



# Public service motivation as a predictor of attraction to the public sector<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

According to public service motivation theory, individuals with a strong public service orientation are attracted to government jobs. This proposition was investigated in three studies by measuring public sector motivation at a pre-entry level as an individual difference variable affecting perceptions of fit and organizational attraction. Results were consistent with a positive relationship between public sector motivation and attraction to both public sector and non-profit organizations. Despite substantial overlap between the constructs of public sector motivation and agreeableness, the present research indicated that public sector motivation has utility in predicting employment interests beyond the general personality factor of agreeableness.

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## 1. Introduction

Public service motivation (PSM), a concept that has become increasingly popular in the public administration and public management literatures, was defined by Perry and Wise (1990) as “an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (p. 368). Although most of the research on PSM dealt with such issues as the relative prevalence of PSM among public sector employees as compared to the private sector, or the impact of PSM on various organizational outcomes, PSM should also serve as a predictor of attraction to public sector organizations among those at the entry stage of their career. Thus, PSM should be an important variable in predicting vocational choice involving public sector careers. While PSM has been linked to organizational commitment, turnover, job satisfaction, and task performance (Crewson, 1997; Hilliard, Doverspike, & Carpenter, 2010; Perry, Hondeghem, & Wise, 2009; Perry & Hondeghem, 2008), the main goal of the current series of studies was to understand whether individuals with high levels of PSM demonstrated greater interest in public sector employment.

Addressing a general lack of research on the relationship between PSM at a pre-entry level and subsequent employment decisions, Studies 1 and 2 investigated the basic relationship between PSM and reported interest in public, private, and non-profit organizations in two distinct samples. In order to establish the value of these concepts for applied purposes, Study 3 utilized a research design with greater fidelity to real-world job search experiences.

### 1.1. Public service motivation

In the 20 years since the concept of PSM was initially defined, several other conceptualizations emerged, but most included general themes of altruism and motivations grounded in public institutions (Perry et al., 2009; Vandenberg, 2007, 2008). For example, Rainey and Steinbauer (1999) provided a broad definition of PSM as “a general altruistic motivation to serve the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation, or humanity” (p. 23). More recently, Vandenberg (2007) attempted to capture the

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various definitions by defining PSM 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. 549). Despite variations on the original definition, the perspective offered by Perry and Wise (1990) remained cited widely (Kim, 2009; Vandenberg, 2008; Wright & Christiansen, 2009).

The original theoretical basis for PSM, proposed by Perry and Wise (1990), was based on the idea that individuals were motivated toward public service by rational, affective, or normative influences. Grounded largely in this rational–normative–affective theory of PSM, Perry (1996) developed a multi-dimensional measure consisting of attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice scales. Other instruments, often abridged versions of Perry's original measure, were also used for PSM research (e.g., Coursey, Perry, Brudney, & Littlepage, 2008; Coursey & Pandey, 2007; Kim, 2009).

Twenty years of research on PSM (see reviews by Hilliard et al., 2010; Perry & Hondeghem, 2008; Perry et al., 2009) led to the identification of several antecedents and outcomes associated with PSM. In terms of individual level precursors for PSM, Bright (2005) found that individuals with high PSM were more likely to be female, managers, and have more education. This evidence was corroborated by findings from Moynihan and Pandey (2007), demonstrating that PSM was correlated positively with membership in professional organizations. Research also suggested a relationship between PSM and political or spiritual ideology (Perry, 1997). Summarizing the literature concerning antecedents and outcomes, Hilliard et al. (2010) found that PSM was associated with organizational commitment, turnover, job satisfaction, and performance, suggesting the importance of PSM as an individual difference variable relevant to individual and, in turn, organizational level outcomes.

In a review of existing research on PSM, Perry et al. (2009) noted limited but supportive evidence for the proposition that individuals with high levels of PSM were likely to seek membership in public organizations. Previous research relied primarily on measurement of the construct within populations of public servants or after organizational choice (Wright & Christensen, 2010). So, although there was strong evidence that PSM was related to the employment sector, the directionality was unclear (Houston, 2000; Wright & Christensen, 2010).

To better understand the usefulness of PSM for recruitment and selection purposes, we identified a need for studies investigating the outcomes associated with PSM in broader populations than those already committed to public service. Research on the existence of PSM at a pre-entry level can serve as a step in broadening our understanding of individual behavioral outcomes related to PSM.

### 1.2. Person–organization fit

Person-organization (PO) fit was conceptualized as “the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when at least one entity provides what the other needs and/or they share fundamental characteristics” (Kristof, 1996, p. 4). Previous research found PO fit to be correlated with a variety of job-related outcomes including job satisfaction, performance, commitment, intent to quit (negative), and coworker and supervisor satisfaction (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005).

Cable and Edwards (2004) defined two types of fit included in the broader PO fit description. Supplementary fit was operationalized as the value congruence or match between beliefs and values of the individual and the organization. Complementary fit was operationalized as satisfaction of psychological needs. Each type of PO fit predicted employee attitudes (Cable & Edwards, 2004).

For recruitment, it is important to understand the processes that underlie PO fit so organizations can provide adequate information and gather pertinent data from job seekers. Applied to public organizations, recruitment efforts may be tailored to provide sufficient information about relevant values. Applicants may use previous and acquired knowledge about the public organization to evaluate their potential fit.

### 1.3. Attraction to the public sector

Drawing heavily on the attraction–selection–attrition model developed by Schneider (1987), PO fit theory presumed that a higher degree of fit between the person and organization increased the attractiveness of the organization to the individual (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Vandenberg, 2008). Previous research established PO fit as a critical link influencing organizational attraction (Braddy, Meade, Michael, & Fleenor, 2009; Cable & Judge, 1996; Dineen, Ash, & Noe, 2002).

Organizational attractiveness was described as “a function of characteristics of the applicant and characteristics of the job/organization” (Schreurs, Druart, Proost, & De Witte, 2009, p. 37). On the organization side, attraction was shown to be related to the meanings applicants associate with recruiting entities (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Early research utilizing the instrumental–symbolic framework found that applicants more easily differentiated between organizations based on trait inferences (symbolic) than traditional job and organizational characteristics (instrumental); instrumental attributes were tangible and objective whereas symbolic attributes were those that related to self-expression, image, and brand (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Recent applications of the instrumental–symbolic framework to a recruiting context advocated tailoring the organizational image to target job seekers with a personality similar to the organization's “personality” (Braddy et al., 2009; Schreurs et al., 2009).

In the case of PSM and public sector organizations, Perry and Wise (1990) proposed that “the greater an individual's public service motivation, the more likely the individual will seek membership in a public organization” (p. 370). However, research supporting this “seeking” hypothesis was limited and inconsistent. In Perry et al.'s (2009) review of the past 20 years of PSM literature, they reported limited but supportive research for this conclusion. More recently, Wright and Christensen (2010) investigated the proposition of public sector seeking in a population of public and private lawyers. The results were not conclusive

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