Revisiting the Motivational Bases of Public Service: Twenty Years of Research and an Agenda for the Future

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Abstract

This paper reviews the evolution of research about public service motivation conducted since “The Motivational Bases of Public Service” (Perry and Wise, 1990) appeared in Public Administration Review in 1990. It assesses research that has been conducted related to three propositions presented in the 1990 article. The review of research covers both public administration and social and behavioral sciences. Based upon the research review, we discuss four priorities for future research: broadening research methodologies to include experimental and quasi-experimental designs; improving measurement for survey-based research; modelling and studying public service motivation as part of a constellation of motives affecting behavior; and applying theory and findings about public service motivation to improve the effectiveness of public organizations.
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In 1990, American public service was beginning to exit from more than a decade of intense criticism and personnel reform. Politicians and policy makers had been searching since the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 for formulas to change government service. It was at this juncture that Perry and Wise’s (1990) “The Motivational Bases of Public Service” appeared in the 50th anniversary volume of Public Administration Review. Their article was grounded in thinking about motivational alternatives to merit pay, which had been introduced in the U. S. federal government in 1979.

Since “The Motivational Bases of Public Service” appeared, more than 125 studies about public service motivation, covering more than a dozen countries, have been published, most of them since 2000. This paper assesses three aspects of subsequent research. We begin by reviewing several definitions of public service motivation, including the original that appeared in Perry and Wise (1990). We next turn to answering the question: What have we learned from public service motivation research to date? The review is framed around three propositions offered by Perry and Wise (1990), but also takes into account recent research in the social and behavioral sciences. The article concludes with a discussion of four priorities for future research.

A Note about Definition

A starting point for developing an understanding of public service motivation is the motivation concept, a pivotal concern of modern organizational research. Its centrality to modern organizational research also helps to account for the diversity of definitions. We prefer, following Perry and Porter (1982, p. 29), to conceive of motivation broadly as the forces that energize, direct, and sustain behavior. This definition is similar to Pinder (1998), who describes
motivation as internal and external forces that initiate work-related behavior, determining its form, direction, intensity, and duration. Although motivation is often studied in the context of work, we prefer not to limit the scope to ‘work’ only, in part because the forces themselves are not bounded by tasks alone, but involve environmental forces, the work itself, and individual needs and motives.

**Public Service Motivation**

Public service motivation originates from beliefs that the motives of public servants are different from their private sector counterparts. As Elmer Staats (1988), former Comptroller General of the United States, concluded after fifty years of public service: “‘Public service’ is a concept, an attitude, a sense of duty—yes, even a sense of public morality” (601).

In public administration, public service motivation has been defined in several different, but compatible, ways. Perry and Wise (1990) defined it as “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (368). The definition clearly sought to emphasize motives, such as civic duty and compassion, which are commonly associated with public enterprises.¹

In a subsequent analysis of public service motivation and government effectiveness, Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) offer a more general definition of public service motivation. They associate the construct with altruism in referring to public service motivation as a “general, altruistic motivation to serve the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation or humankind…” (20). The Rainey and Steinbauer definition is similar to Brewer and Selden (1998, 417), who defined the concept as “the motivational force that induces individuals to perform meaningful … public, community, and social service,” emphasizing its behavioral implications and applicability beyond the public sector.
The most recent variation of the definition within public administration emanates from Vandenabeele’s (2007) research in Europe. Vandenabeele (2007) defines public service motivation as “the belief, values and attitudes that go beyond self-interest and organizational interest, that concern the interest of a larger political entity and that motivate individuals to act accordingly whenever appropriate” (p. 547). The primary departure of this definition from others is the addition of values as a component of institutional identity.

**Altruism**

Public administration definitions of public service motivation invoke both the concepts of self-sacrifice (Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry, 1996) and altruism (Rainey and Steinbauer, 1999). Thus, research about altruism has direct relevance for research about public service motivation. Piliavin and Charng (1990) observe that altruism has traditionally been defined in terms of costs, but they argue that motives should be central to its definition. They write: “We have chosen to adopt a largely motive-based definition of altruism as behaviour costly to the actor involving other-regarding sentiments; if an act is or appears to be motivated mainly out of a consideration of another’s needs rather than one’s own, we call it altruism” (30).

Economists have connected public service motivation to altruism, meaning the willingness of individuals to engage in sacrificial behaviors for the good of others without reciprocal benefits for themselves. Patrick Francois (2000) referred to public service motivation as employees providing “effort out of concern for the impact of that effort on a valued social service” (275). In his research on public servant motivation and policy design, the economist Julian LeGrand (2003), after reviewing relevant literature, including research about public service motivation, concludes that “it is hard to dispute the view that altruistic motivations are
prevalent among the providers of public services” (p. 35). Thus, economists have fairly consistently equated public service motivation with altruism.

**Prosocial Behavior**

A third line of research, most closely identified with the field of organizational behavior, is prosocial behavior, which encompasses a broad category of other-regarding behaviors (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). Some have argued that the meaning of prosocial be tied to an actor’s motives. Walster and Piliavin (1972), for instance, suggest that the definition include that the act is voluntary and without expectations for return. Given how the literature on both prosocial behavior and motives converges with our understanding of public service motivation, we believe the prosocial literature merits consideration in research about public service motivation.

**Summary**

A review of different definitions of public service motivation as they are invoked across several disciplines is helpful for affirming that the construct has currency beyond public administration. Although the meaning of public service motivation varies across disciplines and fields, the construct generally refers to individual motives that are largely, but not exclusively, altruistic and are grounded in public institutions.

**What Have We Learned from Public Service Motivation Research?**

We examine three propositions offered by Perry and Wise (1990) in light of subsequent research about public service motivation. We assess the validity of the propositions in light of subsequent empirical research, what we now know, and what gaps exist in our knowledge related to each of the three propositions.
Attraction-Selection-Attrition

In the original formulation, the first relationship Perry and Wise (1990) proposed was between public service motivation and the likelihood of an individual selecting a public organization. They posited:

Proposition 1: The greater an individual’s public service motivation, the more likely the individual will seek membership in a public organization.

The rationale for the prediction was straightforward. Perry and Wise reasoned that individual behavior would be influenced by the magnetic effects of individual identity and organization characteristics. Individuals who are high in public service motivation would seek out contexts compatible with their dispositions and the contexts to which they would likely be attracted were organizations that satisfied their higher prosocial and altruistic orientations.

Review of public service motivation research on attraction-selection-attrition.

Public administration research about this proposition is limited, but generally supportive. In a formative study that is often associated with the beginnings of public service motivation research, Rainey (1982) found that public managers valued meaningful public service more highly that private managers and the preference for public service was significantly related to job satisfaction. Gabris and Simo (1995) arrived at a contrary finding based on survey results from 96 respondents from six organizations, two each from the public, nonprofit and private sectors. They concluded, “It could be that public sector motivation does exist, but like certain subatomic particles, it is virtually impossible to isolate and visualize” (41).
More recent research reinforces Rainey’s (1982) findings. In an analysis of U.S. General Social Survey (GSS) data from 1989 and 1998, Lewis and Frank (2002) found significant positive associations between a desire to help others and be useful to society and preferences for government jobs. Furthermore, they suggested these relationships might be stronger for college graduates, younger employees, and specific employment classifications such as education. Vandenabeele (2008b), using a sample of 1714 advanced masters students in Flemish universities, found that public service motivation positively correlated with student preferences for prospective public employers. The association of student preferences was stronger for government organizations classified as high, in contrast to low, publicness. An analysis of a large Dutch dataset (Steijn, 2008) showed public sector workers had higher levels of public service motivation than private sector workers. Interestingly, private sector workers with high levels of public service motivation were more likely to be looking for public sector jobs.

Research about attrition from government organizations also supports the original proposition. Crewson (1997) linked public service motivation empirically to higher organizational commitment and lower turnover. Using data from the 1997 Merit Principles Survey, Naff and Crum (1999) found a positive association between public service motivation and intent to remain. Steijn’s (2008) Dutch study showed that workers with high public service motivation fit are more satisfied and less inclined to leave their jobs and the organization they work for than workers without such a fit.

A recent study (Wright and Christensen, 2007), using a panel dataset of employment information for attorneys, offers insights regarding some mixed findings and why the public service motivation and attraction-selection-attrition relationships are more
nuanced than Perry and Wise (1990) originally projected. Wright and Christensen (2007) found that a strong interest in social service/helping others did not predict the employment sector of a lawyers’ first legal job, but it did increase the likelihood of holding subsequent jobs in the public sector. Wright and Christensen suggested that both initial sector choices and retention were affected by other factors that moderated the influence of public service motivation. Based upon their analysis and accumulated evidence, they concluded: “The findings of this study suggest that instead of asking whether PSM affects employee attraction and retention, perhaps it is more appropriate to ask when and under what conditions PSM affects employee attraction and retention” (15).

**Social and behavioral science evidence.** Economists have begun to contribute important research about public service motivation’s relationships to attraction-selection-attrition. Grout, Ratcliffe and Windmeijer (2007) (as reported in Francois and Vlassopoulos, 2007) studied donated labor as measured by unpaid overtime in caring industries in the UK. Grout et al found “that people with high public service motivation in caring industries are more likely to move to public sector or nonprofit firms....” (Francois and Vlassopoulos, 2007, 25). A series of studies by Delfgaauw and Dur (2007; 2008a; 2008b) formally model self-selection decisions in a perfectly competitive economy. Among their conclusions is that when prosocial motivation is private information, then increasing the wage raises the probability of attracting workers with lower prosocial motivations. Another recent study by Georgellis, Iossa and Tabvuma (2008) used data from the first fourteen waves of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) covering the period 1991-2004. Their analysis focused on 747 transitions from the
private to the public sector within the BHPS data. They concluded that individuals move to the public sector because of the higher likelihood of fulfilling their public service motivation.

**Research gaps and utility of research to date.** As we note above, the research related to attraction-selection-retention is beginning to demonstrate that the effects of public service motivation are more nuanced than Perry and Wise (1990) projected. The research results are promising, however, with respect to public service motivation being a factor in attraction and retention. Research from public administration, economics and other disciplines holds out the near-term prospect of creating usable knowledge that can be applied for improving recruitment, selection and retention practices in public organizations.

One line of research that bears on attraction-selection-attrition that has received attention recently but has not been fully assimilated into public service motivation research is person-environment fit models (Leisink and Steijn, 2008; Wright and Pandey, 2008). The person-environment fit models refer to several different ways of assessing the congruence between individuals and the settings in which they reside (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson, 2005). “Fit” refers to how congruent an individual is within a job or social unit, which may include a group or organization. The logic of the person-environment fit models is that individuals are likely to behave according to their essence if they are well adapted or “fit” their context.

Several recent studies (Vandenabeele, 2008b; Bright, 2008; Steijn, 2008) have used various forms of person-environment fit models to analyze the effects of public service motivation. Bright (2008), for example, found a strong, significant relationship between public service motivation and person-organization fit. Given the theoretical case and the prospects that
this research will help to identify more completely factors influencing attraction and retention, we believe this line of research merits continuing attention.

**Motivation--Performance**

The second proposition in Perry and Wise (1990) focused on the relationship between public service motivation and individual performance. It reads:

**Proposition 2:** In public organizations, public service motivation is positively related to individual performance.

Perry and Wise (1990) noted at the time: “Systematic empirical evidence about the relationship between public service motivation and performance does not exist” (371). Their arguments for the proposition rested on two premises. First, public jobs would be intrinsically motivating for individuals with high public service motivation because these individuals would embrace work characterized by attributes such as high task significance. Second, public service motivation is likely to affect positively organizational commitment, which influences prospects for reliable role behaviors and innovative activities, both of which are critical for high individual performance.

different model specification for the 1996 data than Naff and Crum (1999), Alonzo and Lewis were able to replicate Naff and Crum’s findings that public service motivation had a positive impact on performance ratings. Alonzo and Lewis were unable, however, to find a relationship between valuing service to others and higher ratings in the 1991 data set. Public service motivation also had no association with grade level in 1996 and valuing service to others was negatively related to grade level in 1991. Although Alonzo and Lewis acknowledged that differences across the data sets in key measures made multiple interpretations of their findings plausible, their analysis raises legitimate questions about the original proposition.

Three of the studies that used self-reports of performance also incorporated measures of person-organization fit into their models. Bright (2007) used self-reported performance as the dependent variable in a model that tested person-organization fit as a mediator of the relationship between public service motivation and performance. His sample consisted of 205 public health care, city government, and county employees from Indiana, Kentucky and Oregon. He found indirect effects of public service motivation mediated by the fit measure, but no independent direct effects. In a study of a large sample of Flemish state civil servants, Vandenabeele (2009) concluded there was a positive and significant relationship between public service motivation and performance, as measured by employee self-reports. In contrast to Bright (2007), Vandenabeele found support for both direct and indirect effects on performance. The indirect effects were mediated by job satisfaction and normative and affective commitment of the motivation-performance relationships. The third of these studies (Leisink and Steijn, 2009) analyzed the effects of public service motivation on three performance-related outcome variables, commitment, willingness to exert effort and perceived job performance in a sample of 4130 Dutch public employees from all levels and a variety of functions. The hypothesis that
person-organization fit mediates the relationship between public service motivation and the outcome variables was rejected. The effects of public service motivation and fit on the outcome variables were independent.

Two other studies tested a model proposed by Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) in which public service motivation is one of three types of motivation that are the proximate determinants of the effectiveness of government organizations rather than individual performance. The first of these two studies (Brewer and Selden, 2000) again used data from the U.S. 1996 MPS. It found a positive and significant relationship between public service motivation and perceived organizational effectiveness. The second study used responses from 1739 full-time public employees in nine central government, five provincial, and twenty-six lower-level local government agencies in Korea. Kim (2005) found that public service motivation was a significant positive influence on perceived organizational effectiveness, replicating the results of Brewer and Selden (2000).

Ritz (2009) used a three-item survey-based measure of internal efficiency as the dependent variable in a sample of 13,532 Swiss federal employees from all seven ministries. He independently entered two dimensions of public service motivation, attraction to public policy making and commitment to the public interest, into regressions. Commitment to the public interest was significant, but attraction to public policy making was not.

In addition to studies of individual and organizational performance, scholars have also looked at discrete variables that represent facets of performance or could mediate the motivation-performance relationship. Brewer and Selden (1998) concluded that public service motivation was positively related to propensity to blow the whistle. Two recent studies (Kim, 2006; Pandey, Wright and Moynihan, 2008), one based in Korea and the in the U.S., found positive associations
between public service motivation and organizational citizenship behavior. Andersen (2009) investigated the influence of public service motivation and professional norms on the performance of a sample of public and private health professionals in Denmark. The public service motivation of 24 health professionals was inferred from in-depth interviews and specific discrete behaviors were used as measures of performance for the different health professions. Andersen found that public service motivation was at the same high level for public and private health professionals so that it did not affect performance, which did vary with professional norms and economic incentives.

**Social and behavioral science evidence.** A path breaking study is Francois’s (2000), “Public Service Motivation as an Argument for Government Provision.” He acknowledges that the claims of public administration scholars about a public service ethic have not been taken seriously by economists. Using formal mathematical modelling, Francois demonstrates that when public service motivation exists, conditions can be created for government bureaucracy to better obtain effort from employees than a standard profit maximizing firm. The simple form of Francois’s argument is that if government organizations are populated by high public service motivation employees, then government provision or purchase of certain public services is efficient because it allows for the service ethic to be expressed and lowers the price to taxpayers. The willingness of public employees to accept lower financial rewards is compensated by a non-pecuniary benefit of meeting their public service goals. The result is efficient because public employees motivated by public service are essentially volunteering a portion of their time for free, which would not happen if they worked for a private, profit maximizing firm.

Another major contribution is LeGrand’s (2003) *Motivation, Agency, and Public Policy*. LeGrand develops a complex argument that is grounded in two constructs, motivation and
agency. LeGrand argues that the motivation of public servants is complex, but includes both self-interested and altruistic motives. He couples his analysis of motivation with agency, i.e., the capacity to take desired action. The purpose for coupling motivation and agency is to identify how agency should be designed to maximize motivation. His conclusion is that public policies should be designed to create quasi-markets in which public agencies compete with for-profit firms in delivery of services. The consequence of such quasi-markets is that they serve to harness altruistic motivations of all providers (LeGrand, 2003), public and private.

**Research gaps and utility of research to date.** At this juncture, the research seems to point to the conclusion that public service motivation matters for performance, but a good many questions remain unanswered about the degree that it matters and whether its effects are collective rather than individual. Indeed, an interesting aspect of the evolution of the research is that scholars have developed cases at both individual and collective levels for the contribution of public service motivation. This is a departure from Perry and Wise’s (1990) focus on individual performance, but opens up both research and institutional design options that were not considered twenty years ago.²

A research gap highlighted by the contributions of different disciplines is that public administration research has focused primarily on the individual level of analysis and economics research has emphasized institutional design. It would be advantageous for these two streams of research to intersect. Public administration research could promote intersection were it to give more attention to the institutional environment—such as the implications of ownership of the firm (public, commercial, nonprofit) of the firm or the incentive structure in the workplace.

Two significant but less fundamental issues that need attention in future research are the heavy reliance on self-reports in performance studies and the role of person-organization fit as a
mediator in the public service motivation—performance relationship (Bright, 2007; Brewer, 2008; Wright and Pandey, 2008). In a recent article, Wright and Pandey (2008) propose a model that helps to explain inconsistencies in motivation-performance research. They suggest that the effect of public service motivation on job satisfaction is mediated by value congruence. Their model offers promising avenues for future research.

Motivation and Organizational Incentive Structures

The third and final proposition in Perry and Wise (1990) focused on the relationship between public service motivation and the structure of organizational incentives. It reads:

Proposition 3: Public organizations that attract members with high levels of public service motivation are likely to be less dependent on utilitarian incentives to manage individual performance effectively.

The rationale for the proposition was based on Knoke and Wright-Isak’s (1982) predisposition-opportunity model. They conceptualize motives as “predispositions to act under appropriate external cues” (210). If public service motivation represents an individual’s predispositions to act, then the incentives (i.e., external cues) organizations are prepared to offer members for their commitments represent the opportunity side of the model. Knoke and Wright-Isak develop a typology composed of eight different types of organizational incentive systems representing familiar schemes, including pure utilitarian and service incentive systems.

Public service motivation—organizational incentive structure research. This proposition has long-standing empirical support in the public administration literature, but most of the evidence is confined to how highly public employees’ value financial rewards relative to their private sector counterparts or relative to some portfolio of rewards. Reviews prior to 1990
Rainey, Backoff and Levine, 1976; Perry and Porter, 1982; Rainey, 1983) summarized this evidence indicating that financial rewards are less important than other, non-pecuniary rewards.

Recent research formally incorporating public service motivation as an explanatory construct confirms earlier findings. Crewson (1997), Karl and Sutton (1998) and Bright (2005; in press) reported inverse relationships between public service motivation and preferences for monetary rewards. Although those who choose public jobs tend to value intrinsic motivators more and extrinsic motivators less than those who prefer the private sector, Frank and Lewis (2004), using 1989 and 1998 GSS data, found that interaction terms intended to capture public-private differences in a range of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards did not approach statistical significance. This led them to conclude: “In both sectors, an interesting job that allows one to help others and a strong desire for job security appeared to increase the probability that one will put in extra effort, and the size of the effect appeared to be about the same in both sectors” (46).

**Social and behavioral science evidence.** Scholarship in psychology, economics and political science is making significant contributions toward illuminating the motivation— incentive structure relationships. The longest-standing line of research originates with Deci (1975) and has developed further in his collaboration with Ryan (Deci and Ryan, 2004; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Deci, Koestner and Ryan, 1999). The core argument of Deci and Ryan’s research is that a variety of types of tangible contingent rewards undermine intrinsic motivation, but unexpected and task-non-contingent rewards have no effect on intrinsic motivation. Moreover, the experimental evidence suggests that recipients experience positive feedback differently from tangible rewards. Positive feedback can amplify intrinsic motivation.
The Deci and Ryan research has influenced motivation crowding theory (Frey, 1997; Frey & Jegen, 2001), which originates in economics. Frey and Jegen (2001) summarize the two main premises of motivation crowding theory:

(a) All interventions originating from outside the person under consideration, i.e., both positive monetary rewards and regulations accompanied by negative sanctions may affect intrinsic motivation;

(b) External interventions may crowd-out or crowd-in intrinsic motivation (or leave it unaffected) (592).

One of the results of this line of research is that lower powered incentives (e.g., non-pecuniary rewards) are optimal in public organizations (Francois & Vlassopoulos, 2008). Other research in economics (Delfgaauw and Dur, 2008a, 2008b; Georgellis, Iossa and Tabvuma, 2008) provides support for the contention that public service motivation advances the interest of a cost minimizing government because it permits the employer to offer weaker financial incentives than private firms do. Georgellis, Iossa and Tabvuma’s (2008) analysis of transitions between sectors from the first fourteen waves of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) arrived at conclusions consistent with proposition 3. They write:

Our results show that higher wages, satisfaction with pay, job security and working hours in the public sector are either insignificant in influencing the probability of transition to the public sector or reduce this probability. Instead, higher satisfaction with the intrinsic characteristics of work in the public sector increases the probability of transition to the public sector. Individuals are more likely to move due to higher satisfaction with the work itself in the public sector,
as the public sector provides greater opportunity for these individuals to carry out their public service motivation.

A principal-agent analysis of public bureaucratic incentives by two political scientists came to conclusions highly compatible with the research from psychology and economics. Miller and Whitford (2007) argue that principal-agent theory posits it is in the principal’s interest to find incentives that channel the agent’s self-interest toward efficient levels of effort from the agent. They demonstrate, however, that the principal’s self-interest in public settings militates against offering such incentives. Their explanation is that bonuses large enough to produce the efficient incentive effect in public organizations are prohibitively expensive for the principal, creating what they call the “principal’s moral hazard constraint.” Miller and Whitford (2007) suggest the solution for the principal’s dilemma is to revert to using motives underlying public service motivation. They write: “Alternatively, the selection of agents becomes more important when outcome-based incentives cannot align self-interest and organizational efficiency. People with a strong sense of public cause may be more important to bureaucracy for that reason” (229).

**Research gaps and utility of research to date.** The growing body of research from across several disciplines led the author of a recent review (Myers, 2008) to conclude:

“Rebuilding public sector motivation is viewed as a way to improve public service quality and volume without incurring the transaction/monitoring costs associated with ‘higher powered’ incentives such as performance-related pay” (6).

**Summary**

Notable strides have been made in studying the motivational bases of public service since 1990. It is worth highlighting that much of the research directly focused on public service motivation has appeared since 2000 so progress has been especially rapid during the last decade.
It is also noteworthy that progress span disciplines, including economics, psychology and sociology. Beyond the progress, future research needs to explore new directions that entail closer integration with other disciplines, measurement advances, and new methodological strategies for advancing knowledge. The research reviewed above indicates significant progress, but still more needs to be done. Priorities for future research are addressed next.

**What Are Priorities for Future Research?**

We now set out new directions in light of what public administration and other disciplines and fields have to contribute to public service motivation research. We identify four priorities for future research: broadening research methodologies to include experimental and quasi-experimental designs; improving measurement for survey-based research; modelling and studying public service motivation as part of a constellation of motives affecting behavior; and applying theory and findings about public service motivation to change institutional practices.

**Experimental and Quasi-experimental Research**

The reality for most public service motivation research is that it has relied on cross-sectional survey methodology. To some extent the choice of research methodologies is the result of scholars seeking to develop psychometric instruments to measure unobservable variables. As public service motivation research matures, however, it becomes increasingly important to seek more rigor in the research and to explore greater variety in research methodologies.

An obvious candidate for new methodologies is experiments, both laboratory (Bozeman and Scott, 1992) and field (Grant, 2008). In a review article almost two decades ago, Bozeman and Scott (1992) lamented the dearth of laboratory experiments in public policy and management research and identified several reasons for their infrequent use. It is ironic that one of the reasons
was “public policy and management researchers rarely study the individual level of analysis” (295). As an individual attribute, public service motivation is ripe for laboratory experiments.

It is not that laboratory experiments are without flaws, but they may present an alternative approach to testing fundamental questions that may not be readily addressed with other methods. Among the questions that could be investigated experimentally are:

- Is public service motivation a stable individual attribute or is it influenced by organizational and managerial interventions?;

- Does the distinction between act-relevant and act-irrelevant altruism (Le Grand, 2003) capture meaningful differences in how individuals perceive motivational contexts?; and

- What factors mitigate sector choice for high public service motivation individuals?

Randomized field experiments would complement laboratory experiments by creating opportunities for testing the external validity of results from the laboratory. Field experiments are also likely to appeal to professionals interested in applying research results because of their greater authenticity relative to the laboratory. Grant’s (2008) field experiment that manipulated task significance for fund raisers in a public university is an excellent illustration of the value and appeal of field experiments.

Bozeman and Scott (1992) observed that the greatest impediment to more experimental research in public policy and management research may be lack of investigator training. But we believe this impediment can be overcome. More frequent use of experimental studies would certainly create some impetus for better training. In addition, many opportunities for researchers to learn experimental methods are now available that were not when Bozeman and Scott (1992) first broached the idea of more experimental studies in public administration.
Measurement Improvements

The call above for more experimental and quasi-experimental research is intended to diversify and add rigor to public service motivation research. Cross-sectional surveys and secondary aggregated data sources have been the foundation for a large share of research (Wise, 2004). We believe, however, that alternative methods should complement survey methods, not replace them. The development of a survey-based measure for public service motivation (Perry, 1996) has been useful for permitting comparisons across disparate service and national settings (see, for example, Kim, forthcoming; Liu, Tang, and Zhu, 2008; Taylor, 2008), supporting research in other disciplines (Francois, 2000; Grant, 2008), and generally creating foundations for cumulating results. Thus, we believe future research should turn to further improving measurement.

Other scholars (Vandenabeele, 2008a; Kim, forthcoming; Wright, 2008) have identified two important issues that need to be considered in advancing the measurement of public service motivation. The first issue is the dimensionalities of the public service motivation construct. The dimensionalities issue can be reduced to two questions: (1) Are the four dimensions of the standard measurement instrument (Perry, 1996) correctly specified?; and (2) Do the dimensions need to be expanded or modified to accommodate research in non-U.S. settings? These questions have been addressed in other forums so we will not take them up here. We simply note that these questions should be important facets of the measurement research agenda.

The second issue involves the specification of the construct. We agree with Wright’s (2008) conclusion, based upon his methodological review: “Researchers should consider operationalizing this four-dimension conceptualization as first-order reflective and second-order formative” (85). Support for Wright’s position is provided by Coursey, Brudney, Perry &
Littlepage (2008). The resolution of the specification issue in the way proposed by Wright (2008) has significant implications going forward. The foremost of these implications is that if public service motivation is a formative rather than reflective construct, then its dimensions should no longer be used independently for measurement purposes.

**Holistic Motivational Assessments**

Although a relatively large body of research has been published about public service motivation during the last two decades, the focus of a large portion of this research has been on definition (Perry and Wise, 1990), measurement (Perry, 1996), and incidence (Crewson, 1997). These issues will continue to merit attention in future research, but the foundation has been laid so that scholars can turn their focus to other, more substantive and complex issues. Both LeGrand (2003) and Wise (2004) imply one issue that should be high on this future agenda is the composite of motivations that affect behavior. LeGrand (2003) writes: “Altruism exists alongside more self-interested motivations, and is combined with them to affect behaviour in different ways” (35). Wise (2004) is more direct about the need for holistic models: “If we look only for evidence to support the existence of public service motives, for example, we cannot obtain a picture of the complexity of human behavior in a given organization” (670).

Wise (2000) indicates several avenues that might be pursued in a next generation of research that looks more holistically at public service motivation. Among the avenues she suggests are:

- “Individuals with public service motives are not by definition devoid of other motives and human needs” (344);
• “Situational factors play a role in explaining when public service motives surface and dominate individual behavior and when behavior occurs as a consequence of other motives” (345);

• “…contextual factors related to individual actors, situations, events, and the organizations in which behavior occurs influence the strength of public service motivation” (351-2).

Let us offer one example where more encompassing research—research that addressed multiple motives and situations—could offer strategic payoffs. This more encompassing research would involve at least two individual motivational components, public service motivation (or, alternatively, altruism or prosocial motivation) and need for security, and variations in property rights for jobs, which might be classified as an organizational or public policy variable.

The set of variables specified above have been the center of debates about American public administration for more than a century. Job security has been a central tenet of civil service since the U.S. Pendleton Act of 1883. The attack on the job security of government employees continues unabated today with states, such as Georgia and Florida, and federal agencies, such as the Department of Homeland Security, leading the way promoting at-will employment as an alternative to traditional job tenure systems (Kellough and Nigro, 2005; Williams and Bowman, 2007). We also know that security and public service are important motivators, particularly in traditional civil service systems. How do variations in these three factors influence motivation of civil servants? What are the behavioral consequences of relaxing property rights in government jobs? Do different combinations of individual public service motivation and need for security influence behavior of civil servants?
Research along the lines sketched above is vital to create knowledge-based debate relevant for public-service systems. More importantly, it moves us toward a more holistic and complete understanding of behavior in public organizations.

**Applications of Theory and Findings from Public Service Motivation Research**

As we note above, public service motivation research is maturing, but remains a work in progress. At the same time, the accumulating evidence from many disciplines makes a persuasive case for experimenting with new applications. If we believe that various facets of public service affect motivation, then it is time to begin “practicing what we preach.”

What steps might we take to begin applying public service motivation? A starting point might be to look for ways to revitalize public service work. Light (1999) discovered in his surveys of cohorts of MPA alumni from top public affairs programs that the work was the central consideration associated with attraction-selection-attrition. Grant’s (2008) field experiment on task significance indicates that redesigning work to increase public service motivation can have a significant influence on performance.

A strategic priority for improving practice is how to create balance between ‘rational choice’ based systems and ‘public service motivation’ based systems. Research on motivation crowding (Frey, 1997) highlights the risks of weighting reward systems too heavily toward rational choice, thereby crowding out intrinsic rewards. It also calls attention to the benefits of seeking an optimal balance, that is, using extrinsic incentives to crowd in intrinsic rewards.

Another substantive arena for applying research about public service motivation is leadership. Leaders can influence public service motivation through several mechanisms, including engaging employees’ existing values, infusing jobs with meaning, and highlighting and rewarding public service values (Paarlberg, Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). These processes are
not well understood, however, so a robust research program on the role of leaders in building conditions for public service motivation would be desirable.

In order to support managers and human resources staff to deal with public service motivation in their organization, there is a need for practical tools. How can we identify the public service motivation of candidates in a selection context? How do we effectively integrate public service motivation into performance appraisal systems? The psychometric instruments that have been developed to date were oriented towards a research context, but not towards a practical human resources context. Our point is that before public service motivation can become a practical management tool, more investments need to be made.
References


Endnotes

1 Among the organizations we would include as public enterprises are both government organizations and nonprofit organizations, which confer public benefits.

2 An early effort within public administration to formally link individual and collective levels of analysis surrounds the concept of organizational commitment. See Robertson and Tang (1995).