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Making public service motivation count for increasing organizational fit: The role of followership behavior and leader support as a causal mechanism

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Abstract

Many studies in public administration have modeled employees' person–organization fit perceptions as a function of public service motivation, but previous work has not adequately addressed the causal relationship between these concepts. This article represents the first attempt to explain the "black box" that links public service motivation to person–organization fit. Given the various positive benefits associated with person–organization fit in the literature, an understanding of the mechanisms that underpin its relationship with public service motivation has important managerial implications for leaders regarding their interactions with individual employees. Extending the work-based affect model designed by Yu, we explore how PSM increases person–organization fit perceptions through employee followership and leader support as a potential causal chain. The results from a survey of 692 faculty members at a public university are consistent with the predicted three-path mediation model. Among these respondents, higher levels of public service motivation were

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associated with greater followership behavior, which, in turn, increased positive perceptions of person–organization fit through greater leader support.

Points for practitioners

This study suggests that having high levels of motivation to serve the public (i.e. public service motivation) does not directly influence how one perceives his or her fit with the organization. Instead, high public service motivation was associated with person–organization fit indirectly through its influence on active followership behaviors. Managerial actors are thus encouraged to pursue open communications with their subordinates to maintain high levels of public service motivation.

Keywords
leadership, person–organization fit, public service motivation

Introduction

At present, the factors that influence employees' person–organization (P–O) fit perceptions are not well understood. The lack of research in this area is particularly apparent in contrast with the rich empirical literature dedicated to establishing the positive correlation of P–O fit with employees' job performance (Bright, 2007; Gould-Williams et al., 2015), job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Kim, 2012), and with reductions in work-related stress and quit intentions (Gould-Williams et al., 2015). The majority of relevant studies pay substantially less attention to factors that foster high P–O fit, and they tend to take the perspective of the job applicant rather than the job incumbent (Kristof-Brown, 2000). While we acknowledge the merits of previous work, understanding of the fit processes is limited because this literature only offers clear documentation of the importance of fit after hiring (Gabriel et al., 2014; Yu, 2009). By examining the P–O fit of job incumbents, rather than job applicants, and doing so directly (i.e. by documenting their own perceptions), our work stands to provide a more accurate picture of the relationships in the antecedent–fit models.

Here, we draw attention to one specific construct in the public administration literature, namely, public service motivation (PSM), and its effect on P–O fit. More importantly, and in keeping with the call by Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson (2005: 321) to "understand the mechanisms that stimulate fit," we propose and test a three-step mediation model according to which PSM indirectly affects P–O fit through its influence on employee followership and perceived leader support in serial. In this model, followership is approached as a function of perceived leader support, which, in turn, increases employees' fit perceptions within their organizations.

Our model contributes to the P–O fit literature in three key ways. First, it extends the conceptual work of Yu (2009) that identifies individual and organizational motivational factors as the antecedents of fit; our primary contribution is to test a mechanism that

seeks to explain the relationship between PSM and P–O fit. Despite the growing number of empirical studies that have established positive associations between these quantities (e.g. Gould-Williams et al., 2015; Jin et al., 2016; Kim, 2012; Leisink and Steijn, 2009), several scholars have warned against the tendency to associate them automatically and directly (Bright, 2008; Wright and Pandey, 2008), pointing to the absence of a causal link. Given the many positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes associated with high P–O fit (Cable and DeRue, 2002; Gould-Williams et al., 2015), research into the mechanisms that underpin the causal process is important because it may offer a fuller explanation of both individual and organizational factors that stimulate fit.

The second main contribution of this study is to draw attention to the concept of followership developed by Kelley (1992) as a potential causal mechanism that, along with leader support, links PSM to P–O fit. Drawing again on several earlier motivation theories in social and organizational psychology, we test empirically the conceptual framework of Yu (2009) by hypothesizing that individuals with high levels of PSM are likely to demonstrate active followership, and thereby to attract greater support from leaders. In a complementary fashion, we expect increased positive perceptions of leader support to have a positive impact on employees' assessment of P–O fit.

Lastly, the findings presented here contribute to the literature on P–O fit by examining the effects of PSM in the context of faculty at urban public universities. There is a widely recognized difference between academic and traditional public organizations in terms of such factors as tenure, and practitioners and scholars have raised specific concerns about stress, workload, and burnout among urban university faculty (Fuhrmann, 1994; Spaights, 1980). Daly and Dee (2006) suggest that heavy teaching loads, community-based research, and professional service responsibilities may present faculty with an overwhelming set of role expectations. Under these circumstances, it stands to reason that the motivation to serve may play an even more important role in attitudes regarding fit. Given claims that PSM may not apply equally to all employees even within individual public sector organizations (Christensen and Wright, 2011), and given the scarcity of available knowledge regarding the work environments of faculty at urban public universities, we hope to advance understanding of the PSM–fit relationship by testing the three-step mediation model in the context of the public higher education sector.

Theoretical framework

We build on Yu's (2009) work-based affect model of P–O fit, which serves as the starting point for our theoretical framework. Drawing on theories of emotional processes, Yu highlights two perspectives, namely, affective consistency (e.g. "I feel good, thus, I must be experiencing fit on the job") and hedonism (e.g. "I feel good, so I do not need to change myself or the environment in order to improve fit"; cf. Diener, 2000), to describe how affective experience might shape fit. Yu posits that perceptions of congruence between oneself and an environment or organization vary over time, owing to natural fluctuations in the work environment, as well as individuals' active attempts to alter the environment or themselves in order to

improve fit. This reasoning has empirical support. For example, in their study assessing the longitudinal relationship between perceived fit and affect-based variables (i.e. job satisfaction and positive affect), Gabriel et al. (2014) found both that fit perceptions influence job satisfaction and that affect is an antecedent of fit perceptions.

Two key issues need to be addressed in order to advance the theory of P–O fit (Yu, 2009). First, several scholars argue that behavioral and cognitive processes in organizational contexts often take place under significant affective influence (e.g. under the influence of emotions, affective attitude, or intrinsic motivation) (Brief, 2001). However, the idea that one's attitude (e.g. PSM) can help bring about behavioral changes in oneself and in the work environment through shaping perceptions of fit has attracted relatively little attention (Yu, 2009).

A second key issue, related to the first, is the lack of clarity regarding the individual-level antecedents to P–O fit. It is certainly the case that the majority of antecedent–fit models thus far have focused on how such organization-level human resource policies as those regarding recruitment, selection, and socialization can influence employees' organizational fit (e.g. Chatman, 1991). Owing to this lack of focus on the individual-level experience, P–O fit has usually been treated as an exogenous and static construct. Accordingly, the usefulness of P–O fit to organizations and individuals is compromised, at least until research has afforded a better grasp of how individuals experience, manage, and influence P–O fit (Yu, 2009).

Accordingly, this investigation contributes to the current understanding of P–O fit by integrating the role of an attitudinal factor (PSM) with that of a behavioral factor (followership) as a continuum of the psychological process that stimulates perceptions of the work environment (e.g. perceived leader support) and of organizational fit. Our research framework is illustrated in Figure 1. In what follows, we first briefly review the relevant literature on the relationship between PSM and P–O fit and on the variables implicated in shaping P–O fit judgment, and we then develop our hypotheses.

PSM and P–O fit

P–O fit is broadly defined as the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when they share similar fundamental characteristics, such as values and

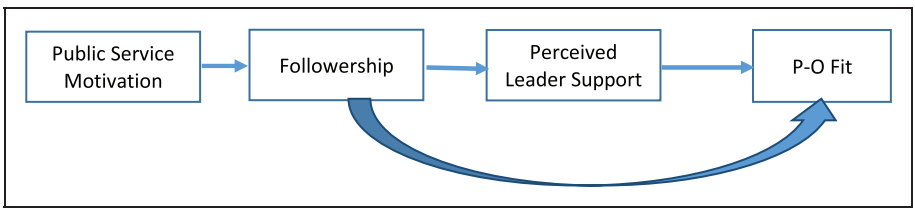

Figure 1. Research framework illustrating indirect effects of PSM on P–O fit.

goals, which is called supplementary fit (Kristof-Brown, 2000). Various ways of measuring P–O fit have been proposed, of which Moynihan and Pandey (2007) suggest that value congruence is the most useful. Our definition of P–O *fit* in the present context reflects supplementary fit (Gould-Williams et al., 2015) since our study addresses the extent of congruence between the values of organizations and their employees.

Public administration scholars have suggested that PSM may play a significant role in determining P–O fit perceptions in public organizations (Bright, 2008; Christensen and Wright, 2011). Perry and Hondeghem (2008) conceptualize PSM as an individual's drive to deliver services that do good for others and society. The basic premise in studies linking PSM and P–O fit is based on Schneider's (1987) attraction, selection, and attrition (ASA) theory, which posits that people seek out situations (or organizations) that are attractive to them and that, once selected to become a part of an organization, they will remain there longer when they are a good fit with it. As mentioned earlier, however, scholars have cast doubt on the causality implicit (or explicit) in this approach, warning against accepting too readily the conclusion that PSM increases P–O fit (Bright, 2008; Wright and Pandey, 2008). For example, in an empirical study of 205 employees in various public organizations, Bright (2008) has shown that, while these quantities can be correlated, PSM alone does not guarantee compatibility between individuals and public organizations. According to his argument, while it is intuitive that individuals with high levels of PSM would be relatively well suited, and therefore attracted, to governmental organizations, it is equally plausible that different public organizations would have differing missions, goals, cultures, resources, and job tasks, some of which may not meet the desires of employees who want to serve the public. There is therefore a need to study other variables, or mechanisms, in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the relationship between PSM and P–O fit.

The mediating role of followership: a potential causal mechanism?

Followership is defined as "an interactive role individuals play that complements the leadership role and is equivalent to it in importance for achieving group and organizational performance" (Howell and Costley, 2007: 298). Advocates of followership theory posit that one of the motivations for playing a followership role is to provide comradeship to valued others, thus helping to satisfy an individual's social needs (Jin and Park, 2016). Further, followership is a way to serve others that can confirm a favorable self-perception (Howell and Costley, 2007). Accordingly, those who value public service highly can be expected to engage in active followership behavior that serves the goals and missions of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

In addition, it is thought that active followers tend to identify with leaders in terms of shared goals and mission (Howell and Costley, 2007). This identification can enhance followers' self-concepts through growth and developmental

experiences that prepare them for greater responsibilities, so that they may assume some management functions and, in the process, enjoy increased emotional support and feedback from their leaders. According to Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory, an individual will act in a certain manner based on the expectation that the act will be followed by a given outcome, in this case, increased support from a leader. In this way, individuals engaging in active followership can expect that their behaviors will induce their leaders to engage in such beneficial acts as increased emotional support and more frequent communication. These positive interactions can, in turn, help employees adjust their own behavior in accordance with work targets and can enhance personal ability and, in turn, fit perceptions in the organization (Peng and Chiu, 2010).

There are several work motivation theories that lend support to the causal link between PSM (attitude), followership (behavior), and P–O fit (perception). According to action theory (Davidson, 1980), an individual's desires and beliefs (such as a faculty member's desire to reach out to the many disadvantaged learners in his or her university) lead to a specific behavior (such as creating courses to meet the needs of these students). In the context of an urban public university with a mission that includes helping the surrounding community, it is not unlikely that the faculty are desirous of serving this community and helping students achieve their objectives. Such behavior corresponds to one of PSM's core components, namely, self-sacrifice.

Drawing on the social psychology literature, Yu (2009) posits that at least two fundamental motivational drives affect fit perceptions: drive for consistency and drive for belonging. The drive for consistency manifests in an individual's inner need for predictable attitudes and behaviors (Cialdini et al., 1995), while the drive for belonging is the need for affiliation and relationships with others (Yu, 2009). Individuals with high levels of PSM will therefore be motivated to increase their fit perceptions by engaging in behaviors encouraged by their organizations in an effort to increase P–O fit. This approach is consistent with that of Perry and Wise (1990), who found that public employees with high levels of PSM tend to believe that their work is meaningful, and thus have a sense of responsibility related to the outcomes of their organizations, circumstances that stimulate them to provide innovative behavior in order to achieve these goals. It is in light of these theories and this empirical evidence that we explore the following two mediation hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: PSM has an indirect, positive effect on P–O fit perceptions through its influence on active followership, which, in turn, encourages favorable perceptions of P–O fit.

Hypothesis 2: PSM has an indirect, positive effect on P–O fit by virtue of its influence on followership and perceived leader support in serial, with active followership leading to increased leader support, which, in turn, leads to increased positive perceptions of one's fit in the organization.

Methods

Survey administration

The data for this study were collected using an online survey at a large and research-intensive public university in the US. A total of 970 faculty participated in the survey, for an overall response rate of 35.8%. However, in order to conduct a valid test of our research questions and remain consistent with the goal of the research, those whose main responsibilities were administrative support were removed from the sample. A total of 692 faculty members were accounted for in our final analysis.

Of the total respondents, 49% were male. As regards age, 24% were between the ages of 21 and 40, 23% were between 41 and 50, 29% were between 51 and 60, and 24% were above 61. Also, 62% of participants had an annual income greater than US$80,000; 70% were teaching and research faculty and 30% were administrative or professional faculty;[1] 35% were tenured; and 88% were white. A total of 53% taught in professional areas (e.g. business, medicine), 16% in arts and humanities, 15% in social sciences and education, and the remaining 16% in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). Furthermore, 55% of participants held a doctorate, 23% a master's degree, and 19% a professional degree (e.g. JD). Less than 3% held no degree higher than a bachelor's.

Measures

Responses for all questionnaire items were recorded using a five-point Likert-type agreement scale, with 1 representing strong disagreement and 5 representing strong agreement (PSM, P–O fit, followership, job opportunity, communication), or a five-point Likert-type fairness scale, with 1 representing very unfair to 5 representing very fair (distributive and procedural justice). A seven-point frequency scale was used for perceived leadership support, with 1 representing never and 7 representing always.

P–O fit. This study employed a direct approach to measuring P–O fit (Bright, 2008). Direct measures are beneficial when the objective is to assess explicit perceptions of fit with their organization. Such measures have been found to be stronger predictors of employee outcomes than indirect measures (Kristof-Brown, 2000). The Cronbach's alpha for P–O fit was 0.789.

PSM. PSM was measured using an aggregate of five items from Perry's (1996) original scale, which has been commonly employed as a direct measure of PSM in previous studies (Wright and Pandey, 2008). The items used capture the three dimensions—commitment to public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice—that Perry identified as representing the affective or normative motives most closely associated with the altruistic appeal of public sector values (Wright and Pandey, 2008). The Cronbach's alpha for the five-item PSM scale was 0.73.

Followership. To measure followership behavior, we used six items from Kelley's (1992) 20-item followership scale. The six-item followership behavior scale was found to be internally consistent, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.75.

Perceived leader support. Perceived leader support was measured by two items: "senior colleagues maintain a friendly working relationship with subordinates" and "senior colleagues behave in a manner that is thoughtful of subordinates' personal needs." The Cronbach's alpha was 0.85.

Covariates. In the interest of tightening the causal links among the study variables in our model, we included an extensive list of control variables to guard against potential confounding and epiphenomenal associations. These controls were, in addition to traditional individual-level demographic factors (gender, income, marital status, tenure status, age, and race), job opportunity, communication openness, distributive justice, procedural justice, role clarity, and workload. Detailed questionnaire items and coding scales associated with all study measures are presented in the supplementary online appendix.

Analyses and results

Our results are presented in three parts. As the measures of the study variables are self-reported, we begin first with an evaluation of potential common method bias. Next, we turn to descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations, including the assessment of the overall measurement model fit using a confirmatory factor analysis to test whether the study variables are properly measured as differentiated concepts. Finally, to provide formal inferential tests of our mediation hypotheses, we use an analytical approach outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2004), using the PROCESS SAS macro.

Testing common method variance

We tested for common method bias because all data in this study were derived from self-reported responses to a single survey. We first conducted Harman's single-factor test, which is useful for examining bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), as well as post hoc statistical tests. Results of the factor analysis revealed the presence of eight factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, rather than a single factor. The eight factors together accounted for 65% of the total variance, with the first (largest) accounting for only 23%. Moreover, a confirmatory factor analysis showed that the single-factor model had an extremely poor fit, χ^2 (df = 405) = 4597, $p < 0.0001$, GFI = 0.591, CFI = 0.445, SRMR = 0.125, and RMSEA = 0.130. While the results of these analyses do not preclude the possibility of common method variance, they do suggest that it is unlikely to confound the interpretation of our results.

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Tables 1 and 2 present descriptive statistics and correlations, respectively, for the study variables. Those comprised of multiple items are integrated by using a mean value, with a minimum value of 1 and a maximum value of 5, except for perceived leadership support, which is based on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = never; 7 = always). When looking at the descriptive statistics, respondents tended to report relatively high levels of followership behavior, PSM, and role clarity, and more moderate levels of P–O fit, leadership support, procedural justice, and workload. To test further whether these variables are properly measured as differentiated concepts, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. Non-normed fit index (.90), CFI (.91), and RMSEA (.05) all showed acceptable fit.

Testing hypotheses

We ran the corresponding inferential tests for the indirect effects, using a bootstrapping procedure that directly tests the indirect effect of the predictor and the criterion variables through the mediator (Preacher and Hayes, 2004). This procedure involves repeatedly drawing samples of size *n* (where *n* is equal to the original sample size) from the existing data, sampling with replacement, and then estimating

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

	Mean	S.D.	Minimum	Maximum	*N*
Job opportunity	3.74	0.82	1	5	689
P–O fit	3.60	0.77	1	5	690
PSM	3.74	0.57	1.6	5	689
Followership	3.94	0.55	1.67	5	691
Leadership support	5.12	1.33	1	7	681
Procedural justice	3.19	0.81	1	5	684
Role clarity	3.96	0.79	1	5	692
Workload	3.50	0.87	1	5	690
Income	3.39	0.91	1	4	689
Tenure (= 1)	0.35	0.47	0	1	689
Marital status (= 1)	0.78	0.41	0	1	692
Gender (Male = 1)	0.49	0.50	0	1	690
Age group	3.53	1.20	1	6	691
Race (White = 1)	0.12	0.33	0	1	692

Notes: Income: 1 = under US$41,000, 2 = US$41,000 to US$60,000, 3 = US$61,000 to US$80,000, 4 = more than US$80,000; age group: 1 = 21–30, 2 = 31–40, 3 = 41–50, 4 = 51–60, 5 = 61–70, 6 = over 70.

Table 2. Zero-order correlations.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Income	na												
Tenure	.32**												
Marital status	.13**	.06											
Sex	.18**	.23**	.22**										
Age	.26**	.36**	.08*	.26**									
Race	.02	–.12**	.02	–.03	–.14**								
Job opportunity	.09*	.07	.07	.08*	.04	.01							
P–O fit	.04	–.12**	.06	–.05	.07	.02	.32**						
PSM	–.05	.04	.00	–.08*	.05	.09*	–.03	.09*					
Followership	.08*	.01	.04	–.07	.06	.06	.26**	.35**	.31**				
Leader support	–.01	–.08*	.06	.01	.05	–.05	.31**	.46**	–.03	.23**			
Procedural justice	.16**	.03	.08*	.05	.03	–.06	.34**	.46**	–.05	.15**	.51**		
Role clarity	.11**	.03	.07	.10**	.16**	.05	.40**	.35**	.03	.28**	.40**	.45**	
Workload	.06	.07	.04	–.17**	–.09*	.01	–.10**	–.08*	.17**	.18**	–.13**	–.16**	–.09*

Notes: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two–tailed); *Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

the indirect effect in each re-sampled data set. Repeating this process thousands of times creates an empirical approximation of the underlying sampling distribution of the indirect effect, which is then used to construct confidence intervals for it.

Table 3 presents the results of the mediation hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 stated that followership mediates the path between PSM and P–O fit. A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect based on 10,000 bootstrap samples was entirely above zero (0.052 to 0.135). In other words, individual employees with high, as opposed to low, levels of PSM demonstrated greater followership behavior ($\beta = 0.263$, $p < 0.0001$; Model 1), which increased perceived leader support ($\beta = 0.300$, $p = 0.006$; Model 2), and this, in turn, enhanced their perceptions of P–O fit ($\beta = 0.117$, $p = 0.0001$; Model 3). The magnitude of this effect in practical or theoretical terms can be appreciated as follows. The proportion of the total effect that is mediated was 0.64 (95% BCI: 0.311 to 2.205), meaning that 64% of the effect of PSM on perceived P–O fit occurs indirectly through followership behavior. This finding suggests that PSM is associated with perceptions of P–O fit primarily through followership, and is consistent, at least in part, with the joint significance test, in which the total effect of PSM on P–O fit was significant (total effect: $\beta = 0.134$, $p = 0.008$) in the model after adjusting for income, tenure status, marital status, sex, age, race, and job and organizational factors, but was not significant when the mediators were taken into account (direct effect: $\beta = 0.051$, $p = 0.316$).

Table 3. Path coefficients and indirect effects for mediation models.

Variable	Path coefficients			Indirect effects	
	Followership (Model 1)	Leader support (Model 2)	P–O fit (Model 3)	*Estimate*	Bias-corrected bootstrap 95% CI
PSM	.26*** (.03)	–.10 (.09)	.05 (.05)		
Followership		.30** (.10)	.32*** (.05)		
Perceived leader support			.11*** (.02)		
Income	.01 (.02)	–.12 (.06)	.03 (.03)		
Tenured	–.04 (.04)	–.26* (.11)	–.16* (.06)		
Marital status (married = 1)	–.00 (.05)	.12 (.11)	.00 (.06)		
Sex (male = 1)	–.07 (.04)	–.10 (.10)	–.12* (.05)		
Age	.02 (.02)	.03 (.04)	.05* (.02)		
Race (white = 1)	.08 (.06)	–.11 (.14)	.13 (.07)		
Job opportunity	.14*** (.03)	.12 (.08)	.08* (.03)		
Procedural justice	.02 (.03)	.60*** (.08)	.25*** (.04)		
Role clarity	.13*** (.03)	.27** (.08)	.02 (.04)		
Workload	.08*** (.02)	–.05 (.06)	–.08* (.03)		
Total effect (PSM → P–O fit)			.13** (.05)		
PSM → Followership → P–O fit (H1)				.086 (.021)	[.0518, .1355]
PSM → Followership → PLS → P–O fit (H2)				.009 (.005)	[.0027, .0211]
Ratio of indirect to total effect of PSM on P–O fit					
PSM → Followership → P–O fit (H1)				.642 (4.903)	[.3115, 2.2059]
PSM → Followership → PLS → P–O fit (H2)				.068 (.536)	[.0162, .2523]
Indirect effect differences					
H1 vs H2				.077 (.020)	[.0429, .1237]
H1 vs NH				.099 (.022)	[.0590, .1496]
H2 vs NH				.022(.014)	[.0001, .0573]

Note: ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$. Standard errors in parentheses. Bootstrap confidence intervals were constructed using 10,000 re-samples. $N = 692$ for all models. $R^2 = .28$ (model 1), .41 (model 2), and .45 (model 3).

With respect to the three-step mediation hypothesis, the total indirect effect (i.e. PSM → followership → leader support → P–O fit) was significant (95% BCI: 0.016 to 0.252). However, the ratio of indirect to total effect was only 0.06, meaning that only 6% of the effect of PSM on P–O fit occurred indirectly through followership and leader support in serial. This finding suggests that, although there is evidence that PSM influences leader support through active followership, leading to increased positive perceptions of P–O fit, the role of the multiple mediators in serial was rather trivial.

Finally, examination of indirect effect pairwise contrasts (i.e. H1 vs H2, H1 vs NH, and H2 vs NH) reported in Table 3 reveals that, while both indirect effects (PSM → followership → P–O fit vs PSM → followership → PLS → P–O fit) were statistically significant, the indirect path, through followership alone, had greater impact, and the magnitude of this difference (H1 vs H2) was statistically significant (95% BCI: 0.0429 to 0.1237).

Discussion and implications

This research makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, our study demonstrates the importance of followership in the process of actualizing employees' perceived P–O fit through PSM. Although public administration scholars have linked PSM to various behavioral outcomes, such as organizational citizenship behavior (Campbell and Im, 2015) and attitudinal outcomes (Gould-Williams et al., 2015; Kim, 2012), no previous study has identified in behavioral factors a potential mechanism for mediating PSM and P–O fit. This study thus contributes to the emerging literature that focuses on the antecedents of P–O fit (Astakhova et al., 2014).

Second, PSM was shown to have no direct effect on P–O fit after controlling for followership and organizational factors. Instead, the findings demonstrate that individuals with higher levels of PSM are more likely than those with lower levels of PSM to report greater fit perceptions with their organizations, which manifests primarily in the performance of followership behavior. In practical terms, the ratio of the indirect effect to the total effect revealed that 64% of the effect of PSM on P–O fit occurred indirectly, through active followership. In the context of faculty at an urban university, examples include being proactive, rather than merely accepting assigned tasks, with regard to identifying activities that are critical for achieving the department's priorities, or seeking out assignments that transcend an employee's job description, such as offering summer classes or partnering with local non-profit oranizations to provide classes off campus. All of these actions have the potential to increase P–O fit perceptions by helping to renew employees' civic mission.

Despite the role and importance of followership as a specific form of contextual performance, however, the majority of existing studies have focused on the antecedents of P–O fit based on theories and models of selection, socialization, or both (Astakhova et al., 2014; Cable and Judge, 1996; Chatman, 1991). For example,

emphasizing, in part, the attraction component of Schneider's (1987) ASA theory, various PSM theorists have posited that those with motivation to serve the public are likely to seek organizations that share similar goals (Gould-Williams et al., 2015; Kim, 2012). However, the causal relationship between increased PSM and greater perceived fit with an organization has remained uncertain (Wright and Grant, 2010).

Furthermore, the use of socialization tactics by organizations, that is, the implementation of protocols whereby individuals acquire the attitudes, behavior, and knowledge needed to participate effectively in an organization (Bauer et al., 2007), can contribute significantly to P–O fit, and, indeed, such tactics have often been seen as a primary force in shaping individuals' attitudes and perceived fit with their organizations (Astakhova et al., 2014; Chatman, 1991). Implicit in this framework are the notions that: (1) all individuals respond identically to the tactics employed by the organization, a claim that is rejected by behavioral theorists (Carver and White, 1994); and (2) individuals are not intrinsically motivated. We find that previous models of the antecedents of fit have, for the most part, failed to account for the role of intrinsic motivation (e.g. PSM) and intrinsically motivated contextual performance (e.g. followership behavior) as processes that shape work experience and, thus, perceived fit. Our study therefore offers a corrective to the majority view expressed in the literature, which has generally understood PSM as triggering decisions to join public-serving organizations, by also making clear that PSM increases fit perceptions through the demonstration of active followership.

This finding addresses, at least in part, two interrelated questions raised in Wright and Grant's (2010) critique of PSM theory. The first concerns whether individuals with higher levels of PSM actually behave in a way that contributes to the broader goals and mission of their organizations, and the second concerns whether public sector jobs have the capacity to cultivate and encourage the expression of PSM among employees. Regarding the first of these questions, our findings support the view that the motivation to serve the public directly translates into a contextual behavior (i.e. followership); in this respect, the present study corroborates the few relevant previous studies by showing that PSM can help drive individual behavior (Brewer, 2003). For organizations trying to affect employees' PSM, the implication is that it makes sense to invest in communication with them. Earlier work has pointed to the impact of communication on relaying organizational goals and motivating employees to fulfill them (Elving, 2005). An investment in communication on the part of an organization can help align employees with its goals and mission, thereby increasing their fit perceptions and maximizing various employee outcomes (Gould-Williams et al., 2015; Kim, 2012).

Given that PSM may be considered a stable trait (Wright and Grant, 2010), from a human resources perspective, our findings suggest an additional strategy for human resource professionals and organizational leaders who are seeking to help employees maintain high levels of PSM indirectly, rather than simply assuming that they instinctively know how to follow (Agho, 2009) or trying to alter their levels of PSM directly.

Finally, our study demonstrates that PSM increases P–O fit through its influence on active followership, which, in turn, stimulates positive leader support, and thereby leads to increased subjective fit between individual workers and their organizations. This finding, in some respects, challenges the basic assumption of social exchange theories (Blau, 1964), as well as the majority of early studies of leader–member exchange (LMX) theory. Drawing on earlier theories of work motivation in social psychology, specifically, self-enhancement and self-protection (Shrauger, 1975), our findings suggest that individual workers with high levels of PSM are motivated to maintain their views because of the desire within each specific follower for self-enhancement, and not because of attempts by leaders to deduce what workers want (Bain, 1982). It must also be noted that only 6% of the effect of PSM on P–O fit occurred indirectly through followership and leader support in serial, suggesting that the role of leader support offers only a very partial explanation of the relationship between PSM and P–O fit. Some research suggests that faculty members are generally motivated by the intrinsic rewards of the work itself, rather than by such extrinsic rewards as praise from supervisors (Deci et al., 1997; Mowday and Nam, 1997). This suggests that leader support may not be as important as other factors in establishing P–O fit for faculty.

Limitations and conclusions

Having discussed the contributions that our research makes to the study of followership, we now acknowledge its shortcomings and discuss how these can be addressed through future research. First, we have adopted a cross-sectional approach in our empirical testing to what is more likely to be a longitudinal and dynamic process, thus limiting our current understanding to a single point in time and precluding an investigation into circular causal processes. Future research could accordingly make use of alternative methods, including qualitative studies and detailed longitudinal studies, to complete the circular process. A related problem is that the demonstration of causal order among the variables presented in this model requires further verification. While potential epiphenomenal association and confounding were managed, at least in part, through the deployment of several organizational controls that affect both the mediators and the outcome variable, the fact remains that cross-sectional design, by nature, cannot completely exclude alternative directional relationships between our constructs.

Second, we must recognize the lack of generalizability, in that this research was based on a unique form of public institution: the university. The employees of public universities represent a large portion of public employees in the US, making them an important subject of study for PSM research. The underlying structure of the university system, however, is much less centralized in its organizational design than the typical public agency. Furthermore, the relative autonomy of university employees means that they are not typically subject to a hierarchical bureaucracy that establishes direction and provides oversight. These distinctions present some concern as to the ability to generalize beyond the institution to other

universities and, more broadly, other public agencies. More work is needed to validate, for example, whether the experience and assessment of urban faculty members are generalizable to those serving in other institutions of higher education. The implications of PSM for leadership development call for further examination of the relationships between these two quantities that can unlock other potentials of the PSM construct. We invite future studies of the psychological mechanisms of PSM in higher education and other distinctive settings.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material is available at journals.sagepub.com/home/ras

Note

1. It can be argued that some administrative/professional faculty (e.g. deans) serve roles that are much different from those of teaching/research faculty. However, owing to the fact that many administrative (e.g. department chairs) or professional (e.g. director of graduate studies) faculty also teach, our analysis is based on faculty in general.

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