

Exploring the Impact of Public Service Motivation on Public Employee's Coping Strategy With Clients: Nuanced Insights From Varied Contexts

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Abstract

This study analyzes the impacts of public service motivation (PSM) on the front-line public employees' coping strategy, considering the moderating roles of two contextual factors: organizational performance pressure and clients' help deservingness. Two vignette-based survey experiments were conducted separately in regulation and service settings (financial regulators and healthcare workers) in China. The findings indicate agreement across different settings on the positive effects of PSM on public employees' intention to move against clients. However, the evidence regarding the moderating roles of organizational performance pressure and clients' help deservingness points to more complexity, with the results varying in the regulation and service settings. In the regulation setting, organizational performance pressure crowds out financial regulators' PSM, leading to declining intentions of moving against clients. However, in the service setting, clients' help deservingness serves as a significant contextual factor, moderating the relationship between healthcare workers' PSM and intentions on moving against clients.

Keywords

public service motivation, clients' help deservingness, performance pressure, coping behavior, front-line public employees

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Introduction

Front-line public employees, who interact directly with clients to provide public services, face challenging working situations (Lipsky, 2010). As a result, they largely rely on psychological inclinations and routine practices to cope with ambivalence (Lazarus, 1966; Lipsky, 2010). The existing literature on variations in public employees' coping strategies has predominantly focused on institutional factors such as rule consistency, leader support, and power structure (Fleming, 2020; N. Liu et al., 2022; Scott, 1997; Soss et al., 2011; Van Loon & Jakobsen, 2018). However, individuals' attitudes, cognitive abilities, and motivations also significantly affect their decision-making and behaviors (Baviskar & Winter, 2017; Jensen & Pedersen, 2017; Keiser, 2010; Tummers et al., 2012).

Decades of scholarly attention on public service motivation (PSM) have demonstrated that PSM, referring to individuals' inclination to do good for society, is a promising psychological factor for explaining variations in organizational behaviors (Perry et al., 2010; Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015; Ritz et al., 2016). As an intrinsic motivation to serve the public interest, PSM is likely to shape employees' selection of specific coping strategies (Schott & Ritz, 2018). However, few studies have linked PSM to front-line public employees' coping strategies, making the ways in which PSM affects their coping behaviors an open question. By identifying the relationship between PSM and coping strategies, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the individual antecedents of coping mechanisms among front-line workers in public sector.

In addition, current research on the relationship between PSM and behavioral consequences remains inconclusive. Some studies have consistently shown that individuals with high PSM are more likely to engage in ethical conduct (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2016) and adhere strictly to rules and enforcement behaviors (Schott et al., 2015; Soss et al., 2011). However, other studies have indicated that PSM can also be associated with the acceptance of unethical justifications and rule-breaking behavior (Prokop & Tepe, 2020; Ripoll & Schott, 2023; Weißmüller et al., 2022). The mixed finding can be attributed to several factors. For example, the clients' information may influence how front-line workers apply the rules to them, especially in face-to-face interactions. Additionally, organizational culture and management practices can either encourage or discourage rigid rule-following behavior. Put differently, employees' behavior is determined not only by motivation but also by how they link this motivation to specific contextual factors and settings.

Coping in the public service context has been identified in three forms: moving toward clients, moving away from clients, and moving against clients (Tummers et al., 2015). However, most of the current literature focuses solely on the first two types, leaving the "moving against clients" strategy in the public sector underexamined. Recent evidence supports the idea that PSM is more closely related to an individual's inclination to do good for society than for specific people (Piatak & Holt, 2020; Ritz et al., 2020), suggesting that PSM may be related to public employees' strategy of moving against individual clients. Thus, this study aims to provide a more

comprehensive understanding of how PSM impacts frontline public employees' use of moving against clients' behaviors, by virtue of considering two critical contextual factors: organizational performance pressure and clients' help deservingness. They represent two distinct pressure contexts—the state-agent and client-agent perspectives—that nearly all types of public employees face in their everyday work (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). By examining these two contexts, this study provides a holistic view of how different pressures shape the relationship between PSM and front-line workers' strategies against clients. Moreover, we analyze whether these relationships differ between service-oriented (healthcare workers) and regulation-oriented (financial regulators) public employees.

Capitalizing on the participation of 84 financial regulators and 121 healthcare workers in China in two vignette-based survey experiments, this study indicates agreement across different scenarios regarding the positive effects of PSM on public employees' intentions to move against clients. However, evidence regarding the moderating roles of organizational performance goals and clients' help deservingness points to greater complexity, with the results varying across regulation and service scenarios.

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, it provides fresh experimental evidence of the positive impacts of PSM on the public employee's intention to move against individual clients, supporting the idea that PSM is primarily directed toward serving public interests rather than those of a specific individual (Piatak & Holt, 2020; Ritz et al., 2020). Second, given that most PSM and coping studies do not seriously consider contextual factors, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how organizational performance pressure and clients' help deservingness affect front-line workers' PSM and one coping strategy. Third, the mixed results on the moderating effects of contextual factors on PSM and coping behavior among regulators and service workers suggest that work type matters in how public employees interpret their role identity and link this identity to their respective behaviors. Practically, by understanding the impact of PSM on public employees' behaviors of moving against clients in various contexts, public organizations and managers can gain deeper insights into employees' motivational bases and the connection between motivation and behavioral outcomes in the specific context.

Theory and Hypothesis Development

A Continent Model of Coping

Coping is a behavioral strategy used by street-level bureaucrats to handle conflicts in daily work (Tummers et al., 2015). Although front-line workers use these strategies to react to stressful situations, individual differences cause significant variations in the extent to which situations are perceived as conflicting and in the strategies that should be used (Baviskar & Winter, 2017; Jensen & Pedersen, 2017; Keiser, 2010; Tummers et al., 2012). A situation viewed as a dilemma by one person may not be perceived as such by others. Furthermore, even if two people agree

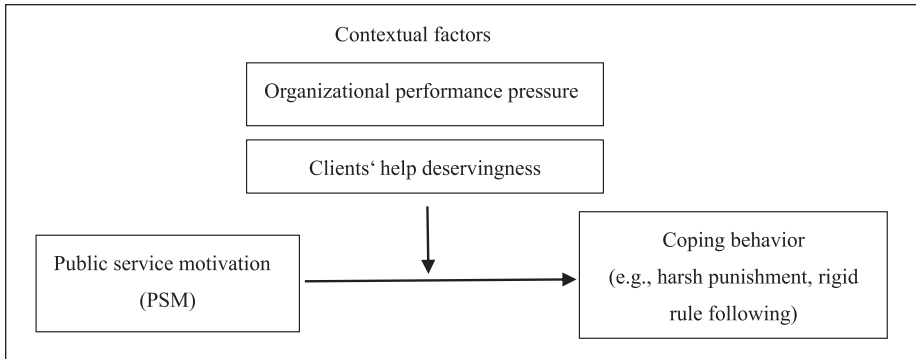


Figure 1. PSM and coping behavior: A contingent model.

that a given situation is challenging, their individual responses are likely to vary considerably, resulting in different coping strategies. With increasing attention to PSM, an essential individual psychological intention to do good for society (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008; Perry & Wise, 1990; Vandenabeele, 2007), we expect that PSM is related to their use of coping strategies.

Lazarus (1966) presents a two-step appraisal process that connects work situations to an individual's behavioral outcomes. The appraisal process describes how individuals perceive a work situation and connect it to their personal resources. In other words, coping strategies result from an emotional assessment of the relationship between the individual and environment. We argue that two important contextual factors—organizational performance pressure and clients' help deservingness—would also influence front-line public employees' use of coping strategies. Hypothetical relationships are illustrated in Figure 1.

PSM and Coping Behavior

In a seminal work, Lipsky (2010) finds that street-level bureaucrats always face conflicting situations in which contradictory organizational requirements and citizen expectations coexist. For instance, healthcare workers are assigned numerous daily workloads, depriving them of time to attend to patients' individual needs. This leads them to cope with conflicts and stresses arising from their work (Lazarus, 1966; Lipsky, 2010). Tummers et al. (2015) identify three categories of coping strategies: moving toward clients, moving away from clients, and moving against clients. Moving toward clients refers to fulfilling clients' interests through rule-breaking, instrumental action, prioritizing, and using personal resources. Moving away from clients entails routinizing and rationing strategies that reduce meaningful interactions with clients. Conversely, moving against clients involves rigid rule-following or aggression, which may break clients' interests.

Although these three types of coping seem equally important, most scholarly attention has been paid to research on moving toward and away from client strategies

(Tummers et al., 2015). Little is known about the correlates and processes of the moving against clients behavior in the public service setting. Therefore, this study focuses on the strategy of moving against clients. The typical moving-against-client behavior is rigid rule-following. In their seminal work, Schott and Ritz (2018) argue that public employees with strong public service motivation (PSM) may exhibit a tendency toward fierce loyalty to their organization, often resulting in strict adherence to rules. Identity theory further explains this relationship. According to Neumann and Schott (2023), civil servants rigorously follow bureaucratic principles to ensure fairness and equality when treating citizens. They do so to signal to others that they are protectors of the public interest.

Although direct evidence of the relationship between PSM and coping strategies is scarce, the existing literature has explored how public employees' PSM is related to decision-making and behavioral consequences (Ritz et al., 2016). Scholars assume that individuals with high levels of PSM tend to exhibit more desirable organizational behaviors such as organizational citizenship and prosocial behaviors (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2016). Although PSM is generally linked to altruism, the recent literature has differentiated between these two concepts by emphasizing that PSM contributes to societal interests, whereas altruism focuses on individual benefits (Piatak & Holt, 2020; Ritz et al., 2020). Thus, a highly service-motivated public servant has a strong sense of social responsibility and commitment to society. Schott et al. (2015) find that a highly public-service-motivated veterinarian inspector strictly applies rules and regulations to safeguard the public interest, reflecting their prominent organizational role identity. Another study by van Roekel and Schott (2022) reveals that healthcare workers with high PSM are more likely to report patient wrongdoing to protect public interests, even if it conflicts with the patients' interests.

Evidence on the dark sides of PSM also indicates that the "good end justifies the means" (Ripoll & Schott, 2023; Schott & Ritz, 2018). Even when sanctions or punishments may undermine individual benefits, they are deemed reasonable and acceptable as long as they serve the greater societal good. In the context of case management, scholars have found that senior officials view client sanctions as crucial in fulfilling their duty and commitment to the public interest (Soss et al., 2011). This finding implies that motivations for sanctioning may still be other-regarding, suggesting a potential relationship between PSM and strategies involving moving against clients. Police research has also confirmed that, to protect public safety, officers are likely to use harsh methods, such as intimidating witnesses, to fight crime (Manning, 1977). Using survey data from Korea, Ahn and Campbell (2023) find that PSM is positively related to support for stringent COVID-19 containment policies that would limit individual freedom. Furthermore, by conducting a public goods game experiment among students, Prokop and Tepe (2020) found that PSM increased the willingness to engage in harsh punishment behaviors toward the free rider. Thus, we expect front-line public employees with higher PSM to be more likely to move against clients.

H1: Front-line public employees with higher PSM are more likely to move against clients.

Organizational Performance Pressure

Setting organizational performance pressure is a common management strategy adopted by the public sector to improve organizational performance (Verbeeten, 2008). Based on the assessment results and associated reward incentives, employee behavior is strongly influenced by these pressures. The existing literature on performance management has highlighted its moderating role in the relationship between PSM and various behavioral intentions (e.g., Ki, 2022; Soss et al., 2011). For instance, setting specific indicators for sanction rates could lead public servants to perceive a loss of control over their work, shifting their focus from societal contribution to performance assessment (Soss et al., 2011). Consequently, these performance indicators may reduce front-line employees' satisfaction with their job needs. As a result, public employees with high levels of PSM may become more reluctant to perform their duties, feeling that their decisions or behaviors no longer directly benefit society but are tied to organizational interests.

Likewise, although studies have demonstrated that public employees with high PSM are often motivated to contribute to organizational interests (e.g., Caillier, 2016; Vandenabeele, 2007) and change (e.g., Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Wright et al., 2013), it is essential to consider the context that may moderate such relationships. In some circumstances, high levels of PSM might result in a reluctance to perform tasks when performance indicators primarily serve organizational interests at the expense of direct societal benefits.

Research on pay-for-performance, for example, indicates that the positive effects of PSM on public servants' willingness to implement public policy are weaker in organizations that adopt the pay-for-performance practice (Deci et al., 1999; B. Frey, 2017; Papenfuß & Keppeler, 2020). This could be due to concerns about being viewed as driven by personal gain rather than a genuine desire to serve the public (Bellé, 2015). Highly public-service-motivated employees perform their duties to enhance their values identity even in the absence of external incentives. A study led by Lee (2019) suggested that the mismatch between performance management and the motivation of public employees significantly reduced their desire to work. Recent research has also found that external rewards have a lesser impact on the readiness to learn among government officials with high PSM, supporting the negative moderation effects between PSM and performance management tools (Ki, 2022). Thus, we hypothesize the following:

H2: Organizational performance pressure negatively moderates the effects of PSM on front-line public employees' intentions to move against clients.

Clients' Help Deservingness

Clients' help deservingness refers to the judgment of employees about whether clients deserve help (Jilke & Tummers, 2018). Research has demonstrated that various client features, including race, gender, and religious status, can serve as information cues to

activate public servants' perceptions of deservingness (Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Lu et al., 2021; Petersen, 2021; Pfaff et al., 2021). Perceived clients' help deservingness significantly affects employees' decision-making, particularly in complex or conflicting situations. In this context, the front-line workers rely on cognitive rules and heuristics to make decisions (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996). External information regarding clients' specific characteristics provides them with critical cues about the potential impacts of their behavior. Based on this information, they assess the situation and conduct behaviors (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996).

Empirical evidence supports the idea that clients' deservingness information cues may moderate the effects of employees' personal characteristics on sanctioning decisions (DeHart-Davis et al., 2006; Pedersen et al., 2018). For example, in an experimental design, Pedersen et al. (2018) found that public servants with longer working experience were less likely to sanction ethnic minority clients compared to ethnic majority clients. An underprivileged client may trigger public servants' sympathy, leading law enforcers to exercise discretionary power to assist them (Keiser, 2010). Similarly, employing a survey experimental design, Weißmüller et al. (2022) reported that the effects of PSM on public servants' intentions to help vary depending on clients' deservingness information, suggesting a potential interaction between PSM and clients' information cues on coping strategies. Based on the existing theoretical work and empirical evidence, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H3: Clients' help deservingness negatively moderates the effects of PSM on front-line public employees' intentions to move against clients.

Data and Method

Research Setting

We test the hypotheses in two different settings in China: financial regulation and healthcare. Financial regulation represents a typical regulatory setting involving sanctions and disciplines, whereas healthcare has historically been regarded as a helping service industry. The different work settings have significant impacts on how public employees conceive of their role identities and the associated coping strategies. Research has revealed that front-line workers' coping behaviors vary in relation to their professional identity (Tummers et al., 2015). However, few studies have examined coping behaviors across different professional industries in one single study.

Furthermore, the settings of our study are very different from those of previous research, which largely focus on individual-oriented regulations (e.g., police) or welfare and educational services. The main task of the financial regulator is to monitor firms in the financial industry, such as banks and insurance agents, to prevent money laundering. Thus, a distinct feature of financial regulation is that the regulatee is an organization rather than an individual citizen. Little is known about the impact of PSM on coping strategies in an organization-oriented regulation setting. With regard to the service setting, almost two-thirds of the previous research on coping behavior was

conducted in the education and social welfare industries (Tummers et al., 2015), while few studies have seriously considered the healthcare profession. Healthcare workers may experience more stress than educators and social welfare workers because the performance outcome in healthcare is typically linked to mortality and recovery rates. The distinctiveness of the research settings provides an opportunity to examine whether the effect of PSM on front-line public employees' coping strategies differs from that of previous research.

Another important difference between this study and previous ones is that we focus on China rather than on well-developed democratic nations. Although the basic functions of financial regulators and healthcare workers are comparable to those in other countries, several distinctions can be observed in China. China has been regarded as an authoritative country, where the government enjoys high legitimacy of administration and the rule of law system rests with the party (Zhang, 2009). These features provide public servants in China with high discretionary power to make decisions and receive great compliance from citizens. Thus, we may expect that the coping strategy significantly differs from that in typical Western countries, where public servants have limited discretionary power and face great non-compliance from clients. In addition, overwork is common among both financial regulators and healthcare workers in China, given the insufficient staffing and high work demand situations in these two sectors. This creates a high-stress working situation for financial regulators and healthcare workers in China compared to those in Western countries. Thus, China provides a unique setting in which to study front-line public employees' coping strategies.

Experimental Design

This study employs a scenario-based experimental design. The benefit of using vignettes is that they create highly realistic scenarios that reflect the work situations in which public employees behave, thereby increasing the internal and external validity of the experimental design (Hughes & Huby, 2012). Additionally, scenario-based experiments allow researchers to manipulate and randomly assign interventions, thereby making causal claims regarding treatment effects (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). We designed two vignettes: one representing the regulatory setting and the other representing the service setting. For financial regulators, the vignettes focused on sanctioning banks that violated the law. The healthcare vignette describes a situation in which a patient desires to cut the line to obtain a medical diagnosis. There are notable parallels between front-line workers in healthcare and financial regulation scenarios. Despite regulatory enforcement officials primarily targeting "organizational clients," they frequently engage in direct and intense interactions with individual clients, such as managers and frontline workers, during inspections. Similar to healthcare workers, regulatory enforcement officials must exercise discretion in enforcement and may adopt a strict and rigid approach toward clients. However, distinctions exist that differentiate the roles of regulators from those of healthcare providers engaged in direct service delivery. Specifically, inspectors do not encounter the same social and emotional pressures from the entities they regulate because enterprises (unlike patients)

typically do not actively seek assistance from inspectors. To further strengthen the realism of the vignette, we consulted five senior frontline workers and three experts with detailed knowledge of financial regulations and healthcare services. This process led to changes in the language used in the vignette to reflect the professional language used by participants.

Financial Regulation Setting

In the financial regulation setting, financial regulators are presented with a description of a bank that has failed to comply with the anti-money laundering regulations set by the central bank. Thus, the financial regulators must use its discretion to identify this violated behavior as a small mistake or serious violation, and then impose associated economic sanctions on the bank. We manipulated the pressure sources such that participants in the treatment group received a vignette with a description of the pressure information, whereas the control group received a vignette without any pressure information. Another aspect to consider involves the financial situation of banks. Literature on regulatory forbearance suggests that regulators may adopt a less punitive stance towards poorly performing banks (Bozçağa & Holland, 2018; Dewey & Di Carlo, 2022; Song, 2023). Just as individual clients may be perceived by regulators as deserving assistance or scrutiny based on factors such as race and gender, banks can also be viewed through a similar lens. In instances where a bank faces financial challenges, regulators may choose to impose less severe penalties to mitigate potential risks to the financial system. Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups with different vignette descriptions. Groups 1 and 2 served as the treatment groups, whereas Group 3 served as the control group. An English translation of the vignettes for the three groups is provided below.

Group 1: During an onsite inspection, you found that a bank's overseas remittance business had incomplete records of remitter information. According to the Administrative Rules for RMB Bank Settlement Accounts, this violated behavior can be identified as "failure to keep transaction records" or "failure to follow the regulation to review and check relevant materials." According to this rule, the former will be fined 5,000 to 30,000 RMB, and the latter will be fined 200,000 to 300,000 RMB. As far as you know, the internal assessment ranking of your organization in the previous year was not satisfactory. One of the reasons was that the total amount of fines was small.

Group 2: During an onsite inspection, you found that a bank's overseas remittance business had incomplete records of remitter information. According to the Administrative Rules for RMB Bank Settlement Accounts, this violated behavior can be identified as "failure to keep transaction records" or "failure to follow the regulation to review and check relevant materials." According to this rule, the former will be fined 5,000 to 30,000 RMB, and the latter will be fined 200,000 to 300,000 RMB. As far as you know, the financial situation of this bank is very poor this year.

Group 3: *During an onsite inspection, you found that a bank's overseas remittance business had incomplete records of remitter information. According to the Administrative Rules for RMB Bank Settlement Accounts, this violated behavior can be identified as "failure to keep transaction records" or "failure to follow the regulation to review and check relevant materials." According to this rule, the former will be fined 5,000 to 30,000 RMB, and the latter will be fined 200,000 to 300,000 RMB.*

These scenarios were designed to capture the most distinctive features of the daily practices of front-line workers in the central bank. One of the central bank's department duties is to manage financial markets and supervise financial agencies. Thus, financial inspection is the real work for which frontline workers in the central bank are responsible. The front-line worker needs to use discretion to classify violated behavior as a small mistake or serious violation, and then choose the associated fine range to impose the punishment. However, the Administrative Rules for RMB Bank Settlement Accounts set vague operational criteria for classifying deviant behaviors. The conditions under which violated behaviors can be judged as large or small are unclear. Therefore, the severity of financial rule-breaking behavior is subject to regulators' judgments rather than objective standards.

Healthcare Service Setting

In a healthcare service setting, healthcare workers are presented with a description of a patient who cuts the queue to obtain a medical diagnosis. Thus, medical staff have the discretion to decide whether to accept this behavior. This scenario is not uncommon for patients in China, as visiting a hospital doctor can be a complicated business with lengthy queues before consultation. Patients usually spend hours or even half a day waiting to see doctors in line, even if they have appointments. For elderly patients with chronic diseases, cutting the hours of waiting in-line is an optimal option for them to receive timely medical consultations. Although most formal regulations in the hospital forbid it, in practice, the doctor would tolerate and understand this if they deemed it necessary. Thus, deciding whether to tolerate the cutting of a line is an actual work situation that medical staff would encounter in the hospital.

Similar to the experiment in the financial regulation setting, we manipulated two different pressure sources in the treatment groups, whereas participants in the control group received a vignette without any pressure information. Previous studies have indicated that age can significantly influence perceptions of deservingness, with older individuals often viewed as more deserving of services compared to younger individuals (Heuer & Zimmermann, 2020; Petersen et al., 2011). Therefore, we used age-related details as cues for deservingness in the experimental group. Groups 1 and 2 served as treatment groups, whereas Group 3 served as the control group. The English translations of the vignettes for the four groups are as follows.

Group 1: *You are working in an outpatient clinic. An older patient temporarily entered the outpatient clinic without making an appointment.*

Group 2: *You are working in an outpatient clinic. A patient temporarily entered the outpatient clinic without making an appointment. As far as you know, the number of patients who have made an appointment today has already exceeded the normal workload.*

Group 3: *You are working in an outpatient clinic. A patient temporarily entered the outpatient clinic without making an appointment.*

Participants

We targeted approximately 120 participants from the Central Bank of China and 200 participants from a hospital in the capital of China. Given that many staff in the Central Bank of China are primarily engaged in policymaking rather than financial regulation, we only select real frontline workers who constantly interact with the financial institution to implement financial inspection. These enforcement workers, who have a deep understanding of financial inspections, are the best subjects for our research. Similarly, in the healthcare setting, doctors usually have the final authority on accepting line skipping, but nurses also play a vital role in patient care and decision-making processes. Nurses administer treatments, monitor patients' conditions, and communicate patient needs to doctors. Therefore, both doctors and nurses are essential respondents in our survey, as they are actively involved in deciding on line-skipping in the Chinese healthcare context. Hence, our survey sample in hospitals focused specifically on medical doctors and nurses, excluding administrative staff.

Survey experiments in the two settings were conducted separately and independently. Data were collected via the Chinese e-survey platform, Wenjuanxin, from April 15 to July 28, 2021. Each participant was randomly allocated by the online program to one of three groups in each scenario. The online survey was first sent to leaders working in organizations who redistributed the survey experiment to their employees via social platforms (e.g., WeChat). Participation was voluntary, but managers encouraged employees to participate. To reduce social desirability bias, we employed several techniques suggested by previous studies, including highlighting the rigorously anonymous policy of the survey at the beginning of the questionnaire, using neutral words to phrase questions, informing respondents that the questions were open-ended, and telling them that their honest answers would contribute significantly to academic knowledge (Nederhof, 1985).

We received 91 and 127 completed responses from the central bank and the hospital, respectively. We excluded questionnaires completed within two minutes because it was impossible to answer all of the questions in such a short time ($N=3$ for the financial regulator; $N=6$ for the healthcare worker). In addition, we excluded questionnaires ($N=4$ for the financial regulator; $N=0$ for the healthcare worker) with IP addresses that deviated from the location in which we distributed the survey, indicating that the respondents may not be the true target samples. Finally, 84 and 121 questionnaires from the central bank and hospital were retained for analysis, respectively.

Measurement

The dependent variable of interest was intention to move against the client. To increase internal validity, we consulted frontline workers and leaders in the two settings to design the measurement instruments. For financial regulators, after reading the vignette, they were asked, "According to the requirements of the onsite inspection, you need to identify and classify the abovementioned behavior as 'failure to keep transaction records' or 'failure to follow the regulation to review and check relevant materials.' Would you make a harsh classification of deviant behavior as a failure to follow the regulation?" Participants indicated their likelihood on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely impossible*) to 5 (*absolutely possible*). Healthcare workers were asked, "Under this situation, how likely would you refuse to treat the person who jumped the queue?" The answer is measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 indicating *absolutely impossible* and 5 indicating *absolutely possible*. Although the specifics of each situation may vary, the fundamental dilemma remains consistent: how to balance the needs of individuals or groups against the requirements of regulations or rules. In this regard, both vignettes present decision-makers with a challenging choice between strictly enforcing rules and regulations or not. Therefore, we created two continuous variables to indicate the likelihood of frontline workers moving against clients.

After presenting the vignette-related questions, all participants were asked about their PSM. We used B. Liu and Perry's (2016) 18-item scale, adapted from Perry's (1996) 4-dimensional scale, to measure PSM. Responses were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type Scale ("strongly disagree" [1] to "strongly agree" [5]). The overall PSM construct showed good internal reliability in two samples (for financial regulators: Cronbach's $\alpha=0.90$, and $\alpha=0.78$ for APM, $\alpha=0.74$ for CPI, $\alpha=0.78$ for COM, and $\alpha=0.89$ for SS; for healthcare workers: Cronbach's $\alpha=0.92$, and $\alpha=0.73$ for APM, $\alpha=0.79$ for CPI, $\alpha=0.74$ for COM, and $\alpha=0.88$ for SS). To test whether the four-factor PSM model fit the data well, confirmatory factor analysis was conducted in AMOS 24 using maximum likelihood estimation. The results showed that the four-dimensional PSM model was better than both the null and one-factor models (see Table A1).

We also asked all respondents about several demographic characteristics, including age, gender, education, and tenure in the organization. For the financial regulator, we asked an additional question about respondents' enforcement style. Individuals with a strict enforcement style are more likely to punish their clients, indicating that enforcement style strongly influences how regulators punish clients when they enforce the law (Lo et al., 2019). It is measured by a single item "*I emphasize legal requirements rather than outcomes in enforcement.*" The full wordings of these questions are provided in Table A2.

Empirical Results

Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the variables observed in the analysis. We have 84 financial regulator respondents, who are slightly dominated by male

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

	Financial regulators		Healthcare workers	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Gender (male= 1)	0.55	0.50	0.45	0.50
Tenure	0.50	0.50	3.28	1.60
Age				
23–30	0.35	0.48	0.33	0.47
31–40	0.24	0.43	0.34	0.48
41–50	0.18	0.39	0.25	0.43
51 +	0.24	0.43	0.08	0.28
Education				
Bachelor degree	0.31	0.47	0.36	0.48
Master degree	0.62	0.49	0.33	0.47
PhD degree	0.07	0.26	0.31	0.46
PSM	4.20	0.46	4.28	0.56

Note. Financial regulators sample $n=84$; Healthcare workers sample $n=121$.

participants (55%) and highly educated employees with a master’s degree (62%). Contrary to the financial regulator sample, the sample ($N=121$) in the healthcare setting is dominated by female participants (55%), consisting of employees with slightly middle-aged and high educational attainment.

We conducted an analysis of variance (ANOVA) or chi-square test to check whether the experimental and control groups differed significantly for each variable. The balance check in Tables A3 and A4 shows that participants are successfully randomized, as all potential observable confounders are balanced among the three groups in both settings.

Figure 2 depicts the differences between the experimental and control groups in terms of the financial regulation setting. It shows that respondents in the “performance pressure” treatment group ($M=3.54$, $SD=0.95$) more often believe that a client should be harshly punished compared to respondents in the control group ($M=3.04$, $SD=1.07$). Conversely, respondents in the “client’s help deservingness” category ($M=2.5$, $SD=0.97$) were less willing to take such harsh punishments toward clients.

The ANOVA results in the healthcare setting (Figure 3) indicate a similar pattern as in the financial regulation setting. Healthcare workers in the “performance pressure” treatment group ($M=3.54$, $SD=0.55$) more often refused to treat patients who jumped the queue compared to respondents in the control group ($M=2.95$, $SD=0.83$). Conversely, respondents in the “client’s help deservingness” ($M=2.5$, $SD=0.63$) are more likely to help the patients even if they are queue jumpers.

We conducted an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to examine the effects of PSM on coping behavior by considering the moderating roles of organizational performance goals and clients’ help deservingness. The mean variance inflation

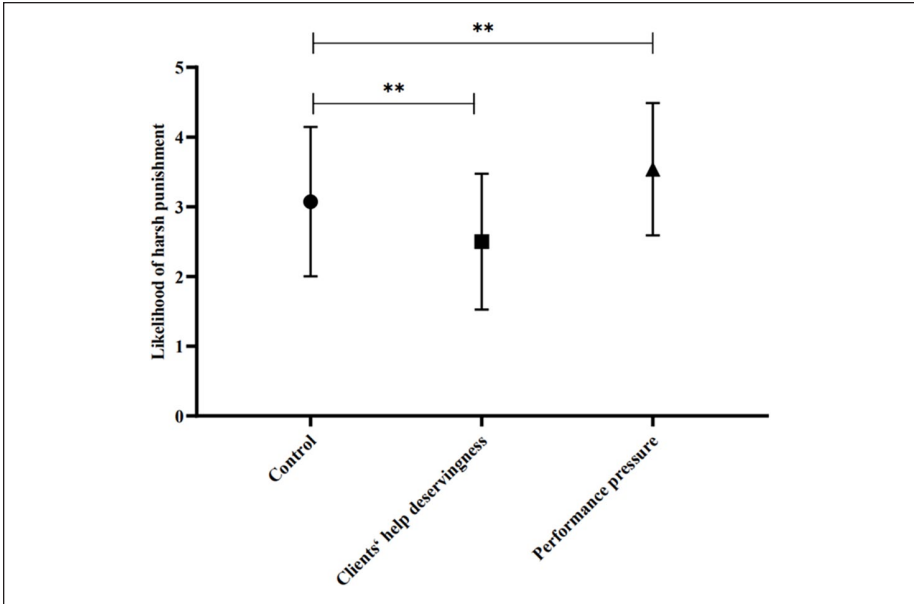


Figure 2. The likelihood of moving against clients among groups (financial regulators). Points represent the mean of the group, error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, and brackets represent significant differences.

** $p < .05$.

factor values of the models for financial regulators and healthcare workers were 2.38 and 1.50, respectively, indicating that multicollinearity was not a significant issue in the analysis. Heteroscedasticity was assessed using the Breusch–Pagan test, which indicated significant heteroskedasticity in both models ($\chi^2 = 0.59$, $p = .44$; $\chi^2 = 1.82$, $p = .178$). To address this issue, robust standard errors were employed in the estimation of the regression models (White, 1980). The results are presented in Table 2.

The results of Model 1 indicate that financial regulators' PSM is positively related to their intention to move against clients ($b = 0.54$, $p < .05$). In other words, front-line public servants with a high level of PSM are more likely to take harsh punishments toward organizations that are caught breaking financial regulation rules. The OLS regression results from Model 4 also show that PSM significantly increases healthcare workers' likelihood of refusing to break rules to help individual patients ($b = 0.29$, $p < .10$). This indicates agreement across different settings regarding the positive effects of PSM on front-line public employees' intentions to move against clients, thus supporting H1.

The moderating analysis of Models 2 and 3 suggests that performance pressure serves as a significantly negative moderator of the positive effects of PSM on harsh punishment by financial regulators. The moderating effects are shown in

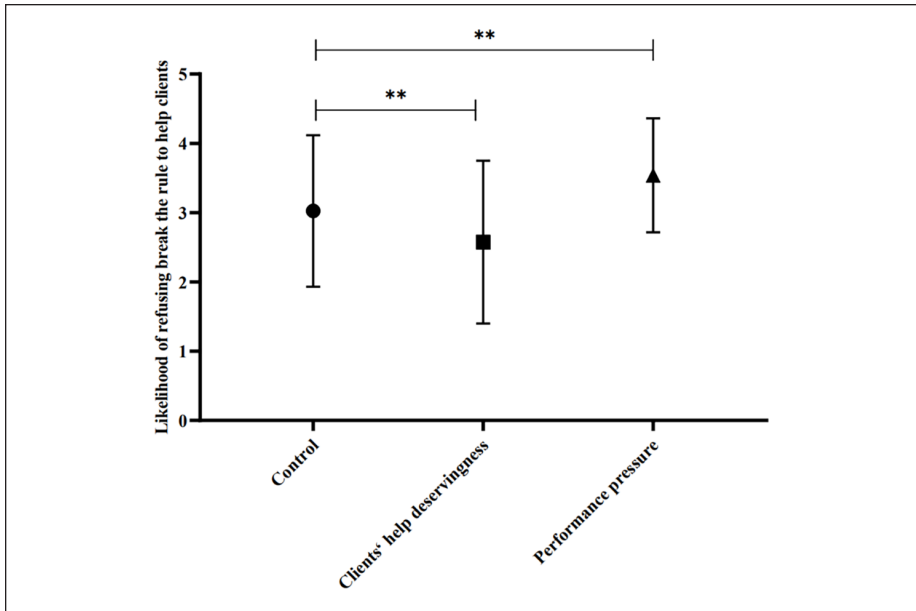


Figure 3. The likelihood of moving against clients among groups (healthcare workers). Points represent the mean of the group, error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, and brackets represent significant differences. $**p < .05$.

Figure 4. When the front-line public servant performs within the context of performance pressure, higher PSM will impose a less harsh punishment on organizational clients. This suggests that performance pressure may crowd out employees' motivation to contribute to society through harsh punishment. In other words, when punishment is linked to organizational interests, it may reduce the perceived meaningfulness of strict law enforcement behavior. Consequently, the existence of performance pressure weakens the positive effects of PSM on harsh punishment. However, the results of Models 5 and 6 suggest that performance pressure itself does not serve as a significant moderator in the relationship between PSM and moving against clients for healthcare workers. Thus, H2 is partially supported.

Regarding clients' characteristics, moderation analysis finds that clients' characteristics themselves do not serve as a significant moderator in the relationship between PSM and moving toward clients in a financial regulation setting. However, we find that client features serve as a significantly negative moderator of the positive effects of PSM on the intention to move against clients in the healthcare setting. The moderating effects are depicted in Figure 5. When front-line public employees engage in a deservingness context, a higher PSM will increase their likelihood of helping the patient. In other words, the existence of clients' deservingness weakens the positive effects of PSM on their intention to move against the client. Thus, H3 is partially

Table 2. OLS Regression Analysis of Moving Against Clients.

	Financial regulators			Healthcare workers		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
PSM	0.54** (0.23)	0.90** (0.39)	0.91* (0.34)	0.29* (0.17)	0.54*** (0.20)	0.54*** (0.21)
Clients' help deservingness	-0.46* (0.26)	-0.42 (0.26)	-0.43 (0.27)	-0.46* (0.25)	-0.47* (0.25)	-0.49* (0.25)
Performance pressure	0.52* (0.28)	0.60** (0.27)	0.30** (0.27)	0.47** (0.21)	0.46* (0.24)	0.45* (0.25)
PSM \times Performance pressure		-1.29** (0.64)	-1.34** (0.65)		-0.24 (0.55)	-0.20 (0.58)
PSM \times Clients' help deservingness		-0.10 (0.48)	-0.25 (0.54)		-0.60* (0.35)	-0.62* (0.37)
Control variables	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Constant	0.001 (0.19)	-0.03 (0.20)	0.69 (0.73)	-0.01 (0.16)	-0.001 (0.16)	-0.10 (0.19)
Observations	84	84	84	121	121	121
R ²	0.21	0.26	0.30	0.15	0.16	0.17

Note. Standard errors are in parentheses; control variables in the financial regulator sample include enforcement style, age, gender, education, and tenure; control variables in the healthcare sample include age, gender, education, and tenure.

* $p < .1$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

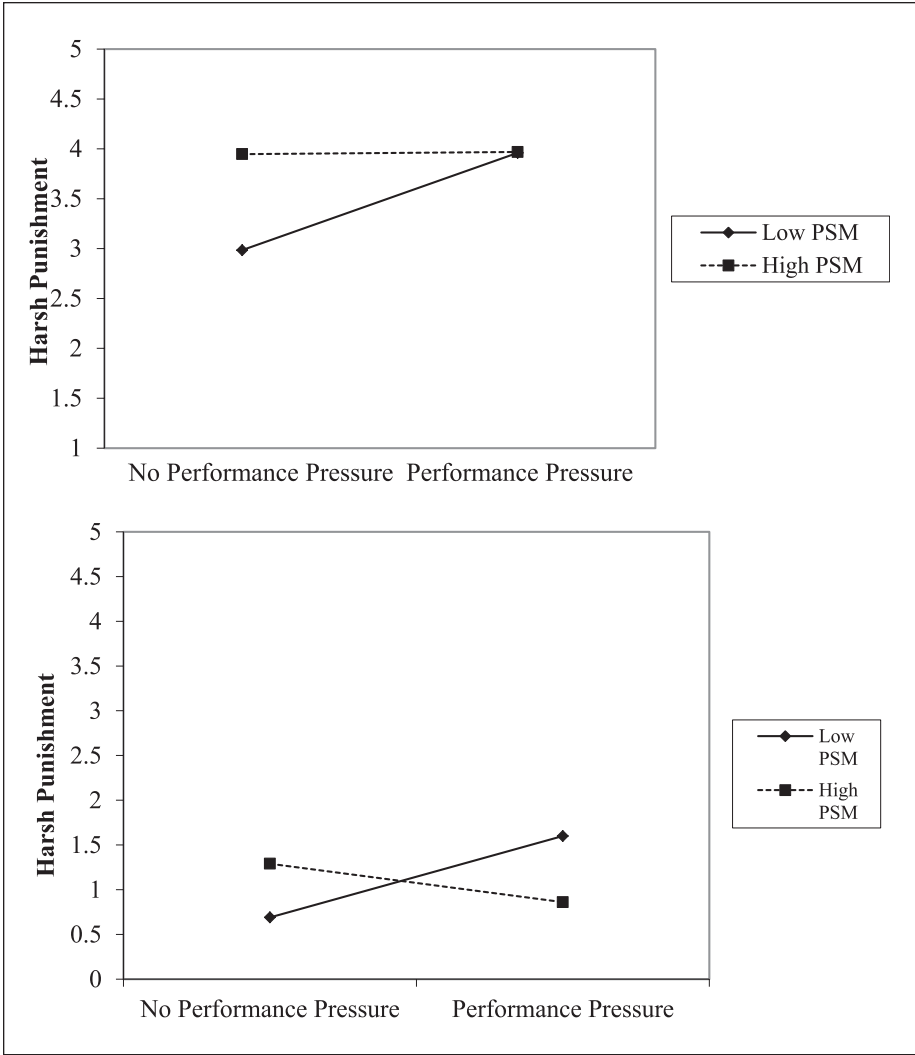


Figure 4. The moderating effect of performance pressure on the relationship between PSM and financial regulators’ intention of moving against clients.

supported. To further validate our findings, we dichotomized the dependent variable, assigning a value of 1 to rigid rule-following (including “very likely” and “likely”) and 0 to all other responses. Subsequently, we reanalyzed the data using logistic regression. The main results remained unchanged.

In summary, evidence regarding the moderating roles of organizational performance pressure and clients’ help deservingness points to more complexity, with

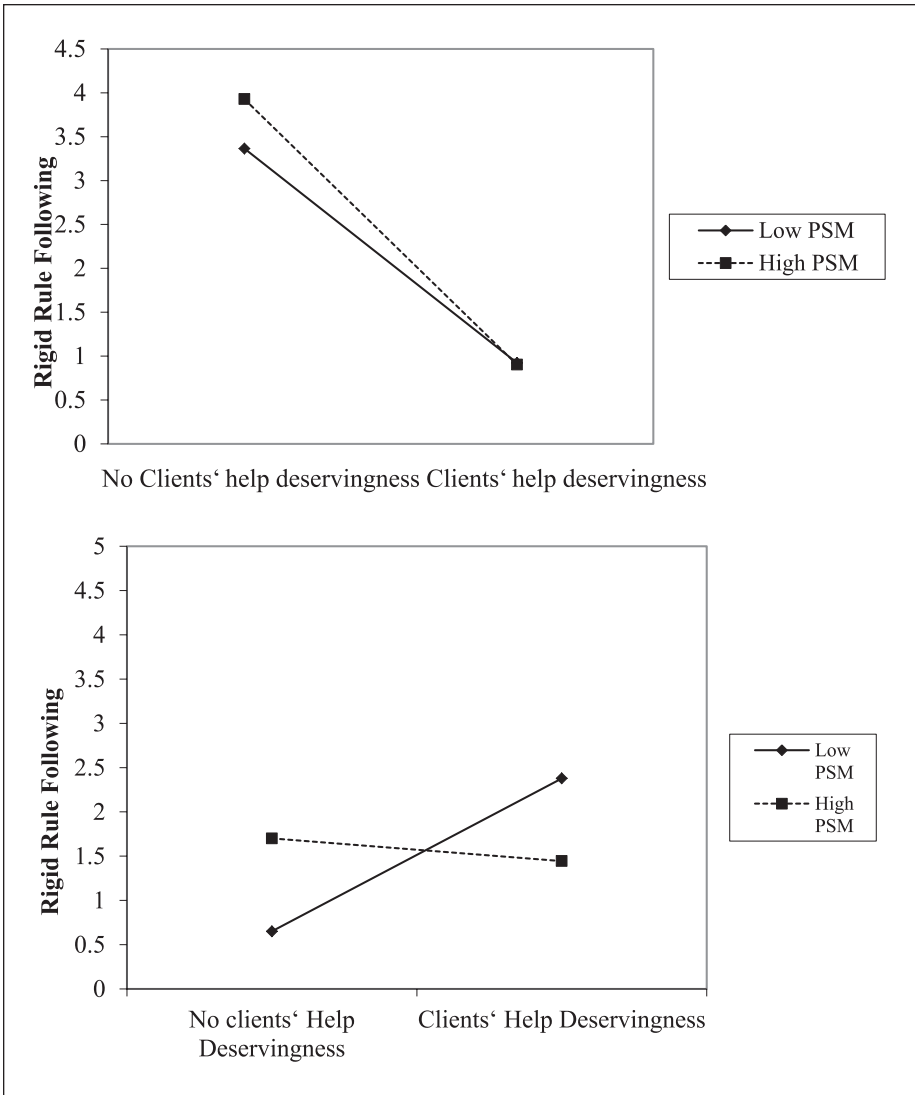


Figure 5. The moderating effect of clients' help deservingness on the relationship between PSM and healthcare workers' intention of moving against clients.

the results varying by regulation and service context. In the regulatory context, the existence of organizational performance pressure crowds out financial regulators' PSM, leading to declining intentions to move against clients. However, in the service context, clients' help deservingness serves as a more significant contextual factor affecting healthcare workers' PSM and decisions to move against clients.

Discussion and Conclusion

Examining how PSM influences front-line public employees' coping strategies toward clients in different contextual situations is of great significance because it can help us understand the motivational mechanisms behind administrative decision-making and secure accountability by avoiding deviant behaviors (Baviskar & Winter, 2017; Jensen & Pedersen, 2017; Tummers et al., 2012). Using experimental data from China, this study examined the effects of PSM on one coping behavior, moving against clients, by considering the moderating roles of performance pressure and clients' deservingness. We further evaluated how regulations and service settings affected the influence of PSM on the intention to use such coping strategy. Overall, our study contributes to the existing literature in several ways.

First, our results contribute to the literature on behavioral consequences of PSM (e.g., Awan et al., 2020; Heine et al., 2022; Prokop & Tepe, 2020; Schott et al., 2018; van Roekel & Schott, 2022) by showing that front-line public employees' PSM influences their coping strategies differently depending on the context. In the regulation scenario, the existence of organizational performance pressure crowds out financial regulators' PSM, leading to a declining intention to move against clients. However, in the service context, clients' help deservingness serves as a more meaningful contextual factor moderating the relationship between healthcare workers' PSM and their decision to move against clients. The finding can be explained by existing literature, which suggests that public employees' perceived role identity significantly influences their decision-making and behaviors, especially in dilemmatic situations (Bednarczuk, 2018; Jaspers & Steen, 2019; Loyens et al., 2019; Schott et al., 2015). In a service context, healthcare workers conceive of themselves as helping identities, which enables them to feel that sacrificing personal benefits helps clients to meaningfully contribute to society. This causes them to pay more attention to individual client features. Conversely, public servants identify themselves as coercive identities in a regulatory setting in which punishment is regarded as an important way to deter illegal acts and benefit society. Thus, the nature of work matters in how public employees interpret their role identity and link this identity to appropriate behaviors to make a difference to society. Our results also align with the mixed findings regarding the consequences of PSM in various contexts (Heine et al. 2022; Schott et al. 2018). For instance, Heine et al. (2022) examined the effects of PSM on voluntary self-sacrifice across different social and game contexts. Their finding indicate that contextual factors can shift an individual's focus from societal good to competition, thereby mitigating the positive effects of PSM on volunteering. Therefore, considering that the effects of PSM on behavioral outcomes are mixed, this finding highlights the importance of separating work settings in which an individual's PSM takes effect.

Second, our research finds that Chinese frontline workers' PSM positively influences their intention to secure public interest by breaking the benefits of individual clients. This finding aligns with existing literature, which suggests that healthcare employees with higher PSM are more inclined to report patients' wrongdoings to safeguard public interests, even if such reporting comes at the

expense of individual patients' interests (Schott et al., 2015; van Roekel & Schott, 2022). Our study extends this body of research from a service context to a regulatory context, revealing that public-service-oriented regulators may also engage in strict punitive enforcement behaviors at the expense of individual benefits. This can be explained by identity literature, which argues that within a regulatory setting, regulators are more likely to perceive punitive enforcement as effective in deterring undesirable behavior to achieve public interest (Soss et al., 2011).

Third, we find that performance pressure negatively moderates the positive effects of PSM on financial regulators' intentions to take harsh punishments toward organizational clients. This is consistent with motivation crowding theory, which argues that extrinsic interventions may crowd out individuals' intrinsic motivations when they are perceived as constraints to their self-determination (B. S. Frey, 1997). Regulators perceive harsh punishment as a way to achieve the public interest when there is no organizational pressure. However, when punishment is linked to organizational performance or interests, it may decrease its meaningfulness and transform regulators' attention from social interests to organizational benefits (Jacobsen & Jensen, 2017; Radin, 2006). In other words, regulators perceive punishment as a method to achieve organizational interests rather than social interests when organizational performance pressures exist. Consequently, this actively decreases regulators' willingness to engage in law enforcement. These findings complement previous findings on the reverse effects of NPM practices, such as pay-for-performance, which crowd out public employees' PSM (B. Frey, 2017; Jacobsen et al., 2014; Papenfuß & Keppeler, 2020). Our results confirm that setting organizational pressure may have the same reverse effects on regulators' motivation and behaviors. Thus, performance management may not be an ideal tool to guide regulators' behavior and decision-making.

Finally, our results suggest that individual clients' deservingness negatively moderates the positive relationship between PSM and intention to move against clients. In other words, highly service-motivated healthcare workers are more likely to pay attention to clients' deservingness of help and consider this feature when making discretionary decisions. This is consistent with existing evidence, which finds that clients' characteristics make a significant difference to individuals' empathy toward clients and subsequently affect their decisions (Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Lu et al., 2021; Keiser, 2010). However, the moderating effect of clients' deservingness was insignificant in the financial regulator samples. A possible reason for this may be that regulators face the organization rather than the individual client in the regulatory setting. Compared to individual clients, the deservingness of the organization may not necessarily arouse the empathy of public servants.

This study has several limitations. First, our findings are based on two experimental studies with relatively small sample sizes. Although the post-hoc power analysis reveals that the statistical power for both financial regulators (0.82) and healthcare samples (0.84) exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.80 (Cohen, 1988), a larger sample size can yield more robust and powerful results. Therefore, while our current

sample sizes are adequate for detecting significant effects, we recommend that future studies replicate our study with a larger and more diverse sample, ideally determined using an *a priori* power analysis.

Second, we only investigate limited contextual factors affecting the role of PSM in coping strategies. Several contextual factors, such as organizational trust, leadership support, and perceived culture, may play significant roles in affecting individuals' motivation (Ritz et al., 2016). Furthermore, our vignettes do not explicitly convey that moving against the client benefits society at large. Respondents may opt to move against the client for reasons unrelated to societal benefits, such as challenging authority or preventing repeated rule-breaking by older individuals. To address this limitation, future research could design vignettes explicitly outlining the trade-off between societal benefits and individual interests. Additionally, incorporating follow-up questions and interviews to explore the reasoning behind respondents' decisions can provide deeper insights into their motivations.

Third, similar to previous research (e.g., Heine et al., 2022; Weißmüller et al., 2022), we were unable to manipulate individuals' PSM. Although scholars have attempted to use micro-interventions, such as reflection and self-persuasion, to activate individuals' PSM, the effects of such interventions are questionable and vary across settings (Pederson, 2015; Wright & Christensen, 2021). Thus, further research should focus on design issues to determine suitable ways to activate individuals' PSM.

Finally, we use a single self-reported item to measure individuals' intention to move against clients' strategies. Further research could use a more valid scale of coping behaviors to improve internal validity. Moreover, it is crucial to note that the target clients in the service and regulatory contexts in our study exhibit slight differences. Financial regulators do not face the same social and psychological pressures as their target group, which consists of enterprises. This distinction may attenuate the influence of clients' perceived deservingness of help cues. Future research could explore regulators who engage directly with individual clients, such as police officers, to further investigate and compare these effects observed in service contexts.

In a nutshell, this study extends the current understanding of the effects of PSM on front-line public employees' coping strategies and provides new insights into how contextual factors interact with PSM to shape coping decisions. Given that the existing evidence about the PSM–performance link is inclusive, examining more contextual factors can advance our understanding of the extent to which PSM can serve as a positive contributor to administrative behavior. In addition, from a normative perspective, administrative behaviors have different implications for various interest groups. Behaviors that harm the interests of individual clients may benefit society or their organizations, and vice versa. Thus, organizational leaders should carefully assess their employees' motivational bases and the link between motivation and behavioral consequences. Public organizations and managers should also acknowledge the existence of the “move against clients” phenomenon, thus sparing no effort in finetuning their internal rules and norms so that a better alignment between organizational values and public interests can be attained.

Appendix

Table A1. Comparison of Measurement Models for PSM.

Model	RMSA	CFI	PMR	χ^2
Financial regulator				
Null model	—	—	—	1,046.96
One-factor model	0.145	0.66	0.08	437.3
Four-factor model	0.07	0.91	0.04	210.28
Healthcare worker				
Null model	—	—	—	1,518.14
One-factor model	0.10	0.84	0.05	348.59
Four-factor model	0.07	0.92	0.04	242.72

Table A2. Survey Items.

Public service motivation
Attraction to public policymaking
I'm interested in making public programs that are beneficial for my country or the community I belong to.
Sharing my views on public policies with others is attractive to me.
Seeing people get benefits from the public program I have been deeply involved in brings me a great deal of satisfaction.
Commitment to the public interest
Meaningful public service is very important to me.
I consider public service my civic duty.
I unselfishly contribute to my community.
I would prefer seeing public officials do what is best for the whole community even if it harmed my interests.
Compassion
I feel sympathetic to the plight of the underprivileged.
It is difficult for me to contain my feelings when I see people in distress.
I am often reminded by daily events how dependent we are on one another.
To me, patriotism includes seeing to the welfare of others.
Self-sacrifice
I'm prepared to make enormous sacrifices for the good of society.
Serving citizens would give me a good feeling even if no one paid me for it.
I believe in putting duty before self.
Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements.
I am one of those rare people who would risk personal loss to help someone else.
I feel people should give back to society more than they get from it.
Much of what I do is for a cause bigger than myself.

Table A3. Balance Test (Financial Regulators).

	Performance pressure	Client's feature	Control	Group difference test
Gender (male, %)	61.54	53.33	50	$\chi^2=76, p=0.68$
Tenure	0.5	0.5	0.5	$F=0.00, p=1.00$
Age (%)				
23–30	30.77	33.33	39.29	$\chi^2=0.46, p=0.80$
31–40	26.92	26.67	17.86	$\chi^2=0.82, p=0.67$
41–50	19.23	13.33	21.43	$\chi^2=0.70, p=0.71$
51+	23.08	26.67	21.43	$\chi^2=0.23, p=0.89$
Education (%)				
Bachelor degree	26.92	30.0	35.71	$\chi^2=0.51, p=0.78$
Master degree	69.23	63.33	53.57	$\chi^2=1.44, p=0.49$
Ph.D. degree	3.85	6.67	10.71	$\chi^2=0.97, p=0.61$
Enforcement style	4.15	4.23	4.29	$F=0.74, p=0.69$
PSM	4.22	4.12	4.26	$F=0.69, p=0.71$
N	26	30	28	

Table A4. Balance Test (Healthcare Workers).

	Performance pressure	Client's feature	Control	Group difference test
Gender (male, %)	35.9	55.0	42.86	$\chi^2=3.0., p=0.22$
Tenure	0.36	0.38	0.36	$F=0.02, p=0.98$
Age (%)				
23–30	38.46	30.0	30.95	$\chi^2=0.77, p=0.68$
31–40	30.77	37.5	33.33	$\chi^2=0.41, p=0.82$
41–50	25.64	25.0	23.81	$\chi^2=0.04, p=0.98$
51+	5.13	7.50	11.90	$\chi^2=1.27, p=0.53$
Education (%)				
Bachelor degree	43.59	35.0	30.95	$\chi^2=1.44, p=0.49$
Master degree	28.21	37.50	33.33	$\chi^2=0.77, p=0.68$
Ph.D. degree	28.21	27.50	35.71	$\chi^2=0.80, p=0.67$
PSM	4.39	4.24	4.22	$F=1.09, p=0.34$
N	39	40	42	

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