



# Organizational commitment across different institutional settings: how perceived procedural constraints frustrate self-sacrifice

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## Abstract

The positive impact of public service motivation on several individual work outcomes of public sector employees has been documented. Recent research into the 'dark side' of such an individual trait, however, has led some scholars to suggest that organizational conditions such as procedural constraints could affect one's motivation, thus leading to the resignation of other-oriented employees. This study explores the relationships between one of the dimensions of public service motivation – namely, *self-sacrifice* – procedural constraints and organizational commitment by expanding the job demands–resources model of organizational commitment to different institutional settings.

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The study employs a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative (structural equation modelling) and qualitative (focus groups and in-depth interviews) data from three industries in Italy (health, local public administration and non-profit organizations). Our findings show that self-sacrifice positively moderates the negative relationship between procedural constraints and organizational commitment. The findings also highlight some of the undesirable effects of self-sacrifice that organizations have to deal with.

### **Points for practitioners**

Selflessly motivated employees tend to be more sensitive to burdensome procedures, and are hence likely to experience tougher effects of such conditions on their commitment. Given the evidence of the public sector being a highly bureaucratic working context, the sources and remedies for this issue deserve attention from both public administration scholars and practitioners. The findings of the study support the development of practices aimed at warding selflessly motivated employees from the risk of entering a loss cycle of psychological impairment.

### **Keywords**

job demands–resources model, mixed methods, procedural constraints, public service motivation, self-sacrifice

## **Introduction**

Employees' organizational commitment is a major issue in the theory and practice of human resource management, particularly in the public sector (Battaglio, 2014; OECD, 2016). Employees who are committed to an organization contribute positively to organizational functioning and performance; however, as members of an organization, individuals have personal expectations that may or may not meet favourable or adverse organizational conditions. These conditions may impact positively or negatively on their attitudes, depending on whether or not their expectations are fulfilled (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). The job demands–resources (JD-R) theoretical model classifies these conditions into demands and resources: job demands refer to those factors that take a physical and/or psychological effort to deal with; whereas job resources help individuals to cope with the demands, satisfy their psychological needs and achieve organizational goals (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). Drawing on the JD-R framework, this study examines the relationships between self-sacrifice (Perry and Wise, 1990) – meaning the concern for others and then sacrificing self-interest – procedural constraints and organizational commitment. Our underlying hypothesis is that a selfless attitude and procedural constraints may have contrasting effects on employees' commitment.

The article is structured as follows. The second section outlines the literature findings and presents the research hypotheses. The third section presents the methodology. The results of the analysis are then summarized in the fourth section. The fifth section presents the discussion and limitations. Lastly, the conclusions and suggestions for further research are reported in the sixth section.

## **Theoretical background and research questions**

The JD-R theory is an organizational theory that aims to explain why some employees lose their enthusiasm at work and burn out (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). At the root of the theory lies the assumption that all issues in the work environment can be reconciled with job demands and job resources, which either positively or negatively affect work engagement (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014).

Scholars have traditionally used this theoretical model to explore the determinants of employee burnout and disengagement (Bakker et al., 2004); however, recent applications of the JD-R model highlight the role played by specific demands and resources within the working environment in shaping both positive and negative employee outcomes (Quratulain and Khan, 2015; Steijn and van der Voet, 2019). In addition, until relatively recently (Borst et al., 2019; Lavigna, 2015), studies applying the JD-R model in combination with organizational commitment or work engagement have disregarded the circumstances of contextual factors.

Following recent contributions (Borst et al., 2019), we consider two factors of the public service context within the existing JD-R model of organizational commitment, namely, procedural constraints and self-sacrifice. Despite being considered among the most influential factors regarding public servants' commitment, the combination of procedural constraints and motivation have only recently been related to the JD-R model in the field of public administration studies (Borst, 2018; Cooke et al., 2019; Giauque et al., 2013; Quratulain and Khan, 2015).

This study also contributes to the strand of research exploring the moderation effect of public service motivation (PSM) on bureaucratic organizational constraints and organizational commitment, within the JD-R theoretical framework (Cooke et al., 2019). The JD-R model has been applied to investigate the relationship between the motivational trait referred to as 'self-sacrifice' and perceived procedural constraints, based on the concept of the 'loss cycle' (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). The idea of this is that when employees are exposed to high job stressors (in this case, procedural constraints), they may enter a cycle in which their accumulated strain leads to self-undermining behaviours and ever-increasing job demands (Bakker, 2015). Although this concept is well established in the literature on public services, it is unclear as to whether PSM has a magnifying (Quratulain and Khan, 2015; Steijn and van der Voet, 2019) or buffering (Cooke et al., 2019; Jex et al., 2003; Shim et al., 2017) effect in terms of the specific job demands on an employee's individual work outcomes, such as organizational commitment.

### *Procedural constraints and organizational commitment*

Organizational procedures form the basis of employees' working lives, particularly in the public sector, with much research highlighting both the beneficial and unfavourable effects on work attitude (Bozeman, 1993; DeHart-Davis et al., 2015; Kaufmann and Tummers, 2017). In fact, they are not considered detrimental in themselves; rather, the undue reliance on formalization can frustrate employees in pursuing their goals (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007). Bureaucratization denotes the adoption of formal, standardized but ineffective or unnecessary procedures and regulations that contribute to the centralization of power in an organization (Wilson, 1989). Those burdensome rules and procedures that are experienced by the employees (Moynihan et al., 2014) as formal but 'pointless' are often referred to as *red tape*, and characterize undesirable work environments (Bozeman, 1993; Giauque et al., 2013). As the concept of red tape has been at the heart of a vast scientific debate and led to countless measurement models (Feeney, 2012; Pandey and Scott, 2002; Van Loon et al., 2016b), this study narrows it down to one of its organizational components: *procedural constraints*, which we define as the prevalence of an organization's formal requirements over substance.

Extensive evidence shows that higher levels of procedural constraints can undermine the work attitudes of personnel (DeHart-Davis and Pandey, 2005; Moynihan and Pandey, 2007). We focus on the effects of perceived procedural constraints on organizational commitment, that is, the individual state defined by a bond that links an employee to their organization. According to the JD-R model, procedural constraints are expected to lower commitment as they represent an excessive or undesirable organizational hindrance. From these observations, the following hypothesis can be drawn:

H1: Perceived procedural constraints are negatively associated with employees' organizational commitment.

### *Self-sacrifice dimension of PSM as a personal resource*

Over the past 30 years, public management studies have often drawn on the concept of PSM to explore the nature of relationships between employees' characteristics and individual work outcomes (Ritz et al., 2016). PSM, which has been defined as an individual's orientation towards delivering services to people in order to do good for others and society (Perry and Hondeghem, 2008), has generally been considered as a positive force. Studies have found that the more a person is motivated to serve society, the more they experience job satisfaction (Vandenabeele, 2009; Wright and Pandey, 2010) and are committed to the organization (Crewson, 1997). Under the lens of JD-R, PSM can thus be framed as a *key psychological resource* (Bakker, 2015).

Scholars have long debated this construct and how to measure it, building on Perry's (1996) path-breaking six dimensions scale, considering: *attraction to policy-making, commitment to public interest, social justice, civic duty, compassion and self-sacrifice*. Following a recent call for further academic attention (Bozeman and Su, 2015; Vandenabeele et al., 2018), some conceptual clarification regarding PSM, pro-social motives and altruism (Schott et al., 2019) has been provided. At the same time, the conceptual multidimensionality of PSM is increasingly being focused on, leading to a more nuanced understanding of its dimensions (Neumann, 2019). In fact, many studies show that the magnitude of the relationship between PSM and several individual work outcomes varies depending on which dimensions of PSM are being examined (Borst, 2018; Homberg, 2015).

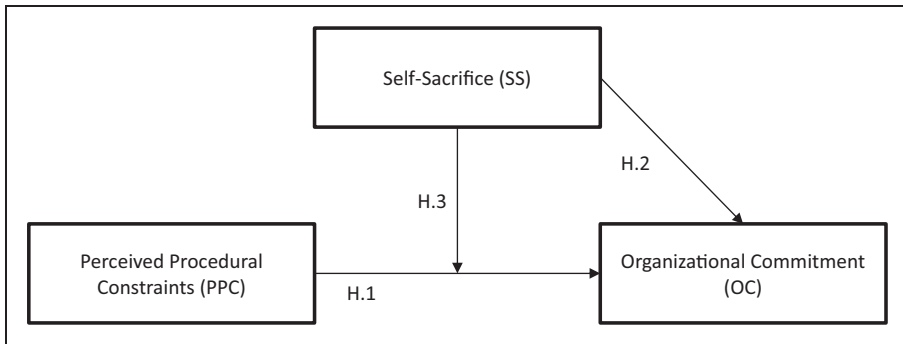
Building on Perry and Wise's (1990) tripartition, an individual's PSM may be related to a combination of rational, normative and affective motives. Self-sacrifice, that is, the willingness to help others even at the expense of one's self-interest (affective motive), is a strong engaging factor for people working in public-interest services, and signally 'stronger than the external self-serving needs including rational motives' (Borst, 2018: 295) as well as normative ones. Thus, following other scholars in the field (Kim and Vandenabeele, 2010; Wright et al., 2013), we focus on *self-sacrifice* – on which 'public service motives are founded' (Kim and Vandenabeele, 2010: 705) – as the most suitable dimension to highlight the altruistic nature of PSM. It thus follows that:

H2: Self-sacrifice is positively associated with employees' organizational commitment.

### *The 'bright' and 'dark' sides of the self-sacrifice dimension of PSM*

A growing body of literature also highlights a 'dark side' of PSM (Brewer, 2019; Van Loon et al., 2015). It is argued that the motivation to sacrifice one's self may have negative effects on employees' well-being as a result of exhausting their own resources. Employees can, for example, become frustrated if they are unable to have an impact on society due to an excessive workload, formalization or a lack of positive feedback (Giauque et al., 2013), and that an initially high PSM may be either altered or reduced, or lead to a state of resigned satisfaction (Giauque et al., 2013). This is likely to occur when an employee cannot achieve their desire to contribute to society.

As the effect of PSM is contingent on the daily work environment, compared to self-oriented employees, those who are prepared to make sacrifices for the good of society are likely to respond differently to certain organizational demands and resources (Bakker, 2015), such as procedural constraints (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007). Based on evidence supporting the idea of the differentiated effects of different dimensions of PSM on procedural constraints and individual work outcomes (Yousaf et al., 2014), we argue that self-sacrifice can worsen the negative relationship between perceived procedural constraints and organizational



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework.

commitment due to highly motivated employees feeling discouraged and helpless (see Figure 1):

H3: Self-sacrifice positively moderates the negative association between perceived procedural constraints and organizational commitment.

## Methods

We adopted a mixed-methods approach based both on data gathered from a multi-sector survey on the organizational climate, conducted in the province of Terni (Umbria, Italy), and on qualitative inquiries (focus groups and in-depth interviews). Mixed-methods research is generally able to answer research questions where other approaches may fail, and thus leads to more informed inferences, enabling a broader range of divergent viewpoints to emerge (Yang et al., 2008). Methodological diversity seems to be particularly appropriate in designing public administration research, which is inherently multidisciplinary (Battaglio and Hall, 2018), as well as ‘for examining the behavior and motivation of public service personnel’ (Raimondo and Newcomer, 2017: 183).

Data on employees’ perceptions is derived from an organizational climate survey, which was managed via computer-assisted web interviews (CAWI) on a census basis, involving employees working in two municipalities, two healthcare organizations and two social cooperatives (non-profit institutions). The survey involved a total of 1612 respondents, reduced to 1566 after list-wise deletion (for full details of the questionnaire, see Garzi et al., 2018; Nuti et al., 2016). The survey was administered between March and April 2016. The average response rate was 26.4%, with a high variation between organizations (ranging from 83% for a non-profit organization to 18.5% for a healthcare organization).

To corroborate our analysis, qualitative methods were also used. Before the survey, employees participated in focus groups to gather information related to the

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Indicator	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Organizational commitment (OC)	OC_a	1581	1	5	3.327	1.182
	OC_b <sup>a</sup>	1583	1	5	3.191	1.427
	OC_c	1590	1	5	3.395	1.161
Perceived procedural constraints (PPC)	PPC_a	1573	1	5	3.009	1.243
Self-sacrifice (SS)	SS_a	1568	1	5	3.919	1.071
	SS_b	1566	1	5	3.770	0.997
	SS_c	1567	1	5	3.556	1.025
	SS_d	1568	1	5	3.934	1.013

Note: <sup>a</sup>Reverse coded.

content of the questionnaire. After the survey collection, in-depth interviews were conducted with key respondents from the participating organizations in order to increase our understanding of the survey results. Excerpts from the qualitative inquiry are reported in the text to illuminate the results of the quantitative analysis and gain a more nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Details of the data-coding process can be found in the online Appendix.

We used a hybrid combination of both sequential and parallel design (Mele and Belardinelli, 2018). On the one hand, the focus groups generated a conceptual basis for the research, followed by a survey collection aimed at revealing the emerging insights. On the other, the in-depth interviews enabled the emerging survey results to be triangulated and analysed, from both a confirmative and further exploratory perspective.

### Quantitative analysis

All measures (see Table 1) were assessed using responses to a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (total disagreement) to 5 (total agreement). Organizational commitment (OC) was measured as the mean of the standardized values of the following items: (1) 'I am proud to tell others that I am part of this organization'; (2) 'If I could, I would probably quit the organization I work for' (reverse coded); and (3) 'I get satisfaction from working in this organization'. The three-item scale for organizational commitment was developed following Andrews and Mostafa (2017) and aims to represent 'employees' satisfaction with their work and connection to their organization' (Andrews and Mostafa, 2017: 8). The use of a term relating to 'satisfaction' in the third item in the scale depends on the fact that in the language of the interviews (i.e. Italian), there is no exact commonly used word for 'committed'; we believe that the corresponding signifier for 'satisfied', together with the specification 'from working in this organization', effectively encompasses the meaning of organizational commitment.

Self-sacrifice (SS) was measured as the mean of the following standardized items referring to the scale derived from Perry (1996): (1) 'I believe in putting duty before

self'; (2) 'I am prepared to make enormous sacrifices for the good of society'; (3) 'Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements'; and (4) 'Much of what I do is for a cause greater than myself'. Researchers have explored a number of ways of measuring procedural constraints (Kaufmann and Feeney, 2012). We built on the line of research that considers individuals' perceptions (Scott and Pandey, 2005), instead of objective measures. To measure perceived procedural constraints (PPC), we focused on *formalization* (DeHart-Davis and Pandey, 2005), and propose a global measure indicating the perceived burden of procedures. We used a single-item variable considering the extent to which respondents perceived their organizations as putting organizational rules before results: 'My organization is more concerned about following the right procedures rather than doing a good job'.

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with varimax rotation was performed, which confirmed that the considered items loaded on three different factors corresponding to the variables in the model. Scale reliability and variance-extracted measures showed encouraging results: Cronbach's alpha was satisfactory for both multiple-item measures, namely, organizational commitment (0.70) and self-sacrifice (0.78), as well as construct reliability (0.83 and 0.82, respectively) and average variance extracted (AVE) (0.63 and 0.54, respectively).

### Qualitative inquiry

This part of the research comprised two phases. First, six focus groups were organized to highlight which hypotheses should be empirically verified, to highlight relevant points of view for the target group of the survey and to extract the terminology used to identify the dimensions being studied. The focus groups took place between December 2015 and March 2016, and the observers used a grid of open questions prepared in advance (Dawson et al., 1993). After the survey, seven in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants from the organizations. The interviews focused on the organizational climate, exploring aspects such as management practices and organizational features.

The transcript analysis combined two complementary criteria. We employed a deductive a priori coding, which entailed classifying the interview statements against the theoretical assumptions of the JD-R model. We also used data-driven inductive coding, which identified responses that complemented and specified the core constructs related to *job demands* and *resources*. Overall, our deductive and inductive coding revealed patterns of thoughts and attitudes regarding the factors shaping the *organizational commitment*, *job demands* and *job resources*.

## Results

Data were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM), with AMOS 22. Maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) was used, which is the most common method of estimation in SEM (Iacobucci, 2010).



### *Measurement model*

The measurement relationships were analysed and the reliability and validity of all the constructs in the study were assessed using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The items and reliabilities per construct that were derived from the CFA are reported in the online Appendix. The overall measurement model fit was initially quite unsatisfactory ( $\chi^2/\text{df} > 5$ ; comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.904; root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.079; Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.850). When error covariances were allowed to correlate, as suggested by the modification indices, the  $\chi^2/\text{df}$  decreased to 4.329 and RMSEA to 0.047, whereas CFI and TLI increased to 0.988 and 0.965, respectively. The results showed that the constructs possessed high internal consistency, with composite reliability scores and AVE scores above the thresholds suggested, that is, 0.70 and 0.50, respectively (Garver and Mentzer, 1999).

### *Common method variance*

Since all the variables considered in the quantitative analysis were measured using data from the same respondents, the effect of common method bias (CMB) was assessed following a combination of different techniques (Jakobsen and Jensen, 2015). First, we used Harman's single-factor test to check for CMB; the single factor extracted explained about 32% of variance, which is significantly lower than the threshold of 50%. We then used the more stringent unmeasured latent method factor technique (Williams et al., 1996); the squared, unstandardized coefficients extracted indicated a common variance of 17%, which additionally confirmed that there was no severe CMB (Eichhorn, 2014).

### *Structural model estimation*

To test our hypotheses, we estimated a model to assess the effect of PPC and SS on OC and the moderating role of SS on the PPC–OC relationship, including respondents' gender and age as control variables. To examine the moderation of SS on the relationship between PPC and OC, Little, Bovaird and Widaman's (2006) residual centring method was used, following the approach of other scholars applying the JD-R model (Andrews and Mostafa, 2017). This two-step approach prevents any statistical dependency between indicators of first-order effect variables and those of the latent product variable, and simulations have shown that it demonstrates reasonable model fit (Little et al., 2006: 512). The proposed structural model (see Table 2) provided a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2/\text{df} = 3.410$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; CFI = 0.980; RMSEA = 0.039; TLI = 0.969).

### *Mixed-methods results*

PPC had a significant negative association ( $-0.286$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) with OC, thus supporting our first hypothesis. Our empirical results on the effect of PPC on OC

**Table 2.** Structural model and fit statistics (overall).

	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P > z	[95% CI]	
<i>Structural model</i>						
Organizational commitment (OC) ←						
Perceived procedural constraints (PPC)	-0.286	0.024	-11.67	0.000	-0.3345	-0.2379
Self-sacrifice (SS)	0.307	0.024	12.53	0.000	0.2588	0.3547
Age	-0.025	0.020	-0.96	0.338	-0.0750	0.0258
Gender (ref.: female)	0.074	0.020	2.89	0.004	0.0238	0.1243
SS × PPC	-0.095	0.026	-2.05	0.025	-0.1858	-0.0041
Goodness of fit statistics						Value
$\chi^2$ (df = 32)						109.36
RMSEA						0.039
CFI						0.980
TLI						0.969

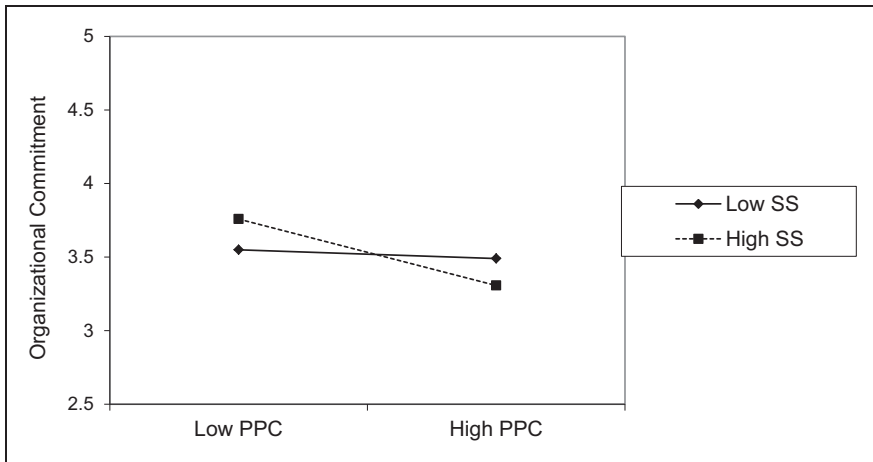
were, in fact, in line with the existing research in the field (Quratulain and Khan, 2015); the following excerpt from a municipality focus group also confirms this: ‘Dealing with bureaucracy makes it all difficult, for me: ever-changing regulations annoy me and make it very tough to keep up with all this’ (focus group, municipality B). The following excerpt, extracted from the transcript of a focus group, emphasizes the ‘burdensomeness’ of the administrative system:

[It is complex to manage] the purely bureaucratic issues of regulations ... looking for the legal clause that enables you to simplify the process because otherwise you would have to do this, this, and that. ... In most cases, we ourselves have to find ways of simplifying the process. (Focus group, municipality B)

SS, on the other hand, had a significant positive association with OC (0.307,  $p < 0.001$ ). Hence, our second hypothesis was also supported. In one of the focus groups, a healthcare worker remarked that:

The greatest satisfaction comes from my patients, if I have to tell you why I like working here. I have many patients who have become almost friends some people come and ask for advice for their mother, sister, daughter. ... Each time I try to help out, even if it's just in a small way, so I'm happy! (Focus group, healthcare A)

The analysis also revealed that the interaction between PPC and SS was significant and negative ( $-0.095$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). As proposed, the negative relationship between PPC and OC was stronger for employees perceiving high levels of SS than for those perceiving low levels. This was confirmed in both the focus groups and in-depth interviews. Employees from different fields expressed how



**Figure 2.** Moderating effect of SS on the PPC–OC relationship.

they were struggling to reconcile their high levels of motivation with the discouragement stemming from highly hierarchical and bureaucratic systems. The following is an excerpt from one focus group with a group of healthcare professionals:

Interviewer: What elements do you find discouraging in this work?

Interviewee: In my opinion, managers should spend more in the field rather than only controlling and setting the rules. . . . When you knock at their door, they say: what do you want? Schedule an appointment! (Focus group, healthcare B)

The following excerpt from an interview with a municipality manager offers further insights into the dynamics of work motivation and the ‘loss cycle’:

In general, I have sensed some bad feeling from those who are very motivated to work because we often tend to overload those who are more motivated and – in contrast – just accept that others are not so motivated. So, those who are very motivated . . . at a certain point end up feeling stressed, even physically, because you tend to entrust tasks to the people and employees who you know will give you a result. (Interview, municipality A)

Figure 2 shows the moderating effect of SS on the PPC–OC relationship. Our third hypothesis was thus supported.

When considering the industry as a grouping variable (see Table 3), PPC had a significant negative association with OC in both the healthcare organizations ( $-0.242, p < 0.001$ ) and municipalities ( $-0.393, p < 0.001$ ). In non-profit organizations, the coefficient of this association was still negative but with only borderline significance ( $-0.199, p < 0.05$ ). SS had a significant positive association with OC in

**Table 3.** Coefficients of the structural model by institutional setting.

Structural model			
OC ←	Healthcare (N = 1022)	Municipalities (N = 427)	Non-profit (N = 234)
PPC	-0.242***	-0.393***	-0.199*
SS	0.343***	0.373***	0.407***
Age	0.008***	0.095 <sup>ns</sup>	0.006 <sup>ns</sup>
Gender	0.088 <sup>ns</sup>	0.037 <sup>ns</sup>	0.156**
SS × PPC (interaction)	-0.154*	0.099 <sup>ns</sup>	-0.109 <sup>ns</sup>

Note: Significance levels: <sup>ns</sup> $p > 0.05$ ; \* $p \leq 0.05$ ; \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

all three industries. However, the interaction between SS and PPC was significant and negative in healthcare only ( $-0.154$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Although this result should not be taken as diriment because of the differentiated subsample sizes, it is interesting that the coefficient of interaction between SS and PPC was still negative for non-profit organizations ( $-0.109$ ) but positive in municipalities ( $0.099$ ), thus suggesting different patterns for interpretation.

## Discussion

Our analysis confirms the combined effects of other-oriented motivation and red tape on employees' work attitudes (Steijn and van der Voet, 2019): highly motivated individuals, when facing high levels of organizational constraints such as formalized procedures, end up reducing their level of commitment and satisfaction. This concept has been referred to as motivation's 'dark side' (Van Loon et al., 2015), and illustrates an example of the 'loss cycle' assumption of the JD-R model: if individuals feel that their working conditions do not fit with their personal expectations, they may consider the terms of the reciprocal agreement with the organization as being 'broken' (Castaing, 2006). The non-fulfilment of expectations can thus lead to a decrease in individual work outcomes, such as organizational commitment.

Besides confirming the potentially ambiguous effects of self-sacrifice on commitment, our study adds further insight to the scientific debate by introducing the role of institutional settings in the interaction between individual motivation and organizational conditions (Vandenabeele, 2007). Although the independent effect of self-sacrifice on organizational commitment is consistent across organizations in the sample regardless of the institutional setting, in fact, the negative procedural constraints–commitment relationship seems to be moderated by motivation only in the healthcare and non-profit settings. Despite the need to be cautious due to the different subsample sizes, this may also be due to the fact that a selfless attitude may particularly affect professionals working in close contact with the final users

due to the specific values of the services provided (Van Loon et al., 2016a), thus increasing the negative effect of rule constraints on individual work outcomes, such as commitment. In fact, those reporting higher levels of self-sacrifice have to deal with a greater feeling of separation from the organization when their professional expectations are not met because of procedural constraints. When the outcome for the final users is beyond an employee's control (as in healthcare), individual outcomes need to build 'sensed' relationships in daily activities. In the face of unsupportive conditions, the other-oriented attitudes of individuals, referred to as 'selfless givers' by Grant (2013), may exacerbate adverse outcomes and contribute to overload and fatigue.

Research in the field has demonstrated that the effects of the different motivational dimensions on organizational commitment may vary based on the individual's choice of organization, and that the nature of the organization itself can be considered as a good proxy for the size of the effects of the different types of motives on individual work outcomes (Borst, 2018; Van Loon et al., 2013), such as commitment and engagement.

### *Study limitations*

While the findings support our hypotheses, the study has a number of limitations. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents definitive conclusions regarding causality from being drawn. Second, one of the variables in the study (PPC) is a single-item variable; although this might not be an impediment when the underlying construct is homogeneous (Loo, 2002), this should be taken into account and addressed in future research. Third, although CMB does not seem to be a serious threat to our findings, research designs that use different sources for the measures on each side of the model would be valuable. Lastly, the different subsample sizes warrant caution when considering the differentiated coefficients of the moderation effect across industries.

### **Conclusions**

Our results suggest that organizational rules have tangible effects on employees' organizational commitment, and that an individual's psychological resources, such as motivation, can exacerbate – rather than mitigate – this effect. As bureaucracy is the dominant form of public organization (Olsen, 2006), strategies aimed at improving the design and use of organizational rules and nurturing employee motivation and commitment are urgently required.

Although rules and procedures are established by organizations and other higher-level institutions, managers can still counteract red tape. DeHart-Davis et al. (2015) recently showed that the combination of an optimal rule application (using procedural fairness) and rule control is associated with positive individual outcomes, such as work satisfaction. Effectively communicating what to do and how to do it, and initiating fair feedback, could support what has been called

‘green tape’ (DeHart-Davis et al., 2015). This may be a valuable strategy, particularly in settings such as health and social care, where employees are professionals who often cover ‘boundary roles’ and towards whom the efficacy of formal rules and hierarchy might be weak (Giacomelli, 2019).


In the wake of recent contributions in the field aimed at providing conceptual clarity on PSM and further other-oriented motivational traits (Bozeman and Su, 2015; Schott et al., 2019), future research could investigate the relationship between motivation, rule constraints and individual work outcomes in order to better understand PSM both from an inter- (Ritz et al., 2020) and intra-construct (Borst, 2018) perspective. In fact, although PSM and pro-social motivation tend to be treated interchangeably (as well as the PSM construct as a whole), it is questionable whether these constructs (or dimensions) relate similarly to individual work outcomes and organizational behaviours.

Moreover, although organizational commitment across sectors has been analysed in the literature (Goulet and Frank, 2002), differences in its positive and negative antecedents in different contexts and their interactions still need investigation. Although beyond the scope of our study, our results seem to suggest that institutional settings do play a role in the model. Although the robustness of group differences in this study is likely to be limited by the subsample size, an interesting variability emerged with regard to the moderation coefficients across the considered industries (healthcare versus municipalities versus non-profit). In line with the Weberian ‘iron cage’ notion, this could thus support the idea that socialization can outweigh professionalization, as suggested by Kjeldsen and Jacobsen (2012). On the other hand, the effects of different professional profiles on organizational commitment and motivation should be further investigated, particularly in terms of proximity to the final user. Professionals who are in direct contact with users may, in fact, be more exposed to the risk of emotional fatigue when experiencing rule constraints and high levels of self-sacrifice, compared to their colleagues in back-office positions.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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