



## Testing a dark side of PSM: justification of unethical behavior

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# Testing a dark side of PSM: Justification of unethical behaviour

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## INTRODUCTION

Within the public administration literature, public service motivation (PSM) – or “the motivation to perform meaningful public service and to unselfishly defend the public interest” (Vandenabeele 2008, 144) – has been one of the most frequently studied and discussed topics. The concept of PSM has not only been associated with positive work-related outcomes, but also with positive behaviors outside of the workplace, such as political and civic engagement (Ritz, Brewer and Neumann 2016). Next to this optimistic view on PSM, there has been a recent thread in public administration research that argues that PSM may also have potential “dark sides”. For example, Schott and Ritz’s (2017) theoretical article addressed the question “why PSM cannot ultimately deliver on its promise,” and political scientist Gailmard (2010) drew attention to the limits of PSM by combining PSM research with insights from principal-agent theory.

The authors of both studies base their “dark side argument” on the observation that people interpret the public interest – which is an “integral and central aspect of PSM” (Schott, Van Kleef and Steen 2015, 693) – differently. More specifically, Gailmard (2010) argues that bureaucrats’ preferences over public policy stem from “the individual agent’s conception of good public policy, or vision of a just social order, or ideals of the public interest, and so forth” (2010:13). Because agents “cannot realistically be asked to abandon their ideals” (p.38), a potential dark side of PSM is the intrusion of politics into public administration. Schott and Ritz (2017) draw on insights from moral psychology (Graham et al., 2011) and philology (Sen 2010) to support the argument that the intentions to do good for society at large and contribute to the public interest (i.e. being public-service motivated) “are insufficient to ensure good results at all time and for everybody” (p. 31). The idea that people bring different interpretations to the public interest has also been highlighted in rational

choice theory. From this perspective, we simply cannot know what the general public interest is because nobody can acquire all the information necessary to divine it (Niskanen 1971).

In this study, we put to test these theoretical arguments, for the first time, thereby answering the question of *whether highly public service-motivated individuals vary their justification of an unethical behavior (i.e. integrity violation) when this type of behavior advances or puts at risk their interpretation of the public interest*. Providing an answer to this question is relevant for both theory and practice. From a theoretical point of view, this study is relevant as it sheds new light on a core concept of public management research: public service motivation (Bozeman and Su 2015). In particular, this study makes evident the importance of considering the public interest, and individual interpretation thereof when conducting PSM research in general and research on the “dark” sides of PSM in particular (c.f. Ripoll 2019, Schott and Ritz 2017). For practitioners, this study contributes to the debate about the desirability of selecting individuals with high levels of PSM, or stimulating it, in order to have an ethical<sup>1</sup> and high performing workforce.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. The next section discusses and combines relevant literature on PSM, ethics and (un-) ethical behavior and decision making. Based on this review we formulate a hypothesis concerning the relationship between PSM and the justification of unethical behavior. After describing the empirical setting, the data and methods, we present our findings based on a large set of data with citizens (N=1512). We then conclude with a discussion.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Introducing public service motivation and the public interest**

After being introduced by Rainey in 1982 as the result of a study investigating private and public managers’ reaction to the question of how they rate their desire to engage “in meaningful public service” (p. 288), Perry and Wise (1990) were the first to formally define the concept of PSM as “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (p. 368). Although this definition has been modified by others (e.g., Brewer and Selden 1998, Rainey and Steinbauer 1999, Vandenabeele 2007), there are two main commonalities which form the essence of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ethical and moral are synonyms.

concept: PSM originates in public institutions, and it reflects an other-oriented motivation directed to improve the society (Vandenabeele et al. 2018).

Authors commonly agree that PSM is a multidimensional concept consisting of the four dimensions of 1) 'self-sacrifice', 2) 'compassion', 3) 'attraction to public service', and 4) 'commitment to public values' (Kim et al. 2013). The 'compassion' dimension specifically describes the degree to which participants identify with the needs and suffering of (unprivileged) others. The willingness to substitute services and resources to others for personal rewards refers to 'self-sacrifice'. 'Attraction to public service' describes the extent to which individuals are dedicated to public service, the common good, and the broader community. Finally, 'commitment to public values' assesses the "extent to which an individual's interest in public service is driven by their internalization of and interest in pursuing commonly held public values such as equity, concern for future generations, accountability and ethics" (Kim et al. 2013, 83).

Some authors have urged scholars to analyse the sub-dimensions of PSM separately, since relationships with other variables (i.e. antecedents and outcomes) have been found to vary in strength and direction (e.g., Andersen and Serritzlew 2012; Jensen and Vestergraad 2016). However, because of the importance of the overall meaning of PSM and the constrain of publicly available datasets, global measures have also been frequently used in PSM research (c.f. Wright et al. 2013, Kim 2017). In fact, according to Vandenabeele et al. (2018) global measures of PSM bypass contextual sensitiveness of multi-dimensional measures and focus on the main driver of the concept (i.e. one is motivated to improve the society). Therefore, as we are interested in the in the unidimensional meaning of PSM and its relationship with (un-)ethical decisions and behaviour, in this article we will refer to PSM as a unidimensional concept.

The growing interest in the concept PSM over the last 30 years is likely to be grounded in one of the core assumptions about PSM, i.e., that "in public service organizations, PSM is positively related to individual performance" (Perry and Wise 1990:370). Aggregated results provide evidence for the positive association between PSM and individual and organizational performance, but also to other outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior or volunteering (Ritz et al. 2016). Next to this substantial body of research, scholars only recently started to explore the dark sides of PSM. This stream of research can further be divided into two sub-streams. First, empirical

research investigating negative attitudinal outcomes of PSM, such as stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction (e.g. Gould-William et al. 2013, Van Loon et al. 2015). These studies lean on Kristof-Brown et al.'s (2005) (mis-)fit hypothesis as a theoretical argument to explain these negative attitudinal outcomes of PSM. Second, there is theoretical research arguing that PSM may be associated with negative decision-making and behaviors (Gailmard 2010, Ripoll 2019, Schott & Ritz 2017). As mentioned in the introduction, the authors of these studies make use of the argument that people interpret the public interest – which is an “integral and central aspect of PSM” (Schott, Van Kleef and Steen 2015, 693) – differently.

Andersen et al. (2013) argues that the public interest is “a public value, but we obviously need more concrete values specifying what serving society should include” (p.296). This is an interesting approach to clarify what serving the public interest – or being public-service motivated – means. However, “employees in public organizations are challenged to balance ‘traditional’ public values such as integrity, neutrality, and legality, on the one hand with ‘business-like’ values such as efficiency, effectiveness, and responsiveness on the other hand” (Steen and Schott 2019: 1). The idea that values can be conflicting has been studied in a telling example found in the daily work of medical doctors (Jensen and Andersen 2015). Physicians are expected to prescribe antibiotics whenever they assume this to be the best way to cure the patient of his or her illness. At the same time, we also know that frequently prescribing antibiotics increases the risk of bacterial resistance; a state that eventually renders the effectiveness of future treatments. This means, the question of what we expect from public organisations and public servant – what safeguarding the public interest means – becomes difficult to answer. Physicians are forced to weight their responsiveness to the individual patient against concerns for future generations. A similar conclusion was drawn by Bailey (1965) already more than a half century ago. He argues that “welfare policies may mitigate hunger but promote parasitic dependence; vacationing in forests open for public recreation may destroy fish, wild life, and through carelessness in the handling of fire, the forests themselves” (p.267).

In order to shed light on the question what constitutes the public interest, Schott et al. (2015) argue that the concept should be seen as a role-dependent concept. Empirical support for this argument is provided by a quantitative study among veterinary inspectors (Schott 2015). Schott (2015) showed that public-service motivated individuals come up with different views on what the public interest means to them in their role as citizen, veterinary inspector,

and veterinarian. While some associate the public interest with ‘social welfare’, others link it to ‘civic duty’ or ‘justice’ when holding the role of citizens. In the role of veterinarian, the public interest was most frequently associated with ‘animal welfare’, whereas in the role of veterinary inspector with ‘public health’. This finding resonates with others who argue that the public interest is an institutional ideal played out at the individual level (Ripoll 2019). Others argue that the public interest has a “different meaning in different narratives” (Rhodes and Wanna 2007: 415), and that “there are as many ways to conceive of public service as there are to conceive of the public interest” (Rainey 1982: 289). This raises an important question. If PSM indeed reflects the attachment to the values and ideals (i.e. public interest) of a public institution, how does it change as a reaction to the many public institutions, which vary from one to another? Because divergences are likely to exist between and across public institutions that form the basis of our society, the values attached to PSM – or public service (moral) identity – are likely to change as well depending on the institution from which they are derived (Ripoll 2019). On the basis of these theoretical and empirical findings we argue that the public interest can be interpreted differently by different persons and that these interpretations guide the actions of individuals with high levels of PSM.

### **Theoretical perspectives on morality**

Ethics are broadly defined as a collection of values and norms to assess the morality of certain attitudes, decisions and behaviours (Lasthuizen et al. 2011). When examining the morality of a decision or behaviour, it is convenient to differentiate between the *content* of the decision or action, and the governance *process* that leads to that decision or behaviour (Huberts 2018). While the former refers to the essence, subject or orientation of a certain decision or behaviour (e.g., developing policy A versus B), the latter is related to acting with or without making integrity violations (e.g., cheating or bribing). While the *content* can vary from one culture to another, integrity violations seem to move beyond cultural borders. For example, the decision to universalize the public health care system (i.e. *content*) is likely to generate serious debates about the appropriateness of such a system between liberals and social democrats. By contrast, if someone is moved beyond his or her ideology and justifies the manipulation of certain documents to underpin the arguments in favour for or against the creation of the public health care system, an integrity violation is committed (i.e. *process*). Put differently, what is morally right (i.e. just, good, ethical) in terms of *content* varies across individuals and institutions, while integrity violations are unethical per se. In this study, these

two approaches towards morality are used to explore the dark side of PSM in relation to ethics.

Next to this, ethical aspects of decisions and behaviours can be studied from a *value perspective*. We want to highlight two classic approaches: quandary ethics and character ethics. *Quandary ethics* (e.g. teleology or deontology) propose that ethical decisions and behaviours are derived following a set of rules, whereas *character ethics* (e.g. virtues) argue that if certain identity traits are cultivated, ethical outcomes naturally arise (Pincoffs 1986). The problem with these approaches is that they do not reach universality, thereby constraining the assessment of social reality. Fortunately, Arendt (1963, 1978) provided a broader analytical framework: identity traits (i.e. virtues) promote ethical outcomes by deduction (i.e. from a general rule to particular situations) or reflection (i.e. from particular to general). This framework enables us to consider how people are and towards which principles they are attached in order to predict their ethical decisions and behaviours in terms of both *content* and *process*.

Finally, when inspecting the morality of attitudes, decisions and behaviours, researchers can also focus on *specific* attitudes or behaviours derived from individual ethical decision-making models. According to Treviño et al., (2006) one frequently used is James Rest's four-component model (Rest 1986). Rest's model understands ethical behaviour as the product of four sub-sequential steps, which are connected by feedback and feedforward loops. First, moral awareness implies that an individual determines that "a situation contains moral content and legitimately can be considered from a point of view" (Reynolds, 2006: 233). Second, moral judgment relates to comparing the standards involved in a situation with those of the individual, to elaborate a prescriptive evaluation of this situation, and, if appropriate, to obtain a solution. Third, moral intention is defined as the willingness to act according to one's judgment. Finally, moral behaviour expresses the consummation of the previous will in an action. Although the language is not always identical to the one used in Rest's four-component model, previous PSM research identified a number of specific ethical attitudes and behaviours. For example, Kwon (2014), Ripoll and Breugh (2019) and Ripoll and Ballart (2019) focused on ethical judgement, Brewer and Selden (1998) and Wright et al. (2016) investigated the relationship between PSM and ethical intention, and Christensen and Wright (2018) researched ethical behaviour as an outcome of PSM. In this article, we focus on (un)ethical judgement as a specific outcome of PSM. (Un)ethical judgement is indeed

particularly relevant in PSM research because of the desire for self-consistency. Self-concepts like identities in general and public service/moral identities in particular consistently drive individuals' attitudes and behaviours in line with the identity-related values, suggesting a strong association between public-service motivated individuals' judgements, intentions and behaviours. This strong relationship between judgements, intentions, and behaviours can be explained by, for example, cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) and theory of reasoned action and planned behaviour (Nguyen and Biderman 2008). Central to these theories is the argument that beliefs and attitudes are a key driver of actual behavioral outcomes.

### **PSM and ethical outcomes: original and state-of-the-art approaches**

Once the main concepts have been defined, we offer now an overview of the relationship between PSM and ethics. After that, we shift the focus and explain why PSM may be able to promote unethical outcomes. According to Horton (2008), the ideal of a public service ethic has been a key concern since the ancient Greeks and Romans. In fact, "the essence of the idea is that a public servant sets aside his personal interest because he sees it as his duty to serve community" (Horton 2008, 18). However, this ideal was formally studied until Perry and Wise (1990) coined the term public service motivation almost 30 ago. This means the concept of PSM has been intrinsically connected to ethics since it emerged. Incipient research addressing the relationship between PSM and ethics (e.g. Brewer and Selden 1998, Choi 2004, Maesschalck et al. 2008, Kwon 2014) relied on one single argument: there is a positive effect of PSM on ethical outcomes because PSM and ethics reflect similar public values and promote the public interest against self-interest driven behaviour. Although concise and neat, this argument faced limits to explain counter-intuitive findings and approaches (c.f. Esteve et al. 2016, Schott and Ritz 2017, Christensen and Wright 2018). Therefore, this argument has recently been reformulated to sustain the explanatory power of PSM in ethics research.

Although usually conceptualized as a motivation, a growing number of scholars view PSM as a (social) identity grounded in public institutions (Bednarczuk 2018, Perry 2000, Ripoll and Breugh 2019, Schott et al. 2015, Vandenabeele 2007, Perry and Vandenabeele 2008). These institutions nourish individuals' PSM, or *public service identity*, by transmitting their institutional logics (c.f. Thornton and Ocasio 1999) through different social processes such as socialization and social learning (Perry and Vandenabeele 2008). Hence, PSM is a self-concept imbued with public content that moves individuals to bring the



acquired public service values to multiple decision situations (Stazyk and Davis 2015). Therefore, it follows that individuals consistently self-regulate their ethical decisions and behaviours in line with the set of values, norms and rules (i.e. ethical frameworks) forming their public service identity (Ripoll and Breaugh 2019).

By combining values, norms and identity traits, it is possible to further inspect the theoretical mechanisms linking PSM and ethics using Arendt's approach towards morality. If applied to ethics, PSM can also be understood as a *public service moral identity* that "reflects a collection of virtues which are normatively oriented to further the public interest" (Ripoll 2019: 27). The public interest, which is determined by the institution, defines the morally right attitudes, decisions and behaviours of public service motivated individuals (Ripoll 2019). The underlying motives of PSM (self-sacrifice, rational, affective and normative) reflect different virtues (e.g. ethical heroism or self-discipline) which are oriented to safeguard the public interest (Ripoll 2019). In sum, by cultivating their virtues, public service motivated individuals develop ethical attitudes, decisions and behaviours (i.e. safe-guarding public interest). This idea can be linked to the *content* definition of ethics (i.e. the institution defines what is ethical and what is not), but also to the importance of not committing integrity violations (i.e. *process*) which could put in danger the public interest.

### **PSM and the justification of unethical behaviour**

Due to the possibility of existing multiple interpretations of the public interest discussed above, two implications arise for the relationship between PSM and (un)ethical behaviour.

First, different public-service motivated individuals may feel attached to different interpretations of the public interests. As a result, in situations where different interpretations of the public interest are conflicting, judging the *content* of a decisions becomes a difficult venture. If an individual defends the public interest A (e.g. security), but people surrounding him or her are attached to public interest B (e.g. transparency), then these people will consider that his/her decisions and behaviours are morally wrong (unethical) if this person takes action that favour A but undermine B (Ripoll 2019). This means judging behaviour and decisions becomes a matter of perspectives. Depending on the institutions individuals are socialized by, their judgement about what is right or wrong shall differ.

Second, and as a consequence of this first argument, it becomes necessary to explore which attitudes, decisions and behaviours public service motivated individuals justify in order to advance ‘their’ public interest (i.e. process). As it has been argued above, while the content of moral decisions can vary, the question what is morally good or bad is incontestable from a process perspective. In fact, Ripoll explains that public service motivated individuals are “prisoners and servants of the public interest at the same time” (p. 27) and that this makes them likely to adhere to the saying ‘the end justifies the means’ (Schott and Ritz 2017). Put differently, for highly public- service motivated individuals safeguarding ‘their’ interpretation of the public interest becomes so important that any way of achieving this – also engaging in unethical behaviour or making unethical decisions – is acceptable to them (Schott and Ritz 2017). On the basis of this we propose that public service-motivated individuals will vary their justification of an integrity violation when this action advances or puts at risk their interpretation of the public interest. We put this argument to the test by the following pair of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: There is a negative association between PSM and the justification of unethical behaviours when individuals’ public interest is not furthered.

Hypothesis 1b: There is a positive association between PSM and the justification of unethical behaviours when individuals’ public interest is furthered.

## **DATA, RESEARCH DESIGN AND MEASUREMENTS, AND ANALYSIS**

### **Data**

This study uses data from a survey. It was run between 25th of March and 10th of April 2019 and targeted a representative sample of citizens from Catalonia (Spain). The company NetQuest did the implementation of the survey. The survey included different experiments and questions on socio-demographic characteristics, ideological preferences, health status, and PSM. The questions and vignettes used to measure the dependent variables were preceded by an experiment about satisfaction evaluations on health services, and followed by an experiment on corruption in public services.

After incomplete responses were discarded, the final sample included was 1512 individuals. To improve the representativeness of our sample, quotas were applied on the sampling process. In particular, quotas were asked for gender (female 50), age (18-24 11.9,

25-34 15.1, 35-44 22.3, 45-54 20.4, 55-64 17.2, 65-74 13.1) and education (primary 33, secondary 33, university 33). As table 1 shows, they closely match the Spanish population of this region.

<<< Table 1 about here >>>

For this study a sample from the general population, rather than public servants was used. There are two reasons for this. The first is that PSM is universal, and can be found in both public, private and non-profit areas. This mix of public, private, and non-profit respondents captures a better range of PSM responses types. Secondly, as we are interested in theory building, using an occupationally neutral set of respondents (i.e. not just teachers, doctors, nurses or police officers) helps us to generalise our findings, which is particularly important for initial theory building.

In line with previous studies oriented to advance theory in general (Chen et al. 2014), the local context is not discussed in detail. However, we would like to stress that Spain is an appropriate setting to develop this study for a single reason. Although Spain is a democratic country scoring high in Freedom House and Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index, corruption is a very salient issue (CIS 2019). Therefore, respondents are familiarized with the situations we presented to them.

### **Research design and dependent variables measurement**

As outlined in the theory section above, this study aims to test if individuals with high levels of PSM are more likely to justify an unethical behaviour when it furthers ‘their’ public interest. The procedure for testing this hypothesis was divided in three steps.

We first identified the individual’s interpretation of the public interest (i.e. independent variable). To do this, respondents saw two pairs of conflicting interpretations of the public interest. For each pair, respondents were asked to report the degree to which they identify with these two interpretations by distributing 10 points to each option (e.g. 7 points to public interest A, and 3 points to B). In each pair one interpretation of the public interest was *due process*. This interpretation conflicted with *efficiency* in pair 1 and with *security* in pair 2. Once the data was processed, we created two continuous variables representing individuals’ identification with *efficiency* and *security* in opposition to *due process*. To facilitate the interpretation of the results, each variable was transformed into a 0-1 scale.

To avoid self-selection or attention biases, we have included an unrelated experiment in-between the measurement of the meaning of the public interest and the related vignettes. In particular, respondents did a small survey experiment about normative orientations, satisfaction and performance of public health system in Catalonia (Spain). After that, respondents were confronted with two hypothetical but realistic dilemmas that put in play the two conflicting interpretations of the public interest. Although the wording was different, the logic behind the two dilemmas was the same. Moreover, they are formulated in such a way that citizens can easily identify with. Each situation revolves around a dilemma faced by a public servant (a policeman, or a bureaucrat). In these dilemmas, a public servant does something against the rules (i.e. *due process*) but in favour of *security* or *efficiency* (see appendix 1). In particular, the public servant conceals (i.e. vignette 1) or manipulates (i.e. vignette 2) information, which is an integrity violation according to Lashtuizen et al. (2011). Hence, depending on individuals' preferred interpretation of the public interest, they are in a situation in which an unethical action either advances or puts at risk their interpretation of the public interest.

In a third step, respondents are asked to report the extent to which the unethical behaviour can be justified (1-7 Likert scale: 1=not at all, 7=completely). This item reflects (un)ethical judgement, a unique (un)ethical attitude or behaviour as explained in the theoretical section. After processing the data, two different continuous variables were created (0-1 scale) representing the judgement of an unethical behaviour for each dilemma (i.e. dependent variables).

### **Other measures of interest**

Since Perry (1996) proposed a measure of PSM, many efforts have been done to validate it across different countries and cultures, and to develop new ones (e.g. Brewer and Selden 1998, Vandenabele 2008, Giauque et al. 2011, Houston 2011, Kim et al. 2013). This means there is not one single way to measure the concept of PSM. One of the main criteria for selecting one or another measure is the researcher's interest in PSM as a uni- or multidimensional concept. There are unidimensional measures using single items and short multi-item scales (c.f. Houston 2011, Bellé 2013), or multidimensional measures using 16 and 24-item scales (c.f. Perry 1996, Kim et al. 2013). Others found that there are not significant differences in predicting and being predicted between uni- and multidimensional measurement instruments (Wright et al. 2013, Kim 2017). Therefore, for this study, we selected the 4-item global measure of PSM designed

by Vandenberg and Penning de Vries (2016). Respondents rated their agreement with the 4 statements (see appendix) on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). Combining all items, a latent variable emerged. A CFA was performed to test the entire measure of PSM in our sample. The results of the model fit (Satorra-Bentler scaled  $\chi^2$  [df=2] = 3.888,  $p = 0.143$ , RMSEA 0.025, CFI 0.999, TLI 0.996, and SRMR 0.007) are satisfactory. Factor loadings, Cronbach's alpha and Joreskog's rho demonstrate the internal reliability of the measure (see table 2). To develop the analyses, the average was calculated and rescaled to a 0-1 scale.

<<< Table 2 about here >>>

While the study is primarily interested in the effect of PSM and the interpretation of the public interest on unethical behaviour, there are a number of additional factors that may influence the likelihood of falling into incorrect behaviour. Therefore, the analysis controls for gender (1=female), age (continuous), level of studies (0=primary, 1=secondary, 2=university) and ideology (0-1 scale, 0= extreme left, 1=extreme right). Some evidence suggests that women and the young have higher ethical standards compared to men and the old (White 1999, Tobin and Hyunkuk 2012). Although there is not clear evidence of a relationship between unethical judgement and the level of studies, it could be that individuals with higher education are more likely to identify the perils of behaving unethically. For example, Tavits (2010) found a negative effect of higher education in corruptibility. Ideology has been included for three reasons. First, when evaluating the morality of a decision or action, people with left- and right-wing ideology tend to rely on a different set of moral foundations (Graham et al., 2009). Second, according to van Lange et al. (2012) conservatives tend to be more individualists and competitors, while progressists are more prosocial. Third, left-wing individuals usually demand morally upright politicians, while those on the right are more likely to tolerate morality breaches (Allen et al., 2016).

### **Common method bias**

Because of respondents provided self-reported information on all key variables, common method bias may be present (Podsakoff et al. 2003). Three points need to be considered. First, this study controlled the four broad sources of this type of bias (Podsakoff et al. 2003, 2012; Favero and Bullock 2015) using design procedures (e.g. psychological separation, protection of anonymity, or reduction of evaluation apprehension). Second, to test the hypotheses

presented in the presented research design, there is a need to use interaction effects. According to Evans (1985) common method bias does not create false observed interaction effects. Also, this bias is less problematic in studies with OLS models with many independent variables where the interaction effects cannot be the product of the bias (Siemsen et al. 2010). Therefore, this study may be confident in the interaction effects results, however it needs to be aware that common method bias can inflate or deflate the pictured marginal effect sizes (Jakobsen and Jensen 2015). Finally, although being interested in the interaction effects, main effects will also be commented. Statistical remedies such as the non-ideal marker approach may help us to avoid common method bias when focusing on direct effects, however they may also remove the actual correlation between the variables along with the bias (Rutherford and Meier 2015). Therefore, we conducted a common latent factor test (Podsakoff et al. 2003). To do so, we loaded all items of perceptual variables included in the analyses into one common factor. As the goodness of fit indicators show (Satorra-Bentler scaled  $\chi^2$  [df=27] = 545.630,  $p < 0.001$ , RMSEA 0.113, CFI 0.807, TLI 0.742, and SRMR 0.091), it is unlikely that results are strongly affected by common method bias.

## RESULTS

The correlation matrix of all continuous variables can be seen in table 3. To test the hypotheses, we performed two moderated multiple regression analyses in Stata. This procedure allowed us to examine the relationship between PSM (independent variable) and the judgement of unethical behaviour (dependent variables) while accounting for the moderation effect of individuals' interpretation of the public interest. Table 4 presents the results for vignette 1 (efficiency), while table 5 shows the results for vignette 2 (security). VIFs are below 5 and tolerances are higher than 0.1 except when including the products in the regressions. This is normal because interaction terms are highly correlated with the main effect terms. Once the variables were centred before estimating the two products, VIFs and tolerances remained below common standards (results available upon request). Overall, we can affirm that multicollinearity is not a concern in this study.

<<< Table 3 about here >>>

On the one hand, model 3 in table 4 shows that no statistically significant effects were found for gender or people with secondary studies. Older and right-wing individuals are more likely to justify unethical behaviour to further efficiency. By contrast, individuals with university

studies are less likely to show unethical judgement. Respondents with a higher identification with efficiency are more likely to justify unethical behaviour, while those with higher levels of PSM are less likely to do it. Model 4 confirms the two hypotheses. The interaction between identification with efficiency and PSM on unethical judgement is positive and statistically significant. That is, the higher the levels of PSM, the more positive the effect of the identification with efficiency on unethical judgement. Figure 1 depicts how unethical judgement varies across respondents' PSM and identification with efficiency. There is a negative association between PSM and unethical judgement when individuals' interpretation is not furthered. By contrast, when individuals' interpretation is furthered, the association between PSM and unethical judgement is positive.

<<< Table 4 about here >>>

<<< Figure 1 about here >>>

On the other hand, model 3 in table 5 shows that the effects of control variables, identification with security and PSM are really similar to the ones found in table 4. However, model 5 rejects the two hypotheses. The interaction between identification with security and PSM on unethical judgement is negative and statistically significant. Thus, the effect of identification with security on unethical judgement is increasingly negative when employees have higher levels of PSM. Figure 2 illustrates this interaction. There is a positive association, although small, between PSM and unethical judgement when individuals' interpretation is not furthered. When individuals' interpretation is furthered, the association between PSM and unethical judgement is negative.

<<< Table 5 about here >>>

<<< Figure 2 about here >>>

## **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to provide empirical evidence on a potential dark side of PSM: justification of unethical behaviour. In particular, we focused on the *process* definition of unethical behaviour: integrity violations (Lasthuizen et al. 2011, Huberts 2018). In line with previous theoretical arguments, it has been argued that public service motivated individuals will vary the justification of unethical behaviour depending on how this behaviour impacts

their interpretation of the public interest. Following this logic, two hypotheses were developed and empirically tested. In the light of the results, both hypotheses can be confirmed (vignette 1) or rejected (vignette 2). In the paragraphs below, we first review the results and then provide an explanation for this empirical contradiction.

The results in vignette 1 and 2 are consistent on two points. First, the main effects of control and main variables on unethical judgement are stable. In fact, all coefficients, except for gender, go in line with the main arguments to include them. And second, the moderation between PSM and the identification with the public interest is statistically significant. Although consistent, the difference sign of the coefficients goes against our expectations.

In vignette 1, the integrity violation furthers *efficiency* (against *due process*). Regression analyses show that individuals with high levels of PSM are more likely to justify an integrity violation if they are more identified with *efficiency*. By contrast, when the level of identification with *efficiency* is low, highly public service motivated individuals are less likely to justify an integrity violation. This confirms our hypotheses and unmasks a dark-side of PSM: although possessing high levels of PSM, individuals' justification of unethical behaviour (i.e. *process*) positively depends on their interpretation of the public interest.

Although interesting, the regression analyses from vignette 2 force us to be extremely cautious in confirming the results. In vignette 2, the integrity violation furthers *security* (against *due process*). As the results indicate, individuals with high levels of PSM are less likely to justify an integrity violation if they are more identified with *security*, and viceversa. This completely twists our hypotheses. In fact, the more highly public service motivated individuals are identified with an interpretation of the public interest, the less they will justify unethical behaviour.

To explain the mixed results we provide the following argument. First, as it has been suggested in the theoretical section of this paper, PSM reflects a cluster of public values. Among them, the public interest is the standard that individuals use to judge the morality of actions and behaviours, but also the standard that needs to be safeguarded through individuals' actions (Ripoll 2019). The public interest may be interpreted differently by different people. Our dilemmas were designed in order to show a conflict between two interpretations of the public interest. *Due-process* was in conflict with *efficiency* in vignette 1 and with *security* in vignette 2. A close inspection of these values signals that while *due-process* and *efficiency* has been labelled as public (service) values, *security* is not usually



included in this category (Brewer 2003, Van der Wal et al. 2008, Jorgensen and Bozeman 2007). Thus, it seems that we included (and compared) apples and oranges in the same vignette, which therefore signals that our research design was flawed. To shed some (modest) evidence on this argument, we conducted a simple test. We created a binary variable for those individuals that have worked or are still working in the public and third sector (=1), or in the private (=0). This aims to identify those individuals which has been more likely to be socialized with public values. ANOVA tests indicated that the likelihood of being identified with *efficiency* significantly differs across both groups ( $F(1, 1366)=11.36, p=0.001$ ), being the public values socialized group the one with a larger identification with this interpretation of the public interest. By contrast, the same test to account for the variation in the identification with *security* reported that the differences are marginal and non-significant ( $F(1, 1366)=0.16, p=0.687$ ).

Since *security* seems to be a personal value, rather than a public (service) value, it could be it does not trigger PSM. Moreover, vignette 2 emphasizes that there is an individual that will suffer the consequences of committing an integrity violation. This could activate the compassion and prosocial motives embedded in PSM. Therefore, although being more attached to *security*, since it is not considered a public value that guide individuals' actions, public service motivated individuals are likely to activate the prosocial component of PSM and act protecting the disfavoured actor in this vignette (i.e. not committing the integrity violation).

## **LIMITATIONS**

## **CONCLUSION**

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## APPENDIX

### Vignettes in English and original survey items in Spanish

Please note, the vignette's used in this experiment were in the Spanish language, and were translated into English for ease of international dissemination.

#### Step 1: identification of the public interest

##### Efficiency – Due process

*Cuando se habla del interés general, se suele hacer referencia a distintos valores. Por ejemplo, en ocasiones se defiende que siempre se debe actuar de acorde con la ley (legalidad). En cambio, en otras ocasiones se defiende actuar rápidamente y sin malgastar recursos (eficiencia). Y tú, ¿qué valor prefieres “legalidad” o “eficiencia”?*

*Distribuye 10 puntos entre las dos opciones (por ejemplo, 7 puntos a un valor y 3 puntos al otro)*

Legalidad	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Eficiencia	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

When people talk about the public interest, they usually refer to different values. For example, sometimes one defends to be a law-abiding citizen (due process). By contrast, sometimes one defends to act quickly without wasting resources (efficiency). And you, what value do you prefer due process or efficiency?

Distribute 10 points among the two options (e.g. 7 points to one value, and 3 points to the other)

Due process	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Efficiency	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

##### Security – Due process

*Cuando se habla del interés general, se suele hacer referencia a distintos valores. Por ejemplo, en ocasiones se defiende que siempre se debe actuar de acuerdo con la ley (legalidad). En cambio, en otras ocasiones se defiende actuar protegiendo a la gente (seguridad). Y tú, ¿qué valor prefieres “legalidad” o “seguridad”?*

*Distribuye 10 puntos entre las dos opciones (por ejemplo, 7 puntos a un valor y 3 puntos al otro)*

Legalidad	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Seguridad	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

When people talk about the public interest, they usually refer to different values. For example, sometimes one defends to be a law-abiding citizen (due process). By contrast, sometimes one defends to act protecting people (security). And you, what value do you prefer due process or security?

Distribute 10 points among the two options (e.g. 7 points to one value, and 3 points to the other)

Due process	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Security	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

## Step 2: Presentation of two dilemmas

### Efficiency – Due process

*Imagina la siguiente situación. Le piden a un/a trabajador/a del sector público que recomiende, lo antes posible, una compañía de obras para construir una nueva piscina pública. Las normas estipulan la apertura de un concurso público en el que se detalla toda la información y los ciudadanos toman la decisión final. El/La trabajador/a público conoce la mejor compañía de obras de la región para hacer este trabajo y decide ignorar la necesidad de abrir un concurso público*

Imagine the following situation. A public sector worker is asked to recommend, as soon as possible, a construction company to build a new public swimming pool. The norms require to open a public tender in which all information is disclosed and the final choice is made by the citizens. This public sector worker knows the best construction company in the region to do this job and decides to ignore the need to develop a public tender.

### Security – Due process

*Imagina la siguiente situación. Un/a policía está seguro/a de que un/a sospechoso/a es un/a traficante de drogas porque un “soplón” se lo ha dicho. Desafortunadamente, esta persona no quiere testificar. Manipulando un informe policial anterior, el/la policía tiene suficientes evidencias para arrestar al traficante de drogas*

Imagine the following situation: A police officer knows for sure that a person is a drug dealer because a sneak told him so. Unfortunately, this person refuses to make a public statement. By manipulating a police report made six months ago for a previous investigation, the officer has enough evidence to arrest the person in question

## Step 3: Measurement of unethical judgement and unethical intention

### Efficiency – Due process

	1=Muy en desacuerdo 7=Muy de acuerdo						
1. Es apropiado ignorar la necesidad de abrir un concurso público	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. To ignore the need to open a public tender is appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

### Security – Due process

	1=Muy en desacuerdo 7=Muy de acuerdo						
1. Es apropiado manipular el informe policial	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1. To manipulate the police report is appropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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## TABLES AND FIGURES

**Table 1.** Socio-demographic characteristics

<b>n = 1512</b>	<b>%</b>
Gender	
Female	50.26
Age	
18-24	11.38
25-34	15.15
35-44	22.42
45-54	20.30
55-64	17.79
65-74	12.96
Level of studies	
Up to Primary Education	33.2
Secondary Education	34.13
University Education	32.67
Work status	
Working	61.11
Housework	4.3
Pensioners	18.25
Unemployed	8.4
Student	6.35
Other	1.59
Work sector	
Public	18.58
Private	41.14
Third	1.39
.	38.89

**Table 2.** Confirmatory factor analysis for PSM

<b>Public Service Motivation, <math>\alpha = 0.883</math> <math>\rho = 0.885</math></b>	<b>SFL</b>	<b>S-B SE</b>
1. I am very motivated to contribute to society <i>1. Estoy muy motivado/a para contribuir a la sociedad</i>	0.787***	0.017
2. I find it very motivating to contribute to society <i>2. Me parece muy motivador contribuir a la sociedad</i>	0.862***	0.013
3. Making a difference in society, no matter how small, is very important to me <i>3. Crear una mejora en la sociedad, sin importar lo pequeña que sea, es muy importante para mí</i>	0.821***	0.014
4. Defending the public interest is very important to me <i>4. Defender el interés general es muy importante para mí</i>	0.770***	0.018

**Table 3.** Correlation matrix of variables included in the models

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. PSM	–					
2. Efficiency	0.01	–				
3. Security	-0.01	0.52*	–			
4. Unethical judgement	-0.07*	0.04	0.05*	–		
5. Ideology	-0.06*	-0.19*	-0.12*	0.08*	–	
6. Age	-0.18*	0.02	0.06*	0.09*	-0.05*	–

Note: n=1512. \*p<0.1.

**Table 4.** OLS regression models, unethical judgement (vignette 1) as dependent variable

Variables	1	2	3	4
Gender (female)	0.001 (0.015)	0.002 (0.015)	0.003 (0.015)	-0.000 (0.015)
Age	0.003*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.001)
Secondary studies	-0.011 (0.018)	-0.011 (0.018)	-0.009 (0.018)	-0.007 (0.018)
University studies	-0.107*** (0.019)	-0.111*** (0.019)	-0.109*** (0.019)	-0.106*** (0.019)
Ideology	0.107*** (0.037)	0.125*** (0.038)	0.120*** (0.038)	0.122*** (0.038)
Efficiency		0.107*** (0.041)	0.107*** (0.041)	-0.338** (0.137)
PSM			-0.070* (0.039)	-0.392*** (0.102)
Efficiency*PSM				0.633*** (0.186)
Constant	-4.947*** (1.057)	-5.020*** (1.055)	-4.599*** (1.080)	-4.483*** (1.077)
Observations	1,512	1,512	1,512	1,512
R-squared	0.040	0.045	0.047	0.054

Primary studies is the baseline category for education. Unstandardized coefficients are shown. Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

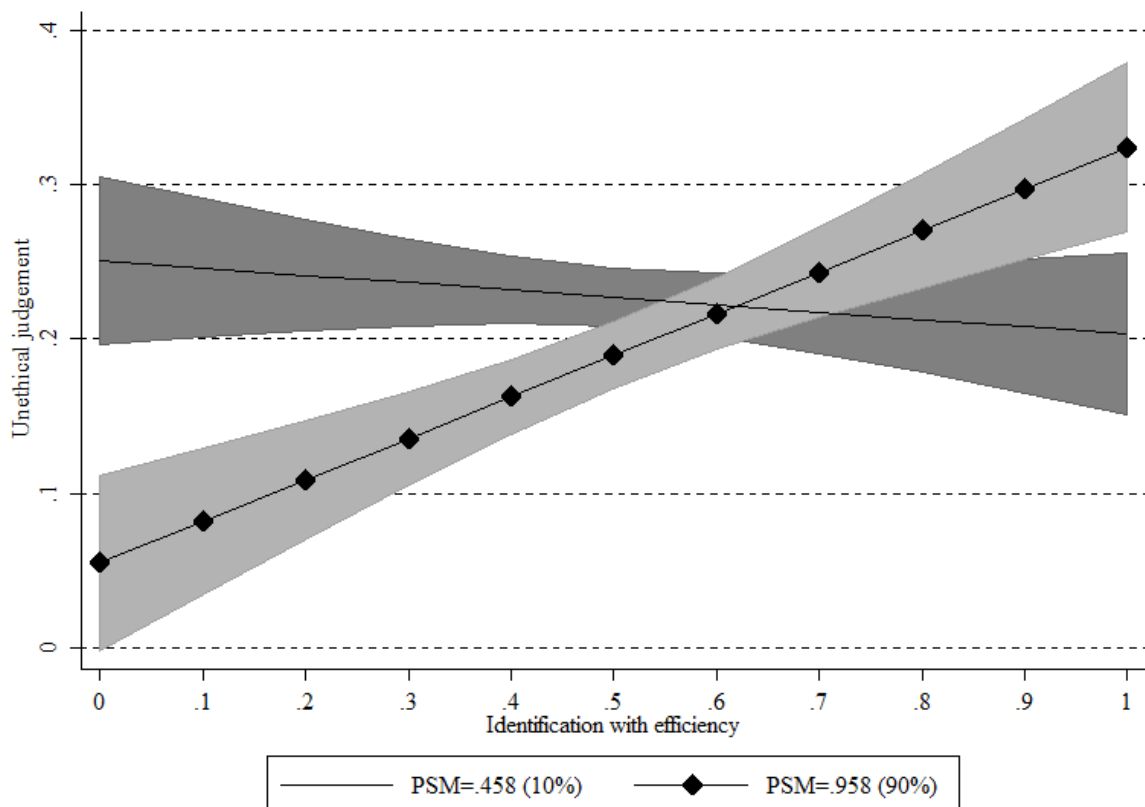
**Table 5.** OLS regression models, unethical judgement (vignette 2) as dependent variable

Variables	1	2	3	4
Gender (female)	0.024 (0.015)	0.023 (0.015)	0.023 (0.015)	0.024 (0.015)
Age	0.001*** (0.001)	0.001*** (0.001)	0.001** (0.001)	0.001** (0.001)
Secondary studies	0.010 (0.018)	0.010 (0.017)	0.013 (0.017)	0.011 (0.017)
University studies	-0.036** (0.018)	-0.038** (0.018)	-0.034* (0.018)	-0.037** (0.018)
Ideology	0.159*** (0.036)	0.169*** (0.036)	0.162*** (0.036)	0.162*** (0.036)
Security		0.099** (0.039)	0.098** (0.039)	0.313** (0.132)
PSM			-0.111*** (0.037)	0.068 (0.111)
Security*PSM				-0.310* (0.182)
Constant	-2.731*** (1.005)	-2.715*** (1.003)	-2.049** (1.025)	-2.173** (1.026)
Observations	1,512	1,512	1,512	1,512
R-squared	0.026	0.030	0.036	0.038

Primary studies is the baseline category for education. Unstandardized coefficients are shown. Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Figure 1.** Marginal effects of identification with efficiency on unethical judgement at different values of PSM (90% CI).



**Figure 2.** Marginal effects of identification with security on unethical judgement at different values of PSM (90% CI)

