



# Turning Into Disengaged Public Servants: Examining the Effects of Discrimination on Work Engagement

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## Abstract

Discrimination disempowers public servants, curtailing their vigor, dedication, and absorption at work. It breaches the psychological contract between public servants and public sector entities, provoking work disengagement. To the best of the author's knowledge, there is limited agreement about how work discrimination disengages public servants. A mediation analysis was conducted to examine the effects of discrimination on disengagement through work meaningfulness and job satisfaction. Discrimination did not directly alter work engagement. It disengaged public servants by disrupting meaningfulness and satisfaction. Alongside preventing discrimination, public managers should enhance the work climate, restoring meaningfulness and satisfaction to keep public servants engaged.

**Keywords** Discrimination · Engagement · Public servants · Satisfaction · Work meaningfulness

## Introduction

Public sector entities are forerunners in the field of anti-discrimination policies and practices (Colgan et al., 2009). Their publicness (Dobusch, 2017) makes them less likely than private sector entities to tolerate prejudicial practices intended to discriminate particular categories of employees (Jilke et al., 2018). Notwithstanding, previous research emphasized that public servants are likely to experience both explicit and subtle workplace discrimination (e.g., Alkadry & Tower, 2011). Discrimination involves an “...*unfair and negative treatment of workers (...) based on personal attributes that are irrelevant to job performance*” (Chung, 2001: p. 34). Such unfair practices are recurring in public sector entities dominated by a

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hegemonic organizational sub-culture (Palumbo & Manna, 2019), which prevents the establishment of an inclusive work climate (Andrews & Ashworth, 2015) and negatively influences individual work attitudes and behaviors (Cho & Sai, 2013).

Tarnishing the work atmosphere, discrimination curtails the organizational commitment of discriminated employees (Hur, 2020). It generates psychological withdrawal (Lee, 2019), making public servants less dedicated, vigorous, and resourceful in accomplishing their jobs (Volpone & Avery, 2013). Psychological withdrawal triggered by discrimination is aroused by weakened organizational identification (Qu et al., 2020) and disrupted affective commitment (Bayl-Smith & Griffin, 2014). Discrimination's adverse effects on disengagement are amplified in the public sector (Hopkins, 1980), where sensitivity toward fairness, transparency, and equality is entrenched in organizational dynamics (Triana et al., 2015).

Public sector entities are inherently focused on generating value for the community (Palumbo & Manesh, 2021). Coherently, in accomplishing their work activities public servants are energized by public service motivation (PSM: Schott & Bouwman, 2023). PSM entails a "...*general altruistic motivation to serve the interests of a community of people*" (Liu & Tang, 2011: p. 718) and is rooted in prosocial factors, such as altruism, empathy, and compassion (Perry & Wise, 1990). It prompts public servants to act out of self-interest and embrace compassion (Brewer et al., 2000). Experiencing discrimination inhibits PSM, entailing a breach of the public ethos (Crawson, 1997). Furthermore, prejudicial practices prevent public servants from flourishing at work, compromising their sense of meaning and purpose (Plimmer et al., 2022).

Disrupting the sense of significance of work, discrimination directly and indirectly impairs work engagement. On the one hand, it disempowers public servants, who are emotionally and cognitively challenged by prejudicial practices (Boulet et al., 2023). Disempowerment heralds psychological and physical detachment from the job, paving the way for limited energy and absorption in fulfilling their tasks (Deng et al., 2022). On the other hand, discrimination creates ambiguity and contradictions (Marshburn et al., 2017), jeopardizing work meaningfulness and satisfaction (Palumbo & Cavallone, 2022). Impoverished meaningfulness and satisfaction substantiate withdrawal behaviors, reverberating in reduced work engagement (Deitch et al., 2003).

Scholars agree about the adverse effects of workplace discrimination on engagement (Hsieh & Kao, 2022; Kim, 2015). However, evidence of how discriminatory practices determine withdrawal behaviors is limited. This is a major knowledge gap preventing us from designing and implementing tailored interventions to cope with discrimination and nourish public servants' work engagement. The article fills this gap by answering these research questions:

*R.Q. 1:* Does discrimination affect public servants' work engagement?

*R.Q. 2:* Do meaningfulness and satisfaction mediate the discrimination's implications on work engagement?

The article proceeds as follows. The next section develops the conceptual background against which the research hypotheses that guided this study were framed.

The methodology depicts the study sample and reports the statistical approach used to test the research hypotheses. The findings are articulated in the fourth section. Based on their discussion, conceptual and practical implications are elaborated. The concluding paragraph epitomizes the contribution of this research to theory and practice.

## Conceptual Background

The plague of work discrimination persists although many steps have been taken to tackle its determinants (Cheung et al., 2016). Institutional, organizational, and management initiatives aimed at addressing the sources of prejudicial practices have been successful in curbing overt forms of discrimination; conversely, they are ineffective in overcoming subtle discriminatory practices, which are hard to detect (Dipboye, 2013). Discrimination is a complex phenomenon that takes many shapes (Stypinska & Turek, 2017). Unfair workplace treatment can be embedded in organizational actions, determining an unfair allocation of workloads and awards or influencing the individual career (Coombs & King, 2005). Moreover, discrimination can intrude on interpersonal relationships, taking the form of harassment, verbal abuse, and threats that deteriorate the quality of the work climate (Dobscha et al., 2021).

The adverse effects of discrimination affect both people who directly experience it and those who are indirectly exposed to it, by simply observing prejudicial practices (Dhanani et al., 2018). Discrimination enacts a disempowering workplace, which dramatically impacts well-being (Clark et al., 2021) and prevents people from flourishing at work (Cavanagh et al., 2021). Work-related discrimination is especially harmful when people report high expectations of fairness in the workplace and are more sensitive to overt and subtle episodes of discrimination (Banerjee, 2008). Hence, prejudicial practices are detrimental within public sector entities, where employees perceive an intrinsic motivation “...to help others and safeguard the public interest” (Ritz et al., 2016: p. 414). Although public servants may face tangible and intangible barriers to reporting discrimination (Yu, 2023), experiencing unfairness dismantles the feelings of altruism and compassion that build PSM (Piatak & Holt, 2020).

Embracing a perspective rooted in Social Exchange Theory (SET), discriminatory practices are disempowering acts, that profoundly influence individual attitudes and behaviors (Cropanzano et al., 2017). When exposed to practices undermining organizational fairness, public servants perceive a state of dissonance that derives from the irreconcilability between actual work behaviors and the cognitive expectations underpinned by PSM (Abben et al., 2013). In such circumstances, public servants reciprocate the negative dynamics experienced at work with physical and psychological withdrawal (Nunez-Smith et al., 2009).

Public servants are willing to “...fully engage based on perceived voluntary favorable treatment by the work organization and its representatives”. Hence, direct or indirect episodes of discrimination pave the way for disengagement, nurturing sensations of unfair and unfavorable work-related treatments (Eisenberger et al., 2019: p. 1036). In this context, work engagement is understood as a positive state

of mind directed towards fulfillment and articulated through vigor, dedication, and absorption in performing organizational tasks (Bakker et al., 2014). Discrimination jeopardizes work engagement and debilitates organizational commitment (Zaniboni, 2015). In line with these arguments, it is hypothesized that:

*Hp. 1:* discrimination impoverishes the public servants' work engagement.

Since it denies the founding values of PSM, discrimination negatively impacts the perception of work meaningfulness, preventing people from making sense of their contribution to organizational dynamics (Mousa et al., 2022). Work meaningfulness refers to the deep sense of significance people retrieve in their job, as well as in their exchange with others (Rosso et al., 2010). It reflects the importance and value attached to individual jobs (Boeck et al., 2019). Discriminatory practices enact a hostile work environment (Caillier, 2021), inhibiting people from acknowledging their work's meaning and setting the ground for alienation (Nair & Vohra, 2010). Hence, unfairness impairs the ability to ascribe usefulness and worth to work (Peng, 2022).

Breaching the psychological contract with the organization and setting up a climate imbued with anxiety and apprehension, discrimination undermines job satisfaction (Triana et al., 2021). Implementing unfair treatment reduces the appreciation of individual worth at work and makes people less gratified with their job (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). On the one hand, discrimination enacts marginalization, which trim job satisfaction (Plexico et al., 2019). On the other hand, it frustrates positive expectations about fair rewards and awards, making people less comfortable with their job (Ensher et al., 2001). When social support is lacking, the negative effects of discrimination on job satisfaction are exacerbated (Harada et al., 2019), since discriminated public servants do not have adequate resources to cope with unfair treatment (Alam & Shin, 2021). Drawing on these arguments, it is assumed that:

*Hp. 2:* discrimination disrupts work meaningfulness;

*Hp. 3:* discrimination reduces job satisfaction.

Work meaningfulness makes people enjoy their job, acknowledging it as a life call (Duffy et al., 2014). Enabling people to recognize the utility and value of their work, meaningfulness boosts job satisfaction (Steger et al., 2012), generating positive sensations and emotions (Kubiak, 2022). In line with these considerations, meaningful work is conducive to a vibrant work atmosphere, which makes people fully gratified with their organizational activities (Haque & Khan, 2023). This encourages them to commit vigor, dedication, and absorption to realize their tasks (Clercq et al., 2019). Work meaningfulness enhances people's interest in their job, urging them to commit effort and resources to their duties (Fairlie, 2011). Appreciating the salience of their job for the generation of public value, people fulfill their need for belongingness and purposefulness (Mostafa et al., 2020). This motivates them to be more committed and dedicated at work (Han et al., 2021). In sum, it is anticipated that:

*Hp. 4:* Meaningfulness improves job satisfaction;

*Hp. 5: Meaningfulness advances work engagement.*

In addition to meaningfulness, job satisfaction is one of the most relevant drivers of work engagement, unleashing vigor, dedication, and absorption in the workplace (Yalabik et al., 2017). Being satisfied energizes people and motivates them to contribute to organizational activities enthusiastically (Brunetto et al., 2012). Job satisfaction fosters the identification process with the organization and inspires people to impact performance through their engagement (Ng et al., 2021). The greater the satisfaction, the stronger the willingness to embrace organizational citizenship behaviors, which trigger a more robust engagement at work (Park & Johnson, 2019). Hence, it is hypothesized that:

*Hp. 6: Job satisfaction adds to work engagement.*

As previously anticipated, discrimination determines a breach of the psychological contract between the public servants and the organization (DelCampo et al., 2010). Such a breach is especially damaging when people do not have formal or informal support to cope with it (Suazo & Turnley, 2010). Limited support witnesses the managers' incapacity to ensure fairness in the workplace (Chrobot-Mason, 2003). Rayton and Yalabik (2014) argue that the disruption of the psychological contract prompts people to reciprocate the organization with a feeling of meaninglessness and dissatisfaction, paving the way for being disengaged at work. Therefore, it is anticipated that:

*Hp. 7: Discrimination indirectly affects work engagement through its adverse effects on meaningfulness;*

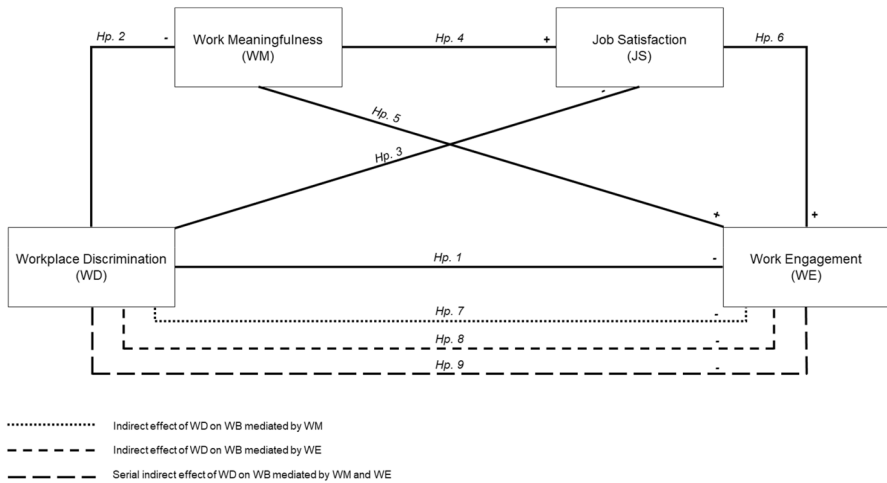
*Hp. 8: Discrimination indirectly affects work engagement through its adverse effects on job satisfaction;*

*Hp. 9: Discrimination indirectly affects work engagement through a serial path involving work meaninglessness and job dissatisfaction.*

Figure 1 graphically depicts the conceptual background. Alongside displaying the relationships between the study variables, it highlights the research hypotheses tested in the empirical analysis, as depicted below.

## Study Design

An empirical study design was arranged to test the research hypotheses. Secondary data were collected from the latest wave of the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS). The EWCS is sponsored by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound). It aims to assess the characteristics and quality of work conditions across Europe. Altogether, 36 countries have participated in the seventh wave of the EWCS, including the member states of the European Union as of 2023, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.



**Fig. 1** The study's conceptual framework

Data were originally collected between March and November 2021. Due to the constraints imposed by the Coronavirus Disease pandemic (Covid-19) at the time of data collection, a Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) technique was adopted to deliver the survey. Additional information about the EWCS can be retrieved in the technical report issued by Ipsos (2022), where details about the data collection process are described.

Secondary data were displayed on an electronic worksheet to investigate the dataset's contents. An initial attempt has been made to elicit the items enabling us to assess the study variables. First, the attention was focused on factors related to Workplace Discrimination (WD). Coherently with the conceptual background reported above, WD has been interpreted as a circumstance in which a member of the organization perceives an unfair or unjustified treatment based on attributes and/or behaviors that are irrelevant to job performance (Yeunaje Lee et al., 2021). As reported in Table 1, different items were used to assess this variable. Rather than relying on a specific measure of discrimination, a broad perspective has been embraced, assessing the subjective perceptions of unfair practices in the workplace (Dhanani et al., 2018). Alongside checking the respondents' experience of prejudicial practices at work, thought was paid to the feeling that work conditions determined risks for individual health. Violence, verbal threats, and abuses were gauged to detect the occurrence of subtle discriminatory practices at work. Following the approach taken in previous research (Pavalko et al., 2003), items related to discrimination were treated as dichotomous variables, with '1' indicating the occurrence of discrimination. WD was obtained from an additive integration of such items. Therefore, it was an interval scale variable, ranging from '0' (lowest levels of perceived WD) to '1' (greatest level of perceived WD).

Drawing on Tummers and Knies (2013), Work Meaningfulness (WM) mirrored the fit between the jobs fulfilled by public servants and the institutional goals pursued by public sector entities. Echoing the approach taken by Nikolova et al., (2023), two items were used to assess WM. On the one hand, the sense of fulfillment

**Table 1** The study measures

Variable (ID)	Items	Scale/Code	Type of variable	Obs	Descriptive statistics	
					$\mu$	$\sigma$
<b>Independent variable</b>						
Workplace Discrimination (WD)	Over the past 12 months at work, have you been discriminated at work? Do you think your health or safety is at risk because of your work? During the course of your work, have you been subjected to verbal abuse or threats? During the course of your work, have you been subjected to unwanted sexual attention?	0 = Absence of WD 1 = Occurrence of WD	Interval scale	644	0.13	0.34
	During the course of your work, have you been subjected to bullying, harassment, and/or violence?			644	0.32	0.47
	During the course of your work, have you been subjected to unwanted sexual attention?			644	0.11	0.31
	During the course of your work, have you been subjected to unwanted sexual attention?			644	0.02	0.14
	During the course of your work, have you been subjected to bullying, harassment, and/or violence?			644	0.07	0.26
<b>Mediating variables</b>						
Work Meaningfulness (WM)	Does your job give you the feeling of work well done? Do you have the feeling of doing useful work?	1 = worst sensation of WM 5 = best sensation of WM	Continuous	644	4.26	0.79
				644	4.44	0.73

Table 1 (continued)

Variable (ID)	Items	Scale/Code	Type of variable	Descriptive statistics
Job Satisfaction (JS)	Considering all my efforts and achievements in my job, I feel I get paid appropriately	1 = poorest level of JS 5 = highest level of JS	Continuous	644 3.38 1.38
	My job offers good prospects for career advancement			644 3.28 1.38
	I receive the recognition I deserve for my work			644 3.73 1.26
	I have enough opportunities to use my knowledge and skills in my current job			644 4.20 1.05
Dependent variable				
Work Engagement (WE)	At my work, I feel full of energy	1 = weakest level of WE 5 = strongest level of WE	Continuous	644 3.71 0.91
	I am enthusiastic about my job			644 3.89 0.94
	Time flies when I am working			644 4.03 0.85

Source: Author's own creation



associated with individual tasks was considered (Dean et al., 2022). On the other hand, the feelings of doing valuable and relevant work for the organization was contemplated (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). WM derived from the aggregation of two items assessed on a five-point Likert scale. It was measured as a continuous variable ranging from '1' (worst perception of WM) to '5' (best perception of WM). This variable had adequate internal consistency, discriminant validity, and convergent validity ( $\alpha=0.71$ ;  $CR=0.81$ ;  $AVE=0.68$ ).

Third, Job Satisfaction (JS) has been understood as a multifaceted – cognitive and affective – response to the job situation (Dalal & Credé, 2013). Since the levels of public servants' satisfaction at the time of the survey have been examined, items appreciating the 'state' job satisfaction rather than the 'generalized' job satisfaction have been used for the purpose of this empirical analysis (Niklas & Dormann, 2005). Following the scholarly recommendations (Judge et al., 2020; Wanous & Lawler, 1972), different aspects of job satisfaction have been pondered. More specifically, attention was paid to the contentment with the rewards and awards obtained for current performance and the appreciation of career and professional development prospects. JS was obtained by aggregating four items rated on a five-point Likert scale. JS was a continuous variable, ranging from '1' (lowest level of JS) to '5' (highest level of JS). This construct had satisfactory internal consistency, discriminant validity, and convergent validity ( $\alpha=0.69$ ;  $CR=0.79$ ;  $AVE=0.49$ ).

Lastly, in line with the definition developed by Schaufeli et al. (2002), Work Engagement (WE) was conceived as "...a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). To assess this construct, the ultra-short measure of WE has been used (Schaufeli et al., 2019). It consists of three items dealing with the energy expressed at work, the enthusiasm felt in the workplace, and the immersion in accomplishing organizational activities. Such factors were gauged on a five-point Likert scale. Therefore, WE was a continuous variable, ranging from '1' (weakest level of WE) to '5' (strongest level of WE). It had good internal consistency, discriminant validity, and convergent validity ( $\alpha=0.69$ ;  $CR=0.75$ ;  $AVE=0.50$ ).

Once the measurement approach was configured, the study sample was identified. Since this research focused on getting evidence of discriminatory practices' implications among public servants, the study sample exclusively included people participating to the seventh wave of the EWCS who, according to the broad groups of the statistical classification of economic activities in the European Community (NACE), reported to work in the field of Public Administration. Therefore, the sample consisted of people performing activities of governmental nature. Respondents who did not thoroughly complete the survey were cut off to avoid biases caused by missing data. Collectively, the study sample consisted of 644 respondents, whose sociodemographic attributes are displayed in Table 2.

The sample was evenly distributed per gender, with men (50.2%) slightly prevailing over women (49.7%). The different geographical areas of Europe were adequately represented in the sample. Eastern Europe (29.2%) and Central Europe (28%) represented the majority of respondents, followed by Mediterranean Europe (25.6%) and Northern Europe (17.2%). On average, public servants were 45 years old ( $\sigma=11$  years) at the time of the survey. Most of them reported higher education

**Table 2** The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (n = 644)

Variable	Total	
	No	%
Gender		
Men	323	50.2
Women	320	49.7
Do not know/Do not answer	1	0.1
Geographical location		
Northern Europe	111	17.2
Central Europe	180	28
Mediterranean Europe	165	25.6
Eastern Europe	188	29.2
Age		
24 years and below	20	3.1
Between 25 and 34 years	112	17.4
Between 35 and 44 years	188	29.2
Between 45 and 54 years	178	27.6
Between 55 and 64 years	132	20.5
65 years and above	14	2.2
Education		
Primary education	2	0.3
Secondary education	201	31.2
Tertiary education	441	68.5
Type of employment contract		
Indefinite duration contract	538	83.5
Fixed duration contract	99	15.4
Do not know/Do not answer	7	1.1
Type of work arrangement		
Full-time employment	572	88.8
Part-time employment	70	10.9
Do not know/Do not answer	2	0.3
Length of service		
1 years and below	28	4.3
Between 2 and 5 years	144	22.4
Between 6 and 10 years	97	15.1
Between 11 and 19 years	144	22.3
20 years and above	186	28.9
Do not know/Do not answer	45	7
Organizational size		
Small-size organization (less than 50 people)	107	16.6
Medium-sized organization (between 50 and 249 people)	359	55.7
Large-sized organization (250 people and more)	155	24.1
Do not know/Do not answer	23	3.6

**Table 2** (continued)

Variable	Total	
	No	%
Involved in flexible working arrangement		
Always	80	12.4
To some extent	334	51.9
Never	229	35.6
Do not know/Do not answer	1	0.1

(68.5%). About 8 in 10 had indefinite contract employment (83.5%) and worked full-time (88.8%). They worked for their current employer for about 14 years ( $\sigma = 10$  years). About half of public servants were employed by medium-sized public sector entities. Additionally, a third did not embrace flexible working arrangements (35.6%).

Serial mediation analysis was designed to test the research hypotheses and collect evidence of discrimination's direct and indirect implications on work engagement. The approach recommended by Hayes (2009) was implemented, which relied on Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regressions run on 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2018). This statistical model permitted us to get reliable evidence, providing similar results to more onerous computational techniques, such as structural equation modeling (Hayes et al., 2017). Statistical elaborations were conducted using the IBM® Statistical Package for Social Sciences and the PROCESS macro. Model 6 of the macro was exploited, which has been specifically conceived for serial mediation analysis. The main results of statistical elaborations are reported below.

## Findings

Discriminatory practices were a notable problem in the study sample ( $\mu = 0.13$ ;  $\sigma = 0.19$ ). A third of the respondents argued that their work put their health at risk (32%). Besides, more than 1 in 10 people claimed they suffered from prejudicial practices in the 12 months preceding the survey (12.9%). Similarly, a tenth of public servants self-reported to be victims of verbal abuse (11%). Bullying (7.5%) and unwanted sexual attention (2%) were relatively less common, but still present in the study sample. Public servants generally perceived that their work was meaningful ( $\mu = 4.35$ ;  $\sigma = 0.67$ ). More than half had a sensation of doing valuable work (54.8%). Besides, about 4 in 10 people claimed that they always felt they were doing the job well (42.4%). However, a tenth of the sample did not comprehensively grasp the value of their work (13.1%), and about 1 in 12 people could not entirely tell their job usefulness (7.9%). The public servants were moderately satisfied with their job ( $\mu = 3.64$ ;  $\sigma = 0.92$ ). A quarter of respondents reported being completely satisfied with the compensation received (24.1%) and the prospects for career advancement (21.7%). Besides, a third felt that they received the recognition they deserved for

their contribution to the organization's functioning (31.5%). Similarly, public servants were generally satisfied with the opportunities to use their knowledge and skills at work (49.4%). Public servants disclosed moderate engagement at work ( $\mu=3.88$ ;  $\sigma=0.71$ ). About 1 in 5 people maintained that they were full of energy at work (18.2%). Over a fourth of the sample disclosed a strong enthusiasm for accomplishing organizational tasks (27%). Lastly, a third of the public servants were significantly immersed in their job, arguing that they had a sensation of time flying at work (32.1%).

Table 3 reports the results of the serial mediation analysis. Alongside the main study variables, some covariates related to the respondents' socio-demographic factors and work arrangements were included in the analysis to check the dependability of the research findings. Disconfirming Hp. 1, the perception of prejudicial practices was not found to have implications on the respondents' vigor, dedication, and absorption at work ( $\beta=-0.02$ ;  $p>0.05$ ). However, in line with Hp. 2, workplace discrimination significantly undermined work meaningfulness ( $\beta=-0.62$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). Victims of discriminatory practices were more likely to have negative sensations about their job's usefulness and value. Similarly, unfair treatment at work had relevant and significant adverse implications on the public servants' satisfaction with their job ( $\beta=-1.41$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), upholding Hp. 3.

Confirming Hp. 4, work meaningfulness triggered positive implications on public servants' satisfaction ( $\beta=0.32$ ;  $p<0.001$ ): people who appreciated the value and usefulness of their work were more likely to express gratification with the current and future perspectives about their job. Moreover, both Hp. 5 and Hp. 6 were confirmed. On the one hand, work meaningfulness had statistically significant and positive effects on the degree of work engagement ( $\beta=0.32$ ;  $p<0.001$ ): public servants who felt their work as meaningful expressed stronger vigor, dedication, and absorption in accomplishing their tasks. On the other hand, public servants who were satisfied with their job were more engaged at work ( $\beta=0.22$ ;  $p<0.001$ ).

Although WD did not directly affect the public servants' work engagement, its indirect effects were statistically significant. First, prejudicial practices undermined the public servants' vigor, dedication, and absorption through the mediating role of work meaningfulness ( $\beta=-0.26$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), thus maintaining Hp. 7. Since it curtailed the sensations of job value and usefulness, the occurrence of workplace discrimination had side effects on work engagement, impoverishing the public servants' psychological state toward work. Second, supporting Hp. 8, discrimination jeopardized work engagement through job satisfaction ( $\beta=-0.32$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Aborting gratification with the current and future work prospects, discriminatory practices had negative implications on engagement, reducing the public servants' effort and commitment. Lastly, the serial indirect effect of WD on WE through the mediation of WM and JS was negative and statistically significant, sustaining Hp. 9 ( $\beta=-0.04$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). In sum, workplace discrimination had relevant side effects on work engagement, which were wholly mediated by work meaningfulness and job satisfaction ( $\beta=-0.62$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). Figure 2 graphically depicts the study findings of this empirical analysis, providing us with an overview of the research hypotheses testing.

Covariates did not significantly affect the study findings. Interestingly, people with higher education showed less work meaningfulness ( $\beta=-0.24$ ;  $p<0.001$ ):

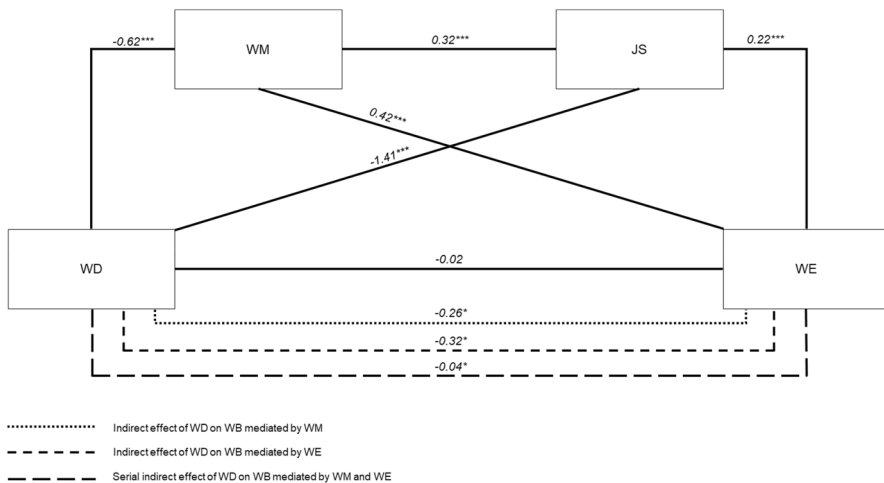
**Table 3** The results of the serial mediation analysis (n = 644)

Model 1—Output: WM						
Model Summary						
R	R <sup>2</sup>	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.33	0.11	0.40	8.85	8	600	0.000
	Coeff	se	T	p	LLCI	ULCI
Const	4.70	0.13	35.99	0.000	4.44	4.95
WD***	-0.62	0.13	-4.63	0.000	-0.89	-0.36
Gender (1 = male)	-0.05	0.05	-0.86	0.390	-0.15	0.06
Age	0.01	0.01	1.48	0.139	-0.01	0.01
Education (1 = Tertiary education)***	-0.24	0.06	-4.18	0.000	-0.36	-0.13
Part-time employment***	-0.28	0.09	-3.29	0.001	-0.45	-0.11
Indefinite employment contract	0.01	0.02	0.05	0.963	-0.05	0.05
Organizational size (1 = large)	0.04	0.06	0.65	0.513	-0.08	0.16
Flexible work arrangement***	-0.08	0.02	-3.88	0.000	-0.11	-0.04
Model 2—Output: JS						
Model Summary						
R	R <sup>2</sup>	MSE	F	df1	df2	P
0.42	0.17	0.70	13.90	9	599	0.000
	Coeff	se	T	p	LLCI	ULCI
Const	2.73	0.31	8.94	0.000	2.13	3.33
WD***	-1.41	0.18	-7.79	0.000	-1.76	-1.05
WM***	0.32	0.05	5.89	0.000	0.21	0.42
Gender (1 = male)	0.09	0.07	1.23	0.218	-0.05	0.22
Age*	-0.01	0.01	-2.45	0.014	-0.01	-0.01
Education (1 = Tertiary education)	-0.07	0.08	-0.92	0.360	-0.22	0.08
Part-time employment	0.09	0.11	0.77	0.439	-0.13	0.31
Indefinite employment contract	0.04	0.03	1.29	0.196	-0.02	0.11
Organizational size (1 = large)	-0.04	0.08	-0.45	0.652	-0.19	0.12
Flexible work arrangement	0.01	0.03	0.42	0.672	-0.04	0.06
Model 3—Output: WE						
Model Summary						
R	R <sup>2</sup>	MSE	F	df1	df2	P
0.56	0.31	0.36	27.35	10	598	0.000
	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Const	1.17	0.23	5.05	0.000	0.72	1.63
WD	-0.02	0.14	-0.12	0.901	-0.28	0.25
WM***	0.42	0.04	10.57	0.000	0.34	0.50
JS***	0.22	0.03	7.70	0.000	0.17	0.28
Gender (1 = male)	-0.09	0.05	-1.70	0.090	-0.18	0.01
Age	0.01	0.01	1.10	0.271	-0.01	0.01
Education (1 = Tertiary education)	0.05	0.06	0.94	0.348	-0.06	0.16
Part-time employment	0.07	0.08	0.83	0.405	-0.09	0.23
Indefinite employment contract*	0.06	0.02	2.34	0.020	0.01	0.10

**Table 3** (continued)

Model 1—Output: WM						
Model Summary						
R	R <sup>2</sup>	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
Organizational size (1 = large)	-0.01	0.06	-0.15	0.878	-0.12	0.10
Flexible work arrangement*	-0.04	0.02	-2.25	0.025	-0.08	-0.01
Total Effect Model—Output: WE						
Model Summary						
R	R <sup>2</sup>	MSE	F	df1	df2	P
0.25	0.06	0.49	4.80	8	600	0.000
	Coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Const	4.08	0.14	28.45	0.000	3.80	4.36
WD***	-0.62	0.15	-4.31	0.000	-0.93	-0.35
Gender (1 = male)	-0.09	0.06	-1.51	0.132	-0.20	0.03
Age	0.01	0.01	0.95	0.345	-0.01	0.01
Education (1 = Tertiary education)	-0.08	0.06	-1.29	0.196	-0.21	0.04
Part-time employment	-0.05	0.09	-0.53	0.595	-0.23	0.13
Indefinite employment contract*	0.07	0.03	2.37	0.018	0.011	0.12
Organizational size (1 = large)	0.01	0.07	0.04	0.969	-0.13	0.13
Flexible work arrangement***	-0.08	0.02	-3.55	0.000	-0.12	-0.03
Indirect effect of WD on WE						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
Total	-0.62	0.11	-0.85	-0.41		
WD—> WM—> WE*	-0.26	0.08	-0.43	-0.11		
WD—> JS—> WE*	-0.32	0.07	-0.45	-0.20		
WD—> WM—> JS—> WE*	-0.04	0.02	-0.08	-0.02		

\*\*\* Significant at the 0.001 level; \*\* Significant at the 0.01 level; \* Significant at the 0.05 level



**Fig. 2** A graphical overview of the study findings

probably, this was related to highly educated public servants' greater expectations towards the organization. Moreover, people working part-time ( $\beta = -0.28$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and those sticking to flexible work arrangements ( $\beta = -0.08$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) disclosed lower perceptions of work meaningfulness. Likely, this circumstance was generated by the greater social isolation and remotization of people adhering to nonstandard work arrangements. Age was a weak, negative, and statistically significant factor associated with public servants' job satisfaction: elderly public servants were less likely to be satisfied with their job. Finally, yet importantly, people who had an indefinite employment contract were more willing to report work engagement ( $\beta = 0.06$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ), while those who adhered to flexible work arrangements showed lesser vigor, dedication, and absorption at work ( $\beta = -0.04$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ).

## Discussion

PSM deeply inspires public servants' organizational behaviors (Clerkin & Cogburn, 2012). It is based on the values of compassion and democracy, which encourage public servants to display altruism and embrace a public service identity in accomplishing their tasks (Vandenabeele, 2007). As reported in previous research, PSM is not exclusively nurtured by the individual socio-cultural background (Steijn, 2008). It is somewhat shaped by the characteristics and dynamics of the setting where people articulate their public service identity (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007). Unfair treatments at work erode PSM and dismantle organizational confidence and trust (Wang & Seifert, 2020). Prejudicial practices disrupt feelings of merit, altruism, and legitimacy, which are cornerstones of the public service identity (Taylor et al., 2022). Perceptions of skepticism follow, that are reciprocated with a diminished organizational commitment (Lee et al., 2020).

In sum, discrimination contaminates the work climate and jeopardizes the public servants' willingness to contribute to public value generation (Moon & Christensen, 2022). It breaches the psychological contract between public servants and the organization, deteriorating work-related attitudes and motivation (Park & Lee, 2020). Workplace discrimination unsettles organizational inclusivity, which public servants greatly appreciate due to their PSM (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). When experiencing discrimination, public servants exchange unfairness with lesser involvement and participation in organizational dynamics (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005), paving the way for work disengagement (Biswas et al., 2013).

The study findings emphasize that the relationship between discrimination and disengagement is not direct. Discriminatory practices indirectly impact public servants' work engagement via the mediating role of work meaningfulness and job satisfaction. On the one hand, prejudicial practices prevent public servants from making sense of their role in the workplace (Robertson et al., 2020). This undermines meaningfulness, making people doubt the utility and value of their job (Afrahi et al., 2022) and inducing psychological withdrawal from the organization (Tougas et al., 2005). Impairing work meaningfulness, discrimination indirectly harms work engagement. It disempowers public servants, preventing them from being energetic, dedicated, and absorbed in accomplishing their tasks (Glavas & Kelley, 2014). On

the other hand, discriminatory practices make people less satisfied at work (Hopkins, 1980). It depletes positive sensations with current and future work perspectives, because of the acknowledgment of workplace unfairness (Hahn & Wilkins, 2013; Rubin & Alteri, 2019). This is especially relevant in the public sector, since publicly-owned organizations are expected to behave as exemplary employers (Boulet et al., 2023). Job satisfaction is further endangered by the loss of work meaningfulness propelled by discrimination. Indeed, work meaningfulness is essential to building job satisfaction and setting the conditions for work engagement (Zheng et al., 2020). From this standpoint, work meaninglessness and job dissatisfaction triggered by unfair treatment at work interact, fully mediating the adverse effects of discrimination on the public servants' vigor, dedication, and absorption (Peng, 2022).

The study findings discussed above should be contextualized to the research limitations. First, the cross-sectional approach taken in this study prevents us from checking the linearity of the relationships between the study variables. However, the constructs used to operationalize and measure the research constructs ensure the reliability of the statistical model. The perception of workplace discrimination was referred to the 12 months preceding the survey, while the self-assessment of meaningfulness, satisfaction, and engagement was related to the time at which the survey was delivered. Second, since secondary data were used, it was not possible to tailor the assessment of the study variables to the specific aims of this research. Nevertheless, the items included in the seventh EWCS enabled us to thoroughly gauge the public servants' perceived discrimination, meaningfulness, satisfaction, and engagement. Last, the study sample included only people who reported to work in the field of public administration. Hence, it is impossible to generalize the findings to public servants working in contexts other than public administration.

Despite these limitations, the evidence collected highlights some intriguing implications for theory and practice. From a conceptual point of view, workplace discrimination does not immediately determine a decrease in public servants' vigor, dedication, and absorption. However, it violates the psychological contract with the organization, which is rooted in PSM. Undermining the public service identity, discrimination triggers work meaninglessness and dissatisfaction, thus setting the ground for work disengagement. Social exchange theory substantiates the indirect side effects of discrimination on work engagement. Public servants reciprocate work-related unfairness with reduced energy, enthusiasm, and dedication, thus compensating for the loss of meaningfulness and satisfaction in the workplace.

From a practical perspective, the study findings prompt recommendations for managers. Preventive and corrective actions intended to address workplace discrimination should be carefully analyzed in light of their implications on work meaningfulness. Interventions aimed at tackling organizational unfairness that are perceived as sterile determine significant side effects on work meaningfulness, provoking dissatisfaction and propelling work disengagement. Alongside conceiving formal actions to deal with workplace discrimination, managers should commit time and resources to craft soft interventions that should leverage the social exchanges established by public servants suffering from prejudicial practices to arrest adverse effects on work meaningfulness and keep them engaged at work. Finally, an inclusive organizational climate supporting victims



of discrimination and overcoming risks of retaliation should be created. Beyond preventing discrimination, such a climate boosts the perception of meaningful work, empowering people to be energetic, enthusiastic, and devoted to accomplishing their jobs.

Further research is required to investigate the relationship between workplace discrimination and work engagement. First, longitudinal studies are needed to obtain in-depth evidence of the interplay between discrimination, work meaningfulness, and job satisfaction, shedding light on how they interact in determining less vigor, dedication, and absorption in organizational activities. Second, attention should be paid to the adverse effects of discrimination on public service motivation, unveiling the inner determinants of feelings of meaninglessness and dissatisfaction at work. Third, in-depth qualitative studies are necessary to understand the public servants' experiences of workplace discrimination, shedding light on their drawbacks on the public service identity of people suffering from prejudicial practices. Last but not least, quasi-experimental studies are required to achieve a thorough investigation of the direct and indirect implications of discrimination in the public sector, illuminating how the occurrence of unfair work practices curtails PSM and the public service identity.

## Conclusions

Workplace discrimination disrupts the public service identity and inhibits the ability of public servants to make sense of their jobs, infringing their psychological contract with the organization. Prejudicial practices blur the sense of the significance of work and usher meaninglessness in the workplace. Being unable to recognize their job's worth and usefulness, public servants experiencing discrimination develop work dissatisfaction. They compensate for the negative sensations in the work atmosphere by expressing less vigor, dedication, and absorption in fulfilling their tasks. Therefore, work disengagement indirectly stems from workplace discrimination. More specifically, it is nurtured by meaninglessness and frustration with work conditions, that prompt public servants to reciprocate the organization with reduced effort to generate public value.

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**Data Availability** The data supporting the findings of this study will available within online supplementary materials.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

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