Public Service Motivation

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is public service motivation?

Public service motivation (PSM) is defined as "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions" (Perry & Wise, 1990). In other words, it is about a person's desire or interest to serve the public, often in the public sector, but also in the private, non-profit sector. It was developed in response to calls to revive interest in working in government, to restore the country's faith in public institutions (Perry & Wise, 1990). The goal of the research was to explore whether people had such values and interests and, if so, the extent to which they would influence their job choices and their effectiveness in public service (Perry & Wise, 1990).

The original measure, which was used for the majority of the initial research, has 24 items and four scales: attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice (Perry, 1996). A myriad of other measures has been developed, mostly as attempts to incrementally refine the original measure (Ritz et al., 2016). More substantive changes included the development of several shorter, global measures (e.g., Kim, 2005; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007) and a more comprehensive revision, to both the dimensions and the items, to improve international applicability (Kim et al., 2013). Despite these efforts, there are still calls for improvements to the measures (e.g., Perry & Vandenbeele, 2015; Ritz et al., 2016). Examples of items for the original and new scales are provided below.

▷ Attraction to public policy making: "The give and take of policy making doesn't appeal to me" and "I don't care much for politicians" (Perry, 1996)

▷ Attraction to public service: "I admire people who initiate or are involved in activities to aid my community" and "It is important to contribute to activities that tackle social problems" (Kim et al., 2013)

▷ Commitment to the public interest: "I consider public service my civic duty" and "Meaningful public service is very important to me" (Perry, 1996)

▷ Commitment to public values: "I think equal opportunities for citizens are very important" and "It is important that citizens can rely on the continuous provision of public services" (Kim et al., 2013)

▷ Compassion: "Most social programs are too vital to do without" (Perry, 1996) and "I empathize with other people who face difficulties" (Kim et al., 2013)

▷ Self-sacrifice: "I believe in putting duty before self" (Perry, 1996) and "I am willing to risk personal loss to help society" (Kim et al., 2013)

Why is PSM important?

PSM is important because it is related to interest in working in the public sector, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behaviors, and tenure. More specifically, in Anglo countries like the United States, overall PSM is modestly connected to attraction to working in the public sector, as measured by interest in applying for a certain public job, public employer, or public employment sector overall (Asseberg & Homberg, 2020). Among the specific aspects of PSM, there is variation; commitment to the public interest has the strongest connection to public sector attraction, whereas feelings of civic duty are unrelated to attraction (Asseberg & Homberg, 2020). For those who are on the job, PSM is moderately associated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Harari et al., 2020). PSM is not meaningfully related to job performance (Warren & Chen, 2013) but is modestly related to organizational citizenship behaviors (Harari et al., 2020), which are discretionary extra-role behaviors, such as volunteering, helping others, and making suggestions for improvement, that benefit the group and organization (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Though overall PSM is not associated with tenure, specific aspects are modestly connected, such that those who are higher in commitment to public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice are likely to have longer tenure (Harari et al., 2020). It is not known how PSM connects to turnover.

What contributes to PSM?

Meta-analytic research on potential contributors to PSM is very limited. There is preliminary evidence that having good human resource practices is modestly associated with higher PSM (Homberg & Vogel, 2016). These practices include things like job enrichment, participation, professional development opportunities, flexible working hours, and reward fairness, among others. Such practices have known connections to other desirable conditions, including general employee motivation (not specific to public service; Jiang et al., 2012). Other factors of interest include individual differences such as personality, vocation interests, education, work experience, and political ideology (Korac et al., 2019). Aspects of the job and organization are potential contributors, especially those that involve deliberate efforts to activate or cultivate PSM through onboarding or other interventions. At this time, the relevance of PSM to child welfare work is unknown but seems worthy of exploration.

QIC-WD Takeaways

► Overall PSM is modestly connected to attraction to working in the public sector and is more strongly connected among those that are high in commitment to the public interest.

► PSM is moderately associated with job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

► PSM is not meaningfully related to job performance but is modestly related to organizational citizenship behaviors.

- ▶ Overall PSM is not associated with tenure, but specific aspects are modestly connected, such that those who are higher in commitment to public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice are likely to have longer tenure.
- ▶ It is not known how PSM connects to turnover.
- ▶ Good human resource practices (e.g., job enrichment, participation, professional development opportunities, flexible working hours, reward fairness) are modestly associated with higher PSM (Homberg & Vogel, 2016).
- ▶ Many other factors are being studied to understand how to improve PSM.
- ▶ Practitioners or researchers that would like to assess PSM should consider the measure developed by Kim et al. (2013).
- ▶ A comprehensive list of PSM publications can be found here: https://psm.indiana.edu/

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