



Research Article

Emotional labor assessments and episodic recall bias in public engagement

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Abstract: In a survey of local officials in Los Angeles County we test individual-level job-related assessments as a function of a public employee's induced recall of discrete citizen engagement and one's intrinsic prosocial motivation through a randomized survey experiment. We explore whether tangible retentions of public service influence the relationship between self-concepts—such as reported prosociality—and job-related assessments. We find that the relationship between self-reports of prosociality and pay satisfaction are contingent upon those concepts being decontextualized, whereas discrete recall bias appears not to affect emotional burnout. In other words, subjects seem to accept the emotional labor of engagement as part of their jobs. However, contextualizing engagement may make them more cognizant of its unremunerated dimensions; and, positive reinforcement of engagement provides encouragement to further engagement. Our findings make the case that emotional labor involves a skill set that employees implicitly recognize merits remuneration and that reinforcing positive engagement outcomes inspires employee motivation.

Keywords: Citizen engagement, Emotional burnout, Pay satisfaction, Emotional labor, Prosocial motivation

Supplements: [Open data](#), [Open materials](#)

Describing the public workplace requires attention not only to structural characteristics of the job (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), but also to the interpersonal interactions that form part of the social context of work. Within that context, emotions play a critical role in how bureaucrats make decisions (Nørgaard, 2018). Public employees regularly interact with members of the public through citizen engagement, consultation, and service provision efforts. While these interactions are predominantly treated by the citizen engagement literatures for their implications for members of the public, and for larger democratic outcomes, public administration is only recently exploring the impact of direct civic engagement on employee outcomes (Hsieh, 2014). Studies of engagement-intensive work, such as

policing, have found a substantial link between emotional labor and burnout (Schaible & Gecas, 2010). Since the emergence of New Public Management, an emphasis on customer service and employee responsiveness continues as a salient aspect of public employees' job responsibilities (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000), but the context in which they interact with members of the public varies considerably by encounter, ranging from a one-time service offering to recurring relationships.

In this study, we explore the relationship between direct interactions with the public and employee job assessments of emotional burnout, willingness toward future engagement (WFE), and pay satisfaction. We propose that individuals who are more prosocially motivated will be less prone to emotional burnout in public service as a function of their other-regarding motives; they will be theoretically more willing to engage with citizens as a function of that prosociality; and, lastly, they will be less susceptible to negative assessments of pay satisfaction. At the same time, positive engagements for highly prosocial workers might reinforce a sense

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of satisfaction in their pay and WFE and lessen negative assessments of emotional burnout. Hence, we inquire as to the potential moderating impact of an employee's recall of either negative or positive direct citizen engagements on the relationship between prosociality and job-related assessments (JRAs).

Emotional Labor

Interactions between public employees and members of the public may be partially understood through the conceptual framework of emotional labor (Guy, Newman, & Mastracci, 2014). The concept, first developed by Hochschild (1983) refers to the "management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display for a wage" (7). In our context, emotional labor is the effort on the part of the public employee that goes into producing the appropriate emotional response during interactions with the public.

Emotional labor from repeated customer service encounters has been linked to burnout through emotional dissonance, or discrepancy between felt and expressed emotions, that occurs particularly in the case of surface acting (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013; Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Burnout resulting from these interactions is likely further influenced by the characteristics of the interaction itself (such as length, frequency, etc.), the organizational context, and personal characteristics (such as negative affectivity) intrinsic to the individuals involved (Grandey et al., 2013).

One criticism of the emotional labor literature, is that studies often take place in customer service encounters characterized by chronic exposure to negative customer affect (Grandey & Diamond, 2010; Grant, 2007). These critics argue that the correlation between customer interactions and burnout identified by the emotional labor literature is largely resulting from the focus on primarily hostile encounters among strangers. We conceptualize citizen engagement as taking on many forms beyond service delivery along a spectrum from one-way communication efforts to deliberative communication aimed at public empowerment (Nabatchi, 2012), and the differences along that spectrum in terms of duration, affective content, level of customization, and relationship characteristics are important contextual forces influencing the emotion regulation efforts of the

employee (Grandey et al., 2013). We use the term *citizen engagement* broadly to encompass the range of direct interactions between employees and residents in their community.

Relational Job Design and Prosociality

While the literature on emotional labor emphasizes the detrimental effects of chronic negative interactions with the public on employees, the relational job design literature alternatively identifies instances in which interactions with the public could be supportive of employee motivation. The relational job architecture model contends that in jobs involving impact on beneficiaries, 'respectful contact' with those beneficiaries will increase motivation to make a prosocial difference by increasing perceived impact on those beneficiaries as well as on affective commitment, resulting in improved persistence behaviors and attitudes toward work (Grant, 2007; Grant, 2008). Such contact allows employees to witness the impact of their labor, and associate that impact with their actions, producing a motivational effect (Grant, 2007).

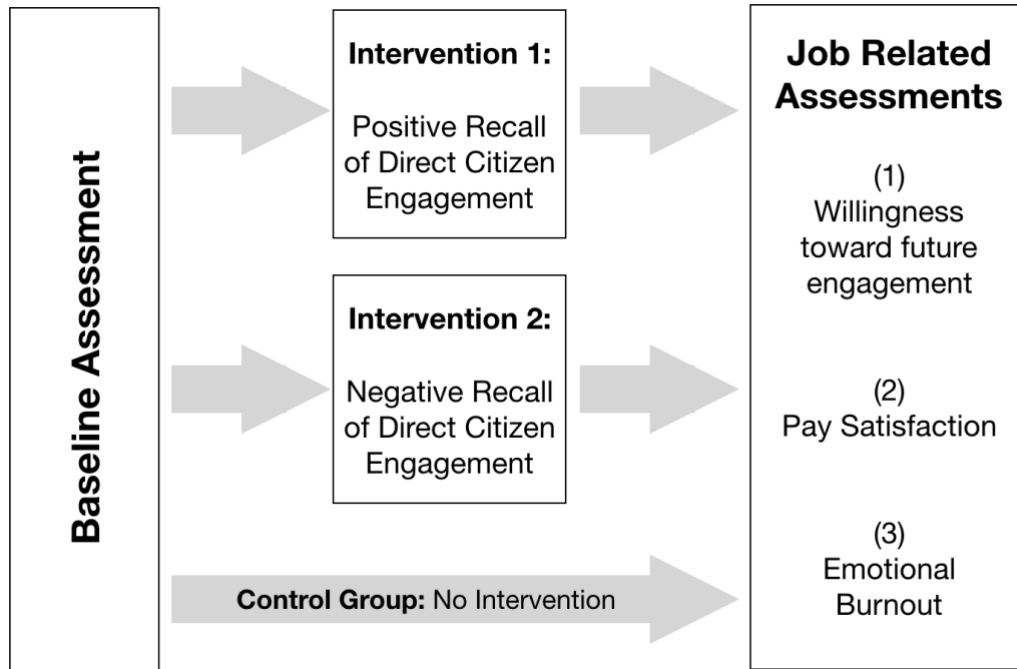
Intrinsic employee characteristics may also influence whether discrete interactions are experienced as either detrimental to motivation or supportive of it. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) found that employee identification with their service role will play a protective role against the negative effects of emotional labor. Of particular relevance to public administration is the intrinsic motivation of prosociality, which may influence the extent to which employees are resilient to burnout and magnify motivation.

As emotional labor has become an essential component of the dynamic relationships between public employees and citizens, a consideration of the importance of prosociality to emotional labor is important (Guy et al., 2009). Citizen engagement demands a generally unacknowledged set of intangible emotional knowledge, skills, and assets (KSAs) that are put to daily use by public service workers. Emotional labor becomes prominent during communication with citizens, when frontline public employees are expected to express empathy, authority, enthusiasm, and other affective displays based on the relationship with the citizen, job demands, and nuances of the immediate situation. These interactions necessitate a range of

interpersonal skills which are rarely, if ever, recognized in functional job evaluations and are not in any way satisfactorily remunerated (Guy et al., 2014).

& Tversky, 1979; Tversky & Kahneman, 1991; Ariely, Huber, & Wertenbroch, 2005; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Within prospect theory, reference dependence implies judgments are made in terms of losses or gains compared to a reference point. Yockey and

Figure 1
Research Design



Prospect Theory

Concepts such as self-reported prosociality, pay satisfaction, and emotional burnout are abstract in many senses. They are often investigated in surveys removed from the subject’s actual work context and, therefore, are capable of being manipulated by cues that ground the subject more tangibly within their actual work environment (Marvel & Resh, 2019). Prospect theory informs our expectations regarding how local government employees’ recollections of past engagement with citizens will influence their JRAs (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). The concept of loss aversion based on prospect theory suggests that losses are more negative than equal gains are positive, and people will impute greater value to an item when they give it up than when they acquire it (Kahneman

Kruml (2009) define a reference point as a “stimuli of known attributes that act as standards against which other categorically similar stimuli of unknow attributes are compared in order to gain information” (p. 97). Reference points inform expectations, aspira-

tions, and norms that help to code new data and experiences as a gain or loss, positive or negative, and success or failure (Cheon, 2016; Kahneman, Knetsch & Thaler, 1991; Meier, Favero, & Zhu, 2015). Olsen (2017) explored how losses and gains differ when using reference points to evaluate organizational performance and finds some evidence of a negativity bias in citizens’ relative evaluations. We believe that inducing positive and negative recall of historical reference points within an employee’s organization—specifically discrete engagements that administrators had with citizens—create cognitive

heuristics that help administrators form positive and negative evaluations about various dimensions of their job respectively (Mussweiler, 2003).

Employee perceptions of the valence of public engagement have not been directly considered by the public management, emotional labor, or relational job design literatures in any systematic way. No study to our knowledge has inquired as to whether individual employee perceptions of discrete citizen engagements will impact employees' evaluations of their respective jobs. Hence, we test the following hypotheses that are consistent with the observations from the scholarship reviewed above:

H1a-c: Positive (negative) recall bias will induce positive (negative) JRAs of pay satisfaction (a), willingness toward future citizen engagements (b), and emotional burnout (c).

H2a-c: Negatively (positively) valenced recall will lessen (strengthen) the relationship between prosociality and JRAs of pay satisfaction (a) and willingness toward future citizen engagement (b), and strengthen (lessen) its association with emotional burnout (c).

Methodology

Research Design

In this study, we assess citizen interactions as a moderating factor in the relationship between prosocial motivation and JRAs, by looking at the relative valence government employees associate with those interactions. We implement a survey experiment using a nonfactorial design with two treatments and a separate control group to test whether a cue that induces positive or negative recall bias of a specific citizen engagement affects employee self-reports of pay satisfaction, emotional burnout, and their willingness for future efforts in citizen engagement. Figure 1 provides a visual map of our research design.

We utilize a between-subjects design that includes two randomly assigned recall/priming treatments (T+/-) and a control group (C). Our sample is a panel of 645 local government employees from municipalities across Los Angeles County, California who answered the same baseline survey questions, including questions about their city, department, position, demographics, prosocial motivation, and various potential controls. 358 of the subjects randomly assigned to one of two treatment groups were prompted to recall episodes of citizen engagement. T+/- subjects are asked to recall a recent direct citizen engagement effort that they

viewed as a negative (T-; N=174) or positive (T+; N=174) experience. All subjects were then asked the same set of post-treatment survey items covering JRAs. Our goal is to gauge whether the episodic recall and its imposed valence has any moderating effect on the relationship between prosocial motivation and individual employees' self-reported WFE, pay satisfaction, and emotional burnout.

Episodic Recall Bias Treatment and Variable Measurement

Our treatment was split between equivalent priming techniques that induce negative and positive recall on a subject's recent engagement with a citizen. The control group received no prime and were not asked to recall an engagement with a citizen of any kind. T+/- subjects were given the opportunity to provide detail of the recalled citizen engagement in long-answer format (i.e., of 1000 characters or less). The recall prime read as follows:

Please recall a POSITIVE [NEGATIVE] experience you had while directly engaging with a member(s) of the public while occupying your current job. Describe this experience in 1000 characters or less.

The average treated subject responded well below the 1000-character limit with a little over 107 characters in their description (SD=168.65). Moreover, the length of response has no effect on JRAs, giving us confidence that survey fatigue induced by lengthy responses to the treatment is minimal compared to the control.

In the baseline assessment questions (preceding the treatment), we explicitly measure prosocial motivation using Grant's (2008) well-established four-item measure. Subjects receive the prompt, "Why are you motivated to do your work?" for four separate items that were randomly distributed throughout the survey instrument: (1) "Because I care about benefiting others through my work;" (2) "Because I want to help others through my work;" (3) "Because I want to have a positive impact on others;" and (4) "Because it is important to me to do good for others through my work." Response options for these items are on a 7-point Likert range. We use a summated scale for a more intuitive interpretation of this analysis. A factor analytic version of this scale produces similar results and yields a Cronbach's alpha of 0.859.

Following our treatment, subjects were asked a series of JRAs which included four items from Maslach’s Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981): (1) “I feel emotionally drained from my work;” (2) “Working with people all day is really a strain for

version of this scale produces similar results and yields a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.802.

Each subject’s WFE is measured through a single item that asks, “To what extent would you like to engage with citizens directly in the future?” We

Table 1
Job-Related Assessments as a Function of Engagement Recall and Prosociality

	(1) Pay Satisfaction	(2) Willingness Toward Future Engagement	(3) Emotional Burnout
Negative Recall Treatment	1.962*** (0.445)	-0.618 (0.504)	-2.740 (2.353)
Positive Recall Treatment	1.492 (1.439)	0.091 (0.745)	1.136 (2.146)
Prosociality	0.086* (0.036)	0.066** (0.023)	-0.293*** (0.079)
Negative Recall * Prosociality	-0.079*** (0.023)	0.035 (0.024)	0.128 (0.099)
Positive Recall * Prosociality	-0.068 (0.060)	0.023 (0.030)	-0.027 (0.075)
_cons	-3.703*** (0.824)	0.839 (0.502)	14.640*** (0.714)
N	590	573	645
Pseudo R ²	0.05	0.06	.
R ²	.	.	0.156

Note: All models include fixed effects for municipality; Heteroskedasticity-corrected standard errors are clustered at municipality in parentheses

* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

me;” (3) “I feel burned out from my work;” and (4) “I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.” Response options for these items are also on a 7-point Likert range. Again, we use a summated scale for a more intuitive interpretation. A factor analytic

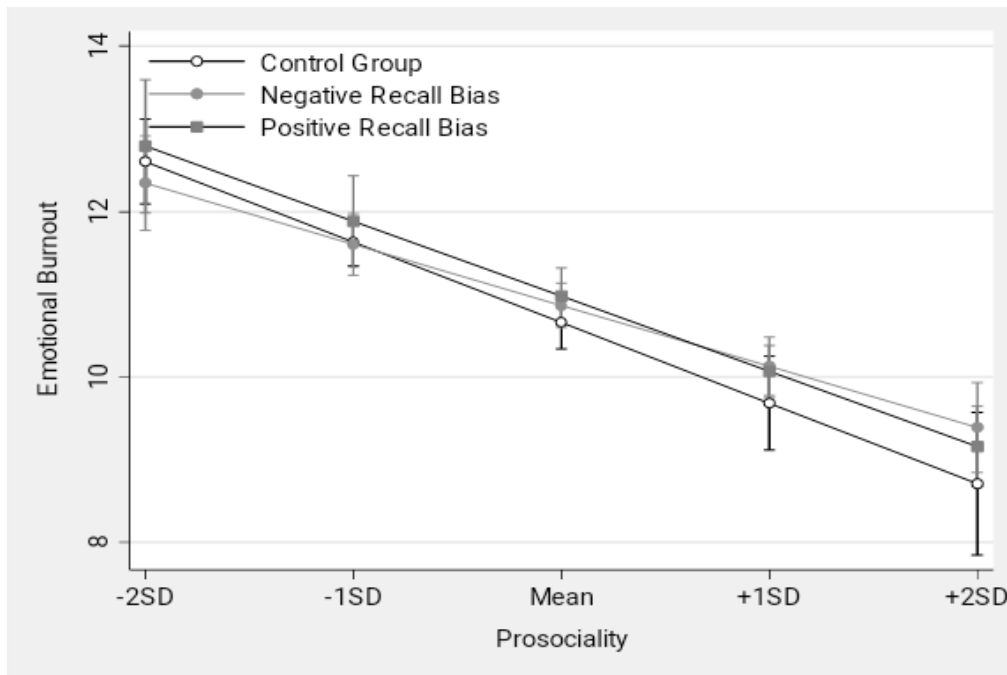
condense this item’s 7-point intensity scale to a binary outcome of 1 if the subject answered, “like a great deal,” “like a moderate amount,” or “like a little.” Otherwise, the outcome was recorded as a zero. The same approach is taken for our measurement of pay

satisfaction. Post-manipulation, subjects were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement “Overall, I am adequately paid for the work I do.” Response options for this item are on a 7-point Likert agreement range. Again, we use a binary outcome that measures 1 for any level of agreement and 0 otherwise. The appendix provides descriptive statistics for the sample and each of the three groups,

models include heteroscedasticity-corrected standard errors, clustered at the municipality.

Because we include interactions between prosociality and the randomly assigned treatment, Table 1 does not allow for intuitive interpretation. Both Negative Recall Bias and Positive Recall Bias operate as shift variables, meaning their coefficients are estimated in comparison to an omitted category

Figure 2
Emotional Burnout by Prosociality and Treatment



as well as a full description of the survey items including potential controls that are not included in our results below.

Results

Table 1 provides results for our three JRAs and includes fixed effects for each respective subject’s municipality of employment. Given the models with various controls (including frequency and duration of engagement) bear similar results, we present the most efficient models. The first two models present logit coefficients for the binary outcomes of Pay Satisfaction and WFE, respectively. The third model presents ordinary least squares coefficient estimates for our Emotional Burnout summated scale. All

(in this case, our control group). Figures 2, 3, and 5 depict the predicted effects for the interactions among the recall bias and prosocial motivation on JRAs compared to the control group.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between prosocial motivation and emotional burnout. Across all three groups, we see that prosociality has a substantively and statistically significant association with emotional burnout. As prosocial motivation increases, we see a subsequent decrease in the level of emotional burnout, which is consistent with H1c. Examining the change from our low to high values of prosocial motivation accounts for a 14% decrease in emotional burnout. However, such evidence is ridden with potential endogeneity problems. We are particularly interested in the potential moderating effect that the exogenous treatment of valenced

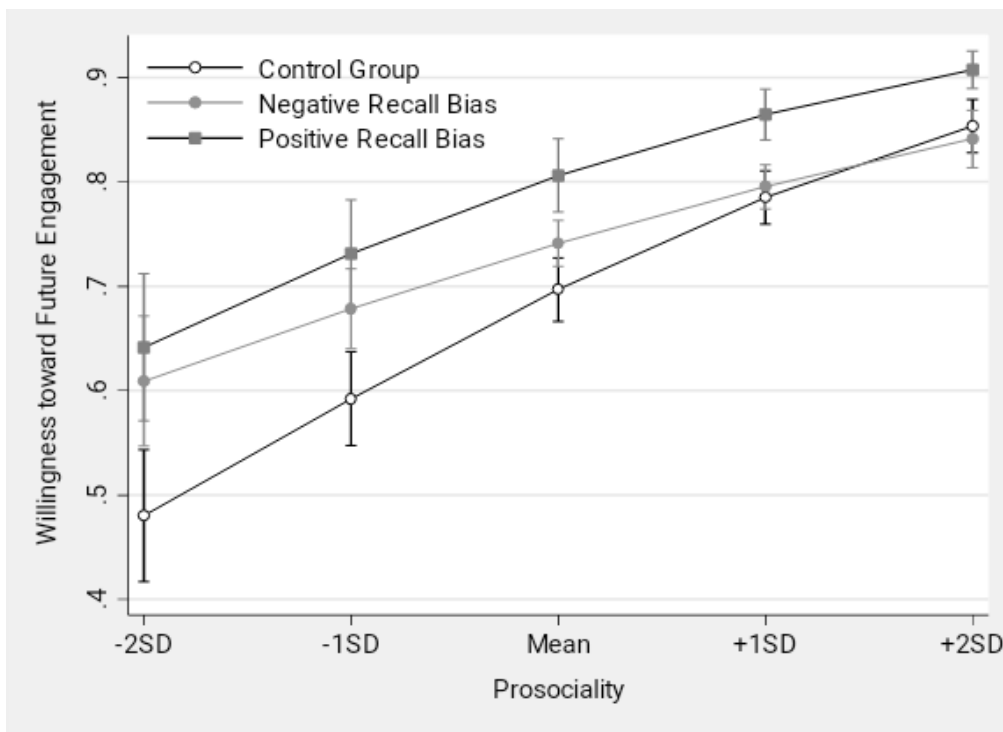
citizen engagement recall has on the relationship with emotional burnout (H2c). We find, counter to the expectations of H2c, that neither induced negative nor positive recall bias has a moderating effect on the relationship between prosociality and emotional burnout.

As revealed in Figure 3, we find a similar relationship between prosocial motivation and the subjects' WFE. Across all three groups, we see a substantively and statistically significant association between prosociality and WFE. As prosocial

having the strongest and statistically discriminant effect from the control. This suggests that subjects who are prompted to recall a positive citizen interaction will express more WFE compared to the control group.

In Figure 5, we plot predicted probabilities that an employee reports satisfaction in their pay as a function of his prosociality. Interestingly, we find no association between prosociality and pay satisfaction in either positive or negative recall groups compared to the baseline control. In other words, we find

Figure 3
Willingness toward Future Engagement by Prosociality and Treatment



motivation increases, we see a subsequent increase in the level of willingness one elicits. We find as much as a 35% increase in WFE as a function of prosociality. Despite a somewhat consistent slope across groups, we do find differences in the parallels, indicating that the treatment has some direct effect (H1a).

Figure 4 illustrates how the groups differ, in terms of the direct effect of recall bias on subjects' WFE. Both negative and positive recall of citizen engagement show a larger substantive effect on WFE than the control group, with the positive recall group

mixed support for H2a. It appears that inducing the respondent to bring specific context to their interactions with citizens substantially weakens the relationship between prosociality and pay satisfaction, regardless of how the recall is valenced.

We asked respondents to describe a negative or positive instance of citizen engagement in 1000 characters or less. These descriptions provide insight into this relationship between prosociality and pay satisfaction for these treatment groups. Guy et al. (2014) argue that the emotional labor of citizen engagement can require skills that are typically

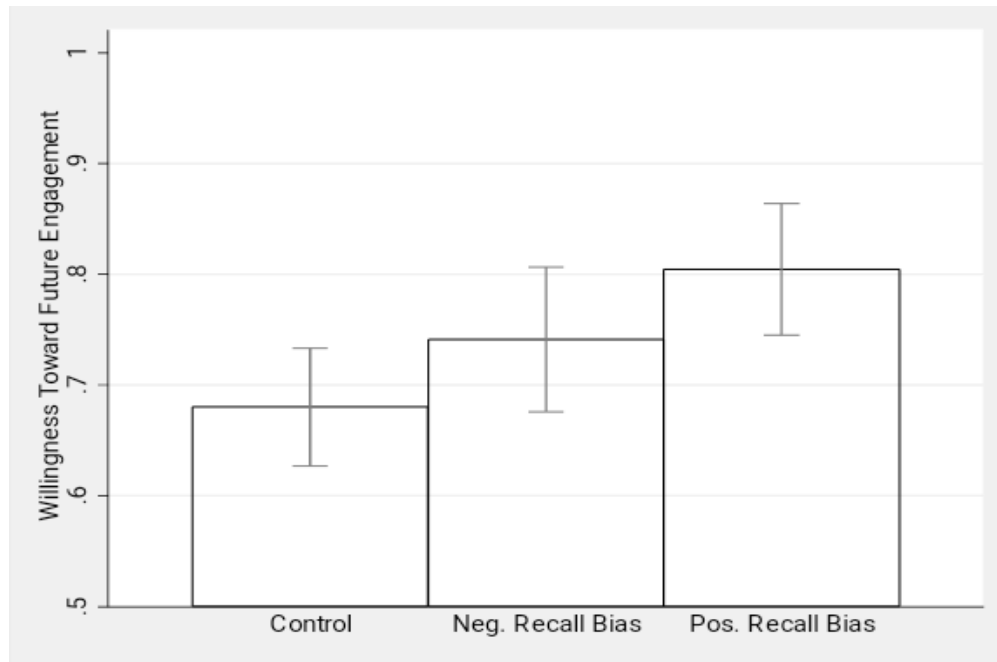
unacknowledged in job descriptions and performance evaluations, and inadequately compensated as a dimension of performance. Unacknowledged KSAs of relational work include

community. While being filmed, the young citizen berated the officer's and firefighters on scene."

"I was cussed out for doing my job...following protocol."

"A woman screamed at me at the public counter, calling me a

Figure 4
Willingness toward Future Engagement by Treatment



caring, nurturing, and invoking and displaying the emotions required to perform such tasks well (Guy et al., 2014). Workers whose jobs require emotional skills are implicitly asked to gauge the emotional response of citizens and shape their behavior to elicit the desired response (Guy et al., 2014).

Recalling past positive and negative interactions draws attention to the emotion experienced while engaging the member of the public. Prospect theory suggests negative episodic recall will be “more salient, potent, dominant in combinations, and generally efficacious than positive events” (Rozin & Royzman, 2001, p. 297). We found descriptions of negative engagements to be intense and indicative of emotional labor skills being requisite to manage the interaction with the citizen. The following represent examples of engagements provided by our negative recall sample:

“While assisting a transient, in custody, with an EMS problem, we were being filmed by a younger member of the

[gendered derogatory term] because I asked her (politely) to fill out the required form for her application.”

Even in positive encounters, subjects described efforts that highlight emotional labor embedded in the interaction. The following represent examples of engagements provided by our positive recall sample:

“We had 2 young ladies in a car accident we calmed them down they indicated they were not hurt and had no injuries. They were both grateful.”

“After treating a child patient from a traffic accident, a citizen came up to us and gave everyone a hug.”

In many of these responses emotion regulation KSAs emerge that are necessary to perform public service when interacting with the public, regardless of a negative or positive valence. A limitation of the emotional labor scholarship is that it often focuses on the private sector, in which customer service interactions are chronically negative and occur in

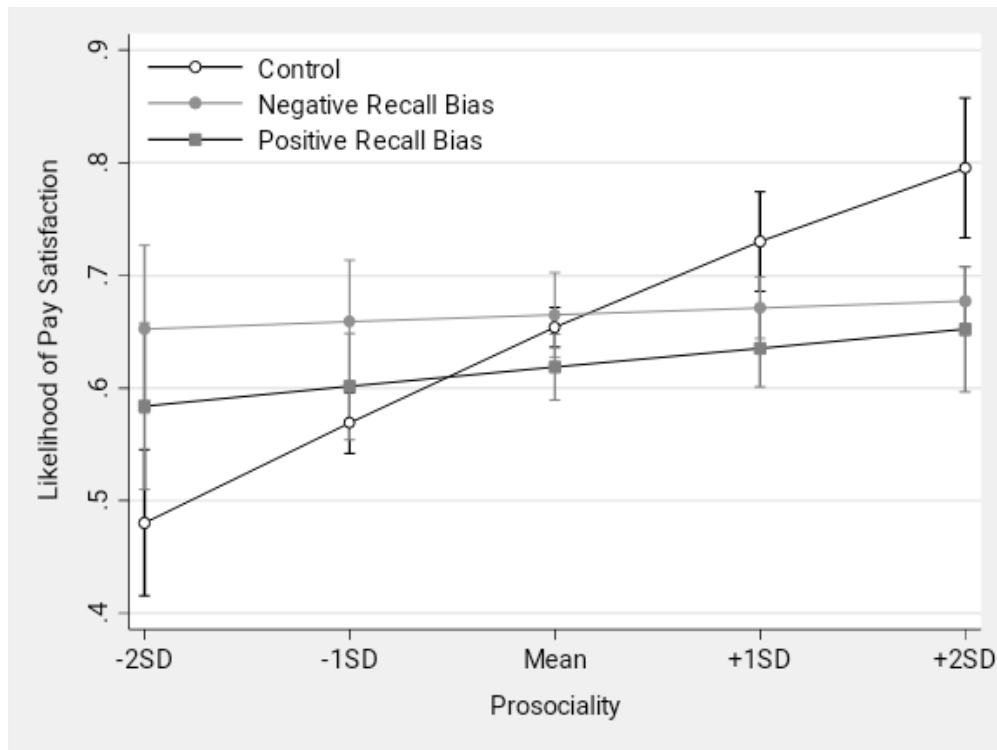
one-off encounters (Grandey & Diamond, 2010; Grant, 2007). By expanding our focus to service and non-service encounters which are both positive and negative, we see that labor “that generates [citizen] perceptions of rapport, supportiveness, congeniality, nurturance, and empathy” may not be adequately compensated in the eyes of the public employees leveraging these KSAs (Guy et al., 2014, p. 137).

Discussion and Conclusion

recall treatment. We also find that our induced recall treatments have a direct effect on WFE. However, perhaps our most interesting finding is with subjects’ reported satisfaction with pay. When subjects are exposed to the recall treatment (regardless of valence) prosociality is negatively associated with pay satisfaction, whereas it is positively associated in the control group.

Our main takeaway is that induced recall of discrete instances of citizen engagement prompts respondents to think concretely about the extent to

Figure 5
Pay Satisfaction by Prosociality and Treatment



This research takes the unique approach of investigating the behavioral motivations of public servants as a function of their engagement with citizens. We focus on the effects of direct contact with the public and episodic recall on individual public servants’ other-regarding motivations and JRAs—especially in terms of positively and negatively valenced emotional labor. We find that prosociality is associated with emotional burnout (-) and WFE (+) in predictable ways, regardless of the

which they are (not) paid for the emotional labor of engagement—an application of KSAs that are often considered nonremunerated “soft skills” (Guy et al, 2014). This attention to emotional effort may have the effect of transforming even positive recollections into reminders of uncompensated work, creating a negativity bias in relation to pay. The control group is not explicitly reminded of discrete engagements and the inherent emotional components of that work, and thus are not reminded of the uncompensated efforts embedded in their jobs, avoiding the

dissatisfaction induced by either valence of the treatment. Based on the frequency with which emotional restraint and expression were detailed in survey responses, it is clear that emotion management is an occupational skill essential to effective job performance. Emotional labor is used in both positive and negative settings, and the exercise of recalling a discrete interaction valenced in either direction appears to heighten the consciousness public employees have for the extra-role emotional work they do.

Those who are more prosocial are more prone to an awareness of being underpaid for their emotional labor. This is consistent with Guy et al.'s (2014) assertion that compensation schedules have historically been designed to minimize relational work because we have not developed an adequate means of appreciating the nature of the emotional components of work. Job analyses that identify and label emotional labor KSAs rather than ignoring them may help to align workplace experiences with compensation expectations. The experiences of the subjects interviewed in this study make the case that the expression of emotion management is a nuanced

skill set that merits remuneration on the same basis as other essential work skills.

Without a change in compensation structures, those who engage in emotional labor suffer a penalty for caring, uncompensated for substantial aspects of their day to day job. Guy et al. (2014) point out that "while the requirement is for emotional performance, its value is low" (137) and the exercise of recalling emotionally valenced experiences highlights the pay inequity as a penalty for emotion work. Future work should look closely at variant compensation structures, such as skill-based pay for the cognitive and emotional competency of employees (Guy et al., 2014), to see if the relationship between recall of emotion work and pay dissatisfaction is moderated by the ways in which compensation is remunerated. Methodologically, this study is limited by its reliance on self-reported data (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000) and future research should consider triangulating data from additional sources as well as potential modifications to the control to probe whether it is recall about citizens or simply the ability to reflect that is driving the results.

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