

Prospective Employee Attitudes Toward Public and Private Sector Employment: A Comparison Study of a Belgian and Two Greek University Student Groups



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Abstract The increasing scarcity of talent and the graying of the labor market in western societies pose a number of challenges for the human resource departments of public sector organizations. Traditionally, the public sector fails to attract high-caliber professionals, since it lacks the resources of private organizations, unable to match their salaries and benefits. The situation is getting even more difficult for managers in the public sector, with the drives of downsizing and leanness, forced on them by the governments. Public organizations thus need to focus on finding high-quality talent, driven more by public service motivation (PSM) and less by extrinsic rewards. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between PSM and student choice of employer. Three samples were used in our analysis, one from a Graduate School of Economics in Belgium, another one from a Graduate School of Public Administration in Greece, and a third one also from a Graduate School of Business in Greece. We used SPSS and conducted a factor analysis, to ensure that the questions correspond to the expected dimensions of PSM. We then examined the relationship between the dimensions of PSM and the employer choices using correlation analysis. The hypotheses concerning the employer choices and the PSM dimensions were tested with ANOVA. The results partially supported the hypotheses proposed in this paper, demonstrating that PSM is a good indicator of an individual's propensity to give preference to working for a public organization, in spite of the less attractive rewards expected by doing so. The implications of the findings in this study are particularly significant for public organizations, since they highlight the value of PSM, as a predictor of how devoted to public service a future employee will be before recruitment. Public organizations can avoid turnover and achieve high levels of job satisfaction and employee motivation, if they use PSM when they recruit their staff.

Keywords Public service motivation · PSM · Employer choice · Greece · Belgium

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1 Introduction

For a very long time, organizational analysis failed to distinguish between the management of public and private organizations, until two decades ago when in the early 1990s, the gap in the literature started to receive the scholars' attention and the management journals increasingly provided space, for the exploration of the particularities of public organization management (Wright et al. 2017; Homberg et al. 2015). The differences between public and private organizations are not limited to ownership, funding, and structure ones but also in the people employed in these organizations, their needs and wants, and their personality makeup in general (Perry and Wise 1990). Perry and Wise (1990), in their seminal work, introduced the concept of public service motivation (PSM), which is the prevailing term among others with relevant meaning, focusing on the motivational differences between the employees of public vs. private organizations. Other researchers expanded their work, examining issues of PSM effects on organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction, performance, turnover intention, absenteeism, etc. (Homberg et al. 2015; Ritz et al. 2013; Leisink and Steijn 2008; Lee and Wilkins 2011). Twenty years after the Perry and Wise (1990) study, 125 studies have been published about PSM (Perry et al. 2010), while Ritz et al. (2013), in their literature review, found 182 papers published by 2012, based on the Perry and Wise study, which had been further refined by Perry (1996, 1997), in terms of the measurement of PSM dimensions' reliability and validity.

There is fairly strong evidence, as reported by many researchers, that people with low PSM levels tend to work in private organizations, while public sector employees are characterized by high PSM levels (Wright et al. 2017; Homberg et al. 2015; Piatak 2016; Lee and Wilkins 2011; Ritz et al. 2013; Clerkin and Cogburn 2012). This is indicative of the need of public organization recruitment officers, to attract people from a talent pool of high PSM level prospective employees. Such employees will require less time to adapt to the organization due to the presumed person-job fit (Neumann 2016) or organization-person fit (Christensen and Wright 2011; Bright 2007), and the socialization effort they will need is going to be minimal (Perry 1997; Kjeldsen et al. 2013).

The abundance of research on PSM naturally generated numerous definitions, leading to inconsistent findings reported in the published studies. Perry and Wise defined PSM as "an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations" (Perry and Wise 1990, p. 368), while Brewer and Selden (1998) thought of it as a force that makes people offer "meaningful public service." In another definition yet, Gould-Williams et al. (2013, p. 2) propose "PSM is an attitude that motivates both public and private sector workers to display altruistic or prosocial behavior." Rainey and Steinbauer (1999, p. 23), emphasizing the altruism aspect, define PSM as "a general altruistic motivation to serve the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation, or humankind." In spite of the slight variations, the majority of the PSM definitions describe the individual's concern for the public good. In this study, the Perry and Wise (1990)

definition will be used, due to its prevailing presence in the literature and its acceptance by the majority of researchers.

The purpose of this study is to compare three different samples of students, from different background each, and ascertain the differences or similarities of those, in terms of their public service motivation. Furthermore, comparisons will be conducted to study where each of the samples stands in the four dimensions of PSM. Finally, the gender issue will also be addressed, to explore potential differences also.

The contribution of this paper is twofold: First, it is expected to help academics observe the PSM instrument behavior in two different cultures (Greek and Belgian) testing thus its reliability, as well as testing the PSM measure in samples from different subcultures (graduate students of public administration and business administration graduate students). Second, the hypothesis of attraction vs. socialization (Kjeldsen et al. 2013) will also be tested, examining the PSM levels of public administration students compared to those of business and economics ones.

2 Literature Review

Numerous studies have shown that public service motivation (PSM) has a positive relationship with public sector employment (Ritz et al. 2013; Clerkin and Cogburn 2012). The topic has been receiving interdisciplinary attention, since the early 1990s, bringing into the discussion perspectives from human resource management (Naff and Crum 1999; Stazyk 2012), management theory and organizational behavior, (person-organization fit, Christensen and Wright 2011) and the attraction-selection-attrition theory (Wright and Christensen, 2010), public administration, and even behavioral economics (Kamenica 2012). Although some studies such as those of Christensen and Wright (2011) and Kjeldsen et al. (2013) called into question part or all of its capacity in the prediction of prosocial behaviors (Lee and Choi 2013), the studies reporting a positive of PSM with public sector employment by far outnumber the former ones (Ritz et al. 2013).

The ultimate question that is being addressed in the PSM literature is what are the characteristics or traits of the person who would be attracted to working in a public organization. Both attraction-selection-attrition and person-organization fit theories propose that people whose values are congruent with the organization (not the sector) will tend to be attracted to the organization and have greater job satisfaction and lower intention to leave. Naff and Crum (1999, p. 12) report that:

...the typical 40-something, white male, grade 12 federal employee who has no motivation toward the public service would have only a 46 percent probability of being satisfied with his job. If the same employee were to have the "average" level PSM ... his chances of being satisfied with his job would increase to 74%. With a maximum level of PSM, he would have an 85% probability of being satisfied with his job.

In the same vain, Lewis and Frank (2002) found a linear relationship between the level of PSM and the desire to work in the public sector.

Two studies disconfirming the assertions by the scholars mentioned above are one by Lee and Choi (2013) and another by Kjeldsen et al. (2013). The first of the two was conducted in Korea and reported that there was no relationship between PSM and prosocial behaviors and public sector's choice among students. Only job security was found to be a main reason why college students wanted to work for the public sector in Korea. The study by Kjeldsen et al., after having studied physical therapy students before and after their first job, reported that:

... PSM is relevant for neither attraction to the public sector nor actual sector of employment. This indicates that within a group of professionals, PSM is probably more associated with the nature of the public service work than the sector itself. Conversely, PSM is found to be severely hampered after job entry, which is interpreted as a shock effect. This effect is also moderated by sector, that is, public organizational membership prevents PSM from declining as much as in the private sector. This suggests that if PSM is associated with sector employment, then it is primarily a consequence of the sector affiliation, but in a more complex way than previously assumed.

In an effort to better understand PSM, some researchers focused on its antecedents. Camilleri (2007) proposes five types of antecedents, based a review of the literature. The first type relates to personal attributes of an individual such as education, job tenure, etc. and individual characteristics such as age, gender, and salary and the second, the role states; third, how the employee perceives the organization; fourth, employee-leader relations; and fifth, job characteristics (Perry 2000). In the Naff and Crum (1999) study of 10,000 public employees, women were found to have greater PSM levels, and bachelor holders or greater degree also had a greater PSM score than those with less education. Finally, Houston (2000) concluded in his study that public sector employees value more meaningful work than higher wages. In general he proposed that public employees place greater importance on intrinsic rewards and the sense of accomplishment rather than higher salaries and shorter work hours. Also, he sites other authors reporting the failure of pay-for-performance systems in public organizations, because such systems are linked to extrinsic rewards. Similar suggestions are offered by behavioral economists proposing that offering rewards for prosocial behaviors will likely lead to the extinction of such behaviors (Kamenica 2012).

Perry (1997) studied parental socialization effects on PSM, religious socialization, professional identification, political ideology, and demographics. Four variables, parental modeling, education, age, and closeness to God, were found to be associated to PSM. Also found against his expectations a negative association of PSM to Church involvement, while income showed a negative association with civic duty (Sahinidis and Kolia 2014).

Many studies report a strong relationship of PSM to organizational outcomes, such as employee commitment (Sahinidis and Kolia 2014; Crewson 1997; Naff and Crum 1999) and job satisfaction which in PSM research is treated as a consequence of PSM (Vandenabeele 2008; Perry and Wise 1990; Naff and Crum 1999; Kim 2005; Park and Rainey 2007, 2008; Bright 2007; Steijn 2008). Also, a positive relationship of PSM to individual performance was reported by Crewson (1997) and by Naff and Crum with the latter stating that: "...a low PSM individual would have a

29% probability of receiving an outstanding performance rating compared to 42% probability for an individual of an average level PSM and a 52% probability for the high PSM employee” (1999, p. 13). Other studies found a PSM relationship with organizational citizenship (Kim 2005; Pandey et al. 2007), lower turnover intention (Giauque et al. 2012), and work effort which was another variable also correlated with PSM, in studies by Wright (2003) and by Frank and Lewis (2004).

Based on the findings of the earlier studies mentioned above, we can form the following hypotheses:

H1 There is no difference between the student groups, represented in the study.

H2 There is no difference between male and female student PSM levels.

3 Method

Three distinct groups of graduate students comprise the sample of this study. The first one is a Graduate School of Public Administration in Greece (GSPAG), consisting of people from different educational backgrounds but joined the Public Administration Graduate Program ($N = 71$). The second one ($N = 141$) also from Greece are graduate students from a large Business School (BSG). The third group ($N = 135$) includes students from a Graduate School of Business and Economics in Belgium (GSEB). The background differences between the groups will enable us to compare the PSM levels of each and the potential differences between gender PSM levels.

PSM was measured with a 17-item Likert-type scale, previously used by Kim et al. (2013) and in Sahinidis and Kolia (2014). The above authors first used the 24-item instrument in Perry’s (1996) study, which they revised in order to meet the criteria of their research. The final measure was tested in a CFA with success and its overall Cronbach $\alpha = 0.87$. The four PSM dimensions whereby *PSM1* refers to *self-sacrifice*, *PSM2* refers to *attraction to public policy*, *PSM3* captures the *compassion items*, and *PSM4* describes the *commitment to public values* ranged in a values from 0.63 to 0.79. Also, the results provided support for both discriminant and convergent validity. The decision to use the particular PSM measure was based on its relative parsimony, without losing much of the richness of the original measure used in the literature. Some comparable studies have used 5-item or 11-item measures, raising the question of how reliable and/or valid the measure is, in capturing all four PSM dimensions content.

SPSS, v. 20 was used in the statistical analysis below, testing for differences between the groups in their employer preferences. The procedure ANOVA was employed (Table 1), which indicates a significant difference between the three samples, Graduate School of Public Administration in Greece (GSPAG) (1), Business School Greece (BSG) (2), and Graduate School of Business and Economics in Belgium (GSEB) (3).

Table 1 ANOVA, between GSPAG, BSG, and GSEB

ANOVA						
		Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
1. To what extent would you like to work for a public organization?	Between groups	170,810	2	85,405	67,716	0.000
	Within groups	433,858	344	1261		
	Total	604,669	346			
2. To what extent would you like to work for a large private organization?	Between groups	52,121	2	26,061	24,024	0.000
	Within groups	373,158	344	1085		
	Total	425,280	346			

Graduate School of Public Administration in Greece (GSPAG) (1), Business School Greece (BSG) (2), Graduate School of Business and Economics in Belgium (GSEB) (3)

3.1 Tables

As expected from the literature review, the null hypothesis H1 is rejected, and indeed there is a statistically significant difference between the three groups, potentially attributable to cultural differences between the Greek and Belgian samples or between the public administration students and the business and economics ones or both. A further analysis (multiple comparisons) will shed more light to the issue (Table 2).

Testing our second hypothesis for differences between male and female PSM levels, across all three samples, the null hypothesis is accepted since no statistically significant difference appears to exist, as we conclude from the similar employment preferences of the two sexes (Table 3). We then used factor analysis, to examine

Table 2 Multiple comparisons

Tukey HSD							
Dependent variable	(I) Category	(J) Category	Mean difference (I – J)	Std. error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
						Lower bound	Upper bound
1. To what extent would you like to work for a public organization?	GSPAG	BSG	1.679*	0.163	0.000	1.29	2.06
		GSEB	1.793*	0.165	0.000	1.41	2.18
	BSG	GSPAG	-1.679*	0.163	0.000	-2.06	-1.29
		GSEB	0.114	0.135	0.677	-0.20	0.43
	GSEB	GSPAG	-1.793*	0.165	0.000	-2.18	-1.41
		BSG	-0.114	0.135	0.677	-0.43	0.20
2. To what extent would you like to work for a large private organization?	GSPAG	BSG	-1.043*	0.152	0.000	-1.40	-0.69
		GSEB	-0.789*	0.153	0.000	-1.15	-0.43
	BSG	GSPAG	1.043*	0.152	0.000	0.69	1.40
		GSEB	0.254	0.125	0.107	-0.04	0.55
	GSEB	GSPAG	0.789*	0.153	0.000	0.43	1.15
		BSG	-0.254	0.125	0.107	-0.55	0.04

**P* = 0.005

possible differences in the samples' attitudes, in terms of the various dimensions of PSM. Table 4 shows the factors and the loadings of each, which indicates that the items loaded as expected, in accordance to the previous studies (Kim et al. 2013; Sahinidis and Kolia 2014).

Table 3 A PSM level means comparison males versus females

Group statistics					
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
1. To what extent would you like to work for a public organization?	M	179	2.87	0.097	0.097
				0.104	
				1.303	
F	168	2.93	1.345	0.104	
2. To what extent would you like to work for a large private organization?	M	179	3.76	0.080	0.080
				0.089	
				1.067	
F	168	3.85	1.153	0.089	

Table 4 Rotated component matrix

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
A1. I am interested in helping to improve public service	0.255	0.825	-0.133	0.036
A2. I like to discuss with others topics regarding public programs and policies	-0.006	0.725	-0.089	0.186
A3. It is important to contribute to activities that tackle social problems	0.138	0.650	0.358	0.162
A4. Meaningful public service is very important to me	0.107	0.798	0.196	0.120
A5. It is important for me to contribute to the common good	0.345	0.571	0.315	0.189
A6. I think equal opportunities for citizens are very important	0.079	0.338	0.277	0.573
A7. It is important that citizens can rely on the continuous provision of public services	0.312	0.063	0.078	0.598
A8. It is fundamental that the interests of future generations are taken into account when developing public policies	-0.064	0.160	0.007	0.824
A10. It is difficult for me to contain my feelings when I see people in distress	0.073	-0.003	0.816	-0.033
A11. I feel sympathetic to the plight of the underprivileged	0.305	0.060	0.750	0.131
A12. I get very upset when I see other people being treated unfairly	0.137	0.135	0.582	0.494
A13. Considering the welfare of others is very important	0.310	0.284	0.495	0.306
A14. I am prepared to make sacrifices for the good of society	0.806	0.211	0.171	0.181
A15. I believe in putting civic duty before self	0.788	0.064	0.143	0.210
A16. I am willing to risk personal loss to help society	0.844	0.198	0.071	-0.090
A17. I would agree to a good plan to make a better life for the poor, even if it costs me money	0.646	0.077	0.195	0.048

Table 5 Group comparisons in terms of PSM1, PSM2, PSM3, and PSM4

		Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
PSM2	Between groups	813,028	2	406,514	28,537	0.000
	Within groups	4,900,418	344	14,245		
	Total	5,713,447	346			
PSM4	Between groups	149,805	2	74,902	13,665	0.000
	Within groups	1,885,613	344	5481		
	Total	2,035,418	346			
PSM3	Between groups	51,544	2	25,772	3884	0.021
	Within groups	2,275,927	343	6635		
	Total	2,327,471	345			
PSM1	Between groups	333,280	2	166,640	15,383	0.000
	Within groups	3,726,363	344	10,832		
	Total	4,059,643	346			

Graduate School of Public Administration in Greece (GSPAG) (1), Business School Greece (BSG) (2), Graduate School of Business and Economics in Belgium (GSEB) (3)

Table 5 shows that the three groups differ, as far as all four PSM factors are concerned. Table 6 describes the differences more lucidly, highlighting the similarities between the Greek and Belgian business schools and the statistically significant differences of both groups to the public administration student group.

4 Discussion, Implications, and Conclusions

The effort in this paper focused on examining the validity of the argument proposed by scholars in earlier studies that PSM is a major trait separating those who want to serve the public and derive motivation from, *vis-à-vis*, those motivated by other forces, needs, or wants. The findings in our study, not surprisingly, support the assertions by Perry et al. (2010), in the studies mentioned above, as well as Vandenaebale (2008) and Ritz et al. (2013) that public servants are motivated by forces other than private sector employees or aspiring employees. The magnitude of the PSM level difference, between the students of the Graduate School of Public Administration, on the one hand and the students of the two Graduate Schools of Business on the other, indicates that indeed different people are attracted to the two types of schools.

What is probably more important is that the findings of the present study fail to support the argument that PSM is acquired, or developed, as a result of socialization rather than being a characteristic of the employee (Wright and Christensen 2010). Also, our findings fail to support those of Lee and Choi (2013) and by Kjeldsen et al. (2013). Lee and Choi argue that the only motive of the public servants is job security and PSM does not relate prosocial behavior, while by Kjeldsen et al. (2013) posit that PSM is irrelevant to attraction to the public sector or actual sector of

Table 6 Multiple comparisons

Tukey HSD		(I) Category	(J) Category	Mean difference (I - J)	Std. error	Sig.	95% confidence interval	
Dependent variable							Lower bound	Upper bound
PSM2	GSPAG	BSG	BSG	3.547*	0.549	0.000	2.25	4.84
		GSEB	GSEB	3.988*	0.553	0.000	2.69	5.29
		GSPAG	GSPAG	-3.547*	0.549	0.000	-4.84	-2.25
	GSEB	GSEB	GSEB	0.441	0.454	0.597	-0.63	1.51
		GSPAG	GSPAG	-3.988*	0.553	0.000	-5.29	-2.69
		BSG	BSG	-0.441	0.454	0.597	-1.51	0.63
PSM4	GSPAG	BSG	BSG	1.271*	0.341	0.001	0.47	2.07
		GSEB	GSEB	1.789*	0.343	0.000	0.98	2.60
		GSPAG	GSPAG	-1.271*	0.341	0.001	-2.07	-0.47
	GSEB	GSEB	GSEB	0.518	0.282	0.159	-0.15	1.18
		GSPAG	GSPAG	-1.789*	0.343	0.000	-2.60	-0.98
		BSG	BSG	-0.518	0.282	0.159	-1.18	0.15
PSM3	GSPAG	BSG	BSG	0.507	0.377	0.370	-0.38	1.39
		GSEB	GSEB	1.032*	0.379	0.019	0.14	1.92
		GSPAG	GSPAG	-0.507	0.377	0.370	-1.39	0.38
	GSEB	GSEB	GSEB	0.524	0.310	0.210	-0.21	1.25
		GSPAG	GSPAG	-1.032*	0.379	0.019	-1.92	-0.14
		BSG	BSG	-0.524	0.310	0.210	-1.25	0.21
PSM1	GSPAG	BSG	BSG	1.840*	0.479	0.000	0.71	2.97
		GSEB	GSEB	2.674*	0.483	0.000	1.54	3.81
		GSPAG	GSPAG	-1.840*	0.479	0.000	-2.97	-0.71
	GSEB	GSEB	GSEB	0.834	0.396	0.090	-0.10	1.77
		GSPAG	GSPAG	-2.674*	0.483	0.000	-3.81	-1.54
		BSG	BSG	-0.834	0.396	0.090	-1.77	0.10

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

employment. The findings of both of the latter two studies may be partially correct, if one is to assume that the cultural differences may explain a large part of the variation. However, the findings in this study depict a large difference between the PSM levels of the two Greek groups, which refutes the argument by Lee and Choi, especially given that in Greece the security offered by the public sector is highly valued too. In addition to that, the remarkable similarity between the Greek and the Belgian Business School students, in their PSM levels, both of which are characterized by low PSM compared to the Public Administration students, attests to the diverging interests and motives of the groups. The Kjeldsen et al. (2013) study using a sample of physical therapists reported that no difference was found in the employees' PSM, whether in the public or in the private sector. This may be correct for the specific profession; however, it needs further testing in other types of professions or jobs before drawing conclusions with a high degree of certainty.

The implications of the study are important for the human resource managers of public organizations, given that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract highly qualified employees, in times of an unprecedented resource scarcity and high levels of employee mobility (the "brain-drain in Greece during its economic crisis is notable"). According to Paarlberg et al. (2008), several tactics can help public HR managers in their recruitment selection and retention practices, including the use of PSM in the selection process. People with higher PSM levels will be more compatible with a public sector job, will have more congruent values, and will tend to stay longer; they can teach the organizational values to the new employees; they can promote and reinforce the main tenets of PSM; and finally, they exhort leadership to be role modeling public service values.

Implication for researchers include further studying of the role of socialization and trait approaches to PSM and the possible difference variables such as the profession may make. Furthermore, studies of multiple cultures may provide greater insight, in the role PSM plays in employee behavior.

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