 'I am often reminded by daily events about how dependent we are on one another'; 'Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements'; 'I am prepared to make enormous sacrifices for the good of society'; 'I am not afraid to go to bat for the rights of others even if it means I will be ridiculed.'

<sup>4</sup> The degree to which an individual cares about the fate of their organization; the degree to which an individual feels that their values are similar to those of their organization.

<sup>5</sup> For parsimony, we have chosen to treat department type as a control variable, but based on earlier work by scholars such as Barnard (1938) and Ashforth and Mael (1989), we recognize that organizational identity can also attach to organizational subunits like departments.

<sup>6</sup> Although being a cross-sectional study with limitations similar to our own, Taylor (2013) makes a compelling argument that PSM and perception of work impact are related and that 'workers with high PSM levels are likely to be more satisfied with their job when they are convinced that their jobs allow them to have a positive impact on citizens'.

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