

The Growth of Public Service Motivation Research

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Abstract: Research on public service motivation, that is, motives and actions in the public domain that are intended to do good for others and shape the well-being of society, has grown significantly in the last twenty years. Over 100 studies have been conducted in more than 20 countries, most during the last decade. Among the findings of the research is that public service motivation is an important influence on a person's willingness to join and remain in a public organization. Findings related to public service motivation and individual performance are less clear cut and are likely mediated by various facets of person-organization fit. Public service motivation affects ethical behavior in both social and organizational contexts, as manifest in such behaviors as blowing the whistle and applying principled reasoning to ethical dilemmas. Despite the significant progress in the study of public service motivation, many important questions remain for future research. The joint effect of public service motivation and job security on employee behavior deserves priority attention, as does the mediating effects of person-organization fit. Public service motivation research would benefit methodologically from the use of experiments and improved measurement instruments.

Keywords: public service, motivation, prosocial behavior, altruism

Public service motivation research has come to hold an increasingly prominent place in the study of public administration. Approximately 10 percent of the papers presented at the 2011 Public Management Research Conference addressed public service motivation. Given that the study of public service motivation began in earnest only two decades earlier, the volume of research is testimony to the acceptance that it has attained within public management.

Public service motivation refers to an "individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations"

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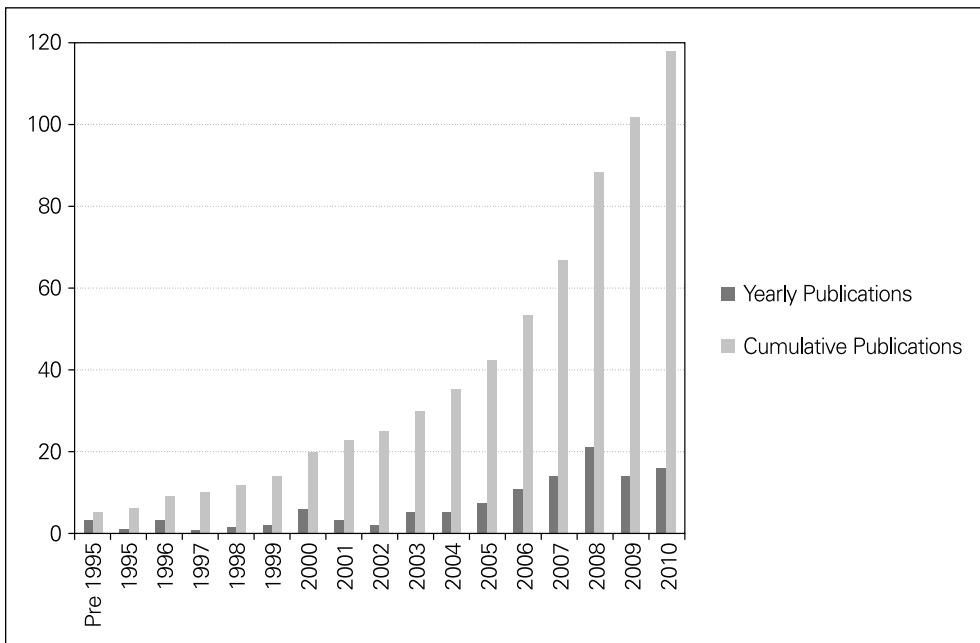
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(Perry & Wise, 1990, p. 386). Although not identical to related concepts such as altruism or pro-social behavior, it reflects a similar other-centered orientation. Recent research has tended to take a broader approach to public service motivation, considering it to include a wider range of motives and actions in the public domain that are intended to do good for others and shape the well-being of society (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008).

Despite the challenges faced by public organizations, such as the devolution toward low-trust principal-agent relationships and recent attacks on the public sector workforce that have accompanied national and state austerity measures, public service motivation continues to be an influential consideration in public service (Moynihan, 2008). In fact, recent trends such as the post-9/11 commitment to public service and increasing emphasis on altruistic socialization in schools may have fostered a generational cohort with greater levels of public service motivation (Marks, 2001; Penner, Brannick, Webb, & Connell, 2005; Perry & Buckwalter, 2010). Public service motivation research has continued to grow as a result of governments' continued search for greater productivity and accountability (Kettl, 2005), the failure of financial incentive schemes (Perry, Mesch, & Paarlberg, 2006; Perry, Engbers, & Jun, 2009), and the increasing attention to normative influences within the bureaucracy (Olsen, 2006).

The idea of a public service ethos dates back to ancient civilizations, with philoso-

Figure 1. Growth of Public Service Motivation Research, Pre-1995 to 2010



phers and behavioral scientists debating the moral dimensions of public service and the motivations of those who undertake it (Horton, 2008). After the birth of the study of public administration around the turn of the century, a number of classic studies investigated the socialization (Merton, 1940), personality traits (Lasswell, 1930) and sense of duty (Mosher, 1968) that influence public action. This scholarship serves as a foundation for the contemporary study of public service motivation.

A systematic examination of public service motivation began in the 1990s, with formal study developing out of Perry and Wise's (1990) conceptual article, "The Motivational Bases of Public Service." This led to the empirical analysis of public service motivation and its origins and antecedents (Perry, 1996; 1997; 2000). Since the 1990s, dozens of scholars have pursued empirical research on public service motivation. Figure 1 shows the rapid growth in scholarly research about public service motivation. The evidence suggests that public service motivation has developed into a widely accepted theory about a robust construct. It has been the subject of research in over 20 countries utilizing a wide range of methods and drawing from diverse disciplines.

RESEARCH FINDINGS IN PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION

In the significant volume of research conducted on public service motivation, a number of regularities can be identified. Space limits the ability to review all of the findings. A limited review of the literature, however, is helpful to point to three major trends in public service motivation research: the relationship between public service motivation and organization membership, performance, and ethical behavior.

Membership

An early conjecture about public service motivation (Perry & Wise, 1990) was that individuals with high public service motivation were more likely to be drawn to public service. Research during the past two decades has largely confirmed the proposition. Public service motivation, as measured by the desire to help others and to be useful to society, is highly correlated with the attractiveness of public employment (Lewis & Frank, 2002; Vandenabeele, 2008). A 2011 study found that people with high public service motivation in caring industries are more likely to move to public and nonprofit firms (Gregg, Grout, Ratcliffe, Smith, & Windmeijer, 2011). This appears to hold across a wide range of occupations. Georgellis and colleagues (2011) examined 747 transitions from the private to public sector and found individuals with high public service motivation to be much more likely to enter public organizations.

Not only are those with high levels of public service motivation more likely to be attracted to public service positions, they are more likely to persist. Several studies have found a positive association between altruistic motivation and intentions to remain in an organization. The intention to remain reflects higher levels of organizational commitment (Crewson, 1997) and greater job satisfaction (Steijn, 2008).

Performance

The research on public service motivation and membership in public organizations has yielded largely consistent results—high levels of public service motivation are associated with the propensity to pursue and persist in public service careers. By contrast, the relationship between a high public service disposition and individual and organizational performance is not conclusive. Several early studies that use self-reported measures of individual performance find a positive relationship between public service motivation and individual performance (Alonso & Lewis, 2001; Naff & Crum, 1999). However, instability of these findings across time suggests that the link between public service motivation and performance may not be a closed issue.

A number of studies have found a connection between public service motivation and performance that is mediated by individual and organizational characteristics. Vandenaabeele (2009) found direct and indirect effects of public service motivation on self-reported performance among Flemish civil servants. The indirect effect on performance was through job satisfaction and normative and affective commitment. A 2008 study (Steijn, 2008) suggests that the primary impact of public service motivation on performance is direct and not through organizational-fit variables. However, this finding was at odds with previous research that found no direct effect of public service motivation (Bright, 2007).

Moving beyond individual performance, public service motivation does appear to have a direct effect on organizational performance. Utilizing data from the 1996 Merit Principles Survey, Brewer and Selden (2000) found a positive association between levels of public service motivation and perceived organizational effectiveness. This was supported by a 2005 study in the Korean public service (Kim, 2005) that replicated Brewer and Selden's (2000) findings. In another study, commitment to the public interest, but not attraction to public policy making, was found to be positively associated with organizational efficiency (Ritz, 2009). As such, there appears to be some connection between public service motivation and performance, but the relationship may be moderated by organizational and individual characteristics.

Ethical Behavior

In the realm of ethical behavior, the effects of public service motivation are manifest in behaviors in both social and organizational contexts. Government employees are more likely to volunteer for charity and to donate blood than private sector employees (Houston, 2006). This general ethical orientation is associated with the willingness for self-sacrifice that accompanies public service motivation. Public sector employees with a heightened sense of self-sacrifice are better able to apply principled reasoning to resolve ethical dilemmas. Moreover, this heightened public service motivation can be cultivated through the education and training of public administrators (Choi, 2004).

The organizational effects of public service motivation are manifest in greater levels of public interest serving behaviors and in higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviors. For example, whistle-blowing often requires self-sacrifice and runs counter to personal self-interest. Yet, whistle-blowing is most common in high-performing organizations characterized by high levels of public service motivation (Brewer & Selden, 1998). This is symptomatic of a larger relationship between public service motivation and interpersonal citizenship in public organizations (Pandey, Wright, & Moynihan, 2008). High public service motivation is related to greater levels of altruism, behavior directly intended to help other people, and conscientiousness, the willingness to be indirectly helpful to others within the organization (Kim, 2006).

PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION RESEARCH FRONTIERS

Although a lot of attention has been directed toward relationships between public service motivation and membership, performance, and ethical behavior, many fruitful questions remain for future research. In particular, much remains to be studied with regard to public service motivation and the influence of job security and mediating effects of other variables. Likewise, the study of public service motivation would benefit methodologically from the use of experiments and improved measurement instruments. This section will review some of the research done in these areas and provide suggestions for future scholarly activity.

Job Security

Given that job security and the service ethic are central concepts in the identity of public institutions, it is surprising that more research has not been conducted on these concepts jointly. Little research has been undertaken examining job security and public

service motivation. The research that has been conducted in this area has focused on attitudes and not the effects of specific policies on public service motivation (Crewson, 1997; Houston, 2000). Moreover, the research that has been conducted has been largely inconclusive. One study found that private sector employees value job security more than public sector employees (Crewson, 1997). However, this has been contradicted by more recent research that finds that public sector employees place a greater emphasis on job security than their private sector counterparts (Houston, 2000). Nor is there a clear theoretical argument for one group having greater levels of concern for job security. Some evidence suggests that public sector employees are more risk-averse and thus more likely to rate job security as important, but the prevalence of greater levels of job security in the public sector may make it less relevant for public sector employees (Crewson, 1997).

For scholars of public service motivation, the challenge is to overcome the fact that during the past 30 years, little research has focused on the motivational and behavioral consequences of different job security rules. It is not at all clear whether a high level of job security protects public employees, allowing them to focus on serving the public interest, or whether it creates complacency that may erode a public service ethos over time. Additionally, as the previous section suggests, public service motivation appears to influence membership, performance, and other relevant outcomes, but we have not yet disentangled these relationships from the impact of job security. Research that introduces job security rules into models of public service motivation will shed light on these remaining puzzles.

Mediating Effects

Progress has been made toward a more nuanced understanding of public service motivation and what mediating effects may be important. Individual characteristics appear to matter, as the effect of public service motivation is stronger for college graduates and younger employees (Lewis & Frank, 2002). Likewise, social and organizational characteristics seem to mediate the impact of public service motivation. For example, organizations with a high degree of publicness foster greater levels of public service motivation (Lewis & Frank, 2002). This is consistent with Steijn's (2008) research, which finds that public service motivation is most influential when employees feel as though their work has meaning. This suggests that the key research question should not be whether public service motivation has an impact but when and under what conditions it has an impact (Wright & Christensen, 2011).

One area in particular that scholars should investigate is the fit between the individual and his or her job, organization, and environment. The person-environment fit model

suggests that individuals are more likely to behave according to their predisposition if there is a good fit between their personal characteristics and the environment in which they work (O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991). Bright (2008) and Vandenberg (2009) conclude that this is the case for public service motivation, but other studies have had more mixed results (Leisink & Steijn, 2009; Liu & Tang, 2011). Emblematic of this research is a 2010 study that finds that after controlling for person-job fit, person-organization fit is less important. Regardless of employment sector, however, public service motivation is a major determinant in job choice among those with high public service motivation emphasizing jobs that provide service to others through pro bono opportunities in the private sector, client interaction in the public sector, or client representation in the nonprofit sector (Wright & Christensen, 2011). Like these fit studies, more scholarship is needed that parses out mediating effects and the nature of the fit between individuals and their jobs and organizations.

Experimental Research

If there is one consistent thread in public service motivation research, it is that it has been dominated by cross-sectional surveys that are methodologically limited. Experimental research is highly underutilized in public administration, and this is no less true of public service motivation research. Because of preferences for external over internal validity, the tendency to focus on groups and organizations that may be less applicable for experimental research, and lack of familiarity with experimental methods among public affairs scholars, researchers have not pursued experimental research on public service motivation (Bozeman & Scott, 1992).

To be sure, randomized field experiments are becoming more common, and experiments would increase the internal validity and contextual realism of public service motivation research (Wright & Grant, 2010). A particularly promising avenue for research is the use of multisource, interrupted time-series designs that feature both observer ratings and objective measures of performance before and after the interventions. Wright and Grant (2010) suggest a number of potential interventions designed to boost levels of public service motivation. These include putting employees in direct contact with clients who benefit from their service, linking goal-setting interventions to public service outcomes, and using self-persuasion techniques such as reflecting on the values of public service. Scholars might also look to naturally occurring interventions—such as a change in the mission statement to reflect greater public service values, inspirational speeches about public service given by organizational leaders, or personal testimony by organization beneficiaries—although these lack the robustness of planned interventions (Wright & Grant, 2010).

Experiments are not a panacea. There are challenges associated with the loss of social context, differences between subjects and non-subjects, and lower levels of external validity, but they do offer a lot of potential for clarifying ambiguities in past public service motivation research (Bozeman & Scott, 1992). Given the lack of consensus regarding the link between public service motivation and performance, this would be a particularly promising area for experimental research (Wright & Grant, 2010).

Measuring Public Service Motivation

Despite prospects for experimental research, survey-based research continues to be the dominant method for studying public service motivation. Over the years, at least four approaches have been utilized: single-item measures of motivation (Rainey, 1982), unidimensional scales (Naff & Crum, 1999), multidimensional scales (Perry, 1996) and behavioral proxies, such as whistle-blowing (Brewer & Selden, 1998). The most recent research has expanded on this literature in two ways. First, the complexity of measures has provided a more nuanced understanding of the basis of public service motivation. Second, international research has begun to refine measures of public service motivation for cross-national use (Kim & Vandenabeele, 2010).

Unlike Rainey's early single-item measure, which asked respondents to report the degree to which they valued "engaging in meaningful public service," recent research has recognized that public service is potentially motivated by a number of factors. Among these more complex measures, Perry's (1996) 24-item scale has been the most widely used (e.g., Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Perry, 1997; Taylor, 2007) because of its ability to parse out four components of public service motivation: attraction to policy making, civic duty, commitment to the public interest, and self-sacrifice. This ability to distinguish among motivations has practical implications for managerial responses and should serve as an example for future measurement research.

The second frontier of public service motivation research concerns cross-national studies. Public service motivation has been found to be applicable in a number of national contexts outside the United States, including Europe, Asia, and Australia (Kim, 2009; Liu, Tang, & Zhu, 2008; Taylor, 2008; Vandenabeele et al., 2009). Yet these studies have used a variety of measures that limit their comparability. Given the constraints of language and culture, a number of recent strides have been made. Research is now underway to create a measure with greater utility for cross-national use (Kim & Vandenabeele, 2010) and to revise the original scale (Perry, 1996) to remedy defects (Wright & Christensen, 2009).

CONCLUSION

The public service motivation literature over the past two decades suggests a strong association between public organization membership and ethical behavior and public service motivation. The associations between performance and public service motivation are mixed. The results come from a growing body of research on public service motivation that has contributed significantly to our understanding, but much more research is needed. Promising frontiers of research include the relationship between public service motivation and a variety of mediating variables. Scholars should seriously consider issues of measurement and the use of experiments as alternative research options.

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