

Public Service Motivation

First empirical evidence in Swiss municipalities¹

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Introduction

Research on Public Service Motivation (PSM) is popular among public management academics, and is spread all over industrialized countries. The present empirical study aims primarily to apply this concept in the Swiss context. It deals with two questions related to the use of the PSM concept to improve our knowledge of Swiss civil servants' motivations: Does PSM constitute a reality in the Swiss context, and what are its antecedents? This article briefly introduces the PSM construct and identifies its main antecedents according to the results of previous studies, after which we present our methodology and data. Following a discussion of the main empirical findings, the conclusion stresses the relevance and use of the PSM concept in public management research and human resources practices.

1. The PSM construct

PSM was defined in the early 1990s on the back of a strong research stream showing that public employees behave differently from private ones (Lyons, Duxbury et al. 2006; Buelens and Van den Broeck 2007). Some studies showed that a specific ethos supports their daily actions (Horton 2006; John and Johnson 2008) and, in particular, that their motives are founded on the will to promote public values in a disinterested way. The PSM construct should be understood as a type of motivation in the public sector with altruistic and disinterested components as distinct from other specific public sector motivations. However, PSM doesn't cover all motives in the public sector. In the public sphere, extrinsic motivational factors such as pay or job security coexist with intrinsic factors like PSM.

The motives encompassed by the PSM construct can be summarized as an intention «to do good for others and shape the well-being of society» (Perry and Hondeghem 2008). These motives take root in diverse components that serve as guidelines for actions. For sociologists, *altruism* is defined as the will to fulfil the needs of others or of a community, instead of our own needs (Piliavin and Grube 2002). For organizational behaviour scholars the concept of *pro-social behaviours* explains voluntary actions performed by an employee toward the welfare of individuals or groups without expectation of a return. It is worth noting that this kind of disinterested motivation is also mentioned in economic analysis (François and Vlassopoulos 2008). In a nutshell, and contrary to the Rational Choice perspective, individuals are not fully selfish when they are able to put effort into an

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action without expecting to be directly and monetarily rewarded for it. Moreover, these individuals seek jobs that benefit the whole community.

For academics working on the disinterested and altruistic motivation of public employees, besides the PSM construct as it applies to the American context, some national concepts are used to describe that particular commitment of civil servants to the public sphere. Consequently, the phrase *Ethique du bien commun* is appropriate for French speaking countries. The Beamtenethos notion fits with the traditional *Rechtsstaat* in Germanic countries, and the term *Public service ethos* is used in the British context.

This PSM, or this will to endorse public motives, has been defined from several perspectives. On the one hand, Perry's definition of PSM as «an individual's predispositions to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organisations» (Perry and Wise 1990) relates to the authors' intent to facilitate the identification and the recruitment of people expected to perform well in American public service. On the other hand, this definition focusing on individualistic characteristics is now challenged by a more institutional one. In an attempt to enlarge the scope of the PSM definition and to bridge disciplinary gaps, Vandenabeele 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» (Vandenabeele 2007). This definition was constructed to encompass other definitions of pro-social and altruistic behaviours held in the public sphere and hence to deepen its links with the theory of motivation in terms of internal and/or external forces producing the induction, the direction, the intensity and the persistence of behaviour.

Six years after the seminal article by Perry and Wise «*The Motivational Basis of Public Service*», Perry constructed and tested empirically a measurement scale (Perry 1996). Several revisions of the scale led to the distinction of four dimensions constituting PSM: «Attraction to policy making»; «Commitment to the public interest»; «Compassion» and «Self-sacrifice». This four dimensional conceptualisation is actually challenged either by authors using a shortened scale for feasibility purposes (Coursey and Pandey 2007; Kim 2009) or by authors developing additional dimensions in order to enhance its analytical relevance for the European context (Vandenabeele 2008; Giauque, Ritz et al. 2009). For the purpose of this study, we rely on the four traditional dimensions of the PSM concept. Hence analysis of the antecedents of the PSM construct are at the dimensional level, as the latest publications on the subject advise for conceptualization purposes.

2. Antecedents of PSM

The comparative studies on PSM demonstrate its context-contingent properties (Vandenabeele, Steijn et al. 2008; Vandenabeele and Van de Walle 2008). The differences concerning either the cultural interpretation of the *Public service* notion or the average empirical scores of the four PSM dimensions illustrate that cultural, organizational and institutional context have an effect on the PSM level. Ho-

wever, no study has tested the impact of culture on PSM for a single sample of public employees. As Switzerland is constituted of three main linguistic regions, our sample of public servants from the German and the French speaking parts of Switzerland enables us to observe those differences.

International scholars investigated the antecedents of PSM quite early (Perry 1997). Individual characteristics as well as institutional variables were taken into account to determine which factor may explain the emergence and the development of such a specific motivation. In this vein, socio-demographic variables were used for estimating their explanatory importance concerning PSM. The results of numerous scientific researches show that *age*, *educational level* and *gender* correlate positively with PSM (Bright 2005; Pandey and Stazyk 2008). So, the older and more educated the civil servants are, the more important their degree of PSM, and this for all four dimensions of the construct (Steen 2006; Moynihan 2008). Relationships between gender and PSM lead to more mixed results depending on the dimension analysed. For example, women show a higher degree of «Compassion» than their male counterparts. As for explanations, academics point out differences in the socialization process through the sexualization of roles within the family, as well as the *traditional* relegation of women in the private sphere and the predominance of male interactions in the public sphere (DeHart-Davis, Marlowe et al. 2006). These assumptions are supported by the fact that men seem to show a higher degree of «Attraction to policy making» and a greater «Commitment to the public interest».

The previous statements lead us to discuss the institutional background of PSM. Indeed, two empirical facts seem to be linked. First, people come into contact with multiple institutions playing a powerful role in the socialization process as they can *instil* values of public service. Second, individuals with high levels of PSM are more willing to choose a job that relates to public service. In this way, values transmitted by *family*, *religion* and *professions* have naturally been the subject of special attention.

Beside the simple effect of *family* sensitization to public values, as a developing factor of PSM, an interesting result shows that the association of parental socialization and religious activity appears to be a positive combination for the development of a public ethos (Perry, Brudney et al. 2008). Regarding *religion* only, it has been shown that involvement in a church has a negative impact on the level of PSM (Perry 1997). On the other hand, people who say that they are “close to God” have a high degree of PSM. The conclusions suggest that if all religious activity can guide the individual towards values compatible with the ethos of public service, belonging to a church can nevertheless have a negative influence on the level of PSM. Even if the correlations in this regard are highly questionable, it is worth noting that individuals involved in public service activities (including through voluntary work) declare themselves more «spiritual» than those who do not participate in such activities (Houston and Cartwright 2007).

Furthermore, two studies report a positive relationship between professionalism or *professional identification* and PSM (DeHart-Davis, Marlowe et al. 2006; Moynihan and Pandey 2007). Both studies demonstrate that employees who are

involved in professional associations or societies do possess a higher degree of PSM than those who are not involved in such professional networks. In addition, people having a strong social capital and civic participation seem to develop a higher level of PSM (Brewer 2003). Similar results have been observed with people donating to charities (Houston 2005).

3. Methodology and data

3.1 Sample

To test the two questions addressed in this article, data were collected from a survey of civil servants in Swiss municipalities². There was a good general response rate (38.1%) and the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents were as follows: 54.4% were men and 45.6% women. The average age was 43 years. The vast majority of participants had either completed a professional apprenticeship (44.1%) or held a college or university degree (38.9%). The German questionnaire was used by 79% of the respondents while 21% used the French version. The latter corresponds approximately with data from 2000 about the relative distribution of languages among all inhabitants (Federal Statistical Office of Switzerland, 2000).

3.2 Measures used

The various theoretical conceptualizations of PSM have resulted in different operational definitions. In this study, Perry's four dimensional measure is taken as a baseline (Perry 1996). A set of 14 items, including all four PSM dimensions, was selected on the basis of previous studies on the psychometric assessment of the PSM scale (Coursey and Pandey 2007; Coursey, Perry et al. 2008). In order to have a clearer overview of the PSM antecedents each of the constituting dimensions («Attraction to policy making»; «Commitment to the public interest»; «Compassion» and «Self-sacrifice») is treated separately in this analysis.

Beside the cultural differences between Swiss-Germans and Swiss-French, our analysis encompasses several socio-demographic variables to identify the antecedents of the PSM dimensions. Age, education level and gender were used to test the individual characteristics. Some professional characteristics were also taken into account: years of service, hierarchical level (grade tenure), tasks, job security and income.

Finally, some new items were developed to measure the impact of social institutions. We took into account the professions of the parents to assess the impact of family socialization. We used items on the practice of religious or spiritual activities to test whether religion impacts on PSM. Professional status is measured by membership of a professional association. Membership of a union,

² In 2008, 1,736 municipalities in the German and French speaking areas were contacted by mail inviting them to take part in a national survey on the motivation of Swiss public employees. 279 municipalities participated in the survey. The survey was given to 9,852 civil servants. 3,733 questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 38.1%.

membership of a political party and the practice of benevolence or donation to charity are considered as elements of social capital or charity proximity. (For complete information about measurement, see Table 1 in the appendix).

3.3 Statistical techniques

Concerning the PSM dimensions, all questions were responded to on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=strong disagreement, 5=strong agreement). In order to test the reliability of our PSM dimensions we used a 4 step procedure using SPSS 17.0: (1) KMO tests and Bartlett's test of sphericity have shown that data are appropriate for factor analysis³. (2) An exploratory factor analysis using principal component factor and varimax rotation was done, resulting in four dimensions. (3) For each dimension extracted, a Cronbach test was run⁴. (4) Finally, the factors' scores were saved as new variables with the regression method. The assessment of the relationship between the selected variables was done with four multiple regression analyses, based on the entry-block method⁵.

4. Results

The analysis of the average score of the items of each dimension of PSM (see Table 2 below) shows that the PSM construct is relevant in the Swiss context, according to the level of its score ($m=3.55$). This score clearly indicates that public servants in Swiss municipalities claim to have a high level of PSM. Hence «Commitment to the public interest» ($m=3.95$) is the most pre-eminent dimension observed whereas the two dimensions «Attraction to policy making» ($m=3.25$) and «Self-sacrifice» ($m=3.26$) have the lowest values.

However, the same table indicates strong cultural differences between the overall level of PSM declared by public servants of the German speaking ($m=3.60$) and the French speaking ($m=3.27$) part of Switzerland, and this for both the overall level and the dimensional level of PSM. The «Compassion» dimension is, however, an exception as the Swiss-French level is slightly higher ($m=3.8$) than the Swiss-German ($m=3.7$).

Still on the average level of PSM, older and more experienced employees show, on the whole, higher scores. Those first findings may be explained by the fact that older employees are also the ones who have more years of service, as found in other international studies. Regarding the impact of the gender characteristics on PSM dimensions, we found that females have a higher score on the «Compassion» dimension of PSM, and that males have higher scores related to all

³ Throughout the analysis, the KMO test always turned out well above the recommended level for adequacy and Bartlett's test significant (0.000).

⁴ Cronbach alpha by dimension: «Attraction to policy making» = .915; «Commitment to the public interest» = .646; «Compassion» = .679 and «Self-sacrifice» = .535.

⁵ In each regression, F-ratio showed that the regression model is significant, the averages of VIF – close to 1 – indicated the absence of collinearity, the Durbin-Watson statistics – close to 2 – indicated that the assumption of independent errors is tenable.

other dimensions, as expected and in accordance with previous studies.

Table 3 examines the relationships between the PSM dimensions and the socio-demographic variables selected for this study. On the one hand, employees positioned mainly on the «Attraction to policy making» axis share similar characteristics. Most of them are male, in the higher age groups, with a good level of education. They tend to be involved in strategic activities, be higher wage earners and to be members of political parties. Participants on the «Commitment to the public interest» axis display the same characteristics but also practice religious activities, donate to charity and do voluntary work.

		Attraction to policy making	Commitment to public interest/civic duty	Compassion	Self-sacrifice
Gender	Male	3.5	4.0	3.7	3.3
	Female	3.0	3.9	3.8	3.2
Age	up to 30 years	2.9	3.8	3.6	3.3
	31–40	3.2	3.9	3.6	3.1
	41–50	3.3	4.0	3.8	3.3
	More than 50	3.5	4.1	3.9	3.4
Language	French	3.0	3.6	3.8	2.7
	German	3.3	4.0	3.7	3.4
Grade Tenure	Apprenticeship	3.1	3.8	3.8	3.3
	Auxiliary	2.7	3.9	3.9	3.4
	Employee	3.0	3.9	3.8	3.2
	Executive	3.4	4.0	3.7	3.3
	Top Executive	3.9	4.2	3.6	3.3
Years of service	Up to 1 year	3.2	3.9	3.7	3.2
	11–20	3.3	4.0	3.8	3.3
	21–30	3.4	4.1	3.7	3.3
	31–40	3.6	4.2	3.9	3.4
Total		3.25	3.95	3.75	3.26
N		3698	3612	3646	3536
All these items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strong disagreement, 5 = strong agreement)					

Table 2: Average scores for dimensions of PSM.

On the other hand, respondents on the «Compassion» axis tend to be female, in the higher age bracket with a good level of education. They are not necessarily responsible for staff supervision, and thus tend to be at the bottom of the wage scales. They practise religious activities and declare involvement in works of mutual aid or donations to charity.

Finally, participants positioned on the «Self-sacrifice» axis tend to be male, have a long history with their organization (organizational tenure) and claim not to benefit from job security. They also practise religious activities and declare involvement in works of mutual aid or donations to charity.

5. Conclusion

First of all, public service motivation (PSM) does constitute a reality in the Swiss municipalities. However, for the first time strong differences between the linguistic and cultural regions are brought to light by a single sample in a single country.

Secondly, PSM antecedents diverge if we consider the four theoretical dimensions of the PSM construct. Respondents positioned mainly on the «Attraction to policy making» axis do not share the same characteristics as the participants along the «Compassion» or even «Self-sacrifice» axes. The fact that different profiles can be identified according to the PSM dimensions implies that it is not easy to find universal tools of management to develop PSM.

Moreover, this very first Swiss study allows us to confirm findings of other similar studies carried out at the international level. On the one hand, it shows that gender, age and educational level indeed seem to be individual characteristics widely correlated to PSM. On the other, it underlines that the practice of religious activities as well as voluntary service and/or the gift (donation) to charity as well as works of mutual aid are also characteristics strongly correlated to PSM.

In conclusion, this PSM concept really deserves particular attention in Switzerland. It would be particularly important to continue scientific studies on this subject in order to better understand the emergence and the development mechanisms of PSM. Especially, from a practical point of view, it would be useful to identify what the tools of HRM are, which can facilitate the development of such a motivational factor.

Variables:	Items/questions:	Statistical coding:
PSM «Attraction to policy making» «Civic duty» «Compassion» «Self-sacrifice»	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I'm very interested in politics 2. I like to discuss political subjects <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It is important for me to contribute to the common good 2. I consider public service my civic duty 3. Meaningful public service is very important to me 4. I would prefer to see public officials do what is best for the whole community, even if it were against my interest <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I am highly moved by the plight of the underprivileged 2. Most social programs are too vital to do without 3. I'm often reminded by daily events how dependent we are on one another <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Much of what I do is for a cause bigger than myself 2. I am one of those rare people who would risk personal loss to help someone else 3. I think people should give back to society more than they get from it 	All these items were measured using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strong disagreement, 5 = strong agreement)
Age	What year were you born?	The year of birth was subsequently transformed into the approximate age by subtracting the year of birth from the year of this study, 2008. Responses were then recoded: Up to 30 years = 1 31–40 = 2 41–50 = 3 More than 50 = 4
Gender	What is your gender?	Female = 1 Male = 2
Language	The survey version chosen by respondents	French = 1 German = 2
Level of education	What is the highest level of education you have achieved?	Responses coded from 1 (obligatory school) to 7 (Ph.D.)
Years of service	How long have you been working in your organization?	Responses were then recorded (0–10 years as 1; 11–20 coded as 2; 21–30 coded as 3; 31–40 coded as 4).
Hierarchical level (grade tenure)	What is your position in your organization?	These Responses were codes from 1 (apprenticeship) to 5 (top-level manager)
Job tasks	What are your main tasks?	Responses were coded: 1. Formulation and the planning of public policy 2. Implementation of public policy 3. Supply of internal services
Job security	Do you benefit from the job security?	Yes = 1 No = 2
Income	What is your gross annual income?	Responses were coded from 1 (less than 52'000 CHF) to 6 (more than 156'000 CHF)
Father's Profession Mother's Profession	In which sector do your close relations spend or did they spend the majority of their professional career?	Public sector = 1 Private sector = 2
Membership of a union Membership of a professional association or society Membership of a political party Practice of religious or spiritual activities Practice of voluntary service or charitable gift (donation)	Closed questions requiring a yes or no answer	Yes = 1 No = 2

	Attraction to policy making			Civic duty			Compassion			Self-sacrifice		
	SE	Beta	Sig.	SE	Beta	Sig.	SE	Beta	Sig.	SE	Beta	Sig.
AGE	.002	.101	.000	.001	.119	.000	.002	.214	.000	.002	-.007	.761
GENDER	.046	.113	.000	.027	.060	.006	.035	-.100	.000	.033	.084	.000
LANGUAGE	.056	.097	.000	.033	.262	.000	.042	-.037	.080	.040	.359	.000
EDU-LEVEL	.012	.100	.000	.007	.010	.649	.009	.084	.000	.009	.024	.265
Years of service	.030	-.031	.135	.018	.045	.043	.022	.040	.083	.021	.064	.004
GRADE-TENURE	.030	-.003	.899	.018	.030	.264	.023	-.119	.000	.022	-.045	.093
TASKS	.034	-.069	.000	.020	-.072	.000	.026	-.023	.248	.025	-.012	.545
JOB-SEC	.050	.004	.817	.030	.005	.812	.038	-.028	.182	.036	-.026	.200
INCOME	.024	.090	.001	.014	-.023	.433	.018	-.088	.004	.018	-.038	.197
FA-PROF	.044	.002	.908	.026	.014	.449	.033	.035	.071	.032	.004	.824
MO-PROF	.033	-.017	.347	.019	.009	.638	.025	.003	.888	.024	-.004	.841
UNION-MEM	.058	-.011	.517	.034	.020	.292	.043	-.040	.044	.042	.002	.917
PROF-MEM	.044	-.015	.434	.026	-.029	.163	.033	.006	.784	.032	-.026	.208
POLITICAL-SMPATHY	.041	-.333	.000	.024	-.048	.013	.031	-.044	.027	.030	-.014	.482
RELIGIOUS-ACTIVITY	.053	-.004	.827	.031	-.070	.000	.040	-.089	.000	.039	-.070	.000
GIFT-CHARITABLE WORK	.044	-.076	.000	.026	-.121	.000	.033	-.139	.000	.031	-.149	.000
R ² adjusted	.272			.149			.105			.164		
F	60.095			28.299			19.312			31.129		
Sig.	.000			.000			.000			.000		

Appendix 2: Table 2: Multiple regressions on PSM dimensions.

Zusammenfassung

Existiert die Public Service Motivation (PSM) in den öffentlichen Organisationen der Schweiz? Welches sind deren Ursachen? Ist das Konzept der PSM ein entscheidender Mechanismus für das Verständnis der Motivation im öffentlichen Sektor? Der Artikel behandelt diese drei Fragenstellungen, dies basierend auf einer Mitarbeiterumfrage in schweizerischen Gemeinden (N = 3733).

Résumé

La motivation à l'égard du service public (PSM) existe-t-elle dans les organisations publiques suisses? Le cas échéant, quels sont ses antécédents? Ce concept de PSM est-il utile pour une meilleure compréhension des mécanismes de motivation dans le secteur public? Cet article traite de ces questions sur la base d'une recherche par questionnaires auprès d'employés publics des communes suisses (N = 3733).

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