The Motivational Bases of Public Service

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The past two decades have brought enormous changes in the environment for public service. Beginning in the mid-1960s, public confidence in American institutions began a two-decade decline. Nowhere is the decline in public trust more apparent than in government. At the start of this last decade of the twentieth century, only one in four Americans expressed confidence in government to "do what is right."

The decline in public trust has precipitated a "quiet crisis" in the federal civil service. The recent report of the National Commission on the Public Service, more commonly referred to as the Volcker Commission after its chair, Paul Volcker, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, recited a litany of shortcomings in the federal personnel system. Although no comparable evidence is available on the status of state and local government civil service systems, they no doubt have suffered problems similar to those experienced at the federal level.

In the face of these long-term trends and their associated consequences, political leaders have begun to call for a rebirth of the public service ethic. The 1988 presidential race was the first in over a decade in which bureaucrat bashing was not one of the favorite pastimes of the candidates. President Bush has been joined in his call for a renewal of interest in public service by other prominent public servants, including former Secretary of State George Shultz and former Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats.

Calls for a recommitment of Americans to values associated with government service, among them personal sacrifice and duty to the public interest, raise practical questions about the power of these values to stimulate and direct human behavior. At their core, calls for a renewal of public service motivation assume the importance of such motivations for an effective and efficient public service. Those who advocate using public service motivation as the primary steering mechanism for bureaucratic behavior perceive that it is essential for achieving high levels of performance.

At least two developments of recent years, one intellectual and one practical, call into question the strength of a public service ethic. One is the rise of the public choice movement, which is predicated on a model of human behavior that assumes that people are motivated primarily by self-interest. According to this view, because self interest is at the root of human behavior, incentives, organizations, and institutions must be designed to recognize and to take advantage of such motivations. A related development, this one arising within government, is the growing popularity of monetary incentive systems, especially at top organizational levels. Extrinsic rewards controlled by one's supervisor are now seen as a major means for directing and reinforcing managerial and executive behavior. These related trends stand in opposition to the view that public service motives energize and direct the behavior of civil servants.

The decline in public confidence in American institutions has taken a particularly heavy toll on the civil service. In calling for a recommitment of Americans to the values associated with public service, political leaders assume that such motives can be translated into effective and efficient bureaucratic behavior. Evidence regarding the strength of public service motives, however, is limited. This article reviews different theories for public service motivation and identifies a typology of motives associated with public service that includes rational, norm-based, and affective motives. Three propositions are put forward that describe the behavioral implications of public service motivation. The authors conclude that past research offers, at best, a poor understanding of the way to stimulate individual behavior in public organizations, and they call for more empirical research and theory development pertaining to the motivational bases of public service.

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The present study seeks to clarify the nature of public service motivation and to identify and evaluate research related to its effects on public employee behavior. The article reviews existing literature about public service motivation to identify the phenomena more precisely. It then discusses the implications of public service motivation for behavior in public organizations. Needs for future research are discussed in conclusion.

Theories of Public Service Motivation

Public service is often used as a synonym for government service embracing all those who work in the public sector. But public service signifies much more than one’s locus of employment. For example, Elmer Staats has written: “Public service is a concept, an attitude, a sense of duty—yes, even a sense of public morality.” Staats’ observation reflects both the breadth and depth of meaning that has been associated with the idea of public service.

Public service motivation may be understood as an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations. The term “motives” is used here to mean psychological deficiencies or needs that an individual feels some compulsion to eliminate. Following Knake and Wright-Irak, this discussion recognizes that these motives may fall into three analytically-distinct categories: rational, norm-based, and affective. Rational motives involve actions grounded in individual utility maximization. Norm-based motives refer to actions generated by efforts to conform to norms. Affective motives refer to triggers of behavior that are grounded in emotional responses to various social contexts.

The motivational characteristics of public service have drawn the attention of scholars dating to the beginnings of the field of public administration. The concern that motives affect the quality and content of public outputs is equally long. The most prominent stream of research on public service motivation historically has focused on attitudes of citizens and various elites toward government employment. Most recognizable among these contributions is Leonard White’s The Prestige Value of Public Employment in Chicago and Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings’, The Image of the Federal Service. Although prestige is a factor that influences the attractiveness of public sector jobs, it does not set apart the motivational bases of public service from other sectors of employment. Early incentive theorists identified prestige as an incentive derived from the size and growth of an organization.

Despite obvious differences in extrinsic rewards, other research has looked comparatively at motivation levels of public and private managers and generally has found few differences in overall measures of motivation. However, this research has not identified what other motives public employment serves to compensate for its limited appeal to traditional rational motives. Do specific motives exist that are associated with public service primarily or exclusively, and, if there are, what are they?

Rational

Little of the literature on public service motivation acknowledges that some of the motives unique to public service are rational in nature; motives are usually treated as wholly altruistic. A strong case can be made, however, that public service motivation is sometimes grounded in individual utility maximization.

In a recent article, Steven Kelman posed the question: “What are the distinctive advantages that might draw people to government?” One of his answers was that public servants are drawn to government to participate in the formulation of good public policy. Although Kelman associates an individual’s desire to participate in the formulation of good public policy with the norm of public spirit, it is likely to appeal to many civil servants in more rational terms. Participation in the process of policy formulation can be exciting, dramatic, and reinforcing of an individual’s image of self importance. Rawls asserts that a greater realization of self emanates from “skillful and devoted exercises of social duties.” Someone drawn to the public sector to participate in policy making may therefore be satisfying personal needs while serving social interests.

Anthony Downs argued that some civil servants are motivated by commitment to a public program because of personal identification with the program. He offered Billy Mitchell and the military use of aircraft as an example of such a motivational base, but other examples such as J. Edgar Hoover and Hyman Rickover come readily to mind. Rickover, for example, was so dedicated to the nuclearization of the U.S. Navy that, even in the face of opposition to his amassing influence and power, he remained at his post well beyond normal retirement age.

A related rational motive that for many individuals may not be served outside of government is advocacy for a special interest. Individuals may be drawn to government or pursue particular courses of action within government because of their belief that their choices will facilitate the interests of special groups. One of the arguments frequently found in the literature on representative bureaucracy is that a widely representative bureaucracy facilitates inclusion of a range of policy perspectives in a society. Such an argument assumes that one motive prevalent in pluralistic societies is an individual’s conscious or unconscious advocacy for special interests.

Norm-Based

Frederickson and Hart have argued that one of the primary reasons why American public administration has had difficulty coping in recent years is its excessive and uncritical reliance upon the values of business administration. Careerism has displaced idealism as a guide for bureaucratic behavior, although there are some notable exceptions to this trend.

One of the most commonly identified normative foundations for public employment is a desire to serve the public interest. Downs argues that the desire to serve the public interest is essentially altruistic even when the public interest is conceived as an individual’s personal opin-
They define patriotism of benevolence as “an extensive love of all people within our political boundaries and the imperative that they must be protected in all of the basic rights granted to them by the enabling documents.”

They go on to suggest that the patriotism of benevolence combines love of regime values and love of others. Although Frederickson and Hart argue that the patriotism of benevolence represents a particular moral position, it also may be understood to describe an emotional state. In fact, the type of moral “heroism” envisioned by Frederickson and Hart may be attainable only through an emotional response to humankind, which brings with it a willingness to sacrifice for others.

Of course, people are a mix of motives, exhibiting combinations of values over a lifetime and focusing on different motives at various points in their careers. Personal or environmental factors might account for changes in individual motives, but clearly an individual can switch among public service motives as well as away from these stimuli altogether. For example, Robert Caro’s autobiography of Robert Moses traces his progression from the norm-based motives of a civil service reformer to the rational motives of a power broker. Describing the failure of Moses’ attempts to reform the New York City civil service and the lesson that power makes dreams come true that he drew from it, Caro writes:

The net result of all his work was nothing. There was no civil service standardization.... Convinced he was right, he had refused to soil the white suit of idealism with compromise. He had really believed that if his system was right—scientific, logical, fair—and if it got a hearing, the system would be adopted.... But Moses had failed in his calculations to give certain factors due weight. He had not sufficiently taken into account greed. He had not sufficiently taken into account self-interest. And, most of all, he had not sufficiently taken into account the need for power.

To summarize, a variety of rational, norm-based, and affective motives appear to be primarily or exclusively associated with public service. This is not to say that all public employees are driven by these needs. Public service motivation is seldom identified with individual utility maximization, but motives such as participation in the process of policy formulation, commitment to a public program because of personal identification with it, and advocacy for special or private interests are essentially rational in nature. Public service motivation is most commonly associated with particular normative orientations—a desire to serve the public interest, loyalty to duty and to the government as a whole, and social equity. The affective aspects of public service motivation have been relatively neglected and may be the least important component of the overall concept. However, motives such as patriotism of benevolence seem to be grounded in an individual’s emotional state.

Affective

As noted above, some public employees may be motivated by a commitment to a public program because of personal identification with a program. In many instances, however, commitment to a program may emanate from a genuine conviction about its social importance. The sources of commitment to a program may be difficult to distinguish in practice, but they are conceptually distinct. Luther Gulick captured the distinction in referring to what he termed “the nobility of the great objectives of the public service.” He believed that motives derived from service to society would be more lasting than those based on the profit motive.

Frederickson and Hart suggest that the central motive for civil servants should be the patriotism of benevolence.
Behavioral Implications of Public Service Motivation

Of what significance is the public service motivation construct? Although theory has not been well developed, the literature on public administration has contended that what has historically been called the public service ethic and what is defined more formally in the present study as public service motivation has significant behavioral implications. The level and type of an individual's public service motivation and the motivational composition of a public organization's workforce have been posited to influence individual job choice, job performance, and organizational effectiveness. Some of the potential behavioral implications of public service motivation can be summarized in propositional form.

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

The general attraction-selection framework implied by this proposition has broad acceptance and has received substantial empirical support. It presumes that organizations with certain properties attract and/or select employees with particular personal attributes. These personal attributes, in turn, influence how employees react to the organization. Thus, the proposition suggests that the greater the strengths of rational, norm-based, and affective public service motives are to an individual, the more likely the individual is to seek public organizations as environments in which to satisfy these needs.

Although evidence indicates that public organizations attract different types of individuals than do private organizations, only limited research attention has been given to issues surrounding the individual-organization match. Available empirical research on the attraction-selection framework involving public organizations provides moderate support for a public service motivation-membership relationship. A comparative study of sectoral choice by Blank found that although clear correlations exist between wages and sectoral choice, sectoral choice involves more than wage comparisons. Among Blank's conclusions was that highly educated and more experienced workers are far more likely to choose the public sector, offsetting lower wages with rewards arising from the characteristics of their jobs.

In two studies comparing graduate students about to enter or reenter the profit and nonprofit sectors of the economy, Rawls and his associates found that nonprofit entrants valued helpfulness (working for the welfare of others), cheerfulness, and forgiveness (willing to pardon others) more highly than students bound for the private sector. Nonprofit entrants placed less value on a comfortable life and economic wealth. These empirical findings are strongly supportive of the relationship in proposition one.

Further theoretical support for the proposition is provided by Albert Hirschman. In Shifting Involvements, Hirschman described a cycle of collective behavior that shifts over time between two ends of a public-private continuum. The spectrum is associated with public affairs or civic involvement at one end and private interests at the other. Hirschman argues that shifts along the continuum are products of factors that both pull masses of people into public or private affairs, such as exceptional economic conditions, and, when preferences change, push individuals away from such activities.

The theory is applicable to decisions by individuals about whether to join and remain with public organizations. Hirschman argues that shifting involvements represent preference changes resulting from disappointments experienced in pursuing either public or private interests. It follows that if individuals are drawn to public organizations because of expectations they have about the rewards of public service but those expectations go unfulfilled, they are likely either to revise their preferences and objectives or to seek membership in organizations compatible with their interests. Thus, public service motivation should be understood as a dynamic attribute that changes over time and, therefore, may change an individual's willingness to join and to stay with a public organization.

Collectively perceived frustrations associated with public life or, conversely, with the perceived moral bankruptcy of private pursuits can produce a similar phenomenon on a larger scale. Dramatic shifts in the attractiveness of government service since the early 1960s could be attributed to the types of collective behavior posited by Hirschman's model. More generally, the literature on "the image of public service" often identifies the push and pull factors contributing to mass shifts in preferences for or frustrations with government service that influence recruitment and retention of members.

In their classic book, Organizations, March and Simon posit that organizations depend on individuals to make two broad sets of decisions on behalf of the organization: to participate and to perform. Proposition one posited a direct relationship between membership or the decision to participate and public service motivation. Although the evidence is less compelling, proposition two suggests a similar relationship between public service motivation and the decision to perform.

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

Table 1

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<th>Rational</th>
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<td>Participation in the process of policy formulation.</td>
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<td>Commitment to a public program because of personal identification.</td>
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<td>Advocacy for a special or private interest.</td>
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Norm-Based

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<td>A desire to serve the public interest.</td>
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<td>Loyalty to duty and to the government as a whole.</td>
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<td>Social equity.</td>
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Affective

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<td>Commitment to a program from a genuine conviction about its social importance.</td>
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<td>Patriotism of benevolence.</td>
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Systematic empirical evidence about the relationship between public service motivation and performance does not exist, but other research regarding the effects of motivational factors on individual performance can be drawn upon to support this proposition. The connection between job characteristics and work performance, which is based on the research of Tumer and Lawrence, has been examined by a number of different researchers. The expectation is that individuals will be motivated to perform well when they find their work meaningful and believe that they have responsibility for the outcomes of their assigned tasks. Among the job characteristics that contribute to performance motivation are autonomy, task identity, and perceived task significance. It can be argued that these are the attributes that individuals with public service motives derive from public sector employment. For individuals with high levels of public service motivation, significant tasks include those that provide opportunities to address questions of social equity, to express loyalty to country, to advocate a valued special interest, or to pursue social programs.

Public service motivation is likely to be positively related to an individual's organizational commitment. Individuals who are highly committed are likely to be highly motivated to remain with their organizations and to perform. In addition, because committed employees are likely to engage in spontaneous, innovative behaviors on behalf of the organization, such employees are likely to facilitate an organization's adjustment to contingencies. In some instances, public service motivation, by inducing high levels of commitment, may produce negative outcomes. Individuals motivated by public service may carry their commitment beyond reasonable boundaries. Extreme commitment could lead to fanatical behavior, suspension of individual judgment, and the like, i.e., the syndrome that Schein termed "failures of socialization."^36

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 question of what sort of motives serve as the principal motivational bases in public organizations is integrally related to the way incentive systems are structured. As a general rule, the incentives that organizations provide are likely to be most effective if they are contingent on the motives of individual members. Thus, organizations whose members are motivated primarily by rational choice are likely to find utilitarian incentives most effective. Organizations whose members are motivated by norm-based and affective considerations must rely more heavily on normative and affectual incentives.

Utilitarian incentives, if maintained at a satisfactory level, are not likely to be critical determinants of outputs where individuals identify with the tasks or mission of the organization. Thus, public organizations that attract employees with high levels of public service motivation will not have to construct incentive systems that are predominantly utilitarian to energize and direct member behavior. Where public service motivation is absent, individual utilitarian benefits may be the most effective incentives. In those instances in which organizational leadership incorrectly matches incentives to motives, the organization is unlikely to reach its maximum potential performance.

The great risk in the current trend of treating the public service like private enterprise is that it fails to acknowledge unique motives underlying public sector employment and the critical linkage between the way a bureaucracy operates in an administrative state and the advancement of social and democratic values. Current crises of ethics and accountability among politically-appointed senior managers in government may be an outgrowth of the idea that management in the public sector is not unique. At the same time, declines in the advancement of social goals may be linked to the emphasis on business management techniques in government. As others have demonstrated, these trends are not unique to the American scene.

Rainey's comparative research on incentives provides empirical support for proposition III. Rainey compared the responses of middle managers in public agencies and private profit-making corporations on a series of scales measuring incentive structures, organizational goal clarity, and individual role characteristics. He found that public managers perceived a weaker relationship between performance and extrinsic rewards. It would have been reasonable to expect differences on scales measuring organizational goal clarity and motivation, but Rainey found no differences. He speculated that different incentives in public organizations act as alternatives to the constrained extrinsic incentive structure and positively influence motivation and effort. In support of this interpretation, he found a comparatively stronger relationship between expected timeliness, quantity and quality of work, and sense of meaningful public service for public sector managers. In a study of public and private managers in Atlanta, Georgia, Baldwin replicated Rainey's results, finding no differences in levels of expressed motivation.

Research Implications

This study suggests several areas where future research might be focused. An obvious priority is that more research needs to be conducted to explore and test the propositions above and to refine understanding of the behavioral implications of public service motivation. Within this context, an understanding of the way values and incentive structures shift over time is a critical ingredient for developing an understanding of cyclical swings in the popularity of public sector employment.

A second research need is the development of measurement methods that facilitate better understanding of how public service motivation contributes to organizational commitment and performance. A necessary component of efforts to advance understanding of the different aspects of public service motivation is a system for defining and measuring public service motives. The available literature does not provide operational indicators of these motives that can be used in research. Development of a psychome-
tric instrument capable of measuring an individual's public service motivational structures along with a model that operationalizes the linkages between individual values, organizational environment and task structure, and outcome (such as commitment, performance, and job satisfaction) is a critical next step.

A third research priority has a greater applied emphasis: how can public service motives be instilled in potential recruits for government service? The problem of transferring to young people the motives of public service has been addressed by statepersons and researchers. Certainly, the image of the public service is a critical ingredient.41 The public bureaucracy cannot serve as the 'whipping boy' for politicians and the public and still attract large numbers of excellent young people into its ranks. Some would argue that highly competitive rates of pay are a critical element for a prestigious public sector,42 but high rates of pay may not attract individuals with high levels of public service motivation.

National initiatives may serve as a catalyst for activating public service motivation. A charismatic leader or collective action can effectively transmit a call for public service. Current discussion in the U.S. Congress has focused on legislation that would provide public service opportunities for young people. These programs are intended to develop normative and affective bases of public service motivation. One idea is to provide a public service experience as a component of high school education. Another approach is to make financial aid for college contingent on public service.

Socialization or incultation of motives, as Chester I. Barnard labeled it, can also be achieved through managerial techniques both in the pre-entry and entry stages of organizational membership.43 The identification of common motives and the development of nationalistic motives are the techniques upon which military recruitment and training are based. Similarly, recent college graduates were recruited into a leading edge computer development company by a combination of incentives presented during the job interview process. The chance to participate in an important project, to create a prototype, was a key incentive for young engineers, but they were also attracted by the description of autonomy in job structure and the idea that only the best engineers would be offered jobs.44

Conclusion

This review suggests that while a crisis in government service is widely recognized, understanding the motives of public servants and the way to stimulate public service motivation are, at best, at a preliminary stage. The popular notion that management in government is not different from private business or industry runs counter to the development and advancement of a theory of public service motivation. The field lacks a clear definition of the different motives that people experience as well as a theoretical context for linking these motives to motivational strategies and incentive structures. Further, a more sophisticated understanding of the effects of cyclical factors on the value of public service employment is fundamental to the development of a working model. Finally, the relationship between individual value structures and the conduct of government remains a critical concern for administrative states where democracy is largely implemented by the bureaucracy.

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Notes

5. One of the first and most prominent statements of the public choice perspective is William A. Niskanen, Jr., Bureaucracy and Representative Government (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971).


18. See, for example, Anthony Downs, Inside Bureaucracy.


33. Idem.

34. See, for example, Marc Holzer and Jack Rabin, "Public Service: Problems, Professionalism, and Policy Recommendations," Public Productivity Review, no. 43 (Fall 1987), pp. 3-12.


37. See Candace Hetzner, "Lessons for America One Hundred Years After Pendleton," Public Productivity Review, no. 43 (Fall 1987), pp. 15-30, and Frederickson and Hart, "The Public Service and the Patriotism of Benevolence."


