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First impressions: An analysis of professional stereotypes and their impact on sector attraction

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Abstract

Public sector professionals are often negatively portrayed with ascriptions such as "ineffective" and "lazy." Such negative connotations might disadvantage public sector organizations when trying to attract applicants, as it can reflect negatively on individuals' social identities. With this pre-registered experimental study, we examine stereotypes of public and private sector workers with and without a signal of specific professions present across both the public and private sector. We examine how this influences attraction in the initial phases of a job search before tangible job attributes become visible. Our study among 290 job seeking citizens in the United Kingdom provides evidence for a generic public sector worker bias, but the bias diminishes when the specific profession is known. Furthermore, we find that job seekers are less attracted to public employment and that this relationship is influenced by a negativity bias against public sector workers. We discuss implications of the study.

Evidence for Practice

- Specific types of professionals are needed for jobs present across all types of sectors, making the competition for these professionals between the public and private sector fierce.
- Job seekers are overall more negative toward public sector workers than private sector workers, but this negativity bias diminishes when a signal of the profession appears.
- Job seekers with negative stereotypes about public sector workers are more inclined to choose a private sector job whereas there is no difference when job seekers are positive.
- A public sector worker bias is primarily present among individuals working in the private sector without public sector experience. These professionals need more knowledge about how their skills can be used in the public sector and public sector managers should proactively use recruitment activities to combat stigmatization and reduce barriers toward mobility across sectors, which could break down stereotypes.

INTRODUCTION

The public sector is responsible for a wide range of tasks requiring a workforce with a diverse skillset, which is critical to ensure legitimacy and performance in the realization of political goals. However, attracting applicants is a challenging endeavor in a job market characterized by a global talent shortage (Theurer et al., 2018), aging workforces (Linos, 2018), and record low unemployment rates (OECD, 2023), especially profiles who are in high demand in both the public and private sector. These profiles typically require specific types of professional background

and experience, for example, data professionals, analysts, and advisors (OECD, 2021). Part of this problem might be attributed to a negativity bias: Several scholars claim that negative stereotypes of the public sector in general (e.g., Marvel, 2015, 2016) and its workers (e.g., Bertram et al., 2022; Chen & Bozeman, 2014) exist in society. The diffusion of such stereotypes can trigger a vicious cycle as the presence of a negativity bias might make it more challenging to attract the "best and brightest." This can breed new or reinforce existing negative perceptions (Döring & Willems, 2021; Hvidman, 2019).

In this study, we examine to what extent stereotypes about professionals present across both the public and private sector affect employer attractiveness. We integrate elements of stereotyping theory, social identity theory, and signaling theory to provide an understanding of how job seekers' stereotypes about public sector workers take part in shaping their responses to job opportunities in the public and private sectors. Building on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), organizational membership is way to express oneself (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) as social identities interact with one's perceived professional image (Roberts, 2005). Perceptions of organizations and professionals working in them, such as stereotypes, relate to individuals' social identity functions whereby individuals can use employment and their professional identity to regulate others' impressions of them (Highhouse et al., 2007; Ripoll et al., 2023). In early recruitment stages in which potential applicants face many employment opportunities and gather only limited and incomplete information on each potential employer (Lee & Jilke, 2024; Spence, 1973), stereotypes about professionals might play an important role for the attraction (or nonattraction) to organizations. If associations are negative, individuals may not engage in further search for job details, as the dominant perception is that the job does not fit with their social identity. We explore such dynamics of sector attractiveness by asking the following research question: *What is the influence of stereotypes about public sector professionals on employer attractiveness at the initial stage of recruitment?*

First, we designed a survey experiment in which we mirrored emails sent by recruitment platforms. From four generic and similar professions present in both the public and private sector (analyst, consultant, project manager, and administrative worker), participants had to choose for which they would continue to the actual job advertisement as an expression of attraction. This complements the first recruitment stage in the three-stage conjoint study by Lee and Jilke (2024) with a more real-life experimental setup among actual job seekers in the United Kingdom (UK). Second, we measured participants' stereotypical beliefs about public sector workers in general and specific professionals, using stereotype valence scores to capture how this influences the relationship between sector signals and initial attraction. To this day, most of the literature on stereotypes of the public sector and its workers is limited to documenting the mere existence of such stereotypes (e.g., de Boer, 2020; Marvel, 2015; Willems, 2020). Although many scholars claim a negative effect on attraction (e.g., Bertram et al., 2022; Dinhof et al., 2023; Döring & Willems, 2021; Neo et al., 2024), this has not yet been examined.

We make at least three contributions with this study. First, we advance research on public sector worker stereotypes to focus on the outcomes of such subjectively assigned meanings. We draw on the social identity approach and signaling theory, which have been extensively applied to understand mechanisms of employer branding generally (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016) but are still neglected in public recruitment research (Jakobsen et al., 2023). Second, whereas extant literature primarily deals with overarching public and private sector worker distinctions (Bertram et al., 2022) and "typical" public sector professions, such as nurses and police officers (Willems, 2020), we extend the focus to professions that are present and necessary across both the public and private sector. Third, we generate new empirical knowledge about the contemporary challenge of public employer attractiveness with relevance for practitioners. If negative stereotypes are present and matter for attraction, public organizations are likely to be overlooked by a pool of candidates, without being able to compete on actual job attributes. By understanding these mechanisms and the specific stereotypes behind sector attraction, public managers will be better equipped to design employer branding strategies and recruitment campaigns to improve their image.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Dovidio et al. (2010, p. 8), stereotypes are "associations and beliefs about the characteristics and attributes of a group and its members that shape how individuals think about and respond to the group." With this definition, we follow the social cognition approach to argue that stereotyping allows individuals to efficiently categorize and generalize groups as a result of overly simplified information-processing (Bordalo et al., 2016; Harrits, 2019). Based on similarities and dissimilarities with oneself, individuals categorize others according to in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel, 1982). However, relying on stereotypes as cognitive shortcuts might bias how individuals perceive others and in turn behave in relation to these individuals. This can result in stigmatization whereby specific out-groups are devaluated (Kreiner et al., 2022).

Studies examining stereotypes related to the public sector can overall be divided into two groups. One group examines stereotypes about the sector in general, such as individuals' perceptions of its performance. One of the first investigations into public sector stereotypes were Marvel's (2015, 2016) studies, comparing individuals'

performance expectations of the United States Postal Service (USPS) and Federal Express (FedEx). Using survey experiments, he found that individuals expect USPS to perform worse than FedEx, even when given identical performance information. Generally, the public sector has often been portrayed as inferior to the private sector in broader society (e.g., Hvidman & Andersen, 2016; Van de Walle, 2004).

Negative talk about the public sector may influence and perpetuate negative stereotypes in society (Hendriks et al., 2024; Szydlowski et al., 2022) and additionally spill over to the people working here (Willems, 2020). Another group of studies therefore examines stereotypes about public sector workers, including specific professionals within the sector. For example, it has often been argued that public sector workers are perceived as being boring, lazy, and less hardworking, compared to private sector workers (see Bertram et al. (2022)). Likewise, Chen and Bozeman (2014) found that public managers perceive talent and creativity lower among public sector workers compared to private sector workers. Willems (2020) provides nuances into this by examining both the overall public sector worker and 11 specific professions that are typically perceived as either public, private, or nonprofit. He finds that the public sector worker is more negatively perceived than some specific public professions (nurse, firefighter, and police officer), but more positively perceived than other professions (politicians, lawyers, and salesmen). While this may be true for professions that are very typical of one sector, it may be different for professions that are more equally present across sectors. Here, professional identity may be reflected in the specific sector or organization rather than the profession. Therefore, we propose that the same type of professionals (including the overarching "public sector worker" category) will be more negatively stereotyped in the public sector compared to the private sector:

> **H1.** Job seekers' stereotypes toward professionals in the public sector are more negative than toward similar professionals in the private sector.

Influence on attraction

Although studies about public sector worker stereotypes have been around for a while, we still do not know much about their mechanisms (Bertram et al., 2022; Dinhof et al., 2023). A possible implication relates to the attractiveness of the public sector as an employer. In early recruitment stages, job seekers gather only limited and incomplete information about potential employers (Baum & Kabst, 2012; Lee & Jilke, 2024; Spence, 1973). While the labor market contains signals from many different employers, job seekers are likely to draw on their preceding beliefs about a potential employer, which can simplify information-processing and decision-making (Battaglio et al., 2019; Turban, 2001). These beliefs are inferred based on the few signals received from the employers. In the very beginning of a job search, this typically includes the type of employer (including sector) and the job title (Lee & Jilke, 2024). These signals also function as a way to interact with job seekers' social identities and are interpreted to generate a picture of what it would be like to work for a potential employer (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Spence, 1973).

Although favorable stereotypes about one's social identity group can work to enhance professional image, negative stereotypes can work to devalue one's professional image (Roberts, 2005). Hence, if a sector and its professionals are negatively stereotyped, it might be less attractive as a potential employer as job seekers' will interpret the sector signal as something that will negatively reflect on one's social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Highhouse et al., 2007; Zhan et al., 2022). Although some attributes may be obvious without looking into a job advertisement (Asseburg et al., 2020), stereotypes about professionals may simultaneously create a profound and unjustified foundation for biased decisions of job seekers in the initial job search.

Complementing these perspectives, the employer knowledge framework posits that individuals' memories and associations about an employer affect attraction and behavior toward this employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). Three aspects are argued to constitute employer knowledge: (i) employer familiarity (i.e., job seekers' awareness about an employer), (ii) employer reputation (i.e., job seekers' beliefs about how the employer is evaluated by others), and (iii) employer image (i.e., job seekers' own beliefs about an organization). In this terminology, stereotyping can be seen as equivalent to image (Pepermans & Peiffer, 2024), which is affected by familiarity and reputation.

Numerous empirical studies have confirmed the positive effects of having a good employer image (see Lievens and Slaughter (2016) for a review), not least in terms of attracting more and talented applicants. Besides the employer itself, the industry (Cable & Graham, 2000) and sector (Peiffer et al., 2018) in which organizations operate are also important determinants of how organizations are perceived. Pepermans and Peiffer (2024) investigate how sector reputation and stereotypical beliefs about competence and warmth of sectors influence attraction to both the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. They find that perceived competence matters, whereas warmth does not. Furthermore, the public sector is considered the least competent and has the weakest reputation of the three sectors.

In a recent three-stage conjoint study by Lee and Jilke (2024), they show that the sector matters for attraction in the first stage of the job search, that is, when only the employment sector and job title (profession) is available.

Similarly, we argue that jobs in the public sector will be less attractive to job seekers compared to jobs in the private sector. Additionally, we argue that the importance of sector in the initial stage of the attraction process varies according to individuals' stereotypical beliefs about the professionals working in the sector. More specifically, we propose that individuals with positive stereotypical beliefs about professionals in a specific sector will be initially attracted based on the signals from the sector and they will thus continue assessing the recruiting organization in terms of actual job attributes. On the other hand, for individuals with negative stereotypical beliefs, the sector affiliation might be more important for their nonattraction to a job than actual job attributes. In summary, we propose the following two hypotheses:

> **H2a.** A job affiliated with the public sector has a negative effect on job seekers' interest to study its job advertisement details, compared to a similar job affiliated with the private sector.

> **H2b.** Job seekers' sector-specific stereotypes about professionals moderate the relationship between a job's sector affiliation and job seekers' interest to study the job advertisement details.

METHODOLOGY

The study and its procedures were ethically approved (approval meeting minutes dated May 25, 2023). The hypotheses, research design, and analysis plan were preregistered at the Open Science Framework (OSF) before all data were collected and prior to starting any analyses (link). After valuable reviewer suggestions, we made some deviations from the pre-registration. Following the procedure and template recommend by Willroth and Atherton (2024), we have reported deviations in Appendix A to be completely transparent about this. Survey and online appendices are openly available at OSF (link).

Sample

Our sample consists of job seeking British citizens residing in the UK. The public recruitment system in the UK is one of the most highly position-based among OECD countries (OECD, 2009), meaning that it is easier for individuals to switch sectors and have different career paths compared to countries with a career-based system. This makes the UK an interesting context as it is possible for both public and private sector workers to easily pursue careers across sectors.

We conducted a power analysis in G*Power (Faul et al., 2007). We could only make assumptions about effect sizes based on previous research related to our hypotheses. Although studies have shown mixed results for the public sector attraction, several of the types of individuals and professions we are interested in have often been shown to be less interested in public employment (e.g., Asseburg & Homberg, 2020; Fowler & Birdsall, 2020; Korac et al., 2019). Overall, we therefore expect low- to medium-sized effects. The power analysis revealed that a sample size of 271 respondents allows us to detect an odds ratio of 0.5 with a standard 0.05 alpha probability and with a power of 0.8 in a one-tailed logistic regression with other variables explaining 0.2 of the variability. We thus instructed a professional panel provider to randomly recruit a sample of 300 citizens in the UK but used gender and age quotas to ensure a certain degree of balance and representativeness in the sample. To increase external validity of the results, we asked a filter question to sample participants who identified themselves as actual job seekers when participating in the survey. It was necessary that participants were actively thinking about finding a new job and would thus potentially be confronted with recruitment efforts at that point in time. We specifically wanted our sample to consist of an overweight of individuals with higher academic degrees within disciplines related to social sciences, such as business, public administration, and economics. Individuals with these types of educations are often eligible for the same type of jobs across industries and sectors.

To arrive at our final sample, we excluded three participants who were not recorded correctly, two students, and five participants above the age of 65 as they are less relevant for the study purpose. We thus ended up with a sample of 290 individuals. Table 1 displays sample characteristics (a comparison to population characteristics is available from Appendix B). Most of the participants are full-time employees (63.5%), but the sample also includes part-time (19.5%), self-employed (5%), and unemployed (12%). Of the employed sample, 57% are currently employed in the private sector, 36% in the public sector, and 7% in the nonprofit sector. 81% of the sample have a university degree whereas 19% do not. Descriptive statistics further show that the sample consists of 39% males and 61% females with an average age of 45 years.

Procedure and measurement

Figure 1 displays a flow chart of our survey procedure. Data were collected in two waves between June and August 2023. Demographics and other control variables were collected in the first wave, whereas we conducted a survey experiment and collected data for the moderator variable in the second wave. Matching of responses from Waves 1 and 2 was done through anonymous identifiers provided by Qualtrics.

TABLE 1 Sample characteristics.

Variable	Category	*N*	%
Employment status	Full-time employee	184	63.45
	Part-time employee	56	19.31
	Self-employed	15	5.17
	Unemployed	35	12.07
Current sector of work (employed only)	Private sector	146	57.25
	Public sector	91	35.69
	Nonprofit sector	18	7.06
Length of job search (unemployed only)	Less than 6 months	3	8.57
	Between 6 and 12 months	10	28.57
	More than 12 months	22	62.86
Sector experience	No experience	8	2.76
	Only private experience	141	48.63
	Only public experience	60	20.69
	Only nonprofit experience	5	1.72
	Public and private experience	42	14.48
	Public and nonprofit experience	9	3.10
	Private and nonprofit experience	5	1.72
	Experience from all three sectors	20	6.90
University degree	Have a degree	234	80.69
	Do not have a degree	56	19.31
Field of university study (only respondents with a degree)	Business Administration and Management	93	39.74
	Public Administration/Political Science	29	12.39
	Economics	19	8.12
	Another field within social sciences	76	32.48
	Other fields	17	7.26
Gender	Female	176	60.69
	Male	113	38.97
	Nonbinary	1	0.34
Age ($M = 45.39$, SD = 11.79)	17–25 years	9	3.10
	26–35 years	59	20.34
	36–45 years	76	26.21
	46–55 years	75	25.86
	56–65 years	71	24.48
Total		290	100

Step 1: Control variables

Participants were initially introduced to the study by informing them that we wanted to use their anonymous responses to examine individuals' perceptions of and attitudes toward different occupations. After giving their informed consent, participants were first asked to answer a number of questions related to demographics and other variables considered relevant control variables.

Gender. Following the assumptions of social identity theory, gender relates to individuals' behavior and attitudes (Korac et al., 2019; Tajfel, 1978). It has been documented that gender influences preferences for employment sector and job attributes, as summarized by Korac et al. (2019).

Age. Older individuals are often more collectively oriented and tend to have more trust in government than younger individuals have (Christensen & Lægreid, 2005). It is therefore expected that older individuals are more positive toward public sector occupations.

Employment status and sector experience. Stereotyping often happens in terms of one's out-group (Bertram et al., 2022; Dovidio et al., 2010). Thus, individuals having experience from a particular sector might be more positive toward occupations in that sector. We therefore asked participants from which sectors they have experience and their current employment status.

Political orientation. Given the general conviction that liberals are more supportive of government, political

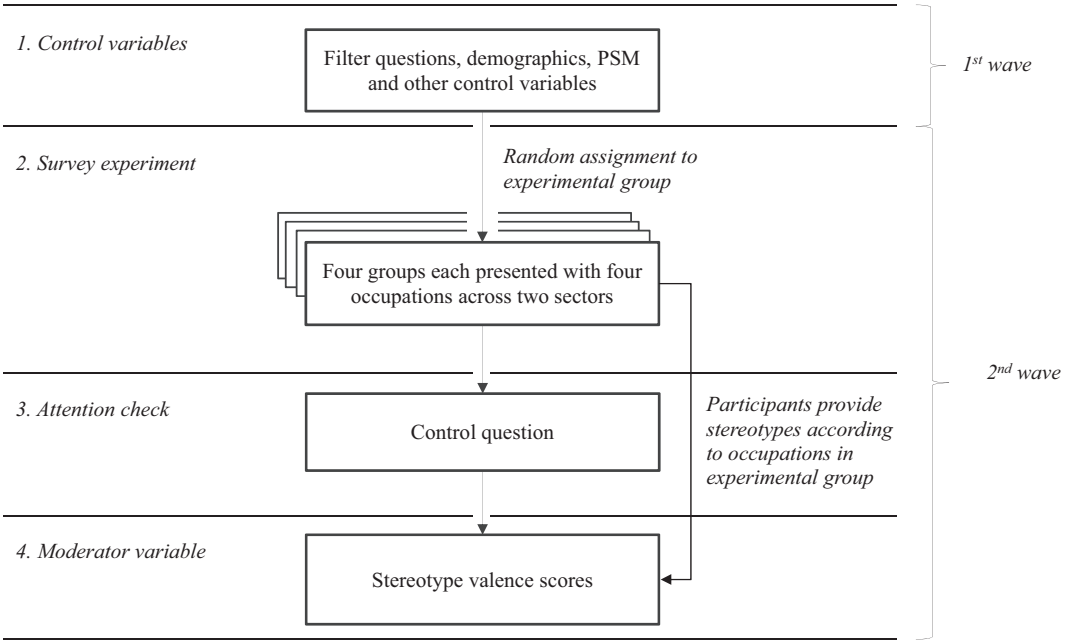


FIGURE 1 Survey procedure.

orientation is often included as a control variable in studies examining attitudes toward the public sector (e.g., Bertram et al., 2022; Willems, 2020). To capture nuances in participants' political attitudes, we amended the two-item 5-point Likert scale questions used by Döring and Willems (2021) who asks to what extent individuals consider themselves conservative and liberals, respectively, to a single 10-point Likert scale with 10 indicating very conservative and 1 indicating very liberal.

Public service motivation (PSM). Evidence suggests that individuals with a high level of PSM are more attracted to public sector jobs (Asseburg et al., 2020). We thus included a five-item validated global measure of PSM (Cronbach's Alpha: 0.80; Wright et al., 2013).

Step 2: Survey experiment

After the first wave of data collection, the panel provider contacted the same respondents to collect data in a second wave. We conducted a survey experiment in which participants were shown a fake, but similar email to what recruitment platforms such as LinkedIn would send to individuals who signed up for it. To ensure a sense of reality, we screened various recruitment platforms and signed up to receive those kinds of emails to imitate them (see vignettes in Appendix C). We chose four broad categories of professions represented in all sectors ("analyst," "project manager," "consultant," and "administrative worker"). These professions were chosen based on a screening of job ads on actual recruitment platforms although we had to make them more generic than is often the case in real-life. Each vignette shows jobs of all four professions, two in the public sector and two in the private sector. We chose to use overall sectors rather than actual company names to ensure that differences in familiarity with a particular company did not influence results (Cable & Turban, 2001). However, we still mirror reality in the sense that recruitment platforms also search for employees for anonymous clients.

Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the vignettes. The participants were told to imagine that they had signed up to receive job ads from a recruitment agency. They were then instructed to select those jobs for which they would have an interest in continuing to the full advertisement. Participants could choose all the jobs and were forced to choose at least one.

Our main independent variable is a binary variable of the public (1) and private (0) sector across the different jobs. Our dependent variable is a binary variable of participants' interest in continuing to the job ads or not for each of the different jobs (1 = *interested*, 0 = *not interested*). Specifically, participants are asked to mark for each job whether it had caught their attention to see the full advertisement. Thus, this serves as an indication of employer attractiveness in the initial phase of recruitment efforts.

Step 3: Attention check

During both survey waves, we included instructed-response attention checks. We thus requested participants to select a specific response from a list of items based on very simple instructions that were not related to the purpose of the survey. This type of attention check

does not affect validity of other survey measures, and it can therefore be used to efficiently detect careless participants to ensure data quality (Kung et al., 2018). We only included participants who passed both attention checks.

Step 4: Stereotypes

In another part of the survey, we measured stereotype valence scores. Like other studies (e.g., Willems, 2020), we included two overarching categories for which participants are asked to indicate generalized beliefs about: "private sector workers" and "public sector workers." However, information-processing about different categories is suggested to be guided by more specific sublevels as global stereotypes are too broad to capture social perceptions about groups (Devine & Baker, 1991). We therefore additionally included various sublevels of workers to compare stereotypes across the specific professions used in the survey experiment, such as "analyst in the private sector" and "analyst in the public sector." Whereas all 290 participants provided their associations with the two overarching categories, each participant was asked to provide associations for professionals according to the same four professions that were presented to them in their assigned vignette. Thus, for the subcategories they provided associations for two types of professionals in the private sector and two in the public sector, generating a total of 1151 stereotype valence scores for specific professionals across the sectors (9 are missing) and 290 stereotype valence scores for each of the two overall categories, that is, public and private sector workers.

Following a method originally designed by Katz and Braly (1933) and similar to Bertram et al. (2022), we provided the participants with a list of 36 words and asked them to select which characteristics/traits they associate with each type of professional. The list of words was compiled based on common stereotypes found in other studies (Bertram et al., 2022; Willems, 2020), combined with a supplemental study conducted prior to the main study to ensure accuracy of the words for the context of this study. Details about this supplemental study are provided in Appendix D. After selecting characteristics/traits from the list, participants were asked to select the five traits that they *mostly* associate with the type of professional at hand. Subsequently, they rated these traits on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) in terms of how desirable they viewed them for the specific category. The stereotype valence score for a type of professional was calculated as the average of the scores across the selected traits. A higher score indicates more positivity toward the professional, whereas a lower score indicates more negativity.

Analytical procedure

To examine the content and connotations of stereotypes about the different professionals (H1), we first use the stereotype valence scores to test differences in means across public and private sector professionals. To provide a more fine-grained analysis of the specific connotations, we use discriminant function analysis (DFA). This analysis was not pre-registered but adds exploratory information and visualization of how specific subcategories are similar or different from each other by identifying dimensions that account for variance in predicting group membership (Devine & Baker, 1991).

To test our main hypotheses (H2a,b), we use logistic regression. We test whether attraction is explained by sector affiliation and include control variables and the stereotype valence scores for both the overall worker categories and specific professionals across sectors as moderators in subsequent steps. We do this in two separate analyses: the first integrates all the specific professions in one model and treats them as control variables. Here, our design allows us to treat each respondent as four observations as they were each asked to choose among four jobs which they were interested in. This approach was suggested by one of the reviewers, and it was therefore not pre-registered. The second runs models for each profession separately as pre-registered. Table 2 displays means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations of the study variables.

RESULTS

Content of stereotypes (H1)

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics for the stereotype valence scores for the public and private sector worker categories with and without the signal of specific professions. In general, both stereotype valence scores are lower for the public sector worker category. As all respondents have provided scores for both public and private sector workers without the signal of specific professions, we conducted a paired samples t-test to test the significance of the mean difference, showing a statistically significant difference, $t(580) = -3.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.202$. Likewise, independent *t*-test analysis shows a statistically significant difference in stereotype valence scores between public and private sector workers when including a signal of specific professions, $t(1{,}151) = -7.36$, $p = .014$, $d = 0.146$. We can hereby confirm H1, that is, job seekers' stereotypes toward professionals in the public sector are more negative than toward similar professionals in the private sector. However, both effect sizes are small, particularly the effect size when including a signal of a specific profession, indicating that stereotypes may be more prevalent when no such signal is present.

We exploratively examined differences in subgroups of the sample (see Appendix E). We find that individuals with experience from only the private sector and/or current work in the private sector are more negative toward public compared to private sector workers. Descriptive

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics and correlations.

	Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Attraction (continue to job ad = 1) (d)	n/a	n/a	1.00											
2	Sector (public sector = 1) (d)	n/a	n/a	−.05	1.00										
Stereotype valence scores															
3	Public sector worker	3.70	1.26	.00	.00	1.00									
4	Private sector worker	3.92	.83	.03	.00	.61*	1.00								
5	Public sector professional	3.89	.95	.01	.00	.49*	.48*	1.00							
6	Private sector professional	3.04	.84	.02	.00	.22*	.56*	.34*	1.00						
Other study variables															
7	Analyst	n/a	n/a	−.07*	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	1.00					
8	Consultant	n/a	n/a	−.07*	−.02	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.33*	1.00				
9	Project manager	n/a	n/a	−.03	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.33*	−.33*	1.00			
10	Administrative worker	n/a	n/a	.18*	.02	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.33*	−.33*	−.33*	1.00		
11	Full time employee (d)	n/a	n/a	.02	.00	.01	.02	.03	−.03	.00	.00	.00	.00	1.00	
12	Part-time employee (d)	n/a	n/a	−.02	.00	.06*	−.02	−.04	−.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.65*	1.00
13	Self-employed (d)	n/a	n/a	−.01	.00	−.18*	−.02	−.14	.10*	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.31*	−.11*
14	Unemployed (d)	n/a	n/a	−.00	.00	.03	−.00	.09*	−.03	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.49*	−.18*
15	Experience only from private sector (d)	n/a	n/a	.03	.00	−.18*	−.06*	−.09*	−.04	.00	.00	.00	.00	.15*	−.20*
16	Experience only from public sector (d)	n/a	n/a	−.02	.00	.17*	.05	.05	.04	.00	.00	.00	.00	.09*	.07*
17	Experience only from nonprofit sector (d)	n/a	n/a	−.00	.00	−.01	.02	−.05	.04	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.06*	.14*
18	Experience from private and public sector (d)	n/a	n/a	−.02	.00	.05	.07*	.04	.05	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.10*	.12*
19	Experience from private and nonprofit sector (d)	n/a	n/a	−.02	.00	.01	.05	.07*	.02	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.01	.00
20	Experience from public and nonprofit sector (d)	n/a	n/a	.03	.00	.06	−.03	.07*	−.03	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.03	.01
21	Experience from all three sectors (d)	n/a	n/a	.01	.00	.00	−.02	−.02	.02	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.10*	.04
22	No sector experience (d)	n/a	n/a	−.02	.00	−.05	−.07*	.03	−.13*	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.22*	−.03
23	Female (d)	n/a	n/a	−.04	.00	.10*	−.01	.04	.04	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.20*	.14*
24	Age	45.39	11.78	−.02	.00	−.06*	.07*	−.13*	.02	.00	.00	.00	.00	−.03	.13*
25	Political orientation	5.37	2.29	.03	.00	−.13*	.07*	−.09*	−.07*	.00	.00	.00	.00	.17*	−.14*
26	PSM	3.70	.70	.03	.00	.29*	.25*	.32*	.17*	.00	.00	.00	.00	.04	.16*

	Variable	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
13	Self-employed (d)	1.00													
14	Unemployed (d)	−.09*	1.00												
15	Experience only from private sector (d)	−.04	.042	1.00											
16	Experience only from public sector (d)	−.04	−.19*	−.50*	1.00										
17	Experience only from nonprofit sector (d)	−.03	−.05	−.13*	−.07*	1.00									

TABLE 2 (Continued)

	Variable	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
18	Experience from private and public sector (d)	.04	−.03	−.40*	−.21*	−.06	1.00								
19	Experience from private and nonprofit sector (d)	−.03	.03	−.13*	−.07*	−.02	−.06	1.00							
20	Experience from public and nonprofit sector (d)	−.04	.06	−.17*	−.09*	−.02	−.07*	−.02	1.00						
21	Experience from all three sectors (d)	.12*	.02	−.27*	−.14*	−.04	−.11*	−.04	−.05	1.00					
22	No sector experience (d)	.06	.33*	−.16*	−.09*	−.02	−.07*	−.02	−.03	−.05	1.00				
23	Female (d)	−.00	.13*	−.21*	.13*	.05	.09*	−.00	.06*	−.00	.01	1.00			
24	Age	.06*	−.16*	.01	−.02	.13*	.05	−.03	.01	−.00	−.14*	−.13*	1.00		
25	Political orientation	.04	−.11*	.23*	.04	−.10*	−.11*	−.08*	−.11*	−.12*	−.10*	−.25*	.09*	1.00	
26	PSM	−.19*	−.13*	−.06*	−.02	.07*	.04	.04	.09*	.01	−.05	−.01	−.01	−.11*	1.00 (.80)

*$p < .05$.

statistics suggest that this is the opposite for individuals with experience from only the public sector and/or current work in the public sector, but these differences are smaller and not significant.

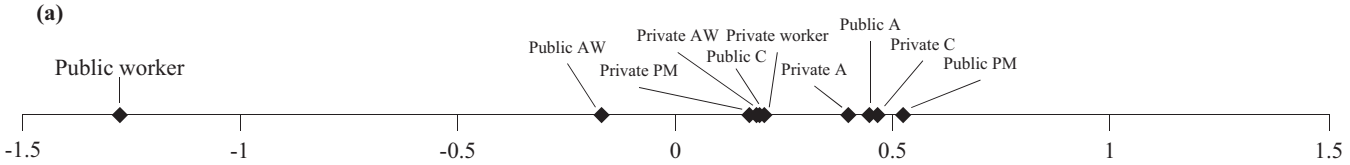
In Appendix F, we display the frequency of traits selected for each category to examine the stereotypes more qualitatively. In general, we conclude from this that larger differences between the overall categories exist than within the specific professions. We explore these differences further by discriminant function analysis (DFA) to better understand similarities and differences between the professional groups. In DFA, the traits are used to define different functions. Larger coefficients imply that a trait contributes more strongly to the ability of the function to distinguish the professionals based on the traits. Furthermore, the sign of each coefficient indicates whether traits co-occur with other traits, that is, traits that share the same coefficient often describe the same professional group. Each professional group is positioned along these functions by group centroids, representing a mean value of the discriminant scores for each professional group on the functions. Magnitudes of centroids illustrate to what extent the traits describing the function align with the traits central to the professional group. Professions with centroids near 0 on a function thus indicate that the traits used to describe this profession do not align well with how the traits define a function (Yantis & Bonam, 2021). Detailed results are provided in Appendix G, but Figure 2 illustrates the most meaningful findings.

In the figure, we interpret only the two significant functions that explain 47% and 30% of the variance in the responses, respectively. For each of the two functions, we have positioned the professional groups according to the group centroids to see how the functions describe the groups and how they distinguish from each other. For both positive and negative associations, we show the five traits that have the strongest associations for each function but highlight those that are above ±0.20. Panel A of the figure shows that the overall category of public sector workers is located at one end of function 1, whereas the remaining groups are located close to each other and near 0. Similarly, panel B shows that the overall category of private sector workers is located at one end, with the remaining groups closer to 0. Thus, the functions indicate that the two overarching categories are somewhat distinct: Whereas public sector workers are mostly associated with "have high job security," "lazy," "helpful," "boring," and "busy," private sector workers are associated with "busy," "professional," "motivated," "well paid," and "arrogant." On the other hand, the functions do not perform well in distinguishing between the specific professional groups, suggesting that the traits used to describe each of them are not very distinct. Aligned with the indications based on the t-tests and frequencies, this suggests that individuals have stronger associations with the overall categories rather than the specific type of professionals.

TABLE 3 Stereotype valence scores.

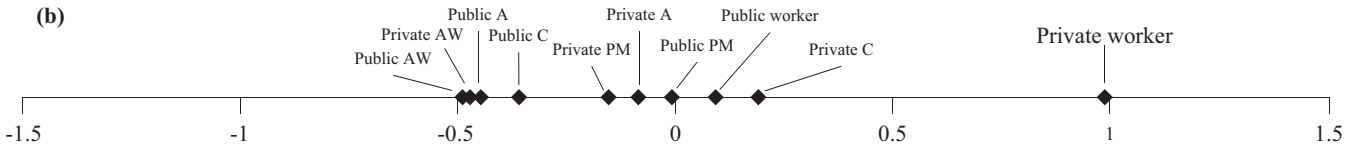
Condition	Treatment	Valid *N*	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Without signal of profession	Public	290	3.70	1.26	1	5
	Private	290	3.92	.83	1	5
With signal of profession	Public	576	3.89	1.09	1	5
	Private	575	4.04	.99	1	5

Note: Each respondent has provided scores for two specific types of professionals in the public sector and two specific types of professionals in the private sector (9 observations are missing), whereas each respondent has provided a score the two overall categories without a specific professional signal.



Characteristic	Function 1 coefficient
Have high job security	**-.402**
Lazy	**-.329**
Helpful	**-.317**
Boring	**-.287**
Busy	**-.217**

Characteristic	Function 1 coefficient
Exhibit leadership	**.205**
Smart	.151
Well paid	.148
Intelligent	.145
Knowledgeable	.129



Characteristic	Function 2 coefficient
Organized	**-.282**
Loyalty	-.173
Trustworthy	-.150
Boring	-.137
Do not work many hours	-.129

Characteristic	Function 2 coefficient
Busy	**.395**
Professional	**.387**
Motivated	**.364**
Well paid	**.338**
Arrogant	**.207**

FIGURE 2 Discriminant function analysis visualization. A, analyst; AW, administrative worker; C, consultant; PM, project manager.

Influence on attraction (H2a,b)

Table 4 shows the results from the aggregated logistic regression with employer attractiveness as the dependent variable measured by individuals' interest in continuing to a job ad, and the specific professions as control variables. Results are displayed in six models with main effects, control variables, and interaction effects entered stepwise. In model I, only the main effects of sector and stereotype valence scores are included. Second, control variables are included in Model II. In Models III, IV, V, and VI, interaction effects between sector and the different stereotype valence scores are included separately, that is, the stereotype valence scores of public sector workers (Model III), private sector workers (Model IV), specific public sector professionals (Model V), and specific private sector professionals (Model VI), respectively.

H2a stipulated that a public sector job has a negative impact on job seekers' interest in studying its job advertisement details compared to a private sector job. Although the odds ratio of sector is below 1, it is marginally not statistically significant with a 5% significance level in the baseline specification (OR = 0.77, $p = 0.055$). However, it switches to significance when including control variables (OR = 0.77, $p = .042$). We thus confirm H2a.

TABLE 4 Logistic regression for employer attractiveness with professions as controls: Odds ratios (standard errors in parentheses).

	Model I	Model II	Model III	Model IV	Model V	Model VI
Main effects						
Public sector (H2a)	.782 (.100)	.766* (.100)	.209*** (.086)	.310 (.199)	.171** (.097)	1.220 (.790)
Stereotype valence score (public sector worker)	.962 (.066)	.974 (.072)	.828* (.074)	.974 (.072)	.973 (.073)	.974 (.072)
Stereotype valence score (private sector worker)	1.078 (.129)	1.061 (.135)	1.062 (.136)	.953 (.140)	1.061 (.136)	1.061 (.135)
Stereotype valence score (public sector professional)	1.008 (.082)	.985 (.086)	.985 (.086)	.985 (.086)	.827 (.089)	.986 (.086)
Stereotype valence score (private sector professional)	1.011 (.097)	1.022 (.101)	1.022 (.102)	1.022 (.101)	1.018 (.101)	1.079 (.134)
Interactions (H2b)						
Public sector × stereotype valence score (public sector worker)			1.420*** (.149)			
Public sector × stereotype valence score (private sector worker)				1.258 (.201)		
Public sector × stereotype valence score (public sector professional)					1.468** (.207)	
Public sector × stereotype valence score (private sector professional)						.891 (.140)
Controls						
Analyst[a]		.403*** (.073)	.398*** (.073)	.402*** (.073)	.403*** (.074)	.401*** (.073)
Consultant[a]		.410*** (.074)	.411*** (.075)	.411*** (.075)	.411*** (.075)	.409*** (.074)
Project Manager[a]		.501*** (.089)	.504*** (.090)	.502*** (.089)	.500*** (.089)	.502*** (.089)
Female[b]		.878 (.127)	.877 (.128)	.878 (.127)	.876 (.127)	.877 (.127)
Age		.997 (.006)	.997 (.006)	.997 (.006)	.997 (.006)	.997 (.006)
Employed—Part time[c]		.962 (.174)	.960 (.174)	.962 (.174)	.958 (.174)	.961 (.174)
Self-employed[c]		.863 (.277)	.859 (.278)	.864 (.277)	.863 (.278)	.863 (.277)
Unemployed[c]		1.012 (.225)	1.009 (.225)	1.011 (.225)	1.010 (.225)	1.013 (.225)
Only public experience[d]		.936 (.170)	.933 (.171)	.936 (.170)	.936 (.171)	.936 (.170)
Public and private experience[d]		.903 (.188)	.903 (.188)	.903 (.188)	.907 (.189)	.903 (.188)
Experience from all three sectors[d]		1.099 (.295)	1.097 (.297)	1.096 (.295)	1.096 (.296)	1.102 (.295)
Other categories of experience[d,e]		1.014 (.252)	1.011 (.252)	1.014 (.252)	1.010 (.252)	1.015 (.252)
Political orientation		1.023 (.032)	1.023 (.033)	1.024 (.032)	1.023 (.032)	1.024 (.032)
PSM		1.054 (.078)	1.053 (.078)	1.053 (.078)	1.053 (.078)	1.054 (.078)
Intercept	.403* (.153)	.897 (.478)	1.633 (.922)	1.370 (.832)	1.811 (1.070)	.716 (.442)
N	1144	1144	1144	1144	1144	1144
Pseudo R^2	.003	.030	.038	.032	.036	.031
AIC	1423	1412	1403	1412	1407	1414
BIC	1453	1513	1509	1518	1513	1520

[a]Reference category: Administrative Worker.
[b]Reference category: Male and nonbinary.
[c]Reference category: Full-time employees.
[d]Reference category: Experience from the private sector.
[e]Other categories include "only nonprofit experience," "private and nonprofit experience," "public and nonprofit experience," and "no experience," which are merged due to a low number of respondents.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.

The last four columns respond to H2b stating that the relationship between sector affiliation of a potential employer and continuing to a job advertisement is moderated by job seekers' sector-specific stereotypes about professionals. Both the interaction effect between sector and the stereotype valence score of public sector workers in general (OR = 1.42, $p < .001$) and the interaction effect between sector and the specific public sector professionals (OR = 1.47, $p = .006$) are significant. Neither of the interactions with stereotype valence scores of private sector workers and professionals are significant. Margins plots of the interactions (see Appendix H) show that when the stereotype valence scores of public sector workers and professionals are low, that is, when job seekers are negative toward public sector workers, job seekers are more likely to be attracted to a private sector job. When the stereotype valence scores are high, that is, when individuals are positive toward public sector workers, there is no difference in attraction to a private and public sector job. On the other hand, there is no heterogeneity in the attraction to a public or private sector job based on stereotype valence scores of private sector workers or professionals. Due to the robustness of ordinary least squares (OLS), we also performed this type of regression as an alternative approach to the logistic regression, which displays the same results (see Appendix I).

As pre-registered, we additionally conducted the analyses separately for each of the specific professions. The main results from models with control variables are visualized in plots of the odds ratios in Figure 3 (full model specifications are available from Appendix J). In these models, none of the interaction effects are significant. However, sector has a statistically significant and negative effect on the attraction to a project manager job when control variables are included (OR = 0.562, $p = .041$). Additionally, the stereotype valence score for public sector workers has a significantly negative effect on the attraction to a consultant job (OR = 0.723, $p = .72$, $p = .042$). None of the other effects are significant.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

With this study, we join the research stream on public sector worker stereotypes. First, our results confirm that job seekers are more negative toward professionals in the public sector compared to professionals in the private sector. This negativity bias is greatest when the specific profession is unknown, that is, when "public sector workers" are evaluated as an overall category. Consequently, our study suggests that perceptions of professionals across sectors are not very distinct, whereas we find larger discrepancies in the traits used to describe the overall public and private sector worker categories. This aligns with the early observation by Goodsell (1994) that citizens are more negative toward the government in general, but when "government" becomes more concrete, the negativity bias diminishes. On the other hand, it contrasts findings by Willems (2020) who find that other professions such as nurse, teacher, and politicians are more homogenous in the traits being used about them, compared to an overarching public sector worker category. One explanation of this can be related to social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012): Professions like nurses and teachers have more clearly defined social roles compared to administrative professions, leading to less uniform stereotypes for the latter. Additionally, several of the types of professions used by Willems (2020) are more gender-dominant than desk-bound jobs like we examine. Gender roles may therefore also play different roles in how these professions are perceived (see Dinhof & Willems, 2023). Thus, individuals may find it harder to distinguish administrative functions rather than professions that are more typical of one sector (and gender) and often require specific vocational education.

Like other studies (Bertram et al., 2022; Neo et al., 2024; Willems, 2020), we find that individuals do not exclusively have negative associations about public sector workers. For example, one of the strongest associations is "helpful." Aligned with the results by Bertram et al. (2022), we additionally find evidence of individuals working in the private sector being more negative toward public sector professionals compared to private sector professionals. On the other hand, there is no significant difference in stereotype valence scores of public and private sector professionals among individuals working in the public sector. Thus, whereas in-group/out-group distinctions can explain the negativity toward public sector professionals among private sector workers, the opposite does not apply among public sector workers. This may reflect that negative stereotypes about the private sector and its workers are not as deeply rooted in society as it is argued to be the case for the public sector and its workers (Marvel, 2016; Van de Walle, 2004).

While considerable literature on the presence of stereotypes of the public sector and its workers exists, we move beyond this to examine if professional stereotypes across sectors moderate the effect between sector and employer attractiveness in initial recruitment phases. First, we find that job seekers have a lower interest in continuing to a job ad for a public compared to a private job. Hence, we support the notion from Lee and Jilke (2024) that employment sector matters for job seekers' decision-making in early-stage job search decisions but in a different direction. A possible explanation of this difference in results is that whereas our sample contains 81% with a university degree, the sample in the study by Lee and Jilke (2024) contains more individuals with lower levels of education. Additionally, we intentionally sampled more individuals with higher academic degrees within fields as business and economics that would be eligible for the same job types. These types of individuals have

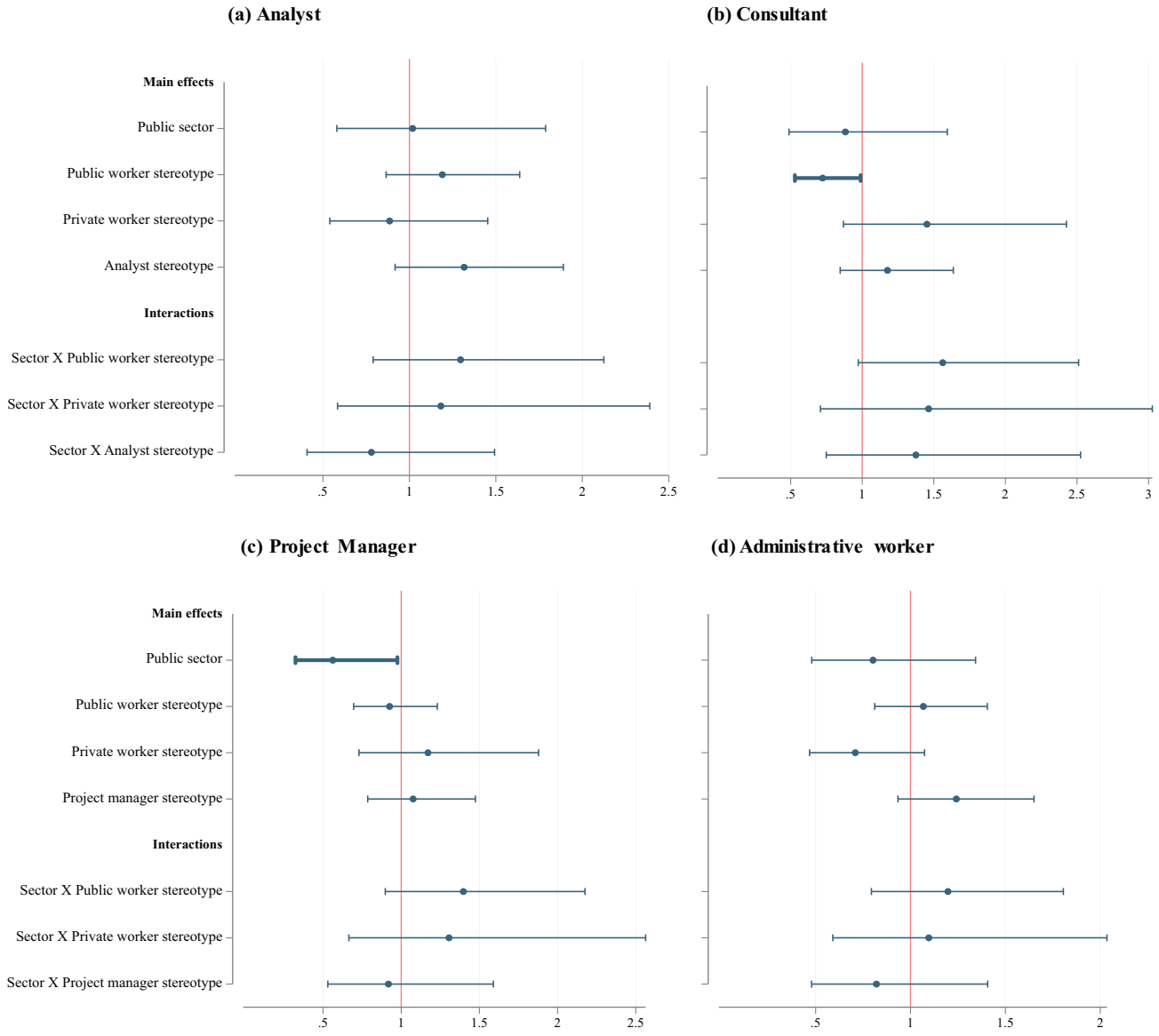


FIGURE 3 Odds ratio plots for employer attractiveness across professions. Bold lines indicate statistically significance. 95% confidence intervals. Full model specifications are available in Appendix J.

specifically been shown to be in less favor of public sector employment (Korac et al., 2019). However, Cordes and Vogel (2022) also build on a sample with this type of education, but find the opposite from us, that is, that public jobs are more attractive. Different from our study, they target students which makes participants in their sample a lot younger. In-groups and out-groups as well as professional identity may not be particularly strong for this target group yet. Exploratory analysis from our data shows that the older individuals (+45 years) are indeed more negative toward public sector professionals, whereas this is not true for younger individuals, which may be a driving force for this difference. This emphasizes the importance of evaluating mixed findings across studies examining attraction to the public sector based on different samples and study designs.

Furthermore, we find an interaction between choice of sector and stereotype valence scores of public sector workers and specific public sector professionals such that job seekers with negative attitudes are less likely to show interest in a public sector job. When the valence scores are positive, there is no difference in attraction to a public or private sector job. We do not find the same interaction for stereotypes about private sector workers and professionals. One interpretation is that stereotypes about public sector professionals are implicit attitudes like argued by Marvel (2016), that is, they exist outside individuals' conscious awareness. This can happen because individuals are exposed to shared cultural biases in their environment (Rudman, 2004). Thus, when we only find an interaction effect of stereotype bias toward public professions, it may reflect that individuals are not exposed to

shared negative attitudes about private sector professionals in the environment in the same way. Additionally, it has been shown that the public sector bias may hold even when individuals have had positive encounters with public organizations and their employees (Pino et al., 2016). Our arguments that the professional and social identity of individuals are compromised by joining the public sector are therefore supported by the findings.

As with any research, this study also has some limitations. First, results are not consistent when conducting the analysis across each specific profession rather than in an aggregated model. As the odds ratios are lower than expected when we conducted the a priori power analysis to guide our sample size decision, it is likely that we do not have enough power to detect significance of the effect sizes in the separate analyses. Second, we strengthen external validity by using a sample of current job seekers and designing the experimental vignettes based on real-life recruiting emails and occupations, but it is still not an accurate representation of reality. To increase external validity further, one could use actual company names in the vignettes. This could also reflect different levels of the public sector as individuals might perceive occupations in local government differently than central government which we cannot distinguish between with this study. On the other hand, using actual company names would blur the manipulation of sector signals as individuals' familiarity with specific organizations influences their attraction (Cable & Turban, 2001). Thus, our design has some advantages in isolating the sector signal exclusively.

Third, although the procedure we use to measure stereotypes is widely used, it has limitations. For example, this way of measuring individuals' perceptions is prone to social desirability. However, mirroring the argument by Bertram et al. (2022), this is expected to be of minor relevance for this study as stereotypes about public sector workers are not socially sensitive, like for example stereotypes about gender and race. Generally, there exists no consensus on how to conduct studies of stereotypes and more research is needed to uncover whether a predefined list is suitable and how the techniques work when examining different aspects of stereotyping.

Fourth, we focus on specific professions and target primarily individuals with a university degree in the UK. However, the cultural and administrative differences between countries might imply that respondents from countries other than the UK have different associations and perceptions of the sectors, for example, countries with a career-based recruitment system. A recent study also suggests that the "ideal public worker" differs according to citizens' national public administrative traditions (Neo et al., 2023). Different expectations to the ideal public worker may influence perceptions and stereotypes. Therefore, expanding research on stereotyping and consequences hereof to other occupations and cultural settings is necessary and we encourage scholars to use comparative designs to conduct cross-country research.

The findings in this study also have implications for practitioners. First, public sector signals become less important for job seekers' negativity bias when specific professions through a job title are also apparent. Therefore, it is important to consider how different job titles may work to provide a positive reflection on individuals' identity. Additionally, the results indicate that public sector jobs are disadvantaged by fewer job seekers continuing to a job ad. Particularly, individuals from the private sector have a negativity bias against public sector professionals. Easing sector mobility is therefore an important means to reduce the effect of biases. Additionally, it is important to proactively engage in branding activities toward students and early-career individuals who can easily pursue careers in different sectors to create positive first impressions.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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