



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

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Identifying the Call to Public Service: Exploring the Relationship between Public Service Motivation and Calling

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Agenda

1. Review of previous research
2. Overview of methodology
3. Discussion of findings
4. Discussion of implications

Research questions

1. How does the calling to public service differ from public service motivation among city government employees?
2. How do city employees describe public service motivation?
3. How do city employees describe the calling to public service?

PSM and calling – definitions

PSM: “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (Perry & Wise, 1990, p. 368).

Calling: “a conceptualization of one’s specific work as something that is noble, meaningful, and ‘meant to be’” (Thompson & Christensen, 2018, p. 445).

Definitional features

PSM	Calling
<p>“A general altruistic motivation” (Rainey & Steinbauer, 1999)</p> <p>“Grounded primarily...in public institutions” (Perry & Wise, 1990)</p> <p>“Meaningful public service is a serious reward” (Brewer, Selden, & Facer, 2000)</p> <p>“Attitudes that go beyond self-...and organizational-interest that concern the interest of a larger political entity” (Vandenabeele, 2007)</p> <p>Accepted dimensions include compassion, self-sacrifice, commitment to public interest (Perry, 1996)</p>	<p>“A transcendent summons” (Dik & Duffy, 2009)</p> <p>“Fulfilling, socially useful work” (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997)</p> <p>Which “one feels destined to [do] by virtue of particular gifts” (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009)</p> <p>With a “consuming, meaningful passion” (Dobrow & Tosti-Kharas, 2011)</p> <p>“That holds other-oriented values and goals as primary sources of motivation” (Dik & Duffy, 2009)</p>

Framework dimensions

- Underlying question
- Focus
- Role of context
- View of individual
- Intensity
- Specialization
- Inevitability
- Process of discovery
- Managerial levers

Methodology

- Semi-structured interviews with city employees in Omaha metro area
- Recruitment through professional networks
 - Adopted snowball methodology
- Conversational research relationship (Rubin & Rubin, 2012)
 - Participatory researcher

Data collection

31 interviews conducted

- 29 in-person and 2 phone interviews
- Conducted at interviewees' offices or local coffee shops
- 28 interviewees gave permission to record
- Confidentiality and anonymity ensured through Interviewee Information Sheet
- Interview length ranged from 15 minutes – 1 hr. 25 minutes

Data collection

- Recruited interviewees from 13 municipal departments

Administration

City council

Community development

Finance

Fire

Human resources

Human rights and relations

Law

Library

Mayor's office

Parks and recreation

Planning

Public works

Demographic information

- 20 males, 11 females
- 18 participants in management positions, 13 in street-level positions
- Variation in city government experience
 - 12 interviewees less than 10 years
 - 11 interviewees between 11 and 20 years
 - 8 interviewees over 20 years

Underlying Questions

- Where one chooses to work vs. what one is meant to do

...when you're in the government, you have so much power that people can't even imagine....changes happen here. It doesn't happen in the nonprofit [sector], it doesn't happen anywhere [else]. **Changes happen in the government.** You can get influence from different actors, but at the end of the day, you are the one who makes the changes and I like that. (Human Rights and Relations Interviewee)

To be honest, I never thought about the public service part of it...it was not like 'Oh, I want to be a public servant.' It was '**Oh, I want to take my work as an architect to a different place and level...**' (Planning Interviewee A)

Focus

- Communal vs. individual

One house in town had several long lines of bushes overgrown and they needed to be trimmed. So, like bureaucrats, we sent a nasty letter and heard back from them, and the old woman was saying ‘I know I need to clean them up, but my husband can’t walk’ and the wife couldn’t do it...So I said let me check to see if I can get some help and get back to you. So I called the youth group from one of our churches to see if they’d do it as service project and they said yes...it was an example where **people in town were willing to help and solve a municipal problem**. For me, it’s not good enough to say it’s not my problem. This was a case where **it was good for the people so it was good for the community**. (Administration Interviewee D)

Role of context

- General context vs. localized context

...we do touch people's lives...sometimes we never hear about it. And we get the same people that come in to the downtown library all the time...that's their home, we're familiar faces...**it's important because it's their community.** (Library Interviewee A)

Basically, **you've got to have a background, you know, a degree in landscape architecture.** I mean...while someone with a planning background could come in...they're not trained in the design end of things and the preparation of specifications and construction documents to put something out to bid...[landscape architecture] is a multi-disciplinary profession. (Parks and Recreation Interviewee)

View of individual

- Generic disposition to PSM vs. idiosyncratic gifts and talents

I actually had another job, but this...it just fit me better. I knew I would be good at it. Going to neighborhood meetings, talking to people, representing the city...**this job was like made for me.** So that's part of the reason I took this job. (City Council Interviewee)

...**I get creative fulfillment from my job** that I don't know if other people would...I found it in planning events or all the project management that we're doing which I just personally find really interesting... (Library Interviewee B)

Intensity

- Moderately intense vs. highly intense affect for work

I was selected to start up a program called Project Nightlife...crashes are the number one cause of deaths for teenagers...The unit's still going today, but that's probably been **one of my most rewarding community components.** (Police Interviewee A)

Snow operations...that's something we're all very passionate about. And those are multiple day events, so if snow is coming, we all kind of gear up around here. We don't sleep and we all work hard, so we're very passionate to make sure we have the right people in the right place and the right plan...And it's really intense for several days. (Public Works Interviewee D)

Specialization

- Generalist vs. specialist

My role is more along the lines of day-to-day operations... We maintain a fleet of 11 vehicles...we have 20 employees...I am the training coordinator, I am the public information officer...I also manage our social media accounts. I directly supervise the patrol sergeants who are the first-line supervisors...I am responsible for policy development...(Police Interviewee B)

...there was one initiative I did...to try to develop research and development methods for developing better practices for street trees...I worked with an arborist to kind of explain the science behind what was going on...**I was able to develop, to establish a research and development period** where we could go in and we can test new ideas and create better practices...(Planning Interviewee A)

Inevitability

- Low inevitability vs. high inevitability

“I had **absolutely no intention of being in public service.**” (Administration Interviewee B).

“I graduated with my Master’s and was looking for a job, putting feelers out, and **a job opened up.**” (Planning Interviewee C)

“**I had this like epiphany at a point.** I was in my mid to late 20s when I was like ‘Oh, you can be a librarian for a living’ and I hadn’t ever thought about it...”
(Library Interviewee B)

Process of Discovery

- Socialization vs. sensemaking

...my dad was a mailman for 43 years. And my mother was a teacher. And we always had a real strong affinity for public service, for public servants...my parents were great students of government and politics. (Human Resources Interviewee)

...when I started in landscape architecture, I was still a little hesitant about the profession, but it was a presentation on zoo design that made me see what landscape architecture was doing to create natural habitats in zoos rather than the old, bare cages with bars on them...**that changed my interest in landscape architecture 100 percent...** (Parks and Recreation Interviewee)

Managerial levers

- Vision of public service vs. job-crafting

...I mean every day just in their actions and their words, they'll just kind of inspire you, really without you realizing it at the time. I had a FAE [Fire Apparatus Engineer] downtown that carried around winter clothes and gift cards for homeless people...they just kind of demonstrate it...the way they handle their job, the level of service they believe we should be showing to the public... (Fire Interviewee D)

He supports me in everything I do. Because he knows I got vision...he lets me do what he thinks I need to do. The issue comes into resources...so then I try to find other ways to get to that...**we're given a lot of autonomy in how we handle things, situations, people.** (Fire Interviewee C)

Analysis

- Fundamental difference in the concepts lies in the source of motivation for individual
- Dimensions of intensity, inevitability, and process of discovery yield most differentiation between PSM and calling
- Dimensions of underlying question, focus, role of context, view of individual, specialization, and managerial levers require explanation through both PSM and calling

Implications

- PSM and calling serve as complementary concepts for meaningful work
- Integrates PSM with other meaningful work concepts
- Rigorous, qualitative study on PSM
- Offers real-world examples of PSM and calling in everyday work experiences
- Affirms public service as noble and meaningful work

Thank you!

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Demographic findings

- Gender: women more likely to describe calling, men more likely to describe PSM
- Management vs. street-level: pretty dispersed descriptions of PSM and calling
- Tenure: pretty dispersed descriptions of PSM and calling
- Education: interviewees with advanced degrees most likely to describe calling
 - Master's degree (completed or in-progress): 17
 - Bachelor's degree: 9
 - High school diploma: 5
- Department: finance, fire, library, and parks and recreation more likely to describe calling

Emergent themes

- Commitment to public service values
- Influence of politics in administration
- Lack of professional development and training opportunities
- Challenges of work-life balance and “dark sides” of over commitment
- Challenges of recruitment and retention

Sample interview questions

- Describe the work you do in your current position. What is your “typical” day like?
- What do you think are some of the specific talents that someone would need to do this job well?
- Can you give an example of a time when your own talents were utilized well?
- Can you give me an example of a time when you were really passionate about a task or specific project?
- Were there any events or experiences growing up that led you to pursue a career in public service?
- Describe a time when your supervisor promoted a vision of public service.

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