



## THE STATE OF THE ART OF PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION

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**ABSTRACT** The origin of the concept of public service motivation (PSM) dates back to 1982. Since then, many definitions, measurement scales and implications have been proposed and discussed. Still, the gap between what we know and what would be useful to know about PSM is open. Therefore, this article reviews the literature of the last thirty years and identifies five main streams within the literature itself. Relevant branches are: definition, measurement, generalizability, relationship between PSM and other individual and organizational variables, and translation of the theory on PSM into human resources management (HRM) practices. Finally, this paper identifies unanswered questions for future researches. What is the relationship between PSM and individual and organizational performance? What is the link between PSM and leadership in the public sector? How should HRM practices be organized to consider the different level of PSM reported by public servants?

**KEYWORDS :****INTRODUCTION:**

The origin of the concept of public service motivation (PSM) can be traced back to 1982, when Rainey studied middle managers in four public agencies and four private organizations to understand whether they reported any differences in their rewards preferences. Results showed that “public managers are higher, to a statistically significant degree, on the items concerning public service and work that is helpful to others” (1982, 293). Therefore, even without referring explicitly to the concept of PSM, he advanced the idea that public and private employees have different motivational basis. The former, in particular, are attracted by other-regarding motives. This was not to say that workers of the public sector are not self-interested. It was to underline that the willingness to help other and reach the common good were stronger motivators in the public rather than the private sector. In 1990, in the United States, Perry explicitly introduced the concept of PSM as the counterweight to the rational choice theory, which assumes that individuals take decisions to maximize their utility. On the contrary, PSM relates to the desire of helping others improve their conditions. Since 1982 many studies have been published regarding the definition, measurement and implications of PSM. In any case, the construct still needs to be fine-tuned and the acquired knowledge needs to be synthesized into a more usable way. In fact, the gap between what we know and what would be useful to know is still open. Hence, this paper presents a thorough review of the existing literature and identifies five main streams within the literature itself. The lack of a generally accepted theoretical framework for the PSM construct is clear evidence that additional research is needed. This is the case even though several authors tried to expand the concept of PSM by drawing on contributions from different disciplines (e.g., psychological economics, psychology, and political science). Frey and Gee (1997) were the initiators of the crowding theory, upon verifying that it is consistent with rational choice principles and hence can be integrated into economics. They found that where public spirit prevails, the introduction of monetary incentives for the localization of a socially desirable but locally unwanted facility crowd out civic duty. Therefore, greater incentives than one would expect applying standard economics rules has to be provided to the local population. In general, “the use of price incentives needs to be reconsidered in all areas where intrinsic motivation can empirically be shown to be important” (1997, 753). Perry (2000) looked at the literature on prosocial behavior and institution theory to suggest a new paradigm of motivation in which the boundaries between organizations and society are less defined and the assumptions on what motivates people are more heterogeneous. Drawing on this, he called for a motivation theory that brings society in and captures the motivational differences between public and private employees. Sociohistorical context, motivational context, individual characteristics, and behavior should all be part of the PSM theory. They aimed at “reviewing the evolving definitions of PSM, including operational definitions used to measure the construct” as well as “answering the question, what have we learned from PSM research?” (2010, 681) They first recalled the existing synergies among PSM,

altruism, and prosocial motivation. The propositions hypothesized a relationship between PSM and the other three dimensions of attraction-selection-attrition, performance, and organizational incentive structures (Perry, 1990). Lastly, they concluded calling for closer integration of the concept of PSM with other disciplines, additional measurement advances, new methodological research strategies and tools, and the translation of theoretical knowledge into human resources management (HRM) practices.

**METHODOLOGY:**

Given the gap between what we know and what we should know about PSM, this article reviews the literature in order to identify and explain the main streams of research. As opposed to Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise (2010), this paper presents the definitions of PSM along with the details on the context where they were proposed. Making contextual factors explicit allows understanding the concerns that each definition was intended to address. Moreover, this work focuses on methodological issues related to the measurement of PSM more extensively than Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise (2010). Different scales are presented according to the concerns the author wanted to address rather than according to the approaches that were used. Also, this paper looks at the generalizability of the construct of PSM across sectors and countries outside the United States, where the concept was originally introduced. Unlike Perry, Hondeghem and Wise (2010), All the articles have been categorized along the following dimensions: author, date, title, journal, research question(s), variables, country, sample, institution type, governmental level, sector, research design, methodology, and relevant results. The table was organized with the purpose of keeping track of all the relevant information required to perform a meaningful literature review. Based on this table then, five main literature streams related to PSM have been identified: definition, measurement scale, generalizability, linkages with other variables, and translation from theory to practice.

**Defining the concept of PSM**

The definition of any concept is vital to provide a solid framework for any further speculations. This is the reason why one branch of the literature on PSM has been focusing and continues to be focused on the concept itself. At the beginning, the core of the construct was narrower than what it is today. As a matter of fact, the last available definitions of PSM try to integrate contributions from different theories. Also, strictly related to the issue of defining PSM is the question about the role of perceptions and values in the PSM construct.

Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise (2010) considered the same contributions on the definition of PSM presented here. However, the following discussion further details contextual factors as well as the sample used to test the validity of the definition provided.

Perry and Wise (1990) gave the first definition of PSM: “an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in

public institutions and organizations” (1990, 368). They were the first authors to call for committed research on the concept of public service motivation, upon reviewing the existing literature. At the time, two contingent factors were predominant in the debate around the United States Federal Government.

Brewer and Selden (1998) gave another definition of PSM: “strong motives to perform meaningful public, community, and social service” (1998, 254). The starting point for the proposition presented was the awareness that dealing with the concept in theory was difficult given the double meaning that the term public service could assume. As mentioned above, closely related to the issue of defining PSM is the question about the role of perceptions and values in such a construct. Brewer et al. (2000) were interested in understanding how individuals perceived the motives linked to public service. They examined 69 employees and students in the United States and came up with four different kinds of perceptions of the motives of public service. Issues bigger than their selves, such as the common good or advocacy, motivate patriots. Sentiments of social justice motivate humanitarians. In conclusion, the reasons to perform public service are different, but in all four cases the three motives identified by Perry (1990) (rational, norm-based, affective) are present.

### Measuring PSM

Four kinds of separate, even though intertwined, discussions are prevalent in the literature stream that aims at elaborating a measurement tool for PSM. The leading questions of the sub-branches are related to whether it makes any concrete difference to try to measure PSM; how to build the measurement scale and test for its internal validity; how to include ethics in the measurement instrument; and what strategies to adopt when empirically measuring PSM. Therefore, the group of articles in this stream is focused on methodological issues, rather on the concept of PSM.

### Generalizing the public service motivation construct

All the studies in this stream aim at verifying whether the concept of PSM can be generalized. Generalization is tested across countries, sectors, activities and international/supranational organizations. In some cases, the same research is interested in looking at more than one type of generalization. In this branch, as opposed to the previous branch, the focus is on the concept itself rather than on methodological issues.

### Relating public service motivation to other variables

The studies in this stream are presented according to the statistical analysis they perform. Some researchers looked at causal relationship, therefore defining antecedents and consequences of PSM, while others verified the correlation between PSM and other organizational and individual variables. Overall, the findings for some of the variables are mixed. This article considers a larger number of variables than Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise (2010). Moreover, they used the three propositions originally offered by Perry and Wise (1990) as the criteria for grouping together studies successively published. The three propositions suggested a relationship between PSM and the three dimensions of attraction-selection-attrition, individual performance, and organizational incentives system (Perry, 1990)

The antecedents of PSM A bunch of studies investigate which individual and organizational characteristics determine a higher or lower level of PSM. Individual variables include education, childhood and professional experiences, preferences for different kinds of rewards, perceptions, pride, closeness to God, parental models, political ideology, and age. Organizational variables, instead, include management level, organizational features, red tape, length of membership in the institution, national institutions and politics, and job features. Gender, even though findings are mixed on the strength and the kind of causation, is also considered to determine the level of PSM.

### The consequences of PSM

Several studies illustrate what are the organizational consequences of PSM. Specifically, PSM is found to influence, either in a positive or negative way, variables such as individual and organization performance, retention, appraisal process, and the direction of efforts.

### Correlations between PSM and other variables

The studies in this branch correlate PSM to other kind of variables. These variables can be categorized as tangible and intangible. The former variables are: performance, turnover, different styles of

leadership, extra-role behavior, citizen participation, network settings, effort levels, employment-at-will policies, and contents taught at Master of Public Administration Programs. The latter variables are: activism levels, social capital, person-organization fit, satisfaction, trust, emotional labor, and culture.

From theory to practice Yet from the beginning of the literature on PSM, some authors have been focusing on the lessons learnt by doing research in order to give policy recommendations. Broadly speaking, these suggestions are intended to improve all the steps in the HRM cycle.

Delfgaauw and Dur (2010) affirmed that in a world with perfect economic competition where potential workers differ in their set of abilities and level of PSM, the per unit output price in the public sector is lower than in the private sector. When PSM is sufficiently prevalent in the public sector, agencies should not aim to recruit and retain the best and brightest at all cost, but rather aim at less productive, but better motivated people. The benefits of improving the quality of public managers by increasing remuneration to private sectors levels are bound to be smaller than the cost” (2010, 658).

### CONCLUSION

This article reviewed the last 30 years of literature on PSM, which is considered under several perspectives. Key unanswered questions remain and should drive future developments of the research. In particular, relevant issues to be investigated are: What is the relationship between PSM and performance, at the individual as well as at the organizational level? What is the link between PSM and leadership in public organizations? How should HRM practices be designed based on the different level and degree of the PSM showed by employees within the institution? Answering this research questions is even more challenging in the case of the Italian public sector due to the limited availability and fragmentation of data. Given the lack of previous empirical studies, we are going to collect data that help us shed light on the role PSM plays in attracting, motivating and retaining Italian public servants.

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