**Establishing a mission-based culture: analysing the relation between intra-organizational socialization agents, mission valence, goal clarity, work impact and public service motivation.**

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**ABSTRACT**

Establishing a mission-based culture: analysing the relationship between intra-organizational socialization agents, mission valence, goal clarity, work impact and public service motivation.

This study contributes to our understanding of the relationship between mission valence, goal clarity, public service motivation and work impact by testing the external validity of existing research using a sample of non-managerial employees. In addition, the study complements existing research by including an institutional perspective: the study assesses how value-laden communication with multiple intra-organizational socialization referents is related with the cited variables. The developed model is tested using structural equation modelling and a sample of 585 non-managerial employees employed by a public welfare organization. The study results indicate that goal clarity, public service motivation and work impact are positively related with mission valence. Consequently, the results of previous studies, all using samples of senior managers or employees from various organizational levels, seem to be generalizable to employees at the opposite end of the organizational hierarchy. In addition, the study results indicate that value-laden communication with top management and co-workers influence perceptions of goal clarity, public service motivation and work impact. However, despite the fact that supervisors are often depicted as an interface between the individual and the organization, the study results indicate that supervisors influence goal clarity but not perceived work impact and public service motivation.

**INTRODUCTION**

Since Osborne and Gaebler (1992) passionate plea for mission-driven organizations, salient missions have been viewed as a key element to enhance the effectiveness of public organizations (Pandey & Rainey, 2006). More specifically, it has been argued that by clarifying what the organization strives for and how these aspirations benefit the community (Wright, Moynihan, & Pandey, 2012), public organizations will not only raise employee awareness of organizational values and goals but also strengthen alignment between employee values and the organization’s ideology (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010) which in turn could motivate employees to help maximize the organization’s social impact (Vandenabeele, 2014). Such attraction to a salient organizational mission has been labelled “mission valence” (H. Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999) and denotes “an employee’s perceptions of the attractiveness or salience of an organization’s purpose or social contribution” (Wright et al., 2012, p. 206).

Given the presumed potential of salient missions to kindle passion, dedication and diligence (Goodsell, 2010), the question raises how public organizations can create a mission-based culture and increase perceived mission attractiveness. Recent research on the topic indicates that goal clarity, public service motivation (PSM), and work impact are levers which organizations and managers can pull to cultivate employee perceptions of mission valence (Caillier, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Wright & Pandey, 2010, 2011). However, despite the emergent knowledge base on the drivers of mission valence, insufficient attention has been paid to the organizational processes underlying the development of mission valence. Studies which systematically investigate the drivers which shape mission valence are limited and focus predominantly on the perceptions of senior managers (Wright & Pandey, 2011).

Based on the identified research gaps, the paper at hand aims to contribute to the literature in two distinct ways. First of all, this study intends to complement and test the external validity of previous research by analysing the relationship between goal clarity, work impact and PSM on the one hand and mission valence on the other using a sample of lower-level employees. Second, given the lack of insights on how the cited relationships are influenced by organizational conditions, the study analyses how intra-organizational socialization referents or agents influence employee attitudes and perceptions of institutional values and goals. Given that previous research indicated that public organizations can be viewed as social institution in which employees’ organizational perceptions and attitudes are primarily shaped through interactions with other members (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Taylor, 2008), we examine how interaction with multiple sources of socializing influence, namely top management, supervisors and co-workers, are related with perceptions of mission valence and its antecedents. As such, this study forms an antidote for the fact that public management research has often neglected to take into account the role of social networks (Moynihan & Pandey, 2008) and intra-organizational interaction as a mechanism for shaping and imparting a mission-based culture (Garnett, Marlowe, & Pandey, 2008; Pandey & Garnett, 2006).

**The concept of mission valence and its antecedents**

Building on the work of scholars from Barnard to Luther Gulick and James Q. Wilson, many public management authors have emphasized that salient and clear organizational missions are conducive to effectiveness and stressed that public agencies are more likely to perform effectively if they are characterized by higher levels of mission valence. Rainey and Steinbauer (1999, p. 16), for example, clarified the relationship between mission valence and the performance of public agencies by stating that “the more engaging, attractive and worthwhile the mission is to people, the more the agency will be able to attract support from those people, […] and to motivate them to perform well in the agency”. According to Rainey and Steinbauer (1999), the relationship between mission valence and desired employee attitudes and behaviour, can be substantiated by Vroom’s expectancy theory. In short, Vroom’s Expectancy Theory argues that an individual’s motivation to display specific behaviour is determined by the desirability of the outcome of that behaviour (Vroom, 1964). The theory suggests that goal motivation will be stronger if individuals assign a high value to the expected outcome or reward resulting from their efforts (Caillier, 2014). Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) argue that such a reward can be a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction derived from advancing an organization’s mission providing that this mission is perceived as engaging, attractive, and worthwhile. As a result, the higher an employee’s perceptions of the attractiveness an organization’s social contribution (i.e. mission valence) (Wright et al., 2012), the more likely an employee will be motivated to contribute to the advancement of this mission (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003; Caillier, 2016a, 2016b; Goodsell, 2010; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010; H. Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999; Wright, 2007). Recent studies, although still limited, seem to confirm the assumed relationship between mission valence and desired employee attitudes. More specifically, positive relationships between mission valence, extra-role behaviour (Caillier, 2016a, 2016b), job satisfaction (Caillier, 2016a; Wright et al., 2012) have been reported as well as a negative relationship with turn over intention (Caillier, 2016a).

Given the increasing body of literature supporting the long-standing tradition of linking the power of attractive missions to desired employee attitudes, it becomes even more important to understand what makes organizational goals attractive to individual employees (Wright & Pandey, 2010) and gain insight in the factors which trigger employees’ interest in an organization’s social purpose (Wright & Pandey, 2011). Although studies analysing the ways in which the benefits of mission valence can be cultivated are scarce, recent empirical efforts have indicated that goal clarity, work impact and PSM are levers which individual managers can pull to maximize mission valence (Caillier, 2014, 2015, 2016a; Wright et al., 2012; Wright & Pandey, 2011).

First of all, goal clarity. The link between goal clarity and mission valence roots in goal setting theory (Locke, et al., 1990; Locke, 2004) which indicates that employees will be more motivated to perform well when they clearly understand the organization’s goals and find them challenging (Wright, 2007). However, merely clarifying organizational goals seems not enough. Employees do not only need to know what the organization stands for but also how their actions contribute to the overarching mission of the organization (Boswell, 2006; Paarlberg & Perry, 2007). According to Wright and Pandey (2011, p. 24) this conclusion is consistent with the earlier mentioned Vroom’s Expectancy Theory as it indicates that an organization must strengthen the degree to which employees perceive “their work as making a meaningful contribution to the organization and its external constituents [because] without such information, investing significant effort toward achieving the goals will either seem futile or inconsequential”. Such perceived connection between an employee’s tasks and the value creation processes of the organization has been labelled “line of sight” (Boswell, 2006). Line of sight is deemed critical for an organization’s strategic success as employees whom “see themselves as effective contributors to the organization’s goals or objectives […], should be more likely to perform at a higher level” (Boswell & Boudreau, 2001, p. 851). Such “aligned employees” are expected to display higher levels of engagement given their increased awareness of the organization’s essence, its importance and how their job contributes to the organization’s capacity to achieve these goals (Biggs, Brough, & Barbour, 2013).

Next to goal clarity and work impact, PSM has also been related with higher levels of mission valence. Perry and Wise (1990, p. 368) described the concept of PSM as “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions”. A a result, employees with high levels of PSM are more responsive to the social contribution which public organizations strive for (Vandenabeele, 2014) and more inclined to perceive their organization’s mission as meaningful (Pandey, Wright, & Moynihan, 2008) and contribute to its realization (Christensen & Wright, 2011).

**The impact of socialization agents**

Although analysing how organizational goal clarity, PSM, and work impact are related with employee mission valence provides valuable insights, one could argue that, from a socialization perspective, that mere focusing on individual employee attitudes provides only partial understanding of the issue at hand because employee attitudes and behaviour are influenced by organizational institutions and the actors within (Hart, 2012). The majority of the research on the subject seem to have analysed how proximate outcomes of adjustment (i.e. goal clarity, PSM and work impact) are related with a distal outcome of organizational adjustment (i.e. mission valence) but neglected to analyse the organizational socialisation processes underlying the development of these outcomes (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003b). A conclusion which ties in with previous analyses indicating that public management research has often neglected to take into account the role of intra-organizational communication (Garnett et al., 2008) and social networks (Moynihan & Pandey, 2008) as a metamechanism for shaping and imparting a mission-based culture (Pandey & Garnett, 2006).

A notion which is supported by various theories. Paarlberg and Lavigna (2010), for example, refer to Pfeffer and Salancik’s (1978) theory of social information processing to argue that employees use information from their social context to develop perceptions about the meaning of their work while social cognition theorists often build on the uncertainty reduction theory to argue that organizational members use various organizational information sources to make sense of their environment and reduce uncertainty (De Vos & Freese, 2011). The information needed to fuel these sensemaking processes is gathered primarily through social interactions with the following organizational information sources: top management, supervisors, co-workers, mentors, and subordinates (Ashfort, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Hart, 2012; Klein & Heuser, 2008).

Given the lack of information on the processes underlying the creation of mission attractiveness, it would be interesting to analyse if and how multiple sources of socializing influence are related with employee mission valence and it’s drivers. Given our interest in the perceptions of lower level employees, we decided to focus on the three organizational socialization sources most relevant for the selected employee subgroup, namely top management, supervisors and co-workers. Figure 1 depicts the proposed research model:

Insert Figure 1 about here

The hypothezised relevance of top management as an organizational socialization source ties in with the research stream on transformational leadership. More specifically, it has been argued that organizational leaders whom articulate the importance of organizational goals and values (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1999) are able to influence the perceived attractiveness of the organization’s purpose (Wright et al., 2012). By communicating a compelling vision that arouses strong emotions, organizational leaders are able to raise employees’ consciousness about idealized goals and as such generate a stronger understanding of the organization’s misson and values (Moynihan, Pandey, & Wright, 2012; Park & Rainey, 2008; Wright et al., 2012; Wright & Pandey, 2011) as well as help employees to understand how they contribute to the social purpose of the organization and how their work contributes to both the organization and society (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010; Wright & Pandey, 2008). These two concepts (i.e. goal clarity and work impact), in turn, have been argued to be related to employee’s motivation to advance the expressed purpose of the organization (Boswell, 2006). In addition, transformational leadership is argued to be a mean to establish a value-based management in the public sector (Vandenabeele, 2014). By clarifying the organization’s goals and values, and linking them to the larger organizational public purpose, transformational leaders are expected to provide employees with “higher levels of intrinsic and altruistic motivation (e.g., PSM) to work for collective and community goals rather than to pursue self-interest or extrinsic rewards” (Park & Rainey, 2008, p. 112).

We thus hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 1. Promotion of organizational values and future by the organization’s top management team is indirectly positively related with employee mission valence through its influence on goal clarity.*

*Hypothesis 2. Promotion of organizational values and future by the organization’s top management team is indirectly positively related with employee mission valence through its influence on PSM.*

*Hypothesis 3. Promotion of organizational values and future by the organization’s top management team is indirectly positively related with employee mission valence through its influence on work impact.*

Although an organization’s top management is likely to be an employee’s primary source of information about the organization’s goals and values (Hart, 2012), top managers often rely on written, mediated messages (which limit the possibility to facilitate rapid feedback, to establish a personal focus or to utilize natural language (Lengel & Daft, 1988)) to disperse information about the organization’s purpose. Consequently, employees frequently turn to other information sources in order to remove organizational equivocality and cognitive disorder (Goodsell, 2010). In the case of lower-level employees direct supervisors and co-workers are expected to act as a significant information source. Although value-communication is often associated with the top of an organizaton, research indicates that organizational members much lower in the organizational hierarchy can be a source of value-laden information and as such impact someone’s work-related identity (Vandenabeele, 2014). More specifically, direct supervisors interact almost daily with their subordinates which provides various opportunities for mission and value clarification while co-workers form the most accessible intra-organizational referent (Kramer, 2010).

Consequently, we hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 4. Promotion of organizational values and future by an employee’s supervisor is indirectly positively related with employee mission valence through its influence on goal clarity.*

*Hypothesis 5. Promotion of organizational values and future by an employee’s supervisor is indirectly positively related with employee mission valence through its influence on PSM.*

*Hypothesis 6. Promotion of organizational values and future by an employee’s supervisor is indirectly positively related with employee mission valence through its influence on work impact.*

*Hypothesis 7. Promotion of organizational values and future by an employee’s co-workers is indirectly positively related with employee mission valence through its influence on goal clarity.*

*Hypothesis 8. Promotion of organizational values and future by an employee’s co-workers is indirectly positively related with employee mission valence through its influence on PSM.*

*Hypothesis 9. Promotion of organizational values and future by an employee’s co-workers is indirectly positively related with employee mission valence through its influence on work impact.*

**Research methods**

**Research Setting and Data Collection**

As previous studies analyzing mission valence and its antecedents stress that their results could lack generalizability because they are based on samples of senior managers (Wright et al., 2012; Wright & Pandey, 2011), we decided to complement these studies by focusing on the perceptions of organizational attributes of employees at the opposite end of the organizational hierarchy. More specifically, we use data collected amongst the non-managerial employees employed by a Belgian social welfare organization. The organization in question falls under the authority of the municipality and provides a wide range of services, predominantly, related to elderly care. In total, we contacted 1978 employees via e-mail and provided them with an internet link which gave access to an online questionnaire consisting of 46 items. After two weeks an electronic reminder was send. The electronic survey was closed after a total of four weeks. Within this timeframe 585 respondents provided sufficient information to test the full model which resulted in a response rate of 29,6%. Non-response bias was assessed by comparing the characteristics of the population with the characteristics of the respondents. The comparison revealed no significant discrepancies between the sample and the population. The majority of the respondents were female (75%) while the average age was 43 years (SD = 11), ranging from 21 to 63 years. The majority was employed on a full-time basis (62%) and had an average organizational tenure of 17 years (SD = 11). The distribution of functional specializations of the respondents matched the distribution of functional specializations within the organization.

**Measures**

The study variables were measured using multiple survey items taken from previously used measures (although sometimes slightly adapted to enhance their focus) (for more details see Appendix 1). All 46 items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (7). Mission valence was measured using a two-item indicator adapted by Wright et al. (2012) from a previous measure of mission valence (Wright, 2007) and reflects an employee’s perceptions of the attractiveness or salience of an organization’s purpose or social contribution. Goal clarity, which denotes an employee’s perceptions of the clarity of the organization’s goals, was measured using a three-item scale devised by Rainey (1983).PSM was measured using 5 items from Perry’s 40-item scale representing the affective or normative motives most closely associated with the altruistic appeal of public sector value (Wright & Pandey, 2011). This short measure has been often used in previous studies (Wright et al., 2012; Wright & Pandey, 2008, 2010). Perceived work impact indicates the degree to which employees are able to see a clear connection between their outputs and larger organizational goals (Scott & Pandey, 2005) and was measured using a three-item scale developed by Wright and Pandey (2011).

To measure the extent to which employees perceive their organization’s top management team as promotors of organizational values and future, we selected 4 relevant items from a 5-item scale developed to measure transformational leadership (Moynihan et al., 2012; Wright et al., 2012). The same items were used (although slightly rephrased) to measure the extent to which supervisors and co-workers are perceived as information sources of the organization’s values and future.

**Characteristics of the selected research design**

This study relies on perceptual data about both the predictor and criterion variables collected through self-report questionnaires. Despite the fact that this is not only one of the most frequently used methods of data collection in public management research (Favero & Bullock, 2015; Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015) and probably the most appropriate to use when ‘both the predictor and criterion variables are capturing an individual’s perceptions, beliefs, judgments, or feelings’(Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2012, p. 549), the adopted method has also inherent drawbacks that must be considered when interpreting the results.

First of all, the presence of common method bias cannot be excluded. However, various ex ante and ex post measures were adopted to, hopefully, mitigate the problem. The selected ex ante measures focused on minimizing two important potential sources of common method bias, i.e. common source bias (e.g. social desirability and consistency motif) and bias produced by item characteristics (e.g. item ambiguity) (Favero & Bullock, 2015; Jakobsen & Jensen, 2015). More specifically, the following procedural remedies related to questionnaire design and administration were adopted: using language, vocabulary, and syntax that match the respondents’ reading capabilities (subject of a pre-test), avoiding complex and abstract questions (subject of a pre-test), labeling all response options rather than just the end points, and creating a methodological distance between specific criterion and predictor items by using buffer items (MacKenzie, 2012; Podsakoff et al., 2012). In addition, a cover letter was used to explain why the topic is important and how research can benefit the organization, to emphasize that personal opinions are important and that there is no right or wrong answer, to stress the voluntary nature of participation, and to guarantee anonymity (MacKenzie, 2012; Podsakoff et al., 2012).

As an ex post measure, the single-common-method-factor approach was used to control for common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). The results suggest that substantial common method bias is absent because the addition of a method factor to a confirmatory factor model that includes the study variables as latent factors does not significantly improve the fit compared to a model with just the hypothesized model’s latent factors although the variables factors' loadings continued to be significant.

Second, using a cross-sectional correlation design prevents the establishment of causal direction (Antonakis, Bendahan, Jacquart, & Lalive, 2014). Consequently, we avoid discussing causal inferences because the suggested direction of the analyzed relationships is theory-driven rather than the result of an observed temporal sequence. This also implies that reverse causality cannot be completely ruled out.

**Data analysis and results**

Prior to the actual data analysis the collected data was (a) screened for coding errors, (b) re-coded when reverse coding had been used, and (c) checked for missing values. Missing values were dealt with by multiple imputation using the expectation maximization (EM) algorithm in SPSS Statistics 22.

**Univariate and Bivariate Analysis**

Table 1 depicts the univariate and bivariate statistics for the study’s measures.

Insert Table 1 about here

**Multivariate Analysis**

A latent variable model was employed to test the hypothesized relationships among the constructs of interest. The analysis followed a two-step approach (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988) using Amos 21.

**Step 1: The Measurement Model**

A maximum likelihood estimation with bootstrapping (5000 bootstrap samples) was used to estimate a multi-factor measurement model aimed at assessing the fit of the measurement model to the data. The tested model has a normed Chi-Square (chi-square/df) value of 2.2 (χ²208=453.41 (*p* < .000)) which is below the threshold of 3.00 and thus meets the criterion for acceptance (Kline, 2005). Although a significant Chi-square test could indicate that the model is unacceptable, research indicated that (given its sensitivity to sample size) the Chi-square statistic nearly always rejects models based on large samples (x > 200) (Hair, Black, & Babin, 2010; Hooper, Coughlan, & Mullen, 2008). In such cases the significant Chi Square can be disregarded if the more sensitive fit statistics provide evidence of model fit. The tested model meets the required thresholds: CFI = .97, GFI = .94, SRMR = .04, RMSEA = .04. Thresholds (for models with N > 250 and the number of observed variables between 12 and 30) are CFI ≥ .92, GFI ≥ .90, SRMR < .08, RMSEA < .07 (Hair et al., 2010).

After establishing an acceptable model fit, we tested the measurement model for construct, convergent, discriminant and nomological validity.

First, the proposed factor structure was supported (i.e. construct validity). The loading of each factor was significantly different from zero and nontrivial (absolute standardized loadings > .60). In addition, the factor loadings of the included items are significantly related to their respective constructs while the explained variance ranges from .38 to .84 while the average variance extracted and the construct reliability of each construct exceeds .50 and .60, respectively (Hair et al., 2010). Second, the significant size of the completely standardized factor loadings ([.62, .91], average λ= .78) provides evidence of convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) Third, all constructs are believed to be discriminant-valid because the square root of variance extracted for each construct is greater than the correlations between the given construct and any other construct (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Moreover, multi-collinearity tests suggest that multi-collinearity is not an issue (the largest bivariate correlation (i.e. .65) –between mission valence and goal clarity- is below the .85 threshold (Kenny, 2012)). The Cronbach’s coefficient alpha’s of the study measures range from .73 to .93. Fourth, nomological validity is expected because the correlations among the constructs are, as expected, all positive.

**Step 2: The Structural Model**

The significance and strength of the hypothesized effects was analyzed with MLE using bootstrapping (5000 bootstrap samples). The results indicate that the developed model is acceptable: χ²214= 570.83, p < .000, CFI = .95, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .06 (see Step 1 for cut offs).

Given that the proposed model actually consists of three clusters of multiple mediations (socialization agents via goal clarity, PSM and work impact on mission valence), the validity of the model was further analyzed using the phantom model approach (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012). The phantom model approach provides an antidote for the fact that some SEM programs (including AMOS) are not able to test specific indirect effects because it allows for the estimation of specific indirect effects and associated confidence intervals nested within complex multi-mediation path analytic models (Sweet, Martin Ginis, & Tomasone, 2013). More specifically, the phantom method involves ‘creating a separate latent variable model (i.e. the phantom model) that represents the specific effect to be tested as a total effect’ (Fenton, Duda, Quested, & Barrett, 2014, 456). Once the necessary phantom models are created bootstrap bias corrected confidence intervals (5000 samples) are used to determine the significance of the specific effects: where the confidence interval does not cross zero, a significant indirect effect is assumed (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Because the phantom approach does not allow the estimation of standardized effects, unstandardized effect sizes are reported (Fenton et al., 2014). Table 2 reports the results of the conducted multiple-mediation tests including both direct and indirect effects (Ledermann & Kenny, 2012; Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Insert Table 2 about here

The hypothesized model consist of three multiple mediations (one for each socialization agent via goal clarity, public service motivation and work impact on mission valence). The results listed in Table 2 confirm two: there is a significant multiple mediation effect between top management team and mission valence and between co-worker and mission valence while the total indirect effect of direct supervisor on mission valence is insignificant.

More specifically, the findings indicated that public service motivation, goal clarity and work impact partially mediate the relationship between top management team and mission valence (95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI: indirect effects from large to small: goal clarity [.063, .218], *p* < .001; public service motivation [.036, .202], *p* < .001; work impact [.048, .196], *p* < .001, and direct effect of top management team on mission valence 0.223 [.077, .318], *p* < .001). These findings support Hypothesis 1 through 3. In addition, the model also supports Hypothesis 7 through 9: public service motivation, goal clarity and work impact partially mediate the relationship between co-worker and mission valence (95% bias-corrected bootstrap CI: indirect effects from large to small: public service motivation [.048, .194], *p* < .001; goal clarity [.055, .182], *p* < .001; work impact [.016, .130], *p* < .01, and direct effect of co-worker on mission valence 0.114, [.000, .232], *p* < .050. Although the total indirect effect of direct supervisor on mission valence is insignificant, the results in Table 2 do indicate that goal clarity mediates the relationship between supervisor and mission valence (indirect effect: .079, [.044, .124], *p* < .001) (acceptance of Hypothesis 4 and rejection of Hypothesis 5 and Hypothesis 6).

Given the identified partial mediations, the hypothesized structural model was extended with a direct effect of transformation leadership and co-worker on mission valence. The model fit indexes suggest that the revised structural model was accurate: CFI = .96, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .06, χ²212 = 540.87, p < .000) and (marginally) outperformed the original model. Figure 2 presents the parameter estimates for the final structural model as standardized regression weights (in order to allow comparisons with the results of previous studies) and the explained variance of the endogenous variables.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Except for two relationships (i.e. supervisor → PSM as well as supervisor → perceived work impact) path coefficients of the hypothesized relationships are significant (*p* ≤ .05), nontrivial (absolute values >.10) and have the expected sign which provides additional support for the accuracy of the theoretical model.

The model is able to explain 63% of the variance in mission valence. A score which, at first glance, seems very high but is consistent with the results of a previously tested model using the same antecedents which was able to explain 62% of the variance in reported mission valence (Wright & Pandey, 2011). The strength of the detected relationship between goal clarity and mission valence, however, is not fully aligned with earlier study results. The path coefficient in this study is β = .26 while previous studies reported stronger relationships, β = .54 and β = .68 respectively (Wright et al., 2012; Wright & Pandey, 2011). The magnitude of the relationship between PSM and mission valence on the other hand is in accordance with previous study results (β = .32 versus β = .33) (Wright et al., 2012) as well as the impact of perceived work impact on mission valence (β = .21 versus β = .16) (Wright & Pandey, 2011).

Furthermore, the results indicate that including the effect of organizational socialization agents in the model helps to gain insight in the drivers of mission valence. More specifically, the variables used to measure social influence explain 46%, 17% and 24% of the variance in goal clarity, PSM and perceived work impact, respectively. With respect to the impact of the organizations’ top management, the study results indicate that employees who perceive their top management team as promotors of organizational values and future report higher levels of goal clarity, PSM and perceived work impact. However, the impact of the top management team on the reported levels of goal clarity and PSM was much lower in our sample of non-managerial employees than a comparable study based on a sample of senior managers (β =.27 versus β =.79 and β =.22 versus β =.31, respectively) (Wright et al., 2012). In accordance with the model constructed by Wright and Pandey (2011), we also tested the direct effect of the top management team on mission valence. In contrast to the original model, which used a sample of senior managers, this relationship proved to be significant (β = .20).

The model also indicates that employees who report higher levels of co-worker communication report higher levels of goal clarity (β = .28), PSM (β = .29) and perceived work impact (β = .21). There is also a, albeit small, direct effect of co-worker communication on mission valence (β = .12). Supervisor communication, in turn, is associated with higher perceived levels of goal clarity (β = .26) but is not significantly related with PSM and perceived work impact.

**Discussion**

The paper at hand has two major objectives. First of all, this study tests the external validity of previous research by analyzing the relationship between goal clarity, work impact and PSM on the one hand and mission valence on the other using a sample of lower-level employees. Second, the study design extents previous work by examining the relationship between the cited antecedents and multiple sources of socializing influence in attempt to shed light on how organizational context and perceptions of mission valence are related.

With respect to the first goal, the study results lend credibility to Wright et al.’s (2012) claim that position in the organizational hierarchy is not likely to influence the relation between mission valence and the selected antecedents. The relationship detected in samples of senior managers (Wright et al., 2012; Wright & Pandey, 2011) and samples with a large proportion of respondents with a supervisory status (Caillier, 2015) is confirmed by our sample of employees without supervisory or managerial status. A such, the results suggest that lower-level employees are no more likely than other employees to show a favorable bias towards the organization and that the available knowledge on the relationship between mission valence and its drivers is probably valid for all employees regardless of organizational position.

Given the relationship between mission valence and specific individual attitudes, disentangling the pathways by which these antecedents are influenced within an organisational setting becomes even more important. Based on the assumption that public organizations can be viewed as social institution in which employees’ organizational attitudes are primarily shaped through interactions with other members (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Taylor, 2008), we analysed how value-laden communication with a variety of organizational socialization agents is related with perceptions of mission valence and its antecedents. The study results confirm the importance of incorporating the institutional setting when analysing mission valence and suggest that value-laden communication with different organizational socialization agents could play an important role in in crafting a mission-based culture. Hence, focusing on a specific socialization agent or using a general socialization construct which amalgates socialization sources could be misleading (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003a).

With respect to the socializing influence of top managers, the study results further support the assumption that the behaviour of top managers, and especially transformational leaders, is related with employee adjustment. The results suggest that by giving “meaning to jobs within the organization, by energizing employees about the importance of their work and by linking employees’ work to organizational goals and employees’ values” (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010, p. 714), top managers could influence employee mission valence. Moreover, besides the mediated relationship, there is also a direct relationship between top management value-communication and employee mission valence. This relationship suggest that the behaviour of top managers and perceived attractiveness of the organization’s values are related and further stresses the relevance of value-laden communication by an organization’s top managers.

The study results also indicate that top managers are not the only relevant organizational information source: value-laden communication with co-workers seems to be equally important. These findings reflect the small group socialization perspective which ‘de-emphasizes the organization and focuses on how individuals learn from those occupying similar roles’ (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003a, p. 783). Although employees should be encouraged to discuss the organization’s mission with their co-workers and as such diminish cognitive disorder by foreclosing alternative interpretations and understandings of phenomena (Vlaar, Van den Bosch, & Volberda, 2006), we have to note that if employees rely predominantly on co-workers to acquire information about the organization and its purpose, this could be problematic. In essence, cultivating mission valence entails translating, mostly abstract, organizational-level goals and values to the individual level and making them relevant. Hence, each socialization source is likely to emphasize certain content aspects on their areas of responsibility and expertise or provide different, or even conflicting, interpretations of the organization’s mission. If different groups interpret organizational cues in isolation from each other, the creation of a common sense of organizational purpose is often impeded (Tourish & Robson, 2006).

One socialization source that could help organizational leaders to disseminate information about the organization’s purpose and help adjust misconceptions about the organization’s essence are direct supervisors. The study results, however, suggest that the role of supervisors is limited. Value-laden communication with supervisors is linked to higher levels of goal clarity but is not related with higher levels of public sector valence and work impact. These results seem to suggest that direct supervisors provide information about the organizational goals but do not succeed to motivate employees to contribute to them or clarify how these goals are related to individual jobs. These findings are surprising given that work impact refers to an employee’s perceived alignment between their job and organizational strategic priorities (Biggs, Brough, & Barbour, 2014) and thus acts as an intermediary level between the organization and the employee. Consequently, one would expect that supervisors act as an interface between the individual and the organization and are thus ideally positioned to help subordinates to link their job characteristics to larger organizational goals. In addition, these findings conflict with previous research indicating that supervisors can act as promotors of organizational values, provide meaning to actions and as such influence PSM (Vandenabeele, 2014). An explanation for these findings, could lie in the fact that supervisors are in some organizations perceived as being “duty-bound” to advance organizational goals which hampers discussion and interaction. In addition, in some organizations employees feel uncomfortable to discuss organizational policies, issues or decisions with supervisors out of fear of damaging one’s image or being labelled in a negative manner (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). Consequently, although the results seem to lend support to the assumption that the often adopted “cascade” mechanism whereby top management communicates strategy and values only to middle managers and depend on them to disseminate it to frontline workers is flawed (Galunic & Hermreck, 2012), these results should be interpreted with care. Future research should include more detailed information on the importance of employee-supervisor relationships in order to shed more light on the socialization role of supervisors.

**Key contributions AND limitations**

The paper at hand responded to Wright and Pandey (2011) call for more research on the drivers of mission valence. More specifically, this study extended the scope of previous research analyzing how goal clarity, work impact and PSM are related with mission valence using a sample of lower-level employees. As such this study provides insight on the generalizability of previous study results, which all used samples of general managers. In addition, this study complements, to employees at the lower end of the organizational hierarchy. In addition, this study clarifies how the drivers of mission valence are influenced by intra-organizational interaction thus providing an antidote for the fact that the impact of communication and social networks has been largely neglected in public management research. Although the study result complement the existing knowledge base, we would like to stress that the results of any single study should be viewed with caution and that one has to recognize that both strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of this study lie in the fact that it, partly, replicates existing studies and thus builds on validated research instruments. In addition, it uses a cross-sectional design which allows to test theoretical predictions using a large sample and sophisticated statistical analysis. On the other hand, the cross-sectional research design provides a snap shot which does not allow to assess how mission valence unfolds over time and fluctuates under the influence of communication and/or change management initiatives. Clearly, more longitudinal research is needed in order to map the dynamics of how mission valence is attained, sustained and fluctuates. Second, this study relies on self-reported behavior and perceptions. There may have been a social desirability bias operating that caused respondents to try to portray themselves in positive ways (Milliken et al., 2003). Studies using qualitative research designs could help validate the results of the research at hand. Third, data was collected in just one organization. Although we focused on analyzing relationships on an individual level and the examined organization is probably too large extent representative for large public organizations, organizational characteristics such as the degree of bureaucracy and communication climate could influence the results. We thus advise to interpret the study results with some caution as future research should use samples from multiple organizations to assure generalizability and analyze the issues examined here in different organizational settings.

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**APPENDIX 1**

Promotion of organizational values and future: Top management team

* The organization’s top management clearly articulates its vision of the future.
* The organization’s top management leads by setting a good example.
* The organization’s top management says things that make employees proud to be part of the organization.
* The organization’s top management has a clear sense of where our organization should be in 5 years.

Promotion of organizational values and future: Supervisor

* My supervisor provides me with information about the organization’s vision of the future.
* My supervisor sets a good example.
* My supervisor provides me with information which makes me proud to be part of this organization.
* My supervisor provides me with information of where our organization should be in 5 years.

Promotion of organizational values and future: Co-workers

* My co-workers provide me with information about the organization’s vision of the future.
* My co-workers set a good example.
* My co-workers provide me with information of where our organization should be in 5 years.
* My co-workers provide me with information which makes me proud to be part of this organization.

Goal clarity

* It is easy to explain the goals of this organization to outsiders.
* This organization’s mission is clear to everyone who works here.
* This organization has clearly defined goals.

Public service motivation

* Meaningful public service is very important to me.
* I am often reminded by daily events about how dependent we are on one another.
* Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements.
* I am prepared to make sacrifices for the good of society.
* I am not afraid to go to bat for the rights of others even if it means I will be ridiculed.

Work impact

* I can see how my work contributes to the performance of my work unit.
* I can see how my work contributes to the performance of my organization.
* I can see how my work contributes to meeting the needs of external clients & organizations.

Mission valence

* This organization provides valuable public services.
* I believe that the priorities of this organization are quite important

Figure 1: Proposed theoretical model

Figure 2: Final structural model

.32

*p* = .000

.16

*p* = .003

.23

*p* = .000

.02

*p* = .59

-.04

*p* = .19

.13

*p* = .009

.17

*p* = .000

.28

*p* = .000

.51

*p* = .000

.24

*p* = .000

.32

*p* = .000

.21

*p* = .001

*R2*= .46

*R2*= .17

*R2*= .24

*R2*= .64

.22

*p* = .001

.11

*p* = .05

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Mean | SD | Correlationsa and construct reliabilities in parentheses |
|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| Study variables |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Top management | 5.6 | 1.3 | (.88) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Supervisor | 5.1 | 1.5 | .45\*\* | (.93) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Co-workers | 4.4 | 1.2 | .52\*\* | .52\*\* | (.86) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Goal clarity | 5.7 | 1.2 | .45\*\* | .47\*\* | .48\*\* | (.85) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. PSM | 5.4 | 1.0 | .26\*\* | .16\*\* | .28\*\* | .33\*\* | (.74) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Work impact | 5.5 | 1.0 | .40\*\* | .27\*\* | .28\*\* | .41\*\* | .36\*\* | (.79) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Mission valence | 5.0 | 1.4 | .49\*\* | 33\*\* | 49\*\* | .54\*\* | .46\*\* | .48\*\* | (.83) |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Control variables |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Genderb | - | - | -.07 | -.01 | -.05 | .01 | .01 | -.04 | -.02 | (n.a.) |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Age | 43 | 11 | .05 | -.04 | -.04 | .05 | .20\*\* | .13\*\* | .02 | -.08 | (n.a.) |  |  |  |  |
| 10. Tenuredc | - | - | .01 | -.03 | .03 | .10\* | .07 | -.09\* | -.04 | .49\*\* | .80\*\* | (n.a.) |  |  |  |
| 11. Educationd | - | - | -.12\*\* | -.01 | -.02 | -.07 | -.10\* | -.09\* | .24\*\* | .04 | -.06 | -.04 | (n.a.) |  |  |
| 12. Org. tenure | 17 | 11 | .01 | -.06 | -.07 | .04 | .13\*\* | .17\*\* | -.07 | -.10\* | .80\*\* | .66\*\* | -.05 | (n.a.) |  |
| 13. Functione | - | - | -.12\*\* | -.07 | -.07 | -.05 | .04 | .02 | -.13\*\* | .03 | .00 | .24\*\* | .09\* | .15\*\* | (n.a) |

*Note:*

aAll calculations are Pearson correlations

b0 = female; 1 = male

c0 = non tenured; 1 = tenured

d1 = Master’s degree; 2 = Bachelor’s degree; 3 = High school degree

e0 = Administrative or technical function; 1 = paramedical function

\*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).

\*\*Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Table 2: Unstandardized estimates and confidence intervals limits for the phantom mediation tests

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Path | Direct effect |  | Indirect effect |  | Total effect |
| *b(SE)* | 95% CI | Sign. |  | *b(SE)* | 95% CI | Sign. |  | *b(SE)* | 95% CI | Sign. |
| Top mgt. → Goal clarity → Mission valence | .223 (.07) | [.088, .373] | .001 |  | .127 (.04) | [.063, .218] | .000 |  | .453 (.09) | [.298, .642] | .000 |
| Top mgt. → PSM → Mission valence | .223 (.07) | [.088, .373] | .001 |  | .107 (.04) | [.036, .202] | .000 |  | .453 (.09) | [.298, .642] | .000 |
| Top mgt. → Work impact → Mission valence | .223 (.07) | [.088, .373] | .001 |  | .103 (.04) | [.048, .196] | .000 |  | .453 (.09) | [.298, .642] | .000 |
| Co-workers → Goal clarity → Mission valence | .114 (.06) | [.000, .232] | .050 |  | .110 (.03) | [.055, .182] | .000 |  | .314 (.07) | [.173, .451] | .000 |
| Co-workers → PSM → Mission valence | .114 (.06) | [.000, .232] | .050 |  | .111 (.04) | [.048, .194] | .000 |  | .314 (.07) | [.173, .451] | .000 |
| Co-workers → Work impact→ Mission valence | .114 (.06) | [.000, .232] | .050 |  | .060 (.03) | [.016, .130] | .006 |  | .314 (.07) | [.173, .451] | .000 |
| Supervisor → Goal clarity→ Mission valence | -.074 (.04) | [-.154, .012] | .094 |  | .079 (.02) | [.044, .124] | .000 |  | .036 (.03) | [-.022, .102] | .210 |
| Supervisor → PSM → Mission valence | -.074 (.04) | [-.154, .012] | .094 |  | -.030 (.02) | [-.078, .009] | .132 |  | .036 (.03) | [-.022, .102] | .210 |
| Supervisor → Work impact → Mission valence | -.074 (.04) | [-.154, .012] | .094 |  | .006 (01) | [-.025, .036] | .652 |  | .036 (.03) | [-.022, .102] | .210 |

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