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

Symposium on Public Service Motivation Research

How has research regarding public service motivation evolved since James L. Perry and Lois Recascino Wise published their essay “The Motivational Bases of Public Service” 20 years ago? The authors assess subsequent studies in public administration and in social and behavioral sciences as well as evolving definitions of public service motivation during the last two decades? What gaps in our understanding and knowledge have appeared with respect to the three propositions offered by Perry and Wise? This essay charts new directions for public service motivation scholarship to help clarify current research questions, advance comparative research, and enhance our overall understanding of individuals’ public service motives.

In 1990, American public service was beginning to exit 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 essay “The Motivational Bases of Public Service” (1990) appeared in the fiftieth-anniversary volume of *Public Administration Review*. The article was grounded in thinking about motivational alternatives to merit pay, which had been introduced in the U.S. federal government in 1979.

Since that essay appeared, more than 125 studies about public service motivation, covering more than a dozen countries, have been published, many of them since 2000. This article assesses three aspects of subsequent research. We begin by reviewing the evolving definitions of public service motivation (PSM), including operational definitions used to measure the construct. We next turn to answering the

question, what have we learned from public service motivation research? The review is framed around three propositions offered by Perry and Wise and takes into account research in both public administration and the social and behavioral sciences. The article concludes by charting directions for future research that might clarify current research questions, advance comparative research on PSM, and enhance our understanding of individuals’ public service motives and their relationship to other important aspects of engagement.

Construct Definitions and Measurement

A starting point for understanding PSM is the motivation construct, a key concern of modern social and behavioral science research. Motivation refers broadly to the forces that energize, direct, and sustain behavior (Perry and Porter 1982). Although motivation is often studied in the context of work, we do not limit the scope of our review to work motivation, in part because the forces are not bounded by work tasks alone, but involve institutional and environmental forces, the work itself, and individual needs and motives.

Public Service Motivation and Related Constructs

In the last two decades, research about PSM and related constructs in other fields has grown significantly. We describe and synthesize the development of three streams of related research, involving PSM, altruism, and prosocial motivation.

Public service motivation.

PSM originates from beliefs that unique motives are found among public servants that are different from those of their private sector counterparts. In public administration, PSM has been defined in several different but compatible ways. Perry and

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Wise defined PSM as “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (1990, 368). The definition clearly sought to emphasize motives, such as civic duty and compassion, that are commonly associated with public organizations.¹

In a subsequent analysis of PSM and government effectiveness, Rainey and Steinbauer offered a more general definition of PSM. They associated the construct with altruism in referring to PSM as a “general, altruistic motivation to serve the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation or humankind”

(1999, 20). The Rainey and Steinbauer definition is similar to that of Brewer and Selden, who defined the concept as “the motivational force that induces individuals to perform meaningful ... public, community, and social service” (1998, 417), emphasizing its behavioral implications and applicability beyond the public sector. The most recent variation of the definition within public administration emanates from research in Europe by Vandenabeele. He defined PSM as “the beliefs, 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” (2007, 547).

Altruism. Public administration definitions of PSM invoke the concepts of both self-sacrifice (Perry 1996; Perry and Wise 1990) and altruism (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999). Thus, research about altruism has direct relevance for research about PSM. Piliavin and Charng observed that altruism traditionally has been defined in terms of costs, but they argued that motives should be central to its definition and focus on acts that appear “to be motivated mainly out of a consideration of another’s needs rather than one’s own” (1990, 30).

Economists have linked PSM directly to altruism. Francois referred to PSM as employees providing “effort out of concern for the impact of that effort on a valued social service” (2000, 275). In his research on public servant motivation and policy design, LeGrand concluded that “it is hard to dispute the view that altruistic motivations are prevalent among the providers of public services” (2003, 35).

Prosocial motivation. 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 behavior can be tied to an actor’s motives. Walster and Piliavin (1972), for instance, suggested that the definition should specify that the act is voluntary and without expectations for return, which places their definition very close to the meaning of altruism. Grant defined prosocial motivation as simply “the desire to expend effort to benefit other people” (2008a, 49).

Synthesis. This brief summary of PSM and related constructs suggests both convergence and divergence in the phenomena. The most prominent area of convergence is the emphasis on *other* orientation—represented by notions of self-sacrifice, altruism, and prosocial—across the motivation definitions. This convergence accords with our long-held understandings of the public service ethic. It also accords with recent research in organizational

psychology and organizational behavior that identifies a fundamental role for other orientation in explaining organizational behavior (De Dreu 2006; Meglino and Korsgaard 2004).

With respect to divergence, the conceptions of PSM are more particular regarding objects of motivation than are altruism and prosocial motivation, which are cast in general terms.

With respect to divergence, the conceptions of PSM are more particular regarding objects of motivation than altruism and prosocial motivation, which are cast in general terms. “Consideration of another’s needs rather than one’s own” (Piliavin and Charng 1990, 30) and “desire to expend effort to benefit other people” (Grant 2008a, 49) are quite broad. All of the PSM definitions draw boundaries:

- “motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (Perry and Wise 1990, 368)
- “interests of a community of people, a state, a nation” (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999, 20)
- “public, community, and social service” (Brewer and Selden 1998, 417)
- “belief, values and attitudes that go beyond self-interest and organizational interest, that concern the interest of a larger political entity” (Vandenabeele 2007, 547)

The boundaries placed on the scope of PSM suggest that it is a particular form of altruism or prosocial motivation that is animated by specific dispositions and values arising from public institutions and missions. Given the blurring of boundaries between sectors and differences in the location of the functions of government, we do not assert that PSM is uniquely found in government organizations (Wise 2000). But we maintain it is grounded in the tasks of public service provision, and is more prevalent in government than other sectors (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999; Wise 2000).

Because PSM has its roots in other orientation, it is conceptually distinct from self-interest, which is rooted in self-concern (De Dreu 2006), and from intrinsic motivation (Grant 2008a). De Dreu argues that self-concern and other orientation are orthogonal and unipolar, meaning that they are independent and vary from low to high. Grant (2008a) observes that prosocial motivation and intrinsic motivation differ in that intrinsic motivation emphasizes pleasure and enjoyment as drivers of effort, but prosocial motivation emphasizes meaning and purpose as drivers of effort. The pursuit of public service motives is not contingent on feelings of pleasure or enjoyment.

Measurement

Although several fields have developed common ground around motivational constructs that emphasize other orientation, we still confront the difficult challenge of measuring PSM both for scholarly research and for practical applications. A detailed discussion of measurement issues is beyond the scope of this article, but we identify here the variety of measurements and some of their implications.

At least four different approaches have been used to measure PSM. They include (1) single survey items about public service (e.g., Rainey 1982), (2) unidimensional scales (e.g., Naff and Crum 1999), (3) multidimensional scales (e.g., Perry 1996), and (4) behavioral proxies, such as whistle-blowing (e.g., Brewer and Selden 1998).

Rainey's (1982) initial effort to measure PSM singled out one reward preference item, "engaging in meaningful public service," as an indication of PSM.

The source for many of the measures of PSM is Perry's (1996) 24-item scale, which is composed of four subscales: attraction to public policy making, commitment to civic duty and the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice. In some instances (Taylor 2007), the aggregate of the scale has been used; in other research, the four subscales have been used individually (Perry 1997) and in various combinations (Moynihan and Pandey 2007a, 2007b). The self-sacrifice subscale calls attention to the roots of PSM in altruism and prosocial motivation. At the same time, the other subscales point to PSM's focus on public institutions, especially the attraction to policy making and commitment to civic duty and the public interest subscales.

The development of a survey-based measure for PSM (Perry 1996) has been useful for facilitating comparisons across disparate services and national settings (see, e.g., Kim 2009; Liu, Tang, and Zhu 2008; Taylor 2008; Vandenabeele et al. 2009), informing research in other disciplines (Francois 2000; Georgellis, Iossa, and Tabvuma 2008; Grant 2008b), and creating foundations for cumulating results. At the same time, the variety of measures used has several consequences (Wright 2008). One is that the results of empirical analyses are not fully comparable across studies. Another is that the meaning of PSM has the potential to shift from study to study. We acknowledge that cultural and language differences make such shifts in the meaning of any construct likely and limit comparison, but urge scholars to pursue efforts to achieve converging meanings and recognize differences in measurement and definition when interpreting findings.

Summary

During the past 20 years, scholarship about PSM and related constructs has flourished, bringing important advances across several fields. A critical mass of research about other-oriented motivation creates prospects for significant improvements in our understanding of PSM during the next decade. Within public administration, the increase in research activity has produced a proliferation of methods used to measure PSM. Although this proliferation has helped expand research more rapidly than might otherwise have occurred, the variety of measures could impede cumulating findings. Despite the variety of constructs and measures, research across several disciplines using different methods and measures leads to similar inferences. We now turn to a review of that research.

What Have We Learned from Public Service Motivation Research?

We examine three propositions originally offered by Perry and Wise (1990) in light of subsequent research. We assess the validity of the propositions given 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 that between PSM 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 PSM would seek out contexts compatible with their dispositions, and the contexts to which they likely would be attracted were organizations that satisfied their prosocial and altruistic orientations.

Review of public administration research. Public administration research on this proposition is limited but generally supportive. In a formative study associated with the beginnings of PSM research, Rainey (1982) found that public managers valued meaningful public service more highly than private managers and the preference for public service was significantly related to job satisfaction. 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 to be useful to society and preferences for government jobs. They suggested that these relationships might be stronger for college graduates, younger employees, and specific employment classifications such as education. Vandenabeele (2008), using a sample of 1,714 advanced master's degree students at Flemish universities, found that PSM was 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 data set (Steijn 2008) showed that public sector workers had higher levels of PSM than private sector workers. Interestingly, private sector workers with high levels of PSM were more likely to be looking for public sector jobs.

Research on attrition from government organizations also supports the original proposition. Crewson (1997) linked PSM empirically to higher organizational commitment and lower turnover. Using data from the 1997 Merit Principles Survey (MPS), Naff and Crum (1999) found a positive association between PSM and intent to remain. Steijn's (2008) Dutch study showed that workers with high PSM fit were 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 2010), using a panel data set of employment information for attorneys, produced mixed findings and offers insights into why the PSM and attraction-selection-attrition relationships are more nuanced than Perry and Wise (1990) originally projected. Wright and Christensen (2010) found that a strong interest in social service and helping others did not predict the employment sector of a lawyer's first legal job, but it did increase the likelihood of holding subsequent jobs in the public sector. The authors suggested that both initial sector choices and retention were affected by other factors that moderated the influence of PSM. They concluded that the key question for research is when and under what conditions PSM affects employee attraction and retention. Other studies have also addressed this question. Steijn (2008) found that PSM's effect

on public employee job satisfaction and intention to stay in their jobs was stronger when employees felt that their work was useful to society. Similarly, Taylor (2008) found that employee PSM did not predict organizational commitment (or job satisfaction) unless employees also felt that their job provided opportunities to satisfy their PSM. These studies point to the importance of understanding task or work role choices for motivation (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999; Wise 2004).

Social and behavioral science evidence. Economists have begun to contribute important research on PSM's relationships to attraction-selection-attrition. Gregg et al. (2008) studied donated labor (unpaid overtime) in caring industries in the United Kingdom. They found that people with high PSM in caring industries were more likely to move to firms in the public or nonprofit sector. A series of studies by Delfgaauw and Dur (2007, 2008a, 2008b) modeled self-selection decisions in a perfectly competitive economy. They concluded that when prosocial motivation is not a revealed attribute of applicants, increasing the wage raises the probability of attracting workers with lower prosocial motivations. A study by Georgellis, Iossa, and Tabvuma (2008) used data from the first 14 waves of the British Household Panel Survey covering the period 1991–2004. Their analysis focused on 747 transitions from the private to the public sector within the data. They concluded that a significant share of individuals move to the public sector because of the higher likelihood of fulfilling their PSM.

Utility of the research and knowledge gaps. As we noted earlier, the research related to attraction-selection-retention is beginning to demonstrate that the effects of PSM are more nuanced than Perry and Wise (1990) projected. The results are promising, however, with respect to PSM as a factor in attraction and retention. Research from public administration and economics holds out the near-term prospect of creating usable knowledge for improving recruitment, selection, and retention in public organizations.

A line of research that bears on attraction-selection-attrition that recently has received attention but has not been fully assimilated into PSM research is person–environment fit models. The person–environment fit models refer to several different ways of assessing the congruence between individuals and the settings in which they work (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson 2005). The logic of the person–environment fit (i.e., how congruent an individual is within a job or social unit) models is that individuals are likely to behave according to their essence if they are well adapted. Several recent studies have used various forms of person–environment fit models to analyze the effects of PSM (Bright 2008; Steijn 2008; Vandenabeele 2008). Bright (2008) found a strong, significant relationship between PSM and person–organization fit. Given the theoretical case and the prospects that this research will help identify more completely factors influencing attraction and retention, we believe this line of research merits continuing attention.

Performance

The second proposition in Perry and Wise (1990) focused on the relationship between PSM and individual performance. It reads,

Proposition 2: In public organizations, PSM is positively related to individual performance.

Perry and Wise noted at the time, “Systematic empirical evidence about the relationship between PSM and performance does not exist” (1990, 371). Their arguments for the proposition rested on two premises. First, public jobs would be intrinsically motivating for individuals with high PSM because these individuals would embrace work characterized by attributes such as high task significance. Second, PSM 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.

Review of public administration research. Several studies have tested the proposition by using self-reported measures of individual performance (Alonso and Lewis 2001; Bright 2007; Leisink and Steijn 2009; Naff and Crum 1999; Vandenabeele 2009). In an early study, Naff and Crum (1999) found a positive relationship between PSM and self-reported performance appraisals among U.S. federal employees. In a subsequent study of federal employees with data from the 1991 Survey of Federal Employees and the 1996 MPS, Alonso and Lewis (2001) used job performance ratings and grade to measure performance. Using a different model specification for the 1996 data than Naff and Crum (1999), Alonso and Lewis were able to replicate Naff and Crum's findings that PSM had a positive impact on performance ratings; however, they were unable to find a relationship between valuing service to others and higher ratings in the 1991 data set. PSM also had no association with grade level in 1996, and valuing service to others was negatively related to grade level in 1991. Although Alonso 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 mediators 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 PSM and performance. He found indirect effects of PSM mediated by the fit measure, but no independent direct effects in a sample of 205 public health care employees representing three states and three levels of government. In a study of a large sample of Flemish civil servants, Vandenabeele (2009) concluded that there was a positive and significant relationship between PSM and self-reported performance. In contrast to Bright, Vandenabeele found support for both direct and indirect effects on performance. The indirect effects on the motivation–performance relationships were mediated by job satisfaction and normative and affective commitment. Leisink and Steijn (2009) analyzed the effects of PSM on three performance-related outcome variables—commitment, willingness to exert effort, and perceived job performance—among 4,130 Dutch public employees from all levels and varieties of public services. The hypothesis that person–organization fit mediates the relationship between PSM and the outcome variables was rejected. The effects of PSM and fit on the outcome variables were independent. The reasons underlying variations in the role of mediators and direct and indirect effects of PSM on performance merit attention in future research.

Two other studies tested a model proposed by Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) in which PSM is one of three types of motivation (public service, task, and mission) that are the proximate determinants of organizational effectiveness, rather than individual performance, in

government. The first of these studies (Brewer and Selden 2000), using data from the 1996 MPS, found a positive and significant relationship between PSM and perceived organizational effectiveness. Based on responses from 1,739 full-time public employees in nine central government, five provincial, and 26 lower-level local government agencies in Korea, Kim (2005) found that PSM was a significant positive influence on perceived organizational effectiveness, replicating the results of Brewer and Selden (2000).

Switching from organizational effectiveness to efficiency, 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 seven ministries. He regressed seven independent variables, including two dimensions of PSM—attraction to public policy making and commitment to the public interest—against the dependent variable. 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 PSM was positively related to propensity to “blow the whistle.” Two more recent studies (Kim 2005; Pandey, Wright, and Moynihan 2008), one based in Korea and the other in the United States, found positive associations between PSM and organizational citizenship behavior. Andersen (2009) investigated the influence of inferred PSM and professional norms on the performance of a sample of 24 public and private health professionals in Denmark. Specific, discrete behaviors were used as performance measures. PSM 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. Research in organizational behavior and economics supports a positive relationship between PSM and performance. Grant (2007) proposed that the social architecture of jobs can be used to reinforce task significance and thereby prosocial motivation. Subsequent empirical research (Grant 2008a, 2008b) on public university fund-raisers and firefighters supports his theoretical arguments. The effects of experimental manipulations of task significance affected not only performance, but also persistence and productivity.

In economics, research by Francois (2000) and LeGrand (2003) is noteworthy. Francois’s essay “Public Service Motivation as an Argument for Government Provision” (2000) acknowledged that economists have not taken seriously the claims of public administration scholars about a public service ethic. Using formal mathematical modeling, Francois demonstrated that when PSM exists, conditions can be created for government bureaucracy to better obtain effort from employees than a standard profit-maximizing firm. LeGrand’s book *Motivation, Agency, and Public Policy* (2003) developed a complex argument grounded in two constructs: motivation and agency. LeGrand argued that the motivation of public servants is complex, but includes both self-interested and altruistic motives. He coupled his analysis of motivation with agency—that is, the capacity to

take desired action. He concluded that public policies should be designed to create quasi-markets in which public agencies compete with for-profit firms in the delivery of services. The consequence of such quasi-markets is that they serve to harness altruistic motivations of all providers, public and private. Although Francois and LeGrand support a relationship between PSM and performance, a limitation of their research is that it relies on formal models rather than empirical analysis.

Utility of the research and knowledge gaps. At this juncture, the research points to the conclusion that PSM matters for performance, but a good many questions remain unanswered about the degree to which 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 the individual and collective levels for the contribution of PSM. 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 20 years ago. The existing research also points to the complexity of motivation, the need to consider competing explanations of bureaucratic behavior, and the importance of contextual factors (Wise 2004).

A research gap highlighted by the contributions of different disciplines is that public administration research has focused primarily on the individual level of analysis, while 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) 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 (Hondeghem and Perry 2009) and the role of mediators such as person–organization fit in the PSM–performance relationship (Bright 2007; Brewer 2008; Wright and Pandey 2008). Wright and Pandey (2008) proposed a model that helps explain inconsistencies in motivation–performance research. They suggested that the effect of PSM on job satisfaction is mediated by employee–organization value congruence, a form of person–organization fit. Their model offers promising avenues for future research.

Another interesting question is how PSM and performance interact over time. Research to date views PSM as a driver of performance, but we also need research that investigates how effective organizations might stimulate or inculcate public service motives among their employees (Moynihan and Pandey 2007b; Rainey and Steinbauer 1999) and whether PSM is a static or dynamic attribute (Wise 2004). The motivational framework outlined in Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993) supports the proposition that PSM is higher in high-performing public services. Research on the causal relationships between PSM and performance could be highly informative for both theory and practice. Finally, research clarifying the relationships between PSM and different types of performance (individual/collective, efficiency/effectiveness) would advance understanding.

Research in organizational behavior and economics supports a positive relationship between PSM and performance.

Organizational Incentive Structures

The third and final proposition in Perry and Wise (1990) focused on the relationship between PSM 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 predisposition-opportunity model, which conceptualized motives as "predispositions to act under appropriate external cues" (1982, 210). If PSM represents an individual's predispositions to act, then the incentives (i.e., external cues) that organizations are prepared to offer members for their commitments represent the opportunity side of the model. Knoke and Wright-Isak developed a typology composed of eight different types of organizational incentive systems representing familiar schemes, including pure utilitarian and service incentive systems. The proposition does not imply that public employees are devoid of utilitarian motives and unconcerned with their level of compensation as sometimes interpreted by subsequent studies (Wise 2000); rather, it is about the degree of dependence on utilitarian and monetary rewards within organizations for stimulating individual performance.

Review of public administration research. This proposition has empirical support in the public administration literature, but much of the evidence focuses on how highly public employees value financial rewards relative to their private sector counterparts or relative to some portfolio of rewards. Reviews prior to 1990 (Perry and Porter 1982; Rainey, Backoff, and Levine 1976) summarized this evidence, indicating that financial rewards were less important than nonpecuniary rewards. Relatively little empirical research in public administration has looked at incentive systems either in the precise form expressed in the proposition or as conceived by Knoke and Wright-Isak. Regardless of the consensus in reviews prior to 1990, more recent research is mixed, so that, like propositions 1 and 2, we have reason to believe the incentive relationships are more nuanced than originally thought.

One study that illustrates the difficulty of interpreting research findings with respect to proposition 3 is Crewson's (1997) analysis of PSM. Crewson used data from the 1989 GSS and a 1994 survey conducted by the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). He compared private and public sector respondents on the importance of pay and did not find the difference to be statistically significant in either the 1989 GSS sample or the 1994 IEEE sample (Crewson 1997, 504). Despite the absence of a difference on pay, he identified differences on other items. Crewson concluded that "although there is no significant difference between sectors in the importance placed on high pay, public employees rate other extrinsic rewards lower in importance than do employees from the private sector. In turn, intrinsic rewards are more important to public employees than to those employed in the private sector" (503-4). Thus, Crewson's conclusion is consistent with the proposition that public organizations are less dependent on *utilitarian* incentives, even if he did not sustain findings from previous reviews that *financial* incentives are less important.

Karl and Sutton (1998) and Bright (2005, 2009) reported inverse relationships between PSM and preferences for monetary rewards. In contrast, Alonso and Lewis (2001), analyzing responses from two large-*n* surveys of federal employees in 1991 and 1996, found no evidence that the link between material rewards and performance mattered any less to those with high PSM. 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 that "[i]n 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" (2004, 46). These findings suggest that prosocial tasks motivate performance regardless of sector and undermine the notion that people with high PSM discount monetary rewards.

In a study of Flemish university graduates, Vandenebeele et al. (2002) found that those who wanted to work for government attached more importance to the social significance of a job as well as to job characteristics related to quality of life, but this did not mean that they attached less importance to extrinsic job factors. Salaries and fringe benefits and promotion opportunities were of equal importance for those who wanted to work for government and those who did not. The results can be interpreted as both supporting the social significance of work tasks as a motivator while refuting the notion that concern for utilitarian incentives is absent among those who seek public service.

A review of all the public administration research on reward preferences and incentives is beyond the scope of this article, but Wright's (2007) analysis suggests a promising path to reconcile the ambiguous results reported here regarding proposition 3. He used goal theory to assess the influence of organizational mission and extrinsic rewards on work motivation among 807 employees in a New York State agency. Wright concluded that "the intrinsic rewards provided by the nature or function of the organization may be more important to public sector employees than—or compensate for the limited availability of—performance-related extrinsic rewards" (2007, 60). Wright's approach using goal theory and similar theoretical efforts to study incentives in more integrated ways merits attention in future research.

Social and behavioral science evidence. Scholarship in psychology, economics, and political science is making significant contributions toward illuminating the relationship between motivation and incentive structure. The longest-standing line of research, originating with Deci and his collaborators (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 1999; Deci and Ryan 2004), posits 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. The experimental evidence suggests that recipients experience positive feedback that can amplify intrinsic motivation differently from tangible rewards, such as contingent pay.

The Deci and Ryan research has influenced motivation crowding theory (Frey 1997; Frey and Jegen 2001), which originated in economics. Frey and Jegen summarized the two main premises of motivation crowding theory: (1) all interventions originating from

outside the person under consideration—both positive monetary rewards and regulations accompanied by negative sanctions—may affect intrinsic motivation, and (2) external interventions may crowd *out* or crowd *in* intrinsic motivation (or leave it unaffected) (2001, 592). One inference that some economists have drawn from this line of research is that lower-powered incentives (e.g., nonpecuniary rewards) are optimal in public organizations (Francois and Vlassopoulos 2008). Scholarship in economics (Delfgaauw and Dur 2008a, 2008b; Georgellis, Iossa, and Tabvuma 2008) puts forward the notion that PSM advances the interest of a cost-minimizing government because it provides an argument for an employer to offer weaker financial incentives than private firms do. Proposition 3 indicates that public service organizations could offset costs for financial rewards by relying on nonutilitarian incentives if they are populated by employees with strong PSM. Whether public service organizations should offer lower financial rewards, however, is a normative question.

A principal–agent analysis of public bureaucratic incentives by two political scientists came to conclusions compatible with the research from psychology and economics. Miller and Whitford (2007) argued that principal–agent theory posits that 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 demonstrated, however, that the principal’s self-interest in public settings militates against offering such incentives because bonuses large enough to produce the efficient incentive effect in public organizations are prohibitively expensive for the principal, creating what they called the “principal’s moral hazard constraint.” They suggest that the solution for the principal’s dilemma is to revert to using motives underlying PSM.

Utility of the research and knowledge gaps. Although research has produced mixed results, some observers (Moynihan 2008) have contended that the substitution of economic rewards for the service ethic has damaged public service missions. The growing body of research from across several disciplines led the author of a recent review 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” (Myers 2008, 6).

A strategic question for future research is how to create balance between utilitarian and service incentive systems. Both LeGrand (2003) and Wise (2004) have contended that one issue that should be high on the future agenda is the composite of motivations that affect behavior. LeGrand wrote, “Altruism exists alongside more self-interested motivations, and is combined with them to affect behaviour in different ways” (2003, 35). Wise was more direct about the need for holistic models: “If we look only for evidence to support the existence of public service motives...we cannot obtain a picture of the complexity of human behavior in a given organization” (2004, 670).

Let us offer one example where more encompassing research—research addressing multiple motives and situations—could offer strategic payoffs. This more encompassing research could involve at

least two individual motivational components, PSM and the need for security and job security rights, which is an organizational policy variable. This set of variables has been at 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 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, promoting at-will employment as an alternative to traditional job tenure systems (Kellough and Nigro 2006). We also know that the need for security and public service are important motivators, particularly in traditional civil service systems. How do variations in these two factors influence the motivation of civil servants? What are the behavioral consequences of relaxing property rights in government jobs? How do different combinations of individual PSM and need for security influence the behavior of civil servants?

Conclusion

This article reviewed empirical research about public service motivation conducted during the last 20 years. The anchor for the review was three propositions proposed by Perry and Wise (1990). We conclude here with some general observations about the research, the state of our knowledge, and additional issues that deserve attention in future research.

The review reflects that public service motivation, broadly defined, is a construct that has attracted attention in several disciplines. At the heart of the construct is the idea that individuals are oriented to act in the public domain for the purpose of doing good for others and society. Differences are evident across disciplines, particularly with respect to the drivers for the other orientation. The commonality, however, is that human behavior is driven by other-regarding motives, not only by self-concern and self-interest. Rational choice theories, grounded in assumptions of self-interested behavior, have had an important influence on public management theory and practice in recent decades. PSM offers an alternative perspective for public management research and practice.

A second conclusion is that research on PSM has diffused widely. Although PSM research was initially concentrated in the United States, it is now conducted in Europe, Asia, Australia, and South America. The diffusion has created challenges for the conceptualization and operational measurement of PSM. The values associated with public service are quite different around the globe. It is likely that the meanings of PSM vary as well and are less institutionalized in some countries than in others. This makes comparative, cross-national research difficult, but a necessary focus in itself. As the internationalization of research proceeds, scholars and professionals need to be attentive to linguistic, contextual, and cultural considerations.

With regard to Perry and Wise’s (1990) proposition 1, the research supports the view that PSM is important in attraction-selection-retention processes. At the same time, it is one of a constellation of factors. One has to be aware that public service motives are not the only—perhaps not even the most important—factors in the attraction-selection-retention process. The question thus is: what is

A strategic question for future research is how to create balance between utilitarian and service incentive systems.

the relative importance of PSM compared to other motives, and are there differences among applicants and incumbents related to work roles and tasks (Leisink and Steijn 2008; Wise 2004).

With regard to proposition 2 on individual performance, empirical research appears to support a relationship, but the scholarship to date begs for some important refinements. The role of intermediate variables, mediating the relationship between PSM and performance, is still unclear. Researchers should also examine the assumptions and linkages for how PSM contributes to higher mission performance and public organization effectiveness, as Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) and others (LeGrand 2003) propose. The original Perry-Wise proposition focused only on individual performance. The relationship between PSM and individual and organizational performance is a complex issue that merits careful attention, including the direction of causality and the roles of intervening variables.

With regard to proposition 3 on organizational incentives, the empirical evidence shows that researchers vary in their understanding of the proposition. More nuance is needed in both the research conducted and how findings are interpreted. Research is confounding whether public employees attach less importance to material rewards than their private sector colleagues overall. Public service organizations appear to have a broader range of incentives because they can call upon the social significance of public jobs. Intrinsic rewards might, therefore, be more important than performance-related extrinsic rewards. This also means that public organizations are more apt to use lower-powered incentive structures. Motivation crowding theory suggests that this is a rational strategy that avoids undermining intrinsic motivation.

The conclusions with regard to the three propositions argue strongly for more holistic research in the future. Although a relatively large body of research has been published on PSM during the last two decades, much of it has focused on definition, measurement, and incidence. These issues continue to merit attention in future research, but the foundation has been laid across disciplines so that scholars can take up other, more substantive and complex issues. Wise (2004) has indicated several avenues that might be pursued in future research that looks more holistically at PSM. One avenue is to look at other motives and human needs besides public service motives, as illustrated earlier, where we suggest joining research on PSM with individual needs for security. Another avenue is to look at situational factors that play a role in explaining when public service motives surface and dominate individual behavior and when behavior occurs as a consequence of other motives. A third avenue is to look at contextual factors related to individual actors, situations, events, and organizations in which behavior occurs that influences the strength of PSM.

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 PSM has appeared since 2000, so progress has been especially rapid during the last decade (Perry and Hondeghem 2008). It is also noteworthy that progress spans disciplines and countries. Beyond progress, future research needs to explore new directions that entail closer integration with other disciplines, measurement advances, and new methodological

strategies for advancing knowledge. Important work also needs to be done in translating PSM research into managerial practice. The research reviewed here indicates significant progress, but now new challenges lay ahead for scholars and public professionals.

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Notes

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

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