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**Death anxiety among street-level bureaucrats: How does it affect their work drive and performance?**

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## **Death anxiety among street-level bureaucrats: How it affects their work drive and performance**

### **Abstract**

Drawing on the depletion model of self-regulation, this study investigates how death anxiety depletes the energy of SLBs, resulting in negative consequences for their work drive and public service performance. The study also examines the importance of trait mindfulness as a boundary condition for determining whether the psychological and work-related outcomes of death anxiety are more or less severe for some SLBs. Using time-lagged and supervisor-matched data from 417 respondents, our findings provide new insights into SLBs' psychological response and job performance in the face of a life-threatening global pandemic.

*Keywords:* SLBs; death anxiety; energy depletion; drive; job performance; Covid-19.

## 1. Introduction

The public service sector has been at the forefront in the global response to Covid-19 (Cheng et al., 2020; Schuster et al. 2020). While most people stayed at home to avoid infection, front-line public service workers continued to work and serve their communities in a variety of important ways. For example, street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) such as healthcare professionals, rescue workers, and officials of government-owned financial institutions responded to daily emergencies and expended both personal and professional resources in providing essential services to the general public (Schuster et al. 2020; Hupe and Buffat 2014; Cheng et al., 2020). SLBs are public service workers who interact directly with citizens as part of their jobs and have substantial discretion in carrying out their duties (Lipsky, 2010). Given the nature of their jobs, many of SLBs worked under immense pressure, often without adequate social support and personal protective equipment (Alcadipani et al., 2020; Emanuel et al., 2020; Lai et al., 2020; Moussa, 2022). Others made personal sacrifices to safeguard and maintain public safety, regardless of how the pandemic personally affected them. These challenging circumstances, combined with inadequate support and direct exposure to Covid-19, create mortality cues that ultimately increase death anxiety (Hu et al. 2020; Menzies and Menzies 2020).

Death anxiety is an emotional state characterized by intense fear and apprehension about a death-related experience, which has serious consequences for people's work and personal lives (Grant and Wade-Benzoni 2009; Stein and Cropanzano 2011). It is a psychological stressor that depletes personal resources (e.g., energy) and endangers people's mental health, well-being, and daily functioning (Iverach et al. 2014; Menzies et al. 2019; Pyszczynski et al. 2015; Sliter et al. 2014). During the pandemic, many SLBs experienced death anxiety due to the sudden increase in public service demands and obligations (Alcadipani et al., 2020; Moussa, 2022). SLBs in healthcare and rescue services, for example, struggled to

meet the physical and emotional demands of caring for dying Covid-19 patients or cleaning and disinfecting public places. Surprisingly, the public management literature has paid insufficient attention to these psychological challenges and how they affect front-line workers' well-being and performance (Dubois, 2016; Tummers et al., 2015). This omission raises important but unanswered questions about the potential coping strategies for improving SLBs' working conditions and public service performance.

Exploring SLBs' death anxiety will shift public management research away from its current emphasis on service quality and toward a better understanding of the psychological mechanisms affecting front-line workers' performance (Eldor, 2018; Guy & Newman, 2013; Vogoda-Gadot & Meisler, 2010). In recent years, the literature has been influenced by public sector reforms (e.g., New Public Management) and changes that require public service organizations to be more "consumer-oriented" in delivering high-quality public services (Eldor, 2018). While this has allowed for knowledge advancement in the field, it has also encouraged less emphasis on the psychological experiences of public service workers on the job (Korunka et al., 2003). In the Covid-19 context, for example, dominant views have focused on SLBs' efforts in tackling the virus and addressing its impact on individuals and communities (e.g., Alcadipani et al., 2020; Mashi et al., 2021; van den et al., 2020); however, evidence suggests that the psychological toll on SLBs is far greater than the research attention it receives (Moussa, 2022). Recognizing this reality helps us understand SLBs' psychological reactions to the pandemic, as well as the consequences for their well-being and job performance.

Drawing on the depletion model of self-regulation (Muraven and Baumeister 2000), we propose and test a model linking SLBs' death anxiety to poor job performance via two psychological mechanisms (viz. energy depletion and reduced work drive). We argue that the process of coping with death anxiety relies on limited amounts of inner self-regulatory resources, which once depleted create emotional and behavioral consequences. As a vital self-

regulatory resource, energy (defined as the feeling of being vigorous and mentally refreshed: Menges et al. 2017) is often limited in supply and depletes rapidly when exposed to fear and anxiety (Deng et al. 2016; Quinn et al. 2012). Thus, SLBs who experience death anxiety and energy depletion may find it difficult to devote time and effort (i.e., work drive) to providing effective public services. Our study focuses on work drive due to its significance as an energy-related factor linked with a person's effectiveness at work (Lounsbury et al. 2004). Ultimately, we argue that a significant reduction in energy and work drive will impair job performance and incur high costs for SLBs and the public service organizations for which they work.

The depletion model of self-regulation further suggests that energy depletion may vary from person to person depending on personal traits (Baumeister et al. 2006; Brown et al. 2007). For example, being goal-oriented, coordinated, and ingenious can mitigate low energy and help an individual cope better with negative impulses. Other traits, such as resilience, mental positivity, and mindfulness, can also mitigate the effects of negative emotions on people's work and personal lives (Entress, et al. 2020; Newman et al. 2014). Extending these arguments, we propose that SLBs with high (vs. low) trait mindfulness are better able to manage death anxiety, energy depletion, and the consequences for work drive and job performance. Trait mindfulness is an important personal characteristic, comprising the quality of being conscious (i.e., being attentive and aware) of one's feelings, thoughts, and experiences in the present moment (Brown and Ryan 2003; Brown et al. 2007; Sutamchai et al. 2020). Mindful people have strong self-regulation abilities, which allow them to exercise adequate control over psychological stressors and other adverse experiences in their work and personal lives (Allen et al., 2012: 373). Given this, we propose that the possible negative impact of death anxiety on energy, and the resulting indirect influence on job performance (via reduced work drive), will be weaker among SLBs with high trait mindfulness.

Our study (Figure 1) makes several theoretical and practical contributions. First, it brings much-needed attention to the psychological challenges confronting front-line public service workers, which have been overlooked in recent public management studies on Covid-19 (e.g., An et al. 2021; Moon 2020). Specifically, we show how the pandemic has exacerbated SLBs' death anxiety, with serious consequences for their well-being and public service performance. In this regard, our research establishes an important theoretical link between work psychology and public management principles, thereby expanding the body of evidence on SLBs' psychological experiences at work. Second, our findings have practical implications for Pakistan (the context of our study), where Covid-19 has heightened the need for public sector reforms, particularly in terms of improving the sector's resilience and efficiency (Bashir et al., 2021; Salman, 2021). In this national context, our research provides critical insights to help public administrators in developing new work-related interventions for addressing the mental health challenges of front-line employees and enhancing public service delivery. Third, by introducing trait mindfulness as a first-stage moderator, we provide a theoretically informed perspective on how SLBs can best manage the experience of death anxiety and energy depletion. To this end, we extend prior research on coping behaviors in public services (Doubis 2016; Tummers et al. 2015) and draw policymakers' attention to the physical, psychological, and well-being challenges faced by front-line workers.

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Insert Figure 1 about here  
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## **2. Theory and Hypotheses**

### ***2.1. Death Anxiety and Energy***

Research has examined the psychological and behavioral outcomes of death anxiety, such as feelings of fear, apprehension, restlessness, powerlessness, being easily agitated,

avoiding contact with others, and social withdrawal tendencies (Milligan, and Almomani 2020; Sliter et al. 2014; Iverach et al. 2014; Menzies et al. 2019; Pyszczynski et al. 2015). Death anxiety is widely regarded as a distinct anxiety disorder that exacerbates the onset and severity of other psychological conditions (Iverach et al. 2014). It can therefore be assessed as either a stable personality trait (Sliter et al. 2014) or as a relatively transient emotional state (Hu et al., 2020), although the outcomes may be identical in both cases. In the present study, we investigate death anxiety as an emotional state, accounting for the dynamic nature of Covid-19 and recognizing that the psychological consequences may fluctuate over time. We also recognize that death anxiety manifests in situations that endanger people's personal lives or threaten the public's health and safety (Iverach et al. 2014; Menzies and Menzies 2020). Coping with such threats can deplete vital self-regulatory resources, making it difficult for people to function optimally within and outside of work (Bacharach and Bamberger 2007; Sliter et al. 2014; Toker et al. 2015).

The self-regulation depletion model is a theoretical framework that describes how psychological stressors can deplete self-regulatory resources (Baumeister et al. 2006; Converse and DeShon 2009; Muraven and Baumeister 2000). At its core is the concept of *self-regulation*—the “process by which people seek to exert control over their thoughts, their feelings, their impulses and appetites, and their task performances” (Baumeister et al. 2006, 1773). As humans, our available self-regulatory resources are limited and susceptible to depletion; therefore, exposure to a psychological stressor could result in a severe mental health burden. Although various self-regulatory resources have been investigated, energy is regarded as one of the most fundamental to the depletion model (Bandura 1996; Converse and DeShon 2009; Muraven and Baumeister 2000). Energy is a high-arousal positive resource associated with strong feelings of vitality, vigour, and alertness (Menges et al. 2017). It has been studied by organizational scholars in a variety of ways, depending on the type of activities that



individuals engage in (Courtright et al. 2016; Quinn et al. 2012). While the present study adopts a broad definition of energy, our core arguments align with the mental and emotional connotations of energy. In other words, we see energy as a self-regulatory resource with physical and cognitive properties that, when depleted, can lead to low drive among SLBs, and consequently, poor public service performance.

Our first hypothesis is based on the idea that death anxiety depletes energy. That is, people will expend a significant amount of self-regulatory resources to manage the fear of death. Death anxiety, as a resource-draining emotional state, induces a type of stress-based response characterized by panic sensations and changes in people's physical and cognitive functioning. This, in turn, puts a significant strain on their mental state, resulting in poor self-regulation and low energy levels (Iverach et al. 2014; Toker et al. 2015). This implies that SLBs suffering from death anxiety are more likely to feel drained and, as a result, lose interest or desire in activities they would normally enjoy. In support, Prem et al. (2016) found that the level of resource depletion associated with anxiety (particularly worrying about time pressure and emotional dissonance) can reduce people's sense of value in themselves. Similarly, Byrne et al. (2013) revealed that depleted leaders tend to worry excessively in their daily experiences, making it difficult to inspire or support followers in achieving their goals. Using these findings as a foundation, death anxiety can be regarded as a resource-draining emotional state capable of impairing self-regulation and depleting energy levels required for optimal function. We therefore propose the following hypothesis:

*H1: SLBs' death anxiety depletes their energy, such that there is a negative association between both variables.*

## **2.2. Death anxiety, work drive, and job performance**

A central premise of the self-regulation model is that high energy levels increase work drive, whereas low energy levels have the opposite effect (Bandura 1996; Converse and

DeShon 2009). Work drive is a job-related psychological characteristic associated with a person's ability to focus attention and go above and beyond normal job expectations to complete work-related tasks more effectively (Lounsbury et al. 2003; Lounsbury et al. 2004). Work drive is closely associated with, but conceptually different from, other constructs such as workaholism (i.e., the tendency to work excessively hard for long hours), work ethic (the tendency to see one's work as being inherently beneficial for both personal growth and development) or work centrality (the tendency to see one's work as being more important than other aspects of one's life). In contrast to these constructs, work drive emphasizes a person's impetus to invest time, effort, and attention toward successfully completing assigned work-related tasks. Lounsbury et al. (2004, 429) further described work drive as reflecting one's disposition to "take on extra responsibilities at work, display a high level of energy at work, and to see oneself as being a hard worker compared to other people."

Prior research has often focused on the positive links between energy and a person's desire for work. Menges et al. (2017), for example, argued that people with high energy levels are more likely to engage in purposeful, goal-oriented actions that make work more enjoyable. For SLBs, this implies a greater focus on the task at hand and a more effective performance of their public service duties. Nevertheless, in cases where SLBs have experienced death anxiety, we argue that this positive scenario is less likely because dealing with such a psychological stressor depletes self-regulatory resources, making it difficult to invest time and effort toward completing work-related tasks effectively. Indeed, recent research based on the self-regulation depletion model has linked psychological stressors to low energy levels and, consequently, a reduced motivation to perform effectively at work (Barber et al. 2017; Breaugh 2021; Vella, and McIver 2019). The rationale is that psychological stressors, whether death-related or not, impair goal-directed work behavior by interfering with a person's physical, emotional, and cognitive capabilities. Thus, affected individuals may struggle to concentrate or stay focused

on achieving desirable work-related outcomes (Breugh 2021; Hsieh 2014; Owens et al. 2016; Quinn et al. 2012). A similar argument could be made for SLBs as their experiences with death anxiety and energy depletion will inevitably reduce their work drive, leading to a reduction in public service performance.

Based on the foregoing, our second hypothesis considers death anxiety to be a negative psychological consequence of Covid-19, capable of depleting SLBs' energy, reducing their work drive, and impairing their public service performance. This is because the experience of death anxiety makes it harder for SLBs to self-regulate and control negative thoughts or emotions, leading to insufficient time and effort spent on providing effective public services. These arguments are consistent with De Clercq et al.'s (2017) research on the links between perceived threats of terrorism attacks and poor job performance. Although De Clercq et al. (2017) did not address death anxiety specifically, they did provide evidence that a life-threatening event induces existential concerns about one's own safety and the safety of those in close proximity (e.g., co-workers). They further argued that dealing with such existential (or mortality-related) issues depletes self-regulatory resources, making it difficult for those affected to perform optimally at work. Applying these arguments to the context of SLBs, we hypothesize that energy depletion and reduced work drive are important psychological outcomes of death anxiety. We also argue that these psychological outcomes serve as mediators between SLBs' death anxiety and poor job performance.

*H2: SLBs' death anxiety has a negative indirect relationship with their job performance via energy depletion and in turn reduced work drive.*

### **2.3. Moderating role of SLBs' trait mindfulness**

Using the depletion model of self-regulation (Baumeister et al. 2006), we have thus far theorized about death anxiety and energy depletion, as well as the likely consequences for SLBs' work drive and public service performance. Another aspect of this model is that

exposure to a psychological stressor and the resulting energy depletion differs from person to person, with those who possess certain personal characteristics or traits being better able to self-regulate and cope with the negative outcomes (e.g., Barber et al. 2017; Baumeister et al. 2006; Deng et al. 2015; Sato et al. 2010). In this study, we consider SLBs' trait mindfulness as one of these personal characteristics and as a first-stage moderator capable of mitigating the energy-draining effects of death anxiety.

The rationale for exploring the moderating role of trait mindfulness stems from previous research emphasizing its effectiveness as a coping strategy during life-threatening events (e.g., Good et al. 2016; Mesmer-Magnus et al. 2017). Mindfulness entails being *attentive to*, and *aware of*, what is taking place in the present moment (Brown and Ryan 2003; Brown et al. 2007). It also embodies the fundamental principles of consciousness, such as paying attention, avoiding distractions, and being cognizant of one's inner thoughts (Sutamchai et al. 2020). This implies that mindful people are more likely to manage their feelings and emotions calmly, rather than dwelling on past failures or worrying about potential future fears. These positive attributes allow mindful individuals to avoid overemphasizing current problems and instead focus their energy on thoughts and experiences that promote calm in the face of adversity (Good et al. 2016).

In addition, those who practice mindfulness are better able to understand the physical and psychological needs of their bodies and respond appropriately. When a stressful event occurs, the body releases 'fight-or-flight' hormones, which activate an impulsive reaction to either avoid or confront the danger. However, because mindful people are generally less impulsive, they can respond to a stressful event with composure (Brown and Ryan 2003; Brown et al. 2007; Sutamchai et al. 2020). They also possess strong self-regulatory capabilities, allowing them to exert adequate control over negative work and psychological experiences (Allen et al., 2012; Friese and Hofmann 2016; Mesmer-Magnus et al. 2017). Against this

backdrop, we propose that SLBs with high trait mindfulness are more emotionally stable and likely to deal with death anxiety in a reflective and meaningful way. SLBs with high (vs. low) trait mindfulness are also more likely to employ healthy coping mechanisms to speed up their recovery from energy loss during a life-threatening situation. In this light, we contend that the negative impact of death anxiety on energy would be less pronounced in more mindful SLBs.

*H3: SLBs' trait mindfulness moderates the negative effect of their death anxiety on energy such that this effect is weaker when trait mindfulness is high (vs. low).*

Furthermore, we posit that the negative work-related consequences of death anxiety will be less pronounced among SLBs who practice mindfulness. In the work domain, trait mindfulness has been described as an important resource for reducing unwanted psychological preoccupations (e.g., perceptions of fear, distress and anxiety), thereby promoting positive work behaviors and, ultimately, improved job performance (Dane 2011; Good et al. 2016; Mesmer-Magnus et al. 2017). Mindful people can thus respond more proactively to challenging situations by avoiding distractions and concentrating on completing assigned work tasks (Dane and Brummel 2014, p. 109). They are also more resilient in the face of adversity and social anxiety because they are better able to disengage from negative workplace experiences and thus perform their jobs more effectively (Good et al. 2016; Vella, and McIver 2019). Given these positive aspects of mindfulness, we expect the negative indirect relationship between death anxiety and job performance (via low energy and reduced work drive) to be weaker in SLBs with high (vs. low) levels of trait mindfulness.

*H4: SLBs' trait mindfulness moderates the negative indirect influence of their death anxiety on job performance via energy depletion and in turn reduced work drive, such that this indirect influence is weaker when trait mindfulness is high (vs. low).*

### **3. Methodology**

#### ***3.1. Data Collection***

We collected time-lagged and supervisor-matched data (four rounds, one week apart) from SLBs in Pakistan, a populous South Asian country with some of the worst cases of Covid-19 deaths and infection rates. Data were collected between July and August of 2020, during the peak period of Pakistan's first wave of Covid-19. We focused on three public service sectors where SLBs' jobs remained fairly active despite Covid-19 lockdown restrictions, namely healthcare, government-owned financial services, and rescue services. Access to respondents was facilitated through the research team's personal and professional contacts who were part of a wider Covid-19 research project. Respondents from healthcare were mostly doctors who worked in 35 government hospitals designated as Covid-19 centers. They were responsible for treating Covid-19 patients, tracking pandemic-related deaths, and performing other administrative duties. Respondents from the government-owned financial services were employees of the National Bank of Pakistan who provided daily financial assistance to clients. They were accessible throughout the pandemic, offering services such as cash deposits and withdrawals, loans, and money transfers. Respondents from rescue services were front-line employees working as urban search and rescue officers, ambulance operators, and community safety personnel. Some of them were responsible for transporting Covid-19 patients to hospitals and burying the deceased.

Data collection involved self-completion surveys distributed online to respondents over four rounds. Each survey contained a detailed explanation of our research objectives, as well as our commitment to strictly adhere to research ethics protocols (e.g., confidentiality, data protection, and right to withdraw). At Time 1 (T1), a total of 531 respondents provided data on death anxiety, trait mindfulness, age, gender, working hours, education level, and working experience. Data on job-related anxiety and neuroticism (a personality trait) were also collected

at T1 to be analyzed as control variables. Out of the T1 respondents, 465 responded a week later (T2) providing data on energy. The number of participants dropped slightly to 443 at T3, where data on work drive were collected. The respondents were also asked at this stage to provide the contact information for their immediate supervisors. Although 160 immediate supervisors signed up to participate in the study, only 147 responded assessed the job performance of respondents at T4.

To account for attrition and drop-out bias, we limited our analysis to respondents who provided complete data across all four rounds. We used unique 8-digit respondent identifiers to match and merge the data from both respondents and supervisors across four rounds. These unique identifiers were generated in the first round of data collection based on respondents' last name, mobile phone number, place of employment, and hometown. After matching the data and accounting for missing values, our final sample size was 417 (41.7% response rate, 57.3 % males, and 42.7 % females). Around 63% of respondents were aged 30 years and over, while 37% of them were aged twenty-nine years or less. At the time of data collection, the majority of respondents (around 67%) had been in their jobs for over a year, whereas 25% had been in the job for up to one year or less. The final sample included 161 SLBs from healthcare, 109 from government-owned financial services, and 147 from rescue services.

### **3.2. Variables and measures**

Our surveys were administered in English as this is the official language of correspondence among Pakistani professionals. For each survey, respondents were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

*Death anxiety* was assessed by adapting Thorson and Powell's (1992) shortened nine-item scale to fit the context of our study. Sample items: "*The subject of death troubles me greatly*" and "*I am worried about what happens to us after we die*" ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

**Trait mindfulness** was measured using the 15-item scale by Brown and Ryan (2003). Sample items: “*I find it difficult to stay focused on what’s happening in the present*” and “*I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.*” These items were reverse-coded such that higher values represent higher scores on the scale ( $\alpha = .96$ ).

**Energy** was measured using the four items from Menges et al. (2017), adapted to fit the context of our own research. Example items: “*I have felt energetic*” and “*I have felt mentally refreshed*” ( $\alpha = .91$ ).

**Work drive** was assessed using the five-item scale developed by Lounsbury et al.’s (2004). These items were adapted to fit the context of our research: “*Recently, I would say that I have had more work drive than most people I know*” and “*I tend to put more effort at work than most people I know*” ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

**Job performance** was assessed using adapted items from Schaubroeck et al.’s (2007) three-item scale. These items were rated by the respondents’ supervisors, thus: “*He/she has adequately completed assigned duties*” and “*He/she has fulfilled the responsibilities specified in the job description*” ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

### 3.3. Control variables

Given their potential confounding effects on job performance, we included the following variables as controls: age (1 = less than 24 years to 4 = 35 years and over), gender (0 = female, 1 = male), education (1 = undergraduate level to 4 = PhD level), working hours, work experience (1 = one year and under to 4 = ten years and over), job-related anxiety, and neuroticism (Owens et al. 2016). We controlled for job-related anxiety to account for respondents' prior experiences with work-related distress, discomfort, and unease, as well as how these factors might influence job performance (Cheng and McCarthy 2018). Our inclusion of neuroticism as a control variable was also necessary to distinguish between respondents' death anxiety and other pre-existing negative psychological tendencies.



#### 4. Analyses and Results

We conducted a one-way ANOVA to determine whether there is a statistically significant difference between the means of the various SLB groups (i.e., healthcare, government-owned financial services, and rescue services). The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences across our main study variables: death anxiety ( $F(1.96)$ ,  $p = .14$ ); energy ( $F(1.04)$ ,  $p = .35$ ); work drive ( $F(.28)$ ,  $p = .75$ ); job performance ( $F(.68)$ ,  $p = .50$ ); and trait mindfulness ( $F(1.16)$ ,  $p = .31$ ). Given the nested nature of the data (i.e., 147 supervisors rating 417 respondents' job performance), we measured intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC1) to ensure that our data are not distorted by clustering effects. The ICC1 values confirm the reliability and consistency of ratings supplied by the various respondent groups in our sample: death anxiety  $= .03$ ; energy  $= .02$ ; work drive  $= .03$ ; job performance  $= .003$ ; and trait mindfulness  $= .02$ .

Prior to testing our hypotheses, we carried out a series of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to verify the level of distinctiveness of our study variables. These analyses were performed using the robust maximum likelihood estimator in Mplus software program (version 8.6). The first CFA model with all five study variables, including death anxiety, trait mindfulness, energy, work drive, and job performance, showed adequate fit:  $\chi^2 = 1097.27$ ,  $df = 580$ , CFI = .95, TLI = .95, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .04. All unrestricted factor loadings were significant and in the hypothesized positive direction. As shown in Table 1, this CFA model outperformed three alternative CFA models. In addition, Table 2 shows that the descriptive statistics and inter-correlations among study variables were consistent with our predictions.

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Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here  
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Hypotheses 1 and 2 were examined simultaneously using path analysis in a one-stage serial mediation model (i.e., death anxiety indirectly associated with SLBs' job performance

via energy and work drive). As reported in Table 3, death anxiety was negatively associated with energy ( $B = -.24$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ ); lending support to Hypothesis 1. Death anxiety was also associated with a decrease in work drive ( $B = -.11$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .01$ ), whereas energy was associated with an increase in work drive ( $B = .13$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, Table 3 shows that the indirect relationship between death anxiety and job performance via energy and work drive was significant and negative (*indirect effect* =  $-.01$ ,  $SE = .003$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $95\% CI = [-.01 \text{ to } -.001]$ ). This suggests that death anxiety, as a psychological stressor, can indirectly impair SLBs' public service performance by depleting energy levels and decreasing work drive (support for Hypothesis 2).

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Hypotheses 3 and 4 were examined simultaneously by a single moderated mediation model (Edwards and Lambert 2007), in which the indirect link between death anxiety and job performance (via energy and work drive) was moderated by SLBs' trait mindfulness (first-stage). The index of moderated mediation was computed as the product of three regression coefficients (i.e., " $a*d*b$ "), where  $a$  represents the regression coefficient between the predictor-moderator interaction term and the first mediator,  $d$  is the regression coefficient between the first mediator and the second mediator, and  $b$  is the regression coefficient between the second mediator and the outcome variable.

The lower portion of Table 3 shows the interaction between SLBs' death anxiety and trait mindfulness had a positive impact on energy ( $B = .35$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p < .001$ ); suggesting that the negative death anxiety–energy relationship was significantly weaker among SLBs with high rather than low trait mindfulness (support for Hypothesis 3). As shown in Figure 2, the simple slope test for this relationship (performed at  $\pm SD$  from the mean of trait mindfulness) indicates that the influence of death anxiety on energy was statistically significant for SLBs

with low trait mindfulness ( $B = -.62, SE = .07, p < .001$ ) and nonsignificant for SLBs with high trait mindfulness ( $B = .19, SE = .07, p > .05$ ).

Furthermore, the interaction between SLBs' death anxiety and trait mindfulness has a positive impact on the indirect path to job performance via energy and work drive ( $Index = .01, SE = .02, p < .05$ ). The simple slopes plot (Figure 3) indicates that the negative indirect link between SLBs' death anxiety and job performance via energy depletion and reduced work drive was less severe at higher rather than lower levels of trait mindfulness (Hypothesis 4 supported).

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Insert Figure 2 and 3 about here  
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## 5. Discussion

Guided by the depletion model of self-regulation (Muraven and Baumeister, 2000), we shed light on the psychological mechanisms linking death anxiety to work-related outcomes among SLBs. We used time-lagged and supervisor-matched data to show that death anxiety from Covid-19 has a negative indirect influence on SLBs' job performance, via energy depletion and reduced work drive. Our findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the psychological factors influencing SLBs' well-being and ability to maximize public service performance during a life-threatening global pandemic. Specifically, we show that SLBs who experience death anxiety have a reduced capacity to self-regulate or transcend negative thoughts and low energy states, making it more difficult to devote adequate time and effort to providing effective public services. Furthermore, our analysis revealed that high (vs. low) trait mindfulness was essential for mitigating the negative impact of SLBs' death anxiety on their psychological and work-related experiences. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Brown et al., 2007), we conclude that mindful SLBs are better positioned to respond more adaptively to psychological stressors and perform effectively at work.

### ***5.1. Theoretical Implications***

Our research makes significant theoretical contributions. First, we incorporate key principles from work psychology and the self-regulation model into public management research, thereby advancing previous knowledge on coping behaviors in the public service context (e.g., Doubis, 2016; Tummers et al., 2015). Particularly, we found evidence that death anxiety from Covid-19 depletes an important self-regulatory resource—energy (Baumeister et al. 2006; Muraven and Baumeister 2000). We also demonstrate that SLBs who experience death anxiety and the resulting energy depletion may not only report poor work drive, but also a reduced capacity to effectively fulfill their public service obligations. These findings alert public management scholars to a previously overlooked psychological issue affecting the well-being of front-line public service workers (Usman et al. 2021). Therefore, our research contributes to the growing theoretical trend of identifying key concepts in work psychology, applying them to public management research, and providing new knowledge to enhance the overall quality of public service delivery (e.g., Eldor 2018; Usman et al. 2021). Furthermore, our findings suggest a paradigm shift away from a predominant emphasis on service quality in public management research and toward a better understanding of the psychological processes that influence the attitudes and well-being of front-line workers (Lipsky, 2010; Kosar, & Schachter 2011; Lavee, 2021; Schachter & Kosar, 2011; Thomann, 2015).

Second, our study highlights two distinct psychological mechanisms (i.e., energy and work drive) that mediate the link between death anxiety and SLBs' job performance. While these psychological mechanisms are important in and of themselves, they have not always been at the forefront of public management research, not least as managers and administrators in the public sector are often more concerned with client-oriented service quality (Lipsky 2010; Lavee, 2021; Tummers et al. 2015). Extending previous research, we place theoretical emphasis on how energy depletion and reduced work drive among SLBs can impair the

effective conduct of public service duties. Work drive, in particular, is not only closely related to energy but is also required for achieving desired work-related goals (Lounsbury et al. 2004). However, when confronted with death anxiety, SLBs are prone to energy depletion and reduced work drive, resulting in an inability to carry out public service duties more effectively. In this regard, our research opens up avenues for new scholarly conversations about the psychological factors influencing SLBs' well-being and public service performance. Our findings also highlight the importance of further research into this topic to provide more theoretically informed evidence on the wider consequences of death anxiety for public service organizations.

Third, our study assessed the wider benefits of mindfulness for improving SLBs' psychological well-being and performance. We found evidence that SLBs with high (vs. low) trait mindfulness were less likely to experience energy depletion as a result of death anxiety. Additionally, high levels of trait mindfulness acted as an important buffer against the negative indirect influence of death anxiety on SLBs' job performance via energy depletion and reduced work drive. These findings corroborate previous evidence that mindful individuals are better equipped with the right resources to achieve and maintain optimal levels of functioning in their work and personal lives (Allen et al., 2012). Specifically, the practice of mindfulness enables individuals to actively disengage from negative thoughts or preoccupations, and consequently redirect their focus to more productive and meaningful activities (Brown et al. 2007; Friese and Hofmann 2016). Our research contributes to these arguments by showing that, while many SLBs experienced death anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic, the negative psychological and work-related consequences were less severe for those who practiced mindfulness. These findings lay the theoretical groundwork for further inquiry into the work and psychological benefits of mindfulness in the public service sector.

## ***5.2. Practical Implications***

Our research has practical implications for public service organizations and administrators, as well as policymakers hoping to enhance the quality of SLBs' jobs in the face of life-threatening events. Following the Covid-19 outbreak, front-line public service employees worked longer hours and responded to emergency situations, all of which took a significant toll on their psychological well-being, possibly more than any other occupation. In the specific context of Pakistan, concerns about death anxiety were further exacerbated by poor resourcing, economic uncertainty, and limited access to adequate social support. Given the findings of this study, particularly the detrimental consequences of death anxiety for SLBs' psychological well-being and performance, public service organizations should prioritize policies that provide a safe space for employees to voice concerns or discuss issues that may be impeding their performance at work. This can be achieved through workplace counselling services and anxiety management programs that assist employees in dealing with psychological stressors more efficiently. Public service organizations should also provide adequate support and resources (e.g., effective work design, workload adjustments, stress-management counseling) to help SLBs recover more quickly from energy loss, so as to achieve optimal levels of functioning both at work and at home.

In addition, our study highlights the importance of mindfulness in helping SLBs to cope with challenging situations. As stated previously, the practice of mindfulness enhances people's capacity to remain aware of their feelings and avoid becoming overly reactive or overwhelmed by what is going on around them (Sutamchai et al. 2020). Therefore, public service administrators in Pakistan and elsewhere should provide mindfulness training programs to help SLBs cope with distressing events, regulate their emotions, and engage in meaningful experiences (Brown and Ryan 2003; Mesmer-Magnus et al. 2017). Participants in such programs are usually instructed on how to pay more attention to the present moment, allowing

them to better control their thoughts or feelings, and make decisions based on facts rather than impulse. Public service organizations should also promote meditation-based programs to help shift SLBs thoughts away from unwanted preoccupations that may arise during and beyond Covid-19. Such programs are often beneficial for anxiety control, self-awareness, relaxation, and improved working relationships (Good et al. 2016).

### ***5.3. Limitations and Future Research***

The strength of our research lies in building and testing theory on how SLBs' death anxiety and the resulting energy depletion can negatively impact the quality of their jobs. Our use of four-wave time-lagged data ensured the necessary temporal separation among study variables (Podsakoff et al. 2003) and helped to achieve a more robust estimation of all hypothesized relationships between our predictor, mediators, and outcomes. Despite these strengths, our use of self-reported data (except for job performance) may have contributed to respondent bias. While this limitation was carefully considered, we also note that self-reports were appropriate for the current study given the need to capture respondents' personal experiences of, and reactions to a dynamic and evolving Covid-19 context. In addition, our use of time-lagged data and reliance on well-grounded theory increased the confidence in interpreting our findings beyond any potential limitations of self-reported data.

Another possible limitation comes from the death-related literature itself, where researchers have increasingly reported instances of positive rather than negative consequences from death-related stimuli (viz. death reflection: Grant and Wade-Benzoni 2009); however, this important nuance was not captured in our research due to our emphasis on the negative psychological aspects of SLBs' death anxiety. Future research may therefore explore the psychological and work-related outcomes of death reflection among SLBs, and determine how these effects are comparable to those reported in the current analysis. Adopting this approach will provide a more comprehensive picture on the topic of death, as well as the varied nature

of its impacts on public service delivery. Moreover, future research is suggested to explore the potential consequences of death-related stimuli outside the work domain and into the family domain—building on growing theoretical discussions regarding work-family spillover, crossover, and social contagion effects (Barber et al. 2017; Courtright et al. 2016; Huang et al. 2019). This issue is especially pressing in light of the increased blurring of boundaries between people's job and family responsibilities (Ferguson et al. 2015), which has been exacerbated in part by the Covid-19 crisis.

#### **5.4. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to determine how death anxiety influences the psychological and work-related experiences of SLBs. We found that SLBs' energy levels were depleted by death anxiety, which reduced their work drive and ability to perform public service duties effectively. We also discovered that the negative effects of death anxiety on these psychological and work-related outcomes were less pronounced among SLBs with high trait mindfulness. Our research advances the field by updating knowledge on how public administrators can best optimize SLBs' work-related experiences when faced with the psychological threats of death anxiety.



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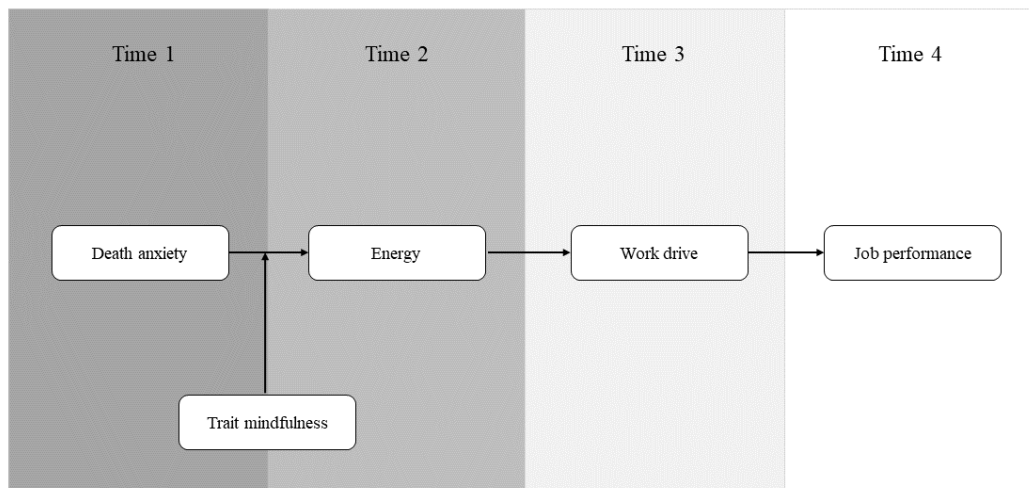
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**Figure 1: Conceptual Model**



**Table 1**  
**Confirmatory factor analysis of discriminate validity**

Models	Factors	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	$\Delta\chi^2$	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI
Model 1	5Factors: DA, E, WD, JP, TM	1097.27	580	1.89	----	.05	.04	.95	.95
Model 2	3 Factors: DA+E, WD+JP, TM	2567.13	587	4.37	1469.86	.09	.09	.81	.80
Model 3	1 Factor: DA+E+WD+JP+TM	6899.49	590	11.69	4332.36	.16	.26	.39	.35

Note: DA = Death Anxiety; E = Energy; WD = Work Drive; JP = Job Performance; TM = Trait Mindfulness

**Table 2**  
**Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Study Variables**

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Age	2.83	1.06	-											
2. Gender	0.57	0.50	-.01	-										
3. Education	2.60	1.10	.02	-.06	-									
4. Working hours	45.70	3.63	.06	.03	-.01	-								
5. Working experience	3.35	1.32	.14*	.05	.03	.02	-							
6. Job-related anxiety	2.73	1.21	.01	-.05	.00	.08	-.04	<b>.95</b>						
7. Neuroticism	2.23	0.95	-.00	.08	.06	-.03	-.04	.02	<b>.88</b>					
8. Death anxiety	3.10	1.15	.05	.02	-.03	.00	-.07	.33**	.02	<b>.94</b>				
9. Energy	2.82	1.30	-.00	-.09	.01	-.03	.01	-.13**	-.08	-.21**	<b>.91</b>			
10. Work drive	3.22	1.02	-.07	.02	.04	-.01	-.03	-.14**	-.07	-.16**	.19**	<b>.87</b>		
11. Job performance	2.85	1.15	.03	-.04	.06	.02	.05	-.18**	-.04	-.23**	.12*	.25**	<b>.83</b>	
12. Trait mindfulness	3.06	1.17	-.03	-.13*	.09	.01	.00	.04	-.06	-.01	.12*	-.07	.00	<b>.96</b>

Sample size (N) = 417, Significance: \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$

Note: SD = Standard Deviation; Cronbach's alpha in the diagonal line in bold

**Table 3**  
**Unstandardized Regression Coefficients**

Variables	Energy			Work drive			Job performance		
	B (se)	p	CI (95%)	B (se)	p	CI (95%)	B (se)	p	CI (95%)
Age							.05 (.06)	.37	-.06, .16
Gender							-.09 (.11)	.40	-.31, .12
Education							.04 (.05)	.38	-.05, .14
Working hours							.01 (.02)	.59	-.03, .04
Working experience							.03 (.04)	.47	-.05, .11
Job-related anxiety							-.10 (.06)	.06	-.20, .01
Neuroticism							-.02 (.05)	.70	-.13, .09
Death anxiety	-.24(.05)	.00	-.35, -.13	-.11(.04)	.01	-.20, -.03	-.15 (.06)	.00	-.26, -.04
Energy				.13(.04)	.00	.05, .21	.03 (.04)	.51	-.06, .12
Work drive							.24 (.06)	.00	.13, .35
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>		.04			.05			.11	
							B (se)	p	CI (95%)
<i>Indirect effects</i>									
							-.01(.003)	.02	-.01, -.001
<i>Moderated effects</i>									
							.35(.04)	.00	.28, .42
							.01(.01)	.01	.002, .02
Sample size (N) = 417									

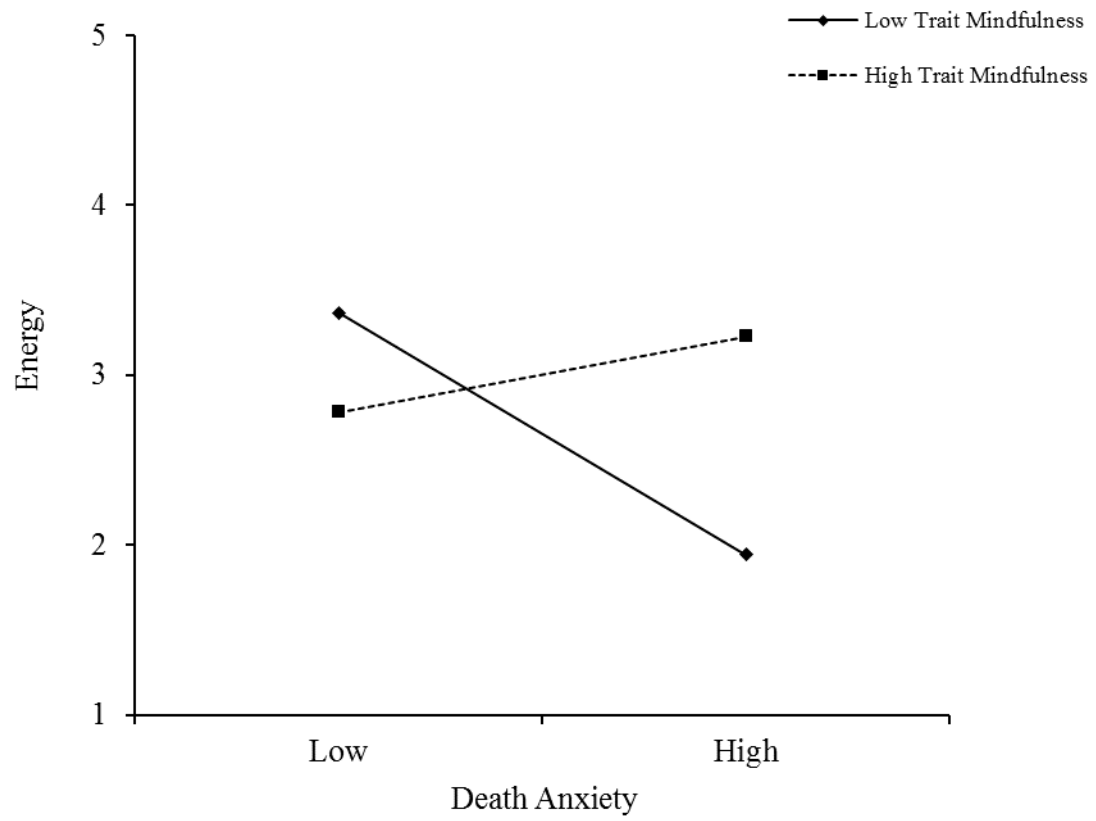


Figure 1 The moderating effect of trait mindfulness on relationship between death anxiety and energy

**Figure 2.** Moderated mediation effect on job performance via energy and work drive

