The Ethical Motivation in Public Service

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Abstract

This paper discusses the role of ethics in public administration practice, and considers the probability of adding an ethical dimension to the public service motivation (PSM) construct.

Several scholars have linked PSM with ethical behavior in government. Together theory and research have shown that public servants, when compared to ordinary citizens, are more concerned about ethical considerations at both the individual (personal honesty and integrity) and collective (social justice and fairness) levels in the United States. It may thus be possible for ethics to play a fundamental role in scholarly efforts to define and measure PSM.

This paper considers the probability of adding an ethical dimension to public administration construct and helps to clarify the role of ethics in PSM discourse and research.
Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role of ethics in public administration and consider the probability of adding an ethical dimension to the public service motivation (PSM) construct.

Two linked questions are posed; what is the role of ethics in public administration practice, and is it possible to formulate and build up an ethical dimension of the construct? These two questions are addressed in turn.

PSM has strong ethical connotations and numerous scholars have already connected the concept with ethical behavior in government. Research has shown that public servants, when compared to ordinary citizens, are more concerned about ethical considerations at both the individual (personal honesty and integrity) and collective (social justice and fairness) levels in the United States. There are also historical precedents suggesting that ethics is an influential part of PSM. It may thus be possible for ethics to play a more prominent role in public service motivation disclosure.

First, I will provide a brief overview of public service motivation research with an eye on the construct measurements. Second, I will explore the importance of ethics and morals in public administration. Third, the role of ethics as a driver of motivation and behavior is explained. And finally, an ethical dimension of the PSM construct is overtly considered.
Public Service Motivation in Theory and Practice

Notions of public service ethics and unusual callings have rumbled in the literature of public administration since inception. The suggestion of distilling these scattered allegations into an empirical concept was first attempted by Hall G. Rainey (1982). In a survey of public and private sector managers, Rainey asked the respondents to rate their “desire to engage in meaningful public service.” He found that public managers reported notably higher scores than private managers, but he acknowledged several problems with this finding. The survey respondents may have provided socially desirable responses, and even if private sector managers are equally public spirited, they may not associate their work activities with “meaningful public service”. In the end, Rainey was somewhat skeptical because of the transitory nature of the concept. He pointed out that public service motivation is an extensive, many-sided concept that vary over time, alters with the public image of government service, and take different forms in different agencies and service areas. Rainey concluded that “public service is an elusive concept much like the public interest” (Rainey, 1982).

James L. Perry and Lois R. Wise (1990) followed on Rainey’s work by defining public service motivation as “an individual’s pre-disposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations.” They identified three possible bases of PSM; rational, norm-based, and affective. Rational motives are grounded in enlightened self-interest. The individual believes that her/his personal interests coincide with the larger community. Such motives can lead individuals to participate in policy process, demonstrate commitment to public programs or policies because of personal identification with them, or serve
as advocates for a special interest. Norm-based motives involve dedication to a cause and desire to serve the public interest, however it is perceived. These motives include patriotism, obligation, and loyalty to the government. Affective motives are grounded in human emotions, and they are characterized by the desire and willingness to help others.

*Perry and Wise (1990)* then formulated three hypotheses to guide future research;

1. The greater an individual’s PSM, the more likely the individual will seek a membership in a public organization.

2. In public organizations, PSM is positively related to performance.

3. Public organizations that attract members with high levels of PSM are likely to be less dependent on utilitarian incentives to manage individual performance effectively.

Over time, empirical research has tended to confirm their prophecies. Yet these findings were more suggestive than conclusive, as there was no accepted way to measure PSM directly.

Addressing this problem, *Perry (1996)* began a pioneering effort to develop a more sensitive and complete measure of PSM. He worked out the theory into a measurement scale and tested it with confirmatory factor analysis. *Perry* derived four factors; public policy making, public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice. The first three factors corresponded to the theoretical framework proposed by *Perry and Wise (1990)*, and the fourth added self-sacrifice is a factor frequently mentioned in the literature. These four factors were represented in 24 measurement items. *Perry’s* final instrument had strong validity and desirable mathematical and socio-metric properties.
Meanwhile, other scholars studying the PSM construct sometimes are veered away from sectoral comparisons and measured PSM by using survey items found in archival data sets that seem closely related to the concept. For example, in one study has the same interest in the ethical nature of public service motivation, Brewer and Selden (1998) analyzed data from a large federal employee survey and focused attention on the consequences of PSM, linking the construct to a broader range of work-related behaviors and attitudes. The authors reported a lowered concern for job security and heightened concern for public interest as the most salient differences between federal whistle-blowers and employees who observe wrong-doing but choose to remain silent. Further comparing these two groups, the authors found that whistle-blowers report significantly “higher levels of job commitment, achievement, and job satisfaction” (Denhardt, 2006). Additionally, they receive higher job performance ratings and they report working for higher performing organizations.

On the other hand, some scholars brought in PSM as “the difference between an individual’s desire for intrinsic rewards (such as serving others) versus extrinsic rewards (earning monetary rewards)” (Crewson, 1997).

Simultaneously, Rainey (1982) agreed that PSM had special significance in the public sector, but he felt that it surpasses the public sector. People in all walks of life can do meaningful public, community, and social service, and these activities are vitally important to society at large.

Broadening the public service motivation concept in this way involves both presenting larger populations and possibly adding new dimensions to the construct, as NPOs’ employees, government contractors, and others those may have, to some extent, different conceptualization of public service.
The Importance of Ethics in Public Administration

Ethics or “morality” is “a branch of philosophy that attempts to define right from wrong, and provide guidance on how an ethical person should behave” (Denhardt, 2006). Nowadays, ethics is often divided into three subfields: meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. Meta-ethics addresses massive questions such as whether ethical claims can be proven or disproven, and if so, what is their reach beyond the present situation? Normative ethics tries to articulate practical moral standards that can be used to find out right from wrong, and help individuals to live morally appropriate lives. That may involve specifying good practices, duties to go after, and whether our actions should be their content or consequences. Applied ethics is the application of the ethical theory to specific issues such as abortion, human rights, and death penalty, and issues of personal integrity such as lying and dishonesty, stealing, and deteriorating responsibility.

Maintaining high ethical standards in government is apparently very important. It can even be argued that ethical bar is set somewhat higher in government than in business or personal life. This is because government has the authority to demand obedience from individuals and oblige them to act in desired ways. Government finances its operations by levying taxes on the public; thus, taxpayers expect honesty and integrity from government. Public administrators are the instruments of the state; their actions are extension of the government institutions, laws, and policies. Moreover, “public administrators exercising discretion when sizing up problems, formulating courses of actions, and carrying out justice” (Davis, 1971).
“Top-level executives exercise enormous power in their spheres of influence; street level bureaucrats are the face of government in their communities and to their clientele” (Lipsky, 1983).

According to Frederickson (1993) Public servants are expected to have high ethical standards for several other reasons. First of all, it is the law. The most basic forms of ethical behavior are prescribed in rules, regulations, ordinances, etc. Second, ethical behavior is essential for maintaining public trust in government. Citizens must know that public officials have integrity and will deliver critical public services on time. High levels of trust translate into greater legitimacy, which is government license to operate. Moral reasoning is required to balance the competing values and demands of government. Public administrators often make hard decisions based on imperfect information; the administrator’s ethical values inform these decisions. Finally, ethics is a central factor in the long running debate over administrative responsibility, responsiveness, and accountability” (Frederickson, 1993).

As a result for this, the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) (2006) has an ethical code with seven important touchstones: (1) serve the public interest, (2) respect the institution and the law, (3) demonstrate personal integrity, (4) promote ethical organizations, (5) strive for professional excellence, (6) promote merit principles that protect against arbitrary and capricious actions, and (7) promote organizational accountability through appropriate procedures. In addition there are a variety of mainstream ethics textbooks, readers, and edited works in public administration (for example; Lipsky (1983), Perry (1996), Davis (1971), Frederickson (1993), Van Wart (1996), Cooper (1991), Denhardt (2006), Bowman (1991), Bruce (2001), Crewson (1997), and many others).
Apprehension about ethical behavior in government, and its antithesis corruption, has become a hot-button issue for international organizations as the United Nations, World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Similarly, many member nations are concerned and have placed special emphasis on stamping out corruption, and encouraging ethical behavior in government.

A lot of questions were raised about the sources of ethical behavior in government, and the specific ethical standards that pertain to public administrators. Cooper (2006) presented five theoretical accounts for a normative basis of public service ethics: (1) connection to regime values, (2) constitutional theory, and (3) founding thought; citizenship theory: which can be thought of as an ethical obligation, and social equity: which can also be thought of as an ethical principle, (4) the virtue approach, which suggests that public administrators should cultivate a balanced set of virtues that include ethicalness and integrity, and (5) the notion of protecting and defending the public interest. Similarly, Van Wart (1996) identified five sources of ethical behavior in government; (1) public interest, (2) legal interests, (3) personal interests, (4) organizational interests, and (5) professional interests. Yet he noted the slippery nature of ethics in the public sector; “administrators’ decisions cannot be determined to be ethical simply based on the content of their final actions, but by the methodical consideration that they give all legitimate values in formulating the best possible decision when various values complete” (Van Wart, 1996).

Davis (1971) went a step further, he examined the public and private roles of the individual citizen as a moral agent and contended that this agent should identify morality as a motive for action, follow moral principles, and recognize this morality as his or her principal. He argued that public administration is a
fundamentally moral enterprise that exists to serve the values that society considers important, largely conceived. Thus, public administration’s moral nature makes it a model for other professions to emulate and an exact copy of moral governance and exercise of authority in society.

A final example helps to boost this point. It is well known how some German public officials contributed in and helped to implement the massacres of World War II. It is also well known how some German citizens and members of resistance groups in occupied countries refused to comply with these orders. As an example, Frederickson and Hart (1985) cite the Dutch resistance and its aid to Anne Frank and other Jews during the German occupation of Holland in World War II. Frederickson and Hart (1985) explained that patriotism by itself (i.e. love of one’s country) is an insufficient basis for ethical behavior. Such behavior must be founded on knowledge of, and belief in, democratic values, and it must include an intentional intimations and practice of benevolence (i.e. the extensive and non-instrumental love of others). They refer to this as “patriotism of benevolence”.

Moreover, Adams and Balfour (2009) argue that there is a tendency toward administrative evil woven into the identity of public affairs and other fields and professions in public life. This tendency can be manifested in acts of dehumanization and genocide wherein ordinary people, acting within their normal professional and administrative roles, engage in acts of evil without being aware that it is wrong. They argued that “under conditions of moral conversion, people may even view their evil activity as good” (Adams and Balfour, 2009).

The instance connects solidly to a renowned series of experiments conducted by the experimental psychologist Stanley Milgram. Milgram tried to figure out why so many people are obedient to authority when structured to commit unethical or
immoral acts. His work was eventually discredited because he subjected experimental subjects to traumatic conditions, but his central research question – to what extent are people obedient to authority, was praiseworthy. Also his conclusions, that more than three-fourths of the experimental subjects would harm other experimental subjects if ordered to do so, were quite astonishing. The take-home point here is that intuition is not a sufficient basis for ethical conduct, and it cannot be grounded in governments, regime values, laws, or management edicts, as history has shown. Rather, ethical conduct must be deep-rooted in more common and deliberative values as Frederickson and Hart (1985) suggested.
The Role of Ethics as a driver of motivation and behavior

The purpose of this section is to shed light on the relationship between ethics on the one hand, and motivation and behavior on the other. An imperative question here is; do ethical judgments influence behavior and how?

Ethical judgments produce moral motivation which is a form of a more general type of motivation called normative motivation. These judgments are by nature motivating; when individuals decide that a particular course of action is good or desirable for whatever reasons, they tend to act accordingly. The motivating force of normative judgments is regarded by many philosophers as the key feature that makes them different from other judgments that the individuals make. For example, an individual may determine, for instance, that the sun is the largest star in the universe, but this judgment does not have any immediate motivational or behavioral implications for the individual. In sharp contrast, if the individual embraces the golden rule (one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself), s/he will likely form altruistic motives and show pro-social behavior. Ethical judgments are powerful as they produce moral motivation which in turn stimulates ethical action.

The implications of this linkage between ethics, motivation, and behavior is extraordinarily important for understanding the importance of ethics, and the relationship between moral judgments, public service motivation, and ethical conduct in government.
An Ethical Dimension of Public Service Motivation

Much of the theoretical and experiential research on public service motivation has been heavily laden with ethical concerns and moral issues. For example, Denhardt (2006) wrote “In the broadest sense, ‘public service’ is a concept, an attitude, a sense of duty – yes, even a sense of public morality.”

A niggling question is whether an ethical dimension of public service motivation is unique or distinctive, or whether it is subsumed by existing bases or dimensions of the construct. Perry and Wise (1990) began their effort to operationalize PSM by building on Knoke and Wright-Isak’s (1982) three fundamental bases for motivation; rational, norm-based, and emotional bases.

Perry (1996) further developed these three bases into four dimensions of PSM; public policy making, public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Since inception, scholars have noted that these bases of motivation and dimensions of PSM are quite greasy and overlapping, which is not necessarily a serious problem. It does, however, set the bar low for additional candidate dimensions of PSM. Such dimensions need not be theoretically distinctive. Individuals may, for instance, render moral judgments those are rational and achievable through the policy making process, norm-based and related to patriotism, or emotional in nature and evoking compassion toward others. Many other variations are possible.

Most motivation scholars accredited that individuals have mixed motives. An ethical dimension of PSM, like other existing dimensions, can draw from all three motivational bases; rational, norm-based, and emotive.
Conclusion

While it appears that there is a noteworthy agreement about certain applied ethical issues such as protecting life and property in literature on ethical standards and behavior in public administration, there is also significant variation in how individuals perceive and prioritize their ethical norms and moral values. This paper has sought to evaluate the probability of an ethical dimension of public service motivation. There is widespread agreement among scholars, practitioners, and others, that ethics is crucial in public administration. The history of the field has been marked by ethical challenges and administrators have been judged by how effectively they responded to these challenges, as well as how morally correct their decisions were. It thus seems reasonable to assume that public service motivation has an ethical dimension.
References


