

# Debate: Advancing public service motivation research

**Donald P. Moynihan,  
Wouter Vandenberghe and  
Jens Blom-Hansen**

An informal way of measuring the value of a concept is whether it has currency with students. Public service motivation (PSM) succeeds on this test—based on our diverse experiences, students relate easily to the idea. PSM also has currency among international scholars—witness the scholarly effort devoted to PSM.

We come to the concept as those who believe it has validity and continuing promise. However, instead of focusing on its evident strengths, in this short article we focus on shortcomings and opportunities for improvement.

## **The link to broader social science**

Public management scholars can, proudly, claim PSM as a home-grown concept. We can point to a body of empirical research that is cumulatively powerful. Against that, it suffers from the ‘balance of trade’ problem in public management research more generally—we import concepts that provide a logic for PSM and relate PSM to broader organizational theory (and given the interdisciplinary status of our field we should continue to do this) but do not export our insights to a broader social science audience.

PSM occupies similar conceptual space with many related constructs (Perry *et al.*, 2010), but in print this overlap is given little more than lip service. Therefore, conceptual analysis is indispensable to ascertain what the extent of overlap is between PSM and related concepts as (pro-social) motivation, altruism or public service ethos in order to acknowledge it. If we do not explicitly pursue this, we risk isolating the topic. In doing so, we lose a rare opportunity to influence social science in an area where we have comparative advantages in the marketplace of ideas, and cede this market to other social scientists. Witness for example the excitement in organizational theory about prosocial motivation, in political science about functional/solidary preferences or ‘policy-motivated’ bureaucrats. Research in mainstream social science journals on these topics scarcely casts a backward glance at PSM, despite its deeper record of scholarship.

## **The focus on measurement**

PSM is prone to measurement issues. In 1996, Perry’s proposed scale kick-started the wave of empirical research. But the scale has not always met basic validity tests in other settings. Therefore, there is no single widely-accepted scale. Instead, there have been numerous efforts, with some trying to develop longer, more detailed measures, whereas others have developed shortened, less exhaustive scales. This not only creates uncertainty in the review process, since different reviewers might have different preferences. It also creates uncertainty about whether findings using one approach would hold using other measures, and therefore general doubt about findings.

We could argue for a shorter and more widely accepted scale. Such items will be easier to promote in large-scale surveys and likely to get us into the game of talking to broader social science. If we focus too much on sub-dimensions of PSM—though these may be real and important—we reinforce the sense of PSM being isolated from broader social science. By contrast, efforts to develop longer international scales of PSM run into a greater potential for cultural differences to mutate the understanding of the basic concept (Kim *et al.*, 2013).

A possible solution for this dilemma could be a good second-order measure of PSM, which sufficiently relates to the individual dimensions but that at the same time can act as a stand-alone measure of general PSM,

## **PMM and PSM**

PMM will be publishing a theme issue on ‘Public service motivation in an international context—taking it one step further’ in 2014. This theme will bring together a series of high-quality articles and commentaries that tell us what the emerging issues are to point the direction for future research and managerial practice. The Guest Editors for PMM’s theme are Wouter Vandenberghe (Utrecht University) and PMM editorial board member Chris Skelcher (University of Birmingham).

much like the item 'Overall, I am satisfied with job' does for the multi-dimensional concept of job satisfaction.

### Better validation of relationships

We have built most of our claims on PSM based on cross-sectional survey responses. This raises the problem of endogeneity, undermining these claims.

We can better validate our knowledge on PSM by tracking clearly exogenous factors. Some of the findings from survey data that are most persuasive are such exogenous factors that we capture relatively objectively by surveys (for example gender). Other survey work has related PSM to exogenous factors, such as actual job selection and work environment (Christensen and Wright, 2011; Kjeldsen and Jacobsen, 2012), or research that shows that the relationship between PSM and job satisfaction varies by type of welfare state regime (Kjeldsen and Andersen, 2012). A similar approach would be to relate self-reported PSM to documented behaviors (such as rates of absenteeism), or behaviors perceived by others (such as supervisor or peer assessments). Finally, experimental designs can examine the effects of treatments intended to alter PSM and the subsequent effects on behavior (Bellé, 2013).

Such findings require more demanding research designs. These should also enable us take on causality in its different forms (for example reciprocity or cyclical). However, in some cases, such hard tests may reveal that previously identified effects are absent. Nevertheless, the net effect will be to build a more persuasive base for the concept of PSM, enabling us to export it outside public administration.

### No behaviouralism with a vengeance

A final warning is that, although PSM is measured at the individual level, it should never be seen apart from its institutional environment, although one might want to de-contextualize it. This evidently raises an interesting tension when transferring it to other political or institutional environments. It therefore pays to adhere to the analytical approach advocated in strategic human resource management research, in which good science is said to be contextual (Boxall *et al.*, 2007).

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*Donald P. Moynihan is Professor of Public Affairs in the La Follette School of Public Affairs, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA.*

*Wouter Vandenabeele is Assistant Professor in the School of Governance, Utrecht University, The Netherlands.*

*Jens Blom-Hansen is Professor in the Department of Political Science and Government, Aarhus University, Denmark.*