Public Value at Cross points – A Comparative Study on Employer Attractiveness of Public, Private, and Nonprofit Organizations

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ABSTRACT

A commonly held assumption is that public service motivation (PSM) positively affects individuals' attraction to government, but there are also private and nonprofit organizations that are beneficial to the common good. Therefore, the goal of this study is to shed light on an understudied topic in Public Administration, namely, how the public value of public, private, and nonprofit organizations affects their attractiveness to citizens and how PSM moderates this relationship. We find that employer attractiveness is strongly influenced by organizations' public value regardless sectoral affiliation. This attribution of public value interacts with citizens' PSM. For high-PSM individuals, the relationship between public value and attractiveness is stronger than for low-PSM individuals. Furthermore, high PSM exercises an asymmetric effect, punishing organizations with low public value more strongly in the private sector. These results highlight important implications for HR practitioners in all three sectors seeking to attract and retain highly motivated employees.

Keywords: employer attractiveness, public value, public service motivation, employee retention, public human resource management

INTRODUCTION

With a workforce aging faster than the labor force as a whole, the challenge facing public organizations is how to attract and retain talent in public service careers (Äijälä 2001; Leisink & Steijn 2008). As a result, increasing employer attractiveness – the interest of individuals in being employed by a certain organization – is of key importance for public organizations. One perennial proposition within the PA literature is that sector matters in job choice decisions. Another widely held assumption is that public service motivation (PSM) – i.e., the willingness to contribute to society at large and to serve the public interest (Perry & Hondeghem 2008) – affects individuals' attraction to public sector employment based on the argument of value congruence (see e.g., Vandenabeele 2008; Christensen & Wright 2011; Brewer *et al.* 2012; Carpenter *et al.* 2012; Asseburg & Homberg 2020).

However, there is only limited evidence that the positive effects of public value on employee attraction and selection differ fundamentally between public and private organizations (Boyne 2002). Research on employer attractiveness has largely ignored the fact that sectorial affiliation and related factors such as, for instance, the relationship between an organization and its environment, or its contributions to society – including creating public value, for example – may affect talents' employer choice (Winter & Thaler 2016). Employment conditions and incentives also vary substantially between sectors and influence sector preferences (Rainey & Chun 2005; Bullock *et al.* 2015).

To date, most research on PSM in general but also research on PSM's role for employer attractiveness, focuses solely on public sector organizations and neglects nonprofit and private sector organizations (Lyons *et al.* 2006; Taylor 2010; Winter & Thaler 2016). This omission is important given the evidence that nonprofit and even private sector organizations are in fact attractive for public service-oriented individuals (Kjeldsen & Jacobsen 2013) and may, therefore, compete for high-PSM talent (Houston 2006; Boxall *et al.* 2007; Christensen & Wright 2011; LeRoux & Feeney 2013). Empirical evidence shows organizations' sector plays a role in both public and private sector employees' attraction to

and selection of their employer, although empirical evidence on the link between PSM and sector attraction for the general population is less conclusive (Vandenabeele 2008; Christensen & Wright 2011; Ritz & Waldner 2011; Kjeldsen & Jacobsen 2013; Pedersen 2013; Rose 2013; Hinna *et al.* 2019; Asseburg & Homberg 2020). Therefore, we need more cross-sectoral research into the relevance of public value in employee attraction and on the role of PSM in this relationship.

One issue is that most of the studies mentioned above focus on data from public employees or students (Asseburg & Homberg 2020). Thus, the current body of research has only limited explanatory power when it comes to explaining organizations' attractiveness to talent in the *general* population and regarding employer selection decisions beyond the choice of a first job (Wright & Christensen 2010; Lee & Choi 2016). A second issue is that public organizations compete for future employees on the general labor market. In this setting of cross-sectoral competition, PSM is argued to be a specific attribute that affects individuals' behavior in a variety of settings, and not only in public organizations (Perry *et al.* 2008; Jin 2013; Ripoll & Schott 2020). Consequently, we need more scientific evidence on how employer characteristics such as public value signals and job seekers' characteristics such as PSM interact, and shape perceived employer attractiveness among the general public.

Against the backdrop of PSM theory and research on public value and employer attractiveness (Highhouse *et al.* 2003; Meynhardt 2009; Ritz & Waldner 2011; Weske *et al.* 2019; Vandenabeele & Jager 2020) we assume that organizations that are perceived as providing high public value to society are also perceived as being more attractive employers, particularly if individuals are highly public service motivated. Thus, our research question is: What is the relationship between the attractiveness of public, private, and nonprofit organizations as potential employers and their perceived public value and what role does PSM play in this relationship?

This study contributes to two streams of research: First, we link the discussion on organizational public value with employer attractiveness. In contrast to most PA research on

public values, we base our measure for public value not on ideals and principles defined by public institutions, but on citizens' own evaluations of real-life organizations. All organizations, not just public organizations, can create public value since they shape and co-create individuals' experience of their societal contexts, thereby influencing individuals' attitudes toward an organization as a potential employer. Second, we contribute to the discussion on the role of sector as a signal for organizations' employer attractiveness. We show that signals related to an organization's sector affiliation affect citizens' perception of employer attractiveness if there is high congruence between individuals' perception of an organization's public value and their motivation to serve society at large.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows: First, we discuss the state of research regarding the public value of organizations. In the second and third sections, we develop hypotheses on the link between public value and employer attractiveness as well as the role of PSM and sectoral context in this relationship. We then present our method and the data from an extensive public value survey conducted with $N = 632$ inhabitants of Switzerland, who are part of the active workforce. Fifth, we present the results of hypotheses testing based on linear regression modelling and further explore the robustness of our findings across sectoral contexts by investigating three-way interactions between public value, PSM, and sectoral affiliation on employer attractiveness. We conclude by discussing these findings' implications for theory and practice.

THEORY

Public Value of Organizations

The public value concept is one of the perennial roots of public administration (PA) and public management (PM) research (Moore 1995). Recent research has expanded the concept's applicability to all sectoral contexts, including public, private, and nonprofit (Meynhardt 2015). The public value construct aims to holistically describe the value of an organization for a social collective as an organization's contribution to the common good. Organizations produce value for communities and society when they improve "the quality of

individual and collective life for citizens" (Moore 2013, p. 8). In that, organizations impact how individuals and groups think and feel about community and society. The public value concept builds on the perspective that any organization does not only create economic value, but also creates value in the form of producing and reproducing societal realities. It concerns value for and from the public. The concept of public value relates to Drucker's (1992) idea that all organizations influence how well society functions as a whole and thus, perform a societal function. Therefore, public value represents an organization's individual contribution to the common good enjoyed by society and, logically, an organization's public value is the result of shared evaluations by external stakeholders (Meynhardt 2009). Consequently, the perception of an organization's public value based on its actions will affect the beholder's attitude and behavior toward said organization (e.g., employment decisions).

The concept of public *value* inherently relates to the concept of public *values* as defined by the work of Jørgensen and Bozeman (2007), Bozeman (2007), or Hood (1991). Both are relational concepts and are always a contextual matter in that they depend on what citizens and political actors value about an organization's actions (Moore 2013; Vandenabeele *et al.* 2013). PA scholars understand public values as the normative consensus regarding legitimacy, benefits, and obligations of societal agents as well as the basic principles upon which governance, policies, and regulations must be based to result in legitimacy (Bozeman 2007). Thus, public values are often defined by politics, they provide direction for public policies, they shape identities of individuals and organizations, and they can be in conflict with each other (Hood 1991; Andersen *et al.* 2021).

In contrast to the many divisible public values identified in prior research, public value is conceptualized as the amalgamation of the entirety of an organizations' actions in the light of said values (Moore 2013; Schott & Ritz 2018). In the current study, we evaluate such an organization's overall public value and not a specific set of public values through the citizens' eyes by employing the public *value* measure by Meynhardt and Jasinenko (2020). They define an organization's public value as a perceptional construct that is manifest in any organization's contribution to the common good perceived as decent actions of the organization, its contributions to social cohesion and quality of life in its environment, and good performance in its core business. Compared with the more refined measurement of a variety of public *values* in Public Administration, we use this rather generalist idea of public value for measuring public value of public, private, and nonprofit organizations as perceived by citizens. How these perceptions are related to the attractiveness of employers will be discussed in the following section.

Public Value and Employer Attractiveness

PA research typically assumes that the public sector mainly employs people who support public values or public service related values such as altruism, solidarity, or fairness (Beck Jorgensen & Bozeman 2007; Holt 2018). Consequently, HR practices are supposed to build upon such values (Ripoll & Ritz forthcoming). When it comes to HR recruitment, employer attractiveness is a primary concern. Prior to initiating selection processes, organizations first need to attract people to their vacancies and those people furthermore need to be interested in working within a certain organization (Ritz & Waldner 2011). Against the background of the attraction-selection-attrition framework and person-organization-fit theory, the underlying assertion is that individuals' decisions about attraction, selection, and attrition are based on the fit between an organization's characteristics and their own traits and motivations (Schneider 1987; Wright & Christensen 2010). Such a fit is based on individuals' "affective and attitudinal thoughts about particular [organizations] as potential places for employment" (Highhouse *et al.* 2003, p. 989). Based on supplementary fit theory (Kristof

1996), congruence of goals and values is key to such affective and attitudinal evaluations and is an inherent part of the attraction-selection-attrition process supporting sector self-selection in recruitment (Schneider *et al.* 1995; Vandenabeele & Jager 2020).

Public organizations are institutions related to commonly shared values that influence individuals' behavior (Vandenabeele 2007). Regarding public value, the attractiveness of public organizations is based on their explicit contributions to society. Although public organizations are not uniform but rather an "amalgam of organizations and institutions that provide public service in its broadest sense" (Vandenabeele 2008, p. 1091), they have strong ties with higher-level institutions, such as public value (Scott 2008; Vandenabeele & Jager 2020). However, it is too easy to assume that public organizations primarily attract employees based on their contributions of public value to society. Against the backdrop of a heterogeneous public sector and publicness theory (Bozeman 2004) it is essential to note that it is not only public organizations that create public value but also private and nonprofit organizations (Ballart & Rico 2018), and that there is no clear evidence that the positive effects of public value – such as, for instance, attractiveness toward potential employees – fundamentally differ between public and private organizations (Boyne 2002). It follows that an organization's public value is a relevant signal in attraction processes regardless of the type of organization (public, private, or nonprofit).

This argument is grounded psychologically in self-enhancement theory (Heider 1958; Baumeister *et al.* 1993; Fiske 2004). Public value functions as a signal of an organization's attractiveness as a potential employer because high public value contribution is socially accepted, nurturing the desire to see oneself in a positive light by associating with such positive values as socially desirable traits. Seeking association with such a high public value-organization as a potential employer helps individuals to maintain their positive self-evaluation, strengthens their own value-based identity, and elevates their status in society. That said, we argue an organization's public value is a factor of attractiveness *per se* and, based on signaling theory (Wanous 1980), serves as a signal to potential job applicants who

draw conclusions about an organization's vision, values, and actions. This argument is in line with research showing that individuals are attracted to employers with a strong stance toward environmental protection (Bauer & Aiman-Smith 1996), employers with affirmative action programs (Wright *et al.* 1995), or those employers who publish their ratings on corporate social performance (Albinger & Freeman 2000).

Consequently, we hypothesize the relationship between an organization's public value and its attractiveness as a future employer is positive in the sense that:

H1: Organizations that are perceived as having high (low) public value are associated with higher (lower) employer attractiveness to potential future employees.

The Moderating Effects of PSM

As argued above, certain organizations attract certain types of people based on their perceived public value, but individual differences may also moderate the effect of an organization's value-related signals on potential applicants' attitudes and their ensuing behavioral outcomes (Lukacik & Bourdage 2020). A central claim in PA research is that individual differences in their level of PSM influence job choice and attraction. People with high levels of PSM exhibit dissimilar behaviors and preferences from those people with low levels of PSM and high-PSM individuals are especially likely to self-select into public sector employment (Vandenabeele 2008; Perry *et al.* 2010; Ritz *et al.* 2016a; Asseburg & Homberg 2020). Thus, those highly sought-after potential employees with high-PSM might be more likely to self-select if they perceive signals indicating that organizations contribute high public value to society. An explanation for this may be because public value focuses on an organization's contribution to the common good and PSM concerns individuals' motivation to contribute to society at large through public service provision and serving the abstract idea of the public interest (Ritz *et al.* 2020).

PSM is associated with commitment to the public interest, social value orientation, and pro-social behavior (Houston 2006; Vandenabeele 2008; Esteve *et al.* 2016; Van Witteloostuijn *et al.* 2017; Ritz *et al.* 2020; Weißmüller *et al.* 2020). A main characteristic of

PSM is its orientation towards larger unidentified collectives instead of particular individuals or groups in one's immediate sphere of contact (Vandenabeele *et al.* 2018; Schott *et al.* 2019). Ritz et al. (2020) call this societal altruism versus interpersonal altruism. We argue that these characteristics of PSM lead to a particularly high value fit between organizations signaling public value and high-PSM individuals. Andersen et al. (2013, p. 305) compare PSM and public value*s* and conclude that "the two concepts cannot be totally separated, as values can be motivating, and motivation is often oriented toward something desirable (e.g., values)." We assume that this might also be applicable to the relationship between PSM and public value. For instance, the public value concept measures an organization's contribution to social cohesion and quality of life and this can be related to the public interest component in PSM, indicating that high-PSM individuals value doing good for others through their work as, for instance, contributions to the social cohesion in society or to the quality of life in the organization's environment (Perry 1996), corresponding with Meynhardt and Jasienko (2020). However, recent research argues that public interest – as a major component of PSM – does not necessarily allow high-PSM individuals to contribute to the common good at all times, because there are many ways in which individuals may conceive the public interest, making it a context- and role-dependent concept (Schott *et al.* 2015; Schott & Ritz 2018). That said, high-level PSM individuals would then evaluate the public value of an organization and its attractiveness as future employer depending on their individual conception of the public interest and as relatively more important than individuals with lower levels of PSM, moderating the relationship between an organization's public value and its attractiveness as a potential employer.

As stated, there is limited knowledge about how public value signals of organizations with different sectorial affiliation influence the perceived employer attractiveness attributed to them by individuals in relation to individuals' level of PSM. Research shows that prosocial employment attributes foster the self-selection of experienced candidates with high levels of PSM into public sector jobs (Wright & Christensen 2010; Lee & Choi 2016; Asseburg *et al.*

2020; Asseburg & Homberg 2020). Recent research by Vandenabeele and Jager (2020) indicates that PSM may indeed moderate the effect of value-statements in recruitment messages on attractiveness, depending on sectoral context and prospective employees' characteristics. However, the question is whether this positive relationship between PSM and self-selection also holds for private sector and nonprofit organizations. Research by Word and co-authors (2013; 2015) supports such attraction effects in the nonprofit sector. Although sectoral boundaries are increasingly becoming blurred (Denis *et al.* 2015), the Continental–European tradition of PA still exhibits strong legal separation between the sectors and sectoral affiliation relates to well-known distinct elements of employment conditions, such as potential job content, salary levels, and the prospect of tenure (Painter & Peters 2010; Kuhlmann & Wollmann 2019). Therefore, against the backdrop of our study's focus on employer attractiveness of public, private, and nonprofit organizations, we are interested in whether individuals with high levels of PSM will react more strongly depending on whether an organization sending public value-related signals is public, private, or nonprofit.

However, PSM is distinct from so-called public *sector* motivation, which is defined as a type of motivation based on individual utility maximization towards institution-specific and extrinsic incentives (Ritz *et al.* 2016b). Thus, both the public value concept and PSM are concepts that transgress sector boundaries (Bozeman 1987; Brewer & Selden 1998), indicating that the information regarding sectoral affiliation will matter more for high-PSM individuals in all type of organizations. It follows that:

H2: The relationship between public value and attractiveness of public/private/nonprofit organizations as future employers will be moderated by PSM, such that high-PSM individuals are more attracted to high-public value organizations compared with low-PSM individuals.

To test the degree to which this hypothesized moderation relationship is, in fact, universal across all three sectoral contexts, we explore potential sectoral differences by conducting further analysis testing the three-way interaction between

public value, PSM, and sector as to identify whether the presumed universality hypothesized in H2 holds across organizations in different sectors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

National Public Value Survey

We raised original survey data in collaboration with the Swiss National Public Value Survey ("*Gemeinwohlatlas*") in 2019. The full *Gemeinwohlatlas* survey raised 14,946 responses representative for the general population of Switzerland, contacting 60,127 individuals in total (response rate: 24.9%). Out of this representative sample of 14,946 individuals, we selected individuals who indicated that they were familiar with at least one of the organizations that we use as rating cases in our study (see next section). We aimed for a quota of about 200 responses per case to allow us reliably to detect even small to medium effect sizes in inter-group correlations (Ellis 2010), which was achieved.[1] This subset of quoted respondents received our treatment and additional questions concerning employer attractiveness, public value, and PSM. 1,164 initial responses were obtained in this way. Since some respondents were familiar with several organizations, these observations are in-fact nested in a smaller number of individual respondents.

Furthermore, our study is concerned strictly with employer attractiveness from the perspective of potential employees to maximize the practical relevance of our insights for personnel management. Therefore, the subsequent steps of analysis focus exclusively on the 632 respondents who are currently of working-age (i.e., 17 to 65 years old), and who also completed the full socio-demographic questionnaire. Furthermore, only responses of individuals who were familiar with at least one of the organizations studied were included. As a result of this rigorous quality control, the final dataset consists of 892 observations nested in 632 individual respondents. This means that although our data is sourced from a

[1] Raw number of observations: N=1,302; Credit Suisse: n=198; Google: n=222; Swiss Paraplegic Foundation: n=237; Swiss Federal Railways SBB-CFF-FFS: n=224; Swiss Radio and Television SRF / RTS / RSI: n=211; Swiss Red Cross SRK: n=210).

representative sample of the German-speaking population of Switzerland, the final dataset used is not fully representative for this population because of the aforementioned inclusion criteria. Nevertheless, it is sufficiently similar to the general working population of German-speaking Switzerland (see sample characteristics below). Using a sample similar to the general population allows us to test our hypotheses from a broader perspective than most studies on PSM and employer attractiveness, which are usually limited by data relying on public sector employees or student samples (Vandenabeele *et al.* 2004; Ritz & Waldner 2011; Weske *et al.* 2019). Study participation was voluntary and anonymous to minimize response bias related to social desirability and reduce common method bias (Podsakoff *et al.* 2003).

Survey Procedure and Rating Stimuli

Our analyses rely on original survey data. The survey followed several consecutive steps. After a short introduction, study participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they were familiar with six large and well-known organizations that are active in Switzerland. The order of these organizations was randomized to inhibit carry-over and order effects. Respondents were then asked to rate the *public value* of each of the organizations with which they had previously indicated familiarity. The six organizations were presented in random order to inhibit priming, order, and spill-over effects (Podsakoff *et al.* 2012). We selected these organizations carefully based on their prominence in prior ratings in the Swiss national public value survey of 2017 to maximize the reliability and objectivity of responses to these stimuli (Sniderman 2018).

We selected six organizations to serve as our rating stimuli for two reasons. First, each of them is exclusively associated with either the *public* (Swiss Federal Railways SBB-CFF-FFS; Swiss Radio and Television SRF / RTS / RSI), the *private* (Google; Credit Suisse Bank), or the *nonprofit* sector (Swiss Red Cross SRK; Swiss Paraplegic Foundation SPF). These organizations are involved in dissimilar industries such as IT, finance, media, health care, or transport. Using two very different organizations per sector increases stimulus variety and inhibits response bias related to recency effects or topical framing effects (Atzmüller &

Steiner 2010), thus increasing data reliability and relevance (Biemer 2010). Second, the general Swiss population considers all six organizations to be highly attractive employers (Universum 2020).

This similar case selection allows us to control for reputation-related noise and allows us to investigate the causal relationship between public value and PSM on employer attractiveness in sectoral contexts on a relatively level playing field, thereby maximizing generalizability. In this, we follow best-practice recommendations by Seawright and Gerring (2008). In the survey, organizations were presented in random order to inhibit order and rating bias by cognitive contamination. For each organization, we displayed the organization's name and brand to boost cognitive stimuli elaboration in respondents and increase treatment salience and exposure (Atzmüller & Steiner 2010). The rating task is complemented by scale measures for public value and concludes with measuring PSM and control variables.

Sample Characteristics

Descriptive sample statistics and pairwise correlations are presented in Table 1. The sample is similar to the working-age population of German-speaking Switzerland (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020d). The 632 survey participants are on average male (62.4%) and 43.0 (*SD* = 14.9; min. = 17, max. = 65) years old. 23.4% hold a tertiary study degree. All participants' first language is German, and they are currently part of the active workforce (62.1% part-time employment; 37.9% full-time employment). By comparison, 53.3% of the working population of Switzerland are male (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020b), the average age is *M* = 41.9 years (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020a), 20.7% obtained a tertiary study degree (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020c), and 36.8% work part-time while 63.2% are full-time employed (Bundesamt für Statistik 2021). Thus, part-time employees and male respondents are overrepresented in our sample while age and study degree are relatively similar.

– Insert Table 1 about here –

Dependent and Independent Variables

Responses for all measures were provided on a six-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 6 (*completely agree*). Variable items are presented in detail in online Appendix A.

Public Value. We measure organizations' public value with an original scale developed by Meynhardt and Jasinenko (2020). It comprises four six-point Likert-type scale items presented in random order, which ask respondents to indicate the degree to which a specific organization *behaved decently*, *contributed to social cohesion*, *performed well in its core business*, and *contributed to the quality of life*. The variable *public value* is the arithmetic mean of these four responses.

Employer Attractiveness. We predict our dependent variable *employer attractiveness* with a seven-item six-point Likert-type scale that represents a condensed form of Highhouse et al.'s (2003) validated 15-item scale on organizational attraction. Highhouse et al.'s (2003) original measure comprises three dimensions with five Likert items each to capture organizational attraction, i.e. an organization's *general attractiveness*, individuals' intention to actively seek employment in said organization (*intention to pursue*), and organizational *prestige*. Since organizational prestige is not the focal point of our study and due to practical limitations related to survey length, we opted to include only the first seven items of Highhouse et al.'s (2003) measure, i.e., five items on general attractiveness followed by the two strongest items of intention to pursue (see online Appendix A for more detail). We selected the items that Highhouse et al. (2003) reported as having had the highest covariances to maximize the internal consistency and reliability of our abbreviated measure.

Public Service Motivation. Due to restrictions regarding survey length, we measure PSM using a six-item six-point Likert-type scale that we developed based on five items from Wright et al. (2013) representing the MSPB measurement scale in combination with a highly correlated item of prosocial motivation. Furthermore we included one item developed by Kim (2009), which we value as an excellent item for measuring the PSM dimension Attraction to

Policy Making (Ritz 2011). This allowed us to include the most relevant facets of PSM in a short scale. The variable items were aggregated by calculating the arithmetic mean of these seven items.

Construct Validity. Since we translated and abbreviated the aforementioned measures, we test for construct validity by conducting exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using maximum likelihood estimations, following Hinkin (1998) as well as conducting Harman's single factor test for endogeneity (Podsakoff & Organ 1986). These procedures revealed that common source bias was not an issue, since one common factor would only extract 34.5% of the variance on average (AVE), which is far below the recommended threshold. Furthermore, discriminant and convergent validity were not an issue, and a three-factor model fits significantly better to the data than a two-factor or single-factor model (see online Appendix C). This underlines that the translation and adaptation of the original items to the Swiss context was appropriate. As to further control for common method bias caused by latent factor(s), we followed best practice recommendations by Podsakoff et al. (2003) and Richardson et al. (2009) and used CFA trait/method modelling (see also latent variable approach to CFA marker technique in Williams et al., 2010) with all main study variable items and an unobserved latent factor. Structural equation modelling revealed no significant relationships of the study variables with a latent, unobserved marker, corroborating the reliability of the findings presented in the next section.

Control Variables. The degree to which an organization is perceived as attractive to potential future employees may depend on their gender, age, education, and socialization effects due to their professional sectoral background (Lewis & Frank 2002; Vandenabeele 2008). Consequently, we control for socio-demographic characteristics, i.e., age in years, gender (0 = male; 1 = female), current employment sector (0 = other; 1 = civil service), and higher education (0 = no; 1 = yes). This also allowed us to control for sample balance. Balance testing revealed that implicit response clusters – a result of some respondents rating

more than one organization – were not an issue since they are balanced in all central variables (see online Appendix B for more detail).

Analytical Procedure and Model Estimation

To test our hypotheses, we estimate seven separate, clustered, and heteroscedasticity-robust OLS regression models on our dependent variable employer attractiveness. We conduct two-dimensional clustering (at the level of the individual *and* at the level of the individual organizations for their conditional contribution) because some participants rated more than one organization and more than one (i.e., two) organizations are associated with each sectoral classification (Cameron *et al.* 2006). Model I is the controls-only baseline for iterative regression analysis. Model II tests H1 by adding the direct effects of public value, PSM, and organizational sector, for which "public" serves as the reference category. We add interaction effect between public value and PSM (PV × PSM) to test H2 in model III. As a robustness check regarding the presumed universality of the moderating effect of PSM on the relationship between public value and employer attractiveness (H2) across all three sectoral contexts, we explore the trifold interaction between public value, PSM, and the respective sectoral context (public, private, or nonprofit) on employer attractiveness further. These explorations are reported in four more models (IV to VII) to compare the corresponding slopes against each other (see Table 2 below). Investigating these three-way interactions is necessary to assess whether the hypothesized relationships are, in fact, universal across all three sectors.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

Table 1 displays the means and standard deviations of and correlations between our study variables. The correlation coefficients are all in the anticipated direction. On average, the sample holds relatively high levels of PSM ($M = 4.16$, $SD = .85$). We find that – compared with public organizations ($\rho = .09$, $p < .01$; *Obs*. = 197, $M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.10$) – study

respondents perceive the private organizations tested (ρ = -.40, p < .01; *Obs*. = 284, *M* = 4.07, *SD* = 1.23) as significantly less valuable to society; two-tailed *t* = -7.231, *p* < .000, Cohen's *d* = |.670|. In contrast, nonprofit organizations (ρ = .33, p < .01; *Obs*. = 411, *M* = 5.17, *SD* = .93) are regarded as contributing relatively higher public value to society compared with public organizations; two-tailed *t* = 3.615, *p* < .000, Cohen's *d* = |.313|. Furthermore, the data indicate that while public value is directly and strongly correlated with employer attractiveness (ρ = .45, p < .01), employer attractiveness varies strongly depending on the sectoral context: While public (ρ = -.03, p > .05; *Obs*. = 197, *M* = 3.32, *SD* = 1.27) and private organizations (ρ = -.11, p < .01; *Obs*. = 284, *M* = 3.26, *SD* = 1.39) are regarded as equally attractive employers if public value perception is not accounted for (two-tailed *t* = 0.426, *p* = .670, Cohen's *d* = |.040|), our sample perceives nonprofit organizations as significantly more attractive employers (ρ = .18, p < .01; *Obs*. = 411, *M* = 3.77, *SD* = 1.31) compared with public (two-tailed *t* = 4.050, *p* < .000, Cohen's *d* = |.351|) and private organizations (two-tailed *t* = 4.891, *p* < .000, Cohen's *d* = |.377|).

Main Analysis

Public Value (H1). Table 2 reports the results of the clustered regression analyses conducted on employer attractiveness. H1 hypothesized a positive relationship between an organization's perceived public value and their attractiveness to potential future employees. The direct effects model (model II) reveals a strong positive direct effect between perceived public value and employer attractiveness (b = .52, p < .000), providing support for H1. Furthermore, model II reveals a robust gender effect, i.e., female respondents perceive the tested organizations as generally more attractive than male respondents (b = .20, p = .049). This direct effects model already explains a considerable amount of variance (adjusted R^2 = .243, F (8) = 28.75, p < .000). Variance inflation was not an issue (mean VIF = 1.26).

– Insert Table 2 about here –

Public Service Motivation (H2). Model II also indicates a robust *direct* relationship between employer attractiveness and PSM (b = .29, p < .000). In H2, we hypothesized that the

relationship between perceived public value and attractiveness will be moderated by PSM. To investigate this relationship, we add the interaction effect between perceived public value and PSM on employer attractiveness (model III), revealing that PSM does indeed moderate the positive relation between public value and employer attractiveness (PV × PSM: b = .19, p = .000). To illustrate this effect further, see the upper panel of Figure 2 that displays the marginal effect of high-PSM (blue line), i.e., individuals with above sample-average PSM scores, vis-à-vis low-PSM (red line), i.e., individuals with below sample-average PSM scores, on the relationship between public value and employer attractiveness. In both cases, the relationship between public value and employer attractiveness is linear and positive, but the effect is significantly stronger for high-PSM individuals but only if both public value and employer attractiveness are above-average high. Hence, we find initial support for H2.

– Insert Figure 2 about here –

To test whether this effect is, in fact, universal across all three sectors, we estimate three-way interactions between perceived public value, PSM, and sectoral context on employer attractiveness (see models VI and VII in Table 2). Model VI provides evidence for a strong, robust, and positive relationship between employer attractiveness and PSM but only if an organization's public value and its sector are accounted for (PV × Public × PSM: b = .16, p = .003; PV × Private × PSM: b = .21, p = .000; PV × Nonprofit × PSM: b = .20, p = .000).

This significant three-way interaction effect is illustrated by plotting the marginal effect of high-PSM (blue line) vis-à-vis low-PSM (red line) on the relationship between perceived public value and employer attractiveness *by sector* (Figure 2). Figure 2's lower panel shows that – while the relationship between employer attractiveness and public value is positive for both high and low-PSM individuals in all three sectors – high-PSM individuals do actually discriminate between public, private, and nonprofit organizations: for high-PSM individuals, private and nonprofit organizations that are perceived as contributing only low

public value to society are regarded as substantially *less* attractive than public organizations of equally low public value.[2]

By contrast, high-PSM individuals regard organizations associated with high public value as substantially *more* attractive as potential employers if they are private or nonprofit organizations rather than public organizations. This effect is particularly robust for private organizations (model VII: PV × Private × PSM: b = .28, p = .018). This means that an individual's level of PSM determines the degree to which an organization's public value matters for that organization's attractiveness as a potential employer and that these organizations will be treated differently depending on their sectorial affiliation.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study is the first to investigate how citizens evaluate the attractiveness of public, private, and nonprofit organizations as a potential employer and their public value. As hypothesized, our research reveals three key findings: First, *public value matters*. Organizations with higher public value are perceived as more attractive to potential employees, irrespective of their sectoral affiliation. Second, *PSM matters*: The effect of public value on employer attractiveness is stronger for high-PSM individuals. Third, *sector matters*: In cases of very high or very low public value, PSM moderates the relationship between an organization's sector affiliation and its perceived public value. Based on these findings and building on extant research, this study offers the following three contributions to the literature with implications for future research.

Our first contribution relates to the universal relevance of *public value*. Research in our field usually investigates the attractiveness of public organizations as employers from (future) employees' perspective, either through the lens of reward and sector preferences

[2] Repeating these marginal effects analyses on the level of the individual organization reveals that this finding is also robust against biases potentially induced by the effect size or salience of individual organizations. Online appendix D provides further supportive material. Conducting clustered linear regression analyses on employer attractiveness for each stimulus organization separately reveals the same pattern of findings regarding the relationships between PSM, perceived public, and their relationship with sector, albeit smaller effect sizes as a consequence of the smaller number of observations in the non-pooled data.

(Lewis & Frank 2002; Tschirhart *et al.* 2008; Ritz & Waldner 2011) or by focusing on motivations such as PSM (Mann 2006; Vandenabeele 2008; Weske *et al.* 2019; Asseburg & Homberg 2020; Vandenabeele & Jager 2020). This often results in the comparison of intrinsic and extrinsic incentives for public sector employment. In contrast, our research contributes to our understanding of employer attractiveness by analyzing public value as a measure of perceived societal relevance as an antecedent of employer attractiveness.

Our study contributes novel empirical evidence to the role public value plays for employer attractiveness using a citizen sample and real organizations from all three sectors. Analysis reveals a strong and significant relationship between perceived public value of public, private, and nonprofit organizations, and employer attractiveness. Organizations in any sector can attract future employees by sending cues relating to their contribution to the common good. This finding also supports Drucker's (1992) idea that all organizations perform a social function, Bozeman's (1987) publicness theory in that all organizations are public, and it stresses the theoretical and practical relevance of organizations' function within society as a strong signal in employee attraction. Thus, the two private sector organizations in our study can profit from signaling public value even though they are perceived as having significantly lower levels of public value compared with the public and nonprofit sector organizations. However, the two companies Google and Credit Suisse not only represent private sector organizations, but also certain industries and particular jobs for which we cannot control with our data. While we made sure to include only stimuli organizations that are generally regarded as above-average attractive employers, we encourage future research to further investigate the degree to which the perception of public value is contingent upon sector affiliation and on other organizational characteristics. Additionally, our measure of public value reveals that an organization's legal status is not a necessary condition for sector attraction as often assumed in PSM-related comparative research (Holt 2018). Nevertheless, we see potential for future research to assess the attraction argument across all three sectors by using more than one cue per sector, as we did with our measure of public value. This could

be done, for instance, by using various cues based on dimensions of publicness, or a variety of public values and dimensions of an overall public value measure. This would allow us better to differentiate between specific values of an organization's attractiveness and could even be linked to concrete efforts in creating employee value propositions of various organizations based on specific public values such as, for instance, environmental sustainability or social equity using a field experiment.

Our second contribution is related to the discourse on the role of *PSM and person-environment-fit* when it comes to the employer attractiveness of public organizations. Research on employer attractiveness in the public sector mainly argues from the perspective of fit (Leisink & Steijn 2008; Vandenabeele 2008; Wright & Pandey 2008; Giauque *et al.* 2009; Christensen & Wright 2011; Ritz & Waldner 2011; Asseburg *et al.* 2018; Weske *et al.* 2019; Asseburg & Homberg 2020; Vandenabeele & Jager 2020). Our study shows that public value fit plays a key role for public organizations but also for private sector and nonprofit organizations. Prior research shows that PSM is a major facet of public employees' value congruence with public employers (Bright 2008; Steijn 2008; Liu *et al.* 2010; Christensen & Wright 2011; Kim 2012; Teo *et al.* 2016). Individuals with higher levels of PSM seek public sector employment because these organizations provide opportunities to satisfy employees' need to behave in congruence with their individually held values. Whereas we support Vandenabeele and Jager's (2020) call to account for the diverse patchwork of public organizations instead of assuming homogeneity across these types of organizations, we lack knowledge about how the relationship between value fit and employer attractiveness differs across sectors. Our research adds relevant insights to this issue and points toward a "pro-public sector buffer" as we will explain in the following paragraph.

High-PSM individuals will make a less hard judgement on public (compared with private and nonprofit) organizations that are perceived as having low public value to the effect that for high-PSM individuals even low-public value public organizations will still be relatively attractive. This result is of particular interest for future research because it shows

that the relationship between value fit and employer attractiveness depends on organizational attributes with different functionalities for the strength of attraction. We need more research investigating how other organizational attributes (e.g., legal status) are relevant facets of public value and influence employer attractiveness. This is not reflected in our approach measuring overall public value. Furthermore, although empirical evidence stresses the relevance of PSM when compared to other reward factors for sector attraction (Asseburg *et al.* 2020; Asseburg & Homberg 2020), we cannot separate effects of our sector classification from other organizational attributes because we tested our hypotheses with six deliberately selected genuine organizations without having more information about their reward structures. Therefore, we see high potential for future research to disentangle the underlying processes at play between public value, other institutional components of organizations and employer attractiveness. Further research should use a larger sample of organizations, including organizations from all state levels, with detailed information about various institutional characteristics, since this is missing in the current dataset. Again, this should be investigated with various organizational types including core administrative units.

Third, our findings show that high-PSM individuals will afford private organizations associated with very high public value "extra credit" in the eye of potential employees, but this does not apply to public organizations of equally high public value. We call this the "*extra mile effect*" for private organizations that contribute public value to society. Public organizations are implicitly assumed to possess inherent public value by design as public institutions so that, if assessed regarding their public value, a high score does not have a lot of salience compared with private organizations. In contrast, public value as part of the employee value proposition of a private organization offers potential for positive signaling to the labor market and supports the immense efforts these organizations undertake in order to highlight their corporate social responsibility and specific contributions to society such as support for environmental and animal protection (Werther Jr & Chandler 2010; Carroll & Brown 2018).

Our findings support earlier research by showing that although public sector employment may be more likely to emphasize service to the public, there may in fact be many private sector organizations signaling enough public value as to satisfy potential employees' PSM, hence increasing these private organizations' employer attractiveness (Kjeldsen & Jacobsen 2013). Thus, this study underlines the challenge of public organizations in attracting and retaining employees in a more and more competitive labor market as described in the opening of our study. As private employers are often seen more attractive regarding pay level, career perspectives, and challenging tasks (Ritz & Waldner 2011), higher perceived contributions to the common good might expand their pool among potential employees who have mixed motives (Ritz *et al.* 2016a; Weske & Schott 2018) as, for instance, being highly public service motivated and at the same time also striving for other rewards such as high pay levels or pursuing an international career. According to our findings, there is a realistic chance that this challenge will increase in the future if the blurring of sectors continues and private (and nonprofit) organizations expand their employer branding strategies with the aim of strategically exploiting their public value contribution (Weske *et al.* 2019). Public organizations may lose ground in countering growing employer competition across sectors with distinct values and sector-specific contributions becoming less clear-cut. This calls for further research to answer the question as to what public organizations can do to increase their employer attractiveness for high-PSM individuals – even if their contribution to public value is low – and whether further investment in attracting high-PSM individuals is likely to pay off.

We must also keep in mind that there is no such thing as "the" archetypical PSM employee. High levels of PSM are a facet of a comprehensive motivational personality structure and recent research has shown that extrinsic incentives might be less detrimental to PSM than often assumed (Kroll & Porumbescu 2019; Asseburg *et al.* 2020). Thus, future research should investigate how different prosocial, intrinsic, and extrinsic motivational signals of public, private, and nonprofit organizations relate to different levels of PSM and

why highly PSM-motivated individuals still prefer public sector employment even if the contribution to public value of these organizations is comparatively low. This would allow to better disentangle the roles that different motives play within PSM-oriented job candidates and to further develop the theory of employer attraction in the public sector.

Additionally, the blurring of sectoral boundaries and the role thereof for public sector recruitment should be taken into account because more and more hybrid organizations brand themselves as employers that relate to both, public and private values are emerging (Emery & Giauque 2005; Doherty *et al.* 2014). The extra-mile effect of public value provides a potential competitive advantage for organizations competing for talent. Above all, private organizations but also nonprofits are advised to make better use of the scientific insights on the relationship between public value and PSM to attract a latent population of highly relevant employees to them. The growing discussion on the purpose-driven organization (Hollensbe *et al.* 2014) highlights the relevance of (societal) service motives such as PSM for private sector organizations. To our knowledge, there is no systematic research into the role and relevance of PSM for the recruitment process of private organizations, opening avenues for future research on PSM's effects beyond public organizations.

LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

Like any type of empirical research, our study is subject to limitations. One potential downside of our survey design is that the main variables (public value, employer attractiveness, and PSM) were measured in a single survey. As expected, based on the theory, we find that these variables correlate moderately to strongly. While moderate correlations in single survey data may hint at common source bias (Richardson *et al.* 2009; Podsakoff *et al.* 2012) resulting in inflated endogeneity hence creating common-method variance bias (Antonakis *et al.* 2010), construct validity latent factor testing revealed no such issues. Furthermore, methodological research by Siemsen et al. (2010) points out that the regression estimates of interaction effects – such as the relationships between public value, PSM, and

sector with employer attractiveness explored in the current study – would be deflated rather than artificially inflated by common method bias, providing further support for the robustness of our findings. Consequently, we do not believe that common source or common method bias reduces the validity of our findings because we created sufficient variance with the six different organizations and because the sample consists of a relatively large number of 632 individual respondents sourced from the general population of Swiss citizens. However, future research aiming to replicate our study might further reduce the threat of common source bias by raising the data with two separate serial surveys that would split the variables with temporal delay to ensure that the items of PSM and public value do not affectively and cognitively contaminate follow-up responses to the dependent variable (see also Podsakoff et al. 2003).

Another limitation of our research strategy is that we do not include public organizations related to the core administration, such as federal ministries, state, or local administrations. The decision to focus on well-known public corporations, but not on PA, was taken by the designer of the Gemeinwohlatlas survey. However, future waves of this survey will include a wider range of public organizations, opening prospects for further research into this topic. A third limitation is the use of an aggregated, a global measure for PSM due to space restrictions by the survey provider. Ideally, future studies replicating our study design might want to measure PSM's four dimensions separately because they have different antecedents and outcomes. However, Andersen et al. (2013) show that at least three of the four PSM dimensions have significant positive correlations with public value dimensions. A meta-analysis by Asseburg and Homberg (2020) provides strong support that both PSM in its aggregated form as well as PSM separated by its four dimensions serves as a reliable predictor for sector attraction. Consequently, we anticipate that the positive relationships between employer attractiveness and our global PSM measure is a highly reliable proxy for the relationship between employer attractiveness and PSM on its dimensional level. Nevertheless, we recommend that future replications of our study capture the full-range construct of PSM.

Regarding the practical relevance of this study, we see three implications of interest. First, the findings show that citizens across all sectors of society are very sensitive to an organization's public value. Because these citizens may be potential future employees, HR departments need to incorporate a broader understanding of what affects not only job seekers' interests in the short-term but also how to develop a sustainable citizen-organization relationship. HR practices such as employer branding strategies and the development of employee *and* citizen relationship management strategies (Fischer 2011) may be advised. Second, the finding that citizens with high PSM react with particular sensitivity by "punishing" low-public value organizations and "rewarding" high-public value organizations in the private sector leads to the recommendation to public organizations that, in a competitive labor market, specific investments are necessary to clearly set them apart from other competitors if the goal is to attract employees with high levels of PSM. Finally, high public value private firms and nonprofit organizations may also take advantage of this effect; their public value is actually an asset and a strategic advantage for the process of attracting talent in a competitive labor market and similarly to other assets can be used to build a strong brand in recruitment campaigns.

We set out to investigate the relationship between public value and employer attractiveness across sectors taking account of citizens' PSM. It is not surprising that public value and PSM play a role when explaining the employer attractiveness of public organizations. However, the relevance of public value theory across sectors becomes obvious as our study shows that both private and nonprofit organizations can make profit out of public value signals on the labor market. Thus, our findings complement Drucker's (1992) view that all organizations always perform a social function and Bozeman's (1987) claim that all organizations are public with its relevance for employer attractiveness. Furthermore, our findings add novel insights into the role of PSM for employer attractiveness: public organizations are not the only employer of choice for people with high levels of PSM – nonprofits and even private organizations can be more attractive, especially if their public

value is high. At the same time, public organizations perceived as having low public value are still preferred by high-PSM individuals compared with private and nonprofit organizations with low public value. Thus, it is important to be aware of the cross points of public value management for attracting potential future employees.

ENDNOTE

The online Appendix provides supplementary material and further supportive analyses regarding the scale measurements used and their construct reliability to facilitate future public value research.

Figure 1

Theoretical Model and Hypotheses

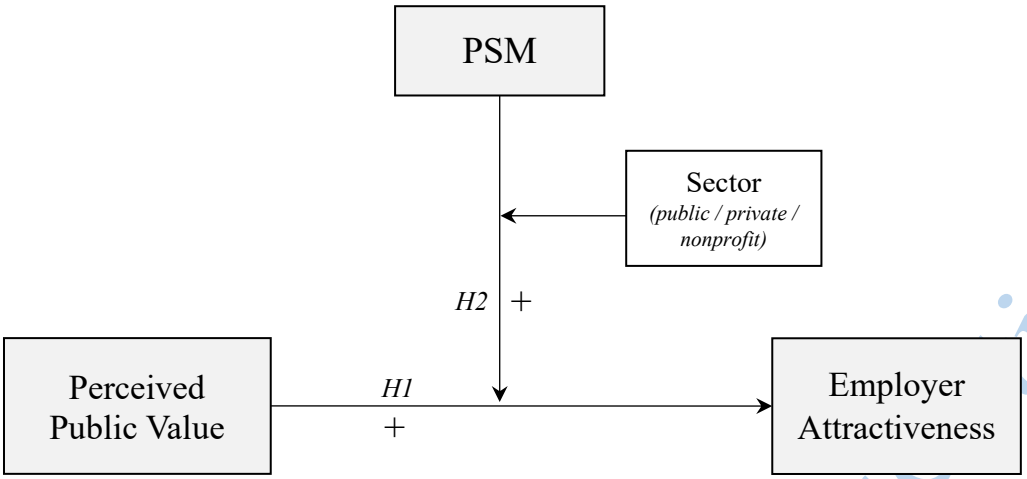

Figure 2

Marginal Effects of Public Value on Employer Attractiveness, by PSM, and sector

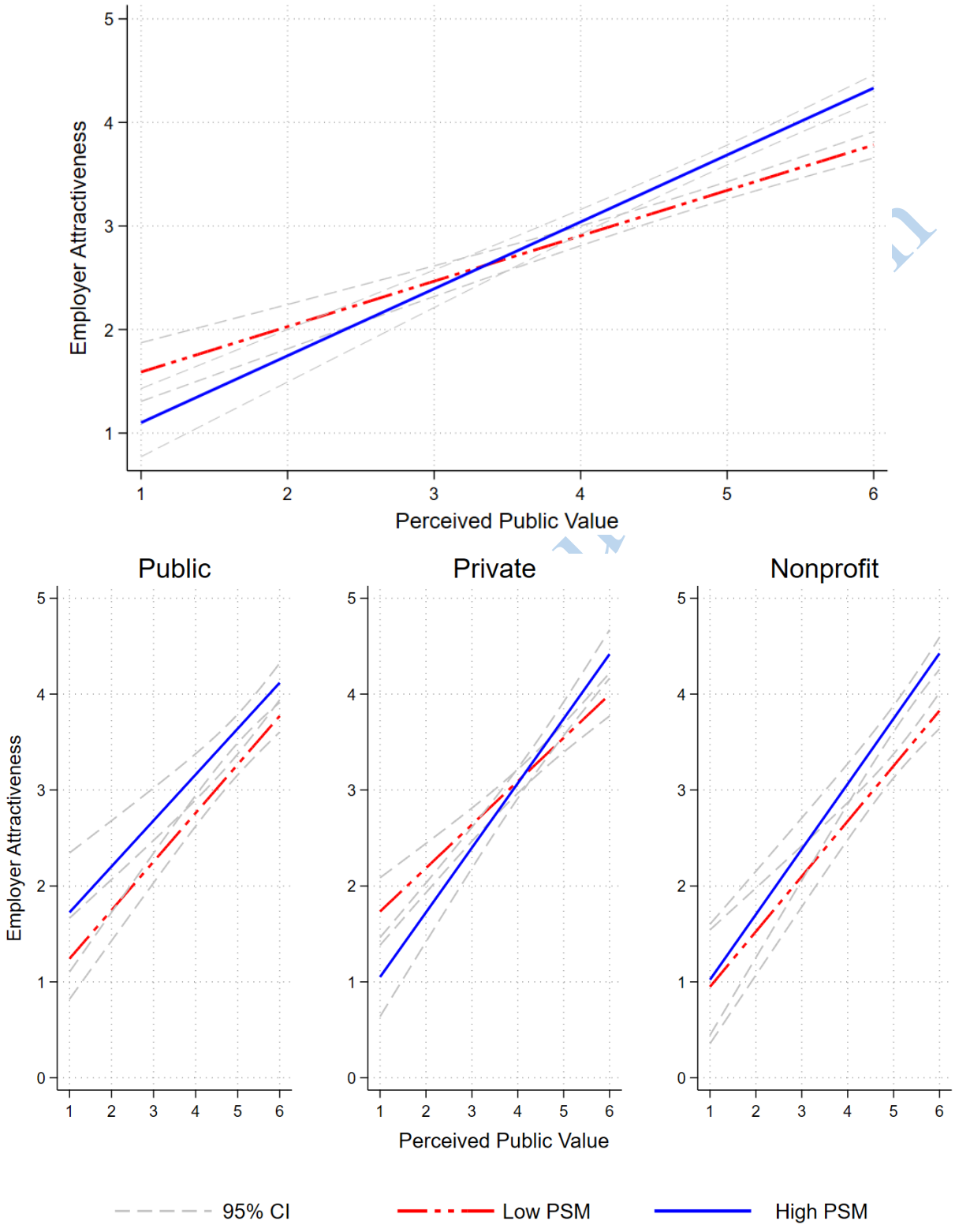

Table 1

Correlations, reliabilities, and descriptive results

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Study variables										
1. Employer attractiveness	–									
2. Public value	**.45****	–								
3. Public organization	–.03	**.09****	–							
4. Private organization	**–.11****	**–.40****	**–.13****	–						
5. Nonprofit organization	**.18****	**.33****	**–.31****	**–.39****	–					
6. PSM	**.22****	**.12****	**–.09****	–.04	**.12****	–				
Control variables										
7. Age (years)	–.01	–.03	**–.07***	–.03	–.00	**.24****	–			
8. Female	–.01	**–.14****	.06†	.04	**–.13****	**–.09***	**.11****	–		
9. Civil servant	–.02	.01	.05	.05	.03	**.16****	**.07***	**–.09****	–	
10. Higher education	–.04	–.06†	–.02	.03	**–.11****	.03	.03	.06†	**.11****	–
M	3.51	4.75	.48	.42	.46	4.05	43.0	.38	.26	.23
SD	1.35	1.17	.50	.49	.50	.77	14.9	.49	.44	.42
Range	1 – 6	1 – 6	0 / 1	0 / 1	0 / 1	1.5 – 6	17 – 65	0 / 1	0 / 1	0 / 1

Note. † $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2

Results of clustered regression analyses on employer attractiveness

Model	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Independent variables							
Public Value (PV)		**.52*****	–.29	**.31*****	**.52*****	–.30	.38
		(.04)	(.22)	(.08)	(.04)	(.22)	(.38)
PSM		**.29*****	**–.63***	**.29*****	**.26***	**–.63***	.35
		(.06)	(.25)	(.06)	(.11)	(.25)	(.43)
Public organization				*– reference category –*			
Private organization		**.33****	**.32***	**–.93***	.77	–.56	4.38†
		(.13)	(.13)	(.45)	(.66)	(.35)	(2.30)
Nonprofit organization		.24†	.20	**-1.17***	–.44	–.65	3.15
		(.13)	(.13)	(.59)	(.62)	(.41)	(3.52)
PV × PSM			**.19*****				–.02
			(.05)				(.09)
PV × Public organization					*– reference category –*		
PV × Private organization				**.27****			–.88†
				(.10)			(.50)
PV × Nonprofit organization				**.28***			–.67
				(.11)			(.69)
PSM × Public organization					*– reference category –*		
PSM × Private organization					–.11		**-1.29***
					(.16)		(.55)
PSM × Nonprofit organization					.16		-1.00
					(.15)		(.83)
PV × Public × PSM						**.16****	.00
						(.05)	(.)
PV × Private × PSM						**.21*****	**.28***
						(.05)	(.12)
PV × Nonprofit × PSM						**.20*****	.22
						(.05)	(.16)
Age (years)	–.00	–.00	–.00	–.00	–.00	–.00	–.00
	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)
Female	–.02	**.20***	.18†	.18†	**.21***	.18†	.18†
	(.11)	(.10)	(.10)	(.10)	(.10)	(.10)	(.09)
Higher education	–.13	–.06	–.08	–.05	–.06	–.06	–.07
	(.12)	(.11)	(.11)	(.11)	(.11)	(.11)	(.11)
Civil servant	–.04	–.13	–.15	–.15	–.16	–.16	–.16
	(.14)	(.11)	(.11)	(.11)	(.11)	(.11)	(.11)
cons.	**3.57*****	–.28	**3.64*****	.79†	–.10	**4.37*****	.57
	(.17)	(.35)	(1.09)	(.47)	(.53)	(1.09)	(1.76)
F (df)	.35	**28.75*****	**31.53*****	**24.48*****	**23.64*****	**29.19*****	**24.64*****
df	4	8	9	10	10	11	15
p	.843	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
AIC	307.45	2823.49	2801.67	2817.29	2821.06	2796.75	2796.81
BIC	3094.42	2866.63	2849.60	287.02	2873.79	2854.27	2873.50
R^2	.002	.250	.270	.259	.255	.277	.284
Adj. R^2	–.003	.243	.262	.250	.247	.268	.271

Notes. Based on $N = 632$ and *Obs.* = 892; two-dimensionally clustered at individual and organizational level for conditional contribution; heteroscedasticity-robust *SE* in parentheses: † $p < 0.1$. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

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