# Public Service Motivation: State of the Art and Conceptual Cleanup

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**Abstract** Public service motivation is an increasingly researched and, at the same time, hotly debated concept in the field of public management and public administration. It refers to the motivation people have to contribute to society. This chapter provides an overview of what has happened so far in this field since the introduction of the concept in the 1980s and 1990s, with a particular focus on the role of the research community. In this overview, causes, consequences, and related theories are identified. The chapter also establishes gaps in the literature and issues that remain unresolved. In so doing, we carry out a conceptual cleanup by positioning the subject alongside related but different concepts such as intrinsic motivation, altruism, and prosocial motivation.

## 13.1　Introduction

Public service motivation (PSM) is usually viewed as the motivation that people have to contribute to society (Perry and Hondeghem 2008a). In contemporary public administration and public management research, few topics have engendered as much debate as has PSM. For some, it is the answer to one of the big questions in public management, for example, as stated by Robert

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Behn (1995, 319): 'How can public managers motivate public employees (and citizens too) to pursue important public purposes?' Despite PSM not being initially offered as a possible answer to the question posed by Behn, with the question framed from a control perspective that relied heavily on principal–agent problems and theory, many have nevertheless looked to PSM to provide an answer (Brewer et al. 2000; Houston 2006; Vandenabeele 2008b). In fact, one-quarter of the articles citing Behn's big question are related to PSM.

Publication data demonstrate a steady increase in the number of peer-reviewed articles addressing the topic of PSM in one way or another (Perry and Hondeghem 2008b; Vandenabeele et al. 2014; Ritz et al. 2016). Equally, citation scores for PSM-related articles demonstrate that such papers have above-average citations (Vandenabeele and Skelcher 2015) indicating that the topic is one that engenders debate.

The reasons for this apparent popularity are manifold. Apart from the aforementioned reason that it addresses one of the big questions in public administration and public management, one can distinguish at least five other reasons for the resonance that PSM creates. First, it fits into a longer tradition of using unselfish reasons to explain organizational behavior. The category of 'unselfish motivational components' has been applied by many to answer all kinds of collective action problems (Simon 1991; Osterloh et al. 2001), and PSM is another example of this tendency. Second, PSM theory provides a bridge between institutional and individual levels of analysis (Perry 2000). In this sense, it appeals to the interdisciplinary nature of public administration (Frederickson et al. 2015) and can be considered as a precursor to what has recently been described as 'behavioral public administration' (Tummers et al. 2016)—the application of psychological insights to public administration issues. Third, with its methodological approach, PSM research has been considered by many as a good example in terms of rigor when it comes to scale development (Jilke et al. 2015). In striving to advance this field methodologically, in order to keep up with other subfields in the social sciences, this certainly has some appeal. Fourth, within the interdisciplinary field of public administration, there are only a few constructs that have been developed as specific to the field—red tape, publicness and public value, and representative bureaucracy are other exceptions (Moynihan et al. 2013). Although PSM research still relies heavily on other fields, it is slowly beginning to export its native concepts to other fields (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015). Finally, the role of the research community should not be underestimated in explaining the appeal. Key players in the PSM field have devoted large parts of their careers to building constructive and positive research communities not only in the US but also in Europe (Vandenabeele and Skelcher 2015; Ritz et al. 2016). In fact, in recent years, most of the high-impact research projects on PSM have been based in Europe (in particular in Denmark, the Netherlands, and Italy).

Summing up, with its incidence and prevalence repeatedly demonstrated, PSM is here to stay (Wright and Grant 2010). Nevertheless, some still question the very concept, both its nature (Bozeman and Su 2015) and its outcomes (Jakobsen and Jensen 2015). This chapter aims to resolve some of the issues related to PSM by providing an overview of the existing evidence for

PSM and at the same time establishing conceptual clarity. This latter effort will be discussed in the next section. This is followed by an overview of the causes and consequences of PSM. Further, the concept is integrated within a job demands–resources perspective to further its practical application. Finally, some of the remaining issues are discussed.

## 13.2 What PSM is (and what it is not)

PSM stems from an idea that has been around for thousands of years, namely that providing public service is based on a drive to do good for others and for society (Horton 2008). Nevertheless, it was not until Rainey (1982) first coined the term and, later, Perry and Wise (1990, 368) formally defined it, that research into the concept was sparked. Their seminal definition sees PSM as 'the individual predisposition to respond to motives primarily or uniquely found in public institutions.'

However, since then, it has been redefined by many others, mainly because the original definition is somewhat abstract and intangible (Brewer and Selden 1998; Rainey and Steinbauer 1999; Vandenabeele 2007). The common denominator in all these definitions is that PSM is first about the willingness to contribute to public, and therefore political, processes, and second to possibly disregard one's own interests in doing so. Here, political processes are conceived in line with David Easton (1968, 129)—'the authoritative allocation of values for a society.' As such, these definitions refer first to deciding what is important for society and trying to provide it, and second to a certain level of self-sacrifice. Horton (2008, 18) very aptly summarizes it as '[t]he essence of the idea is that a public servant sets aside his personal interest because he sees it as his duty to serve his community.' This reflects a minor shift in focus insofar as, in its original conception, PSM did not reflect a purely altruistic concept, but a mix of affective, normative, and rational motives (Perry and Wise 1990).

Nevertheless, such conceptual definitions are still somewhat vague and intangible until more concrete aspects are added, for example, by providing insights into the actual dimensions of the concept. Initially, Perry (1996) distinguished four dimensions of PSM: attraction to policymaking—to what extent do you like participating in policy decisions; public interest/civic duty—how important is the common good and your own sense of duty; compassion—to what extent do you empathize with less privileged people; and self-sacrifice—to what extent are you willing to sacrifice your own interests to benefit others. These four dimensions were derived from a six-fold typology that separated civic duty from the public interest and added social justice. Although agreeing with the general principle, many later researchers have stressed the need for additional dimensions, such as the importance of democratic governance (Vandenabeele 2008a; Giauque et al. 2011) or conversely removed some of the dimensions (Coursey and Pandey 2007; Coursey et al. 2008). In a test of the various dimensions across twelve countries (Kim et al. 2013), the dimensions of compassion and self-sacrifice were retained, but the other two were re-conceptualized as commitment to public values (to what extent do you adhere to

public values that are important to society) and as attraction to public service (to what extent do you want to provide public service).

Given this complexity, and also because of the lack of replicability this dimensional structure creates, some researchers have raised questions about the need for a dimensional approach (Wright et al. 2013). In particular, the added value of looking at dimensions of PSM is questioned. Although untangling the different causes of PSM by 'unbundling the concept' is useful for analytical purposes (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015), in some instances advancing PSM research is better served by just having one overall concept (and overall measure) of PSM. First, because such a measure will probably be closer to actual behavior, as opposed to more distant dimensions. Second, because PSM has proven to be institutionally dependent and comes in differing guises in different circumstances or organizations (Van Loon et al. 2013), a fixed set of dimensions will not always tell the entire story. Sometimes, included dimensions are not relevant and, at other times, possibly relevant dimensions are overlooked. As such, a global or overall concept may be more informative as it does not preselect which elements determine the actual behavioral inclinations associated with PSM.

Another issue in delineating the concept of PSM is to recognize what it is not. Various concepts have been muddled with PSM, such as intrinsic motivation, altruism, prosocial behavior, and prosocial motivation. Although these may conceptually or empirically overlap, they are not the same thing and therefore should be clearly distinguished from PSM. Schott et al. (2016) have identified two important distinctions that can be used in unraveling these concepts.

First, there is the distinction between intention, or motive, on the one hand and actual behavior on the other, as these 'present two different states of human actions' (Schott et al. 2016, 9, derived from Heckhausen 1987, 1989). Prosocial behavior, defined as a 'broad category of acts that are defined by some significant segment of society and/or one's social group as generally beneficial to other people' (Penner et al. 2005, 366), clearly refers to behavior—the second state—and should therefore not be confused with motivation but instead seen as a possible outcome of it. Similarly, Wilson (1975, 578) defines altruism as 'self-destructive behavior performed for the benefit of others.' Here again, there is a clear focus on behavior. The other, the first, state considered in Schott et al. (2016) is motivation for this behavior. Also, constructs such as intrinsic motivation (Houston 2000; Steijn 2008), prosocial motivation, and again altruism spring to mind when thinking of PSM. The most encompassing concept in this list is intrinsic motivation, which can be defined 'as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence' (Ryan and Deci 2000, 56). Prosocial motivation, on the other hand, 'takes a eudaimonic perspective by emphasizing meaning and purpose as drivers of effort […] effort is based on a desire to benefit others' (Grant 2008, 49). This definition largely overlaps with altruism as defined by Batson and Shaw (1991, 108) as 'a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing another's welfare.'

Second, additional parameters of the target audience or beneficiaries (Schott et al. 2016) can be considered in making a further conceptual distinction. First, there is the distinction between self-oriented or other-oriented motivation in terms of who will benefit most from the motivation to perform such behaviors. As can be derived from the definition, and as already stated by Grant (2008), intrinsic motivation is mainly self-oriented (or hedonistic), whereas prosocial motivation takes the perspective of the other. As such, intrinsic motivation is not a substitute for PSM, nor is it an essential part of it (Neumann and Ritz 2015). However, if we look at the definitions of Rainey and Steinbauer (1999), Vandenabeele (2007), and more implicitly at the references to public institutions or public service in the definitions of Perry and Wise (1990), Brewer and Selden (1998), we see that PSM is prosocial in nature.

Furthermore, one can make a distinction between clearly identified, or non-anonymous, beneficiaries and the largely unidentified 'society at large' as the beneficiary (Schott et al. 2016). Although Grant and Berg (2011) explain that beneficiaries of prosocial motivation can vary from individuals and groups to larger collectives such as nations or societies, it is nevertheless likely that there will be some kind of identification with these beneficiaries—and thus direct interaction. For prosocial motivation, the relationship with these beneficiaries is seen as important in terms of feedback and appreciation (Grant 2008). Therefore, one cannot equate PSM with prosocial motivation, since the latter will have a broader scope in terms of beneficiaries (both identified and unidentified), whereas the former is mainly aimed at unidentified beneficiaries (e.g., society). This was illustrated by Wright et al. (2013) who found considerable overlap (to the extent of empirical equivalence) between measures of PSM and of general prosocial motivation, whereas Jensen and Andersen (2015) found differential effects of individual user orientation (as an instance of prosocial motivation) and PSM.

These distinctions are summarized in Fig. 13.1. When distinguishing motivation in terms of the characteristics of the beneficiaries, intrinsic motivation is largely self-oriented (and therefore not motivated by public service ideals), whereas PSM is a particular instance of prosocial motivation, in that it is mainly directed at society at large or, at least, unidentified beneficiaries. An important caveat is that the Perry and Wise (1990) definition leaves some room for self-interested behavior by linking the 'attraction to public policy-making' dimension to a rational motive. Thus, depending on the conceptualization, PSM may spill over into other quadrants, but its core remains in the lower-right quadrant.

Conceptualizing PSM like this has an important consequence that directly impacts on its scope and its incidence: PSM does not equal the overall motivation of public or civil servants, nor is it only found in the public sector. Conceptually, several theoretical approaches have explicitly related PSM to focus rather than to locus. For example, Perry and Wise (1990, 368),
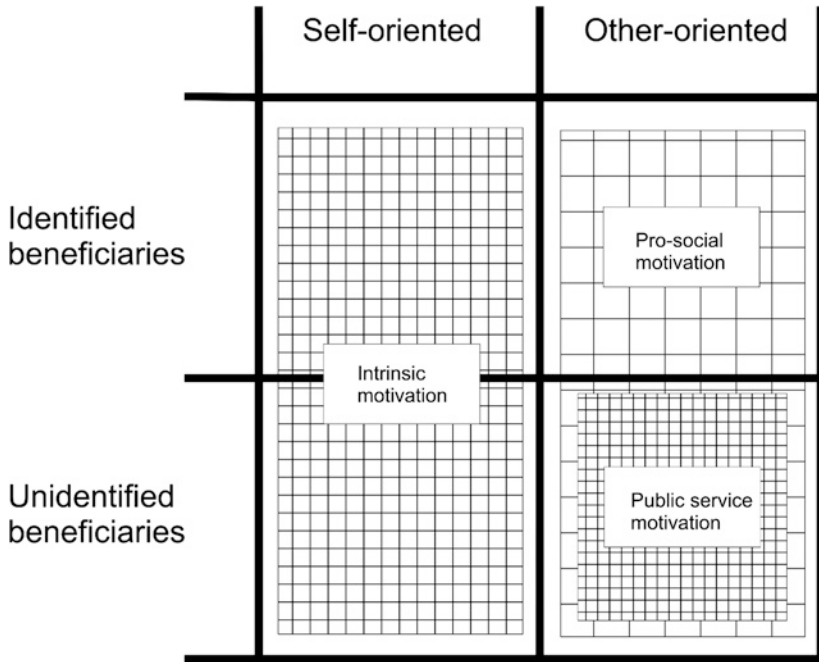
| | Self-oriented | Other-oriented |
|---|---|---|
| Identified beneficiaries | | Pro-social motivation |
| | Intrinsic motivation | |
| Unidentified beneficiaries | | Public service motivation |

**Fig. 13.1**    Typology of motivations

paraphrasing Elmer Staats, wrote that 'public service is much more than one's locus of employment' and that the use of PSM is not limited to the civil service, but is to be found in 'public institutions and organizations.' This position has later been further elaborated by several other researchers (Vandenabeele 2008b; Houston 2011; Perry and Vandenabeele 2008). Empirically, PSM has been found (and its effect demonstrated) in various populations including firefighters, police officers, nurses, social workers, teachers, military personnel, volunteers, and even private sector workers (Perry et al. 2008; Van Loon et al. 2013; Kim 2011, Bellé 2013; Kjeldsen 2014; Brænder and Andersen 2013; Van Loon 2015).

## 13.3    What Causes PSM?

A crucial element in determining the source of PSM is the recognition that it is institutionally embedded (Perry 2000; Vandenabeele 2007). The term institutions refers to all 'formal or informal, structural, societal or political phenomena that transcend the individual level, that are based on more-or-less common values, have a certain degree of stability and influence behavior' (Peters 2000, 18). Essentially, they encompass all structured, value-based interactions between people. They exist on various levels (Scott 2001) from micro (involving permanent direct interactions) through meso (with a mix

of direct and indirect interactions) to macro (mainly indirect interactions between members). Within these institutions, members operate according to logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1989) meaning that people do what they are supposed and expected to do. This is ingrained in their identity (March and Olsen 1995) and based on the core values of these institutions. Within public institutions—which can vary in guise and nature, but share a core characteristic that they promote public values—PSM is related to an over-arching identity, referring to a more-or-less common set of the abovementioned public values that enable people to operate in a range of such public institutions (Vandenabeele 2007). As such, PSM is created through processes of institutional socialization within various public institutions. Institutions that can enhance PSM at the micro-level include structural work relationships (with colleagues and supervisors or leaders), job design, and also family history and volunteering experiences (Perry 1997; Perry et al. 2008; Vandenabeele 2011; Kjeldsen and Jacobsen 2012; Wright et al. 2012; Bellé 2014). At the meso-level, links have been found in institutions such as churches, professional associations, education, and the organization in which one is employed (Perry 1997; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Vandenabeele 2011; Bright 2016). Where the relationship is much more indirect, at the macro-level, particularly public sector employment, cultural belonging, and country-citizenship have been related to PSM (Vandenabeele and Van de Walle 2008; Anderfuhren-Biget 2012; Kjeldsen and Jacobsen 2012; Ritz and Brewer 2013).

PSM cannot exist without these institutions, but the picture is more complex than this. These socialization processes are not linear or absolute, as institutions are more than their core values. There are, for example, close links between PSM and self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2004). The way people are treated within organizations and in particular, stemming from self-determination theory, the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs, have been demonstrated to influence this process (Vandenabeele 2014). Also, the idea that extrinsic motivators crowd out autonomous motivation (Deci et al. 1999), as has been demonstrated to be the case for PSM (Bellé 2015), links to self-determination theory.

Furthermore, there are also connections with identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1985), and how identities develop and become salient, and this boosts the prominence of PSM in the array of a person's identities. Additionally, although PSM is a relatively stable trait (Vogel and Kroll 2016), some events, such as persuasion by others or oneself, seem to trigger PSM and to make it more salient within an individual (Bellé 2013; Pedersen 2015). Such a perspective sheds a different light on PSM's development.

PSM has also been linked to other stable traits such as gender—with women scoring invariably higher on the compassion dimension, while men tending to score higher on the other PSM dimensions; age—with older people generally outscoring younger people; and personality type—linking it to various personality types, although not always consistently (DeHart-Davis et al. 2006; Pandey and Stazyk 2008; Carpenter et al. 2012; Esteve et al. 2015).

## 13.4    What Are the Consequences of PSM?

From its conception, researchers have always seemed to be more interested in the consequences and outcomes of PSM than in its origins. This is perhaps not surprising since the consequences are what give PSM its possible practical value. As such, the bulk of the research has been devoted to the relationship with outcomes (Ritz et al. 2016). However, there are a range of outcomes that can be addressed when answering this question.

A large part of this research effort has addressed the relationship with performance, which in itself is often a vague and multi-facetted concept, and so complicates the research. One could, for example, look at overall in-role performance or extra-role performance, or at more contextualized measures related to specific jobs. Furthermore, complications relate to the source of information: it could be a self-assessment, a peer or supervisor assessment, or register data. As meta-analyses in other fields have demonstrated, the typical correlation between different dimensions and measures of performance is rather weak (Bommer et al. 1995). As such, caution is warranted when assessing the claim of relationships between PSM and performance, since these are often in the eye of the beholder.

A study that failed to find the abovementioned connection (Alonso and Lewis 2001) has cast a long shadow over research and led to one of the original propositions of PSM theory—that PSM would increase performance (Perry and Wise 1990)—being discarded for a long time. However, since that study, a multitude of studies have demonstrated the existence of such a relationship, both when it comes to a broad general performance measure (Bright 2007; Vandenabeele 2009; Van Loon 2016) or more contextualized behaviors such as the grading of teachers, university service or research output (Andersen et al. 2014; Jin et al. 2016), packaging surgery kits for nurses (Bellé 2013), the number of home visits or antibiotic prescriptions by general practitioners (Jensen and Vestergaard 2016; Jensen and Andersen 2015), or knowledge sharing behavior in organizations (Chen and Hsieh 2015). In all of these instances, PSM was reported to increase the measured outcome variable and thus, in one way or another, to boost performance.

This idea was strengthened by the observation that, mediated through individual performance, PSM also robustly increases organizational performance (Brewer and Selden 2000; Kim 2005; Ritz 2009; Giauque et al. 2013; Van Loon et al. 2016). Other outcome variables, such as organizational commitment (Naff and Crum 1999; Vandenabeele 2009), job satisfaction (Homberg et al. 2015; Kim 2012), organizational citizenship behavior (Ritz et al. 2014; Koumenta 2015), and whistleblowing behavior (Brewer and Selden 1998; Caillier 2015), that are considered to boost organization performance are also positively affected by PSM.

Nevertheless, a number of studies have warned against excessive optimism and called for a more nuanced perspective. PSM is not a magic wand and will not render positive results in all instances or for all types of desirable

outcomes. Important elements one should consider are the context of a particular situation and the particular type of performance one is looking for (Van Loon et al. 2015a; Wright et al. 2015). Here, the fit between an individual's level of PSM and the environment is a crucial factor. The fits with the job and with the organization (Christensen and Wright 2011) have been shown to be important mediators between PSM and positive outcomes. Moreover, it is important to note that preventing a misfit provides a stronger driver for desirable behavior than achieving a good fit does (Neumann 2016). This meshes very well with the idea that PSM operates according to logic of appropriateness: only if an environment judges PSM to be appropriate, or calls out for the public service motive, will PSM be able to realize its full potential in terms of outcomes. This shows that public service motivation is not only institutional in its origins but also in its outcomes. This is reflected in the finding that PSM increases the likelihood of later public employment (Kjeldsen and Jacobsen 2012; Wright et al. 2015).

Another warning against adopting an overly optimistic view is that, recently, research has begun to investigate the so-called 'dark side' of PSM. PSM has, in some cases, been identified as increasing the risk of stress and burnout (Van Loon et al. 2015b; Giauque et al. 2012b) and also of resigned satisfaction (Giauque et al. 2012a). These studies clearly indicate that PSM can induce a process of exhaustion or frustration, leading to negative outcomes, both for the individual and for the organization.

Overall, current research presents a much more nuanced and complex picture of PSM outcomes than was apparent in the early years of PSM research. It is increasingly acknowledged that context plays an important role—that linking PSM with a certain outcome is no longer sufficient. This broadens the scope of the concept since institutional arrangements that include a public component spread far beyond public sector organizations. At the same time, PSM is no longer conceived as always a good thing in that not only may it have no influence due to a lack of fit, but it may also have negative consequences.

## 13.5    What Can You Do with PSM?

Public administration and public management have always been a practice-oriented branch of the big tree of science (Wilson 1887). This automatically points to the question as to what one can do with this kind of knowledge and what the possible applications are. One way to frame PSM's role is to place it in the framework of a job demands–resources (JD-R) perspective (Bakker 2015). This theoretical perspective tries to explain individual behavior within organizations by distinguishing elements in the broad setting of the job that either drive performance and provide energy (i.e., job resources) or that drain energy without rendering positive results (job demands) (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). An interesting aspect of this theoretical perspective is its flexibility in that virtually anything can be a resource or a demand (Bakker et al. 2014). This enables one to bring various context-specific elements into the equation. Hence, although the

JD-R model was not developed with public services in mind, it has been applied successfully in various public contexts (Hakanen et al. 2005; Hu et al. 2012), albeit without addressing the specific context of the public sector. Only recently has it been particularly linked to public management theory and the specificity of public service by looking into the role of PSM. Here, PSM is theoretically conceived as an individual-level variable that affects daily resources and demands (Bakker 2015). Perhaps surprisingly, empirical results indicate that it can be seen as either a resource, or, more unexpectedly, as a demand (Van Loon et al. 2015b; Giauque et al. 2012b).

The JD-R model also offers the prospect of integrating general human resources management (HRM) practices as either demands or resources. It makes it possible to pinpoint the aspects of managing human resources that influence the outcomes in either a positive or a negative way. Aspects such as job enrichment, performance appraisal, participation, and professional development are positively related to PSM (Giauque et al. 2013; Schott and Pronk 2014), whereas pay for performance is negatively related (Bellé 2015). These aspects can, within the boundaries of the context, thus be used (in the latter case avoided) to positively influence outcomes. This corresponds with some of the much earlier recommendations made by Paarlberg et al. (2008) for fostering and harnessing PSM.

## 13.6    What issues are left (or at least the most urgent)?

Despite the sharp increase in PSM knowledge, the research is far from complete. Notwithstanding all the insights generated so far, PSM is far from 'a puzzle solved.'

One issue that remains important as a research topic is the integration of PSM with other theoretical insights. PSM, as a truly interdisciplinary concept, has, since its inception, been developed on the basis of theoretical ideas drawn from psychology, political science, sociology, and economics. Some of these have crystallized at the core of PSM, but integrating these concepts in a solid framework has not always been easy. Some work remains to be done in this respect, for example, with developing closer connections with identity theory, JD-R, and self-determination theory. Also, the roles of context and fit, and looking at different aspects or operationalizations of fit, such as team or supervisor fit, need to be further investigated.

Another element that warrants further investigation is the measurement of PSM. Research into the concept, in terms of testing measurement instruments, has been exemplary for other fields from the initial attempt (Perry 1996) to its most recent effort (Kim et al. 2013). Nevertheless, the PSM research community might 'have spent too much effort on measurement and, simultaneously, too little' (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015, 694). While the statistical methods have substantially advanced, the theoretical development of measures has not. In order to rectify this, issues related to measurement variance need to be addressed (Kim et al. 2013), in particular how and why factor structures differ among populations. Also, the further unbundling of PSM,

and looking into particular subdimensions that may be relevant in particular contexts and cause-specific outcomes, would be valuable (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015). At the same time, there is a need to develop a truly global measure of PSM (Wright et al. 2013; Moynihan et al. 2013) since this would have the potential to bypass the contextual sensitiveness of existing dimensional measures. The idea behind such global measures is that they can directly gauge the end result of the PSM process, namely whether one is motivated to perform public service (or not). As such, they disregard all the facet or dimensional influences, in much the same way as has been done for job satisfaction by posing the question 'Are you satisfied?' (Ironson et al. 1989). In this, we may find a fresh solution for assessing PSM in different environments.

Finally, the thorniest issue is drawing solid causal inferences based upon empirical evidence. Much of the work that has been done so far uses cross-sectional data. Such research is open to endogeneity and common method bias (Meier and O'Toole 2013), which can lead to spurious findings. Although not all cross-sectional work suffers from this—genuinely exogenous factors such as age or gender (Moynihan et al. 2013) and moderating effects (Jakobsen and Jensen 2015) are unlikely to be affected—there is a need for much more robust studies to corroborate the existing findings. More experimental evidence (which has its own drawbacks including limited external validity) and/or multiple wave panel data analyses are needed, but such studies take time, especially given the replication efforts required to account for contextual effects.

Some of these issues are being addressed by researchers around the world, with European scholars playing an important role. The development of field experiments (Bellé 2013; Pedersen 2015) and panel datasets (Brænder and Andersen 2013; Vogel and Kroll 2016; Van Loon et al. 2016; Kjeldsen and Jacobsen 2012) is something to which European scholars have significantly contributed. Often this has been part of wider collaborations in which researchers from all corners of the globe contribute, as in the study on measurement invariance in PSM (Kim et al. 2013), and it is probably in such research ventures that the future lies.

## 13.7  Conclusions

PSM has evolved markedly over the past 25 years. When first conceived, it was an often-criticized concept that did not really fit in the, then prevalent, new public management doctrine, in which rational choice was predominant. However, PSM has since turned into a widely accepted concept that is seen to be at the heart of public service delivery. In this period, the insights have become more and more nuanced, and theory has become more and more complex, taking into account an increasing set of variables and a broadening scope. Nevertheless, much work remains to be done, both in terms of theory development and methods. There is maybe even enough to keep us all busy for another 25 years!

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