

## A GRANULATED EXPLORATION OF PUBLIC SERVICE CAREER CHOICE MOTIVATIONS IN SAUDI ARABIA: A TEST OF SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY AND PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the public administration literature by taking a granulated approach to measuring motivational drivers to become a public servant. Taking Self-Determination Theory and Public Service Motivation as theoretical bases, the research explores the relationships between a range of extrinsic and intrinsic regulations and intent to work in the public sector. The data collected from 444 undergraduate students in Saudi Arabia was analyzed by Structural Equation Modeling. The results demonstrated direct effects of external and introjected types of regulation. Public Service Motivation fully mediated the relationship between intrinsic and identified regulation and intent to work. Practical implications are discussed and future research directions are proposed.

**Disciplinary:** Management Science.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Motivation to work in the public sector is important in the field of Public Administration, as public organizations are being increasingly under pressure to work efficiently while offering a high level of service (Papadopoulou & Dimitriadis, 2019; Serhan et al., 2018).

The intent to work in the public sector is often associated with such intrinsic factors as job security and public service motivation (PSM) – a set of values and beliefs directed at benefiting society at large (e.g., Asseburg & Homberg, 2020; Bullock et al., 2015; Winter & Thaler, 2016). Accordingly, this is contrasted with the intent to work in the private sector that is linked more to the extrinsic set of factors such as better compensation, in-kind benefits, and material rewards (e.g., Christensen & Wright, 2011; Word & Park, 2015).

However, viewing intention to work in the public sector through the lens of an intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy maybe both misleading and incomplete, especially when it is considered in non-Western cultural contexts. For example, it is acknowledged that in some Asian countries, public service work is associated with family prestige (Chen et al., 2018; Elman, 2013). Similarly, in some Middle Eastern countries, public service jobs often pay more than jobs in the private sector (Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2012; Iles et al., 2012). Further, even within the context of the western developed nations, the link between Public Service Motivation and public service attraction has been mixed (Asseburg & Homberg, 2020; Hinna et al., 2019).

The aforementioned findings suggest that the motivational aspect in the public career choice may be beyond the traditional intrinsic-extrinsic dichotomy. One way to offer a more granulated view on the public sector career choice is to use the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) which considers several types of extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, all linked to different needs and wants. In the field of public administration, SDT is being increasingly considered a valuable motivation research framework (e.g., Breaugh et al., 2017; Corduneanu et al., 2020; Ritz et al., 2016). However, SDT-based research as applied specifically to a career choice in the public sector is still relatively rare (Asseburg et al., 2020; Asseburg & Homberg, 2020; Chen et al., 2018).

This study contributes to the literature on motivation in public career choice by investigating Saudi undergraduate students. Students, as a job-seeking population, have been subject to investigating public service career choice preferences in various contexts (e.g. Lee & Choi, 2016; Winter & Thaler, 2016; Wright et al., 2017). However, such studies in the context of the Middle Eastern countries are virtually absent in both general and specific literature on career choice in the region (e.g., Al-Waqfi & Forstenlechner, 2012; El-Dief & El-Dief, 2019; Iles et al., 2012). Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap in knowledge by focusing on a wide range of motivations predicted within SDT for possible influences on Saudi students' choice of public service careers.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY

Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) considers the motivation for human behavior on a continuum represented by extrinsic and intrinsic factors. Figure 1 shows that three categories of motivation are considered: amotivation, extrinsic motivation, and intrinsic motivation.

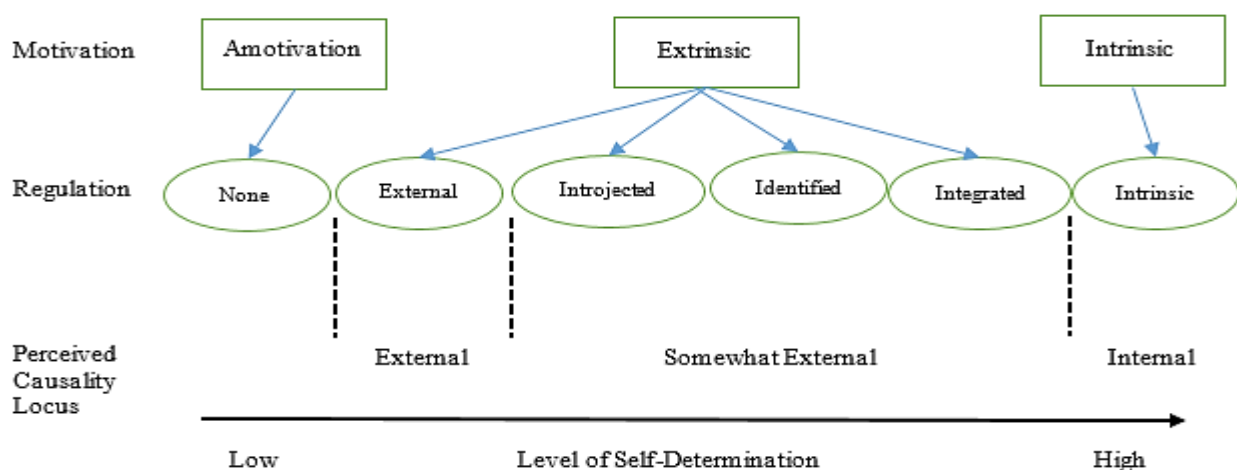


Figure 1: The Self-Determination Continuum (after Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Accordingly, the types of motivation are also distinguished by their regulatory style and perceived locus of causality. The theory proposes that even though more than one style typically play role in motivation, intrinsic is the preferred regulation since it encompasses genuine desire and choice, free from external influences. Because this study focused on motivational factors of public service career choice, amotivation, or absence of motivation, was not considered. Other regulation styles are discussed below. Extrinsic motivation is represented by four regulatory styles. Ryan and Deci (2000) describe externally regulated behaviors like the ones directed “to satisfy an external demand or reward contingency” (pp. 72-73). Individuals driven by external regulation would likely choose public service careers for the benefits they provide such as job security, good pay, and perks (Chen, 2015; Chen et al., 2018). Introjected regulation is associated with avoiding feelings of guilt or shame for not complying with contingent consequences (Ritz et al., 2016). Introjected regulation will drive individuals to choose the public sector career to avoid a feeling of regret for missing an opportunity for a lucrative position and secure future. Influenced by both higher salaries and benefits in the public sector as well as limited opportunities and less job security in the private sector, the Saudi work seeking population is likely to be pressured by applying for public sector jobs (Aamir et al., 2012; Kumar et al., 2019). Therefore, the hypotheses are formulated

**H1a:** External regulation will be positively related to the intent to work in the public sector.

**H1b:** Introjected regulation will be positively related to the intent to work in the public sector.

More autonomous extrinsic regulatory styles are identified and integrated regulation. Identified regulation prompts behaviors that are in line with the individual’s value system even though it is recognized that such behaviors bring external benefits (Gagne et al., 2010). The choice to work in the public sector driven by identified regulation will be based on the perception that public service is a valuable activity or an ability to make a positive difference for society (Chen et al., 2018; Kim, 2009). Further, identified regulation drives engagement in behaviors that have been evaluated and “brought into congruence with one’s other values and beliefs” (Ryan and Deci, 2000, p. 73). In the context of this study, individuals driven by integrated regulation would choose public sector employment because it may be consistent with their values, identity, or life goals. Thus,

**H1c:** Identified regulation will be positively related to intent to work in the public sector.

**H1d:** Integrated regulation will be positively related to the intent to work in the public sector.

Intrinsic motivation is regarded as the most autonomous type of motivation, unaffected by external forces. Unlike the extrinsic, “caused” motivation, intrinsic motivation emerges from within individuals being internally regulated in its entirety. People who are intrinsically motivated, initiate behaviors on their own and select their own ways to achieve the desired goals and outcomes (Ryan and Deci, 2000). As such, intrinsic motivation has the strongest degree of internal control locus (Spector, 1988) because individuals are in control of both internal drives and the consequences of their behaviors. Intrinsically motivated individuals are subject to internal regulation, which relates to self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this study, intrinsic motivation would arise from genuine happiness or a calling to engage in public service work (Houston, 2006). Hence, intrinsic motivation can be a factor defining public service career choice (Bright, 2009; Georgellis et al., 2011). Thus,

**H1e:** Intrinsic motivation will be positively related to the intent to work in the public sector.

## 2.2 PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION

While the Self Determination Theory can be considered a general motivation theory, researchers have distinguished specific forms of motivation in the public service as well. Among these, Public Service Motivation has become a major concept in public administration research in the past several decades (Boyd et al., 2018; Corduneanu et al., 2020; Vandenabeele et al., 2018). Public Service Motivation is grounded in the logic of appropriateness within the institutional theory which posits that employees are driven by behaviors and rules inherent to institutions (March & Olsen, 1989; Ritz et al., 2016). Perry and Wise (1990) originally defined Public Service Motivation as “an individual predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions” (p. 368). More recent definitions offer broader perspectives by describing it as a set of intentions to do good for others and society in general (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008; Ritz et al., 2016). These intentions, arguably, are best realized by working for public service organizations.

Public Service Motivation is distinct from the concept of public sector motivation. Public sector motivation encompasses rational motives that arise in self-interest and the desire to maximize personal utility (Neumann & Ritz, 2015). It makes public sector motivation externally driven. Specifically, individuals choose the public sector as a place for work for the benefits it provides over the private sector. Examples of such benefits could be higher salary, promotion opportunities, favorable working hours, job safety, or attractive pension schemes (French and Emerson 2014; Ritz et al., 2016). In contrast, Public Service Motivation places more value on public service rather than public sector work itself. Individuals high on Public Service Motivation would be likely to make choices about public sector employment even if the aforementioned benefits are worse than in the private sector.

In the field of public administration, Public Service Motivation is being increasingly considered in integration with Self-Determination Theory (Andrews, 2016; Chen et al., 2018; Corduneanu et al., 2020; Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015). Specifically, from the Self-Determination Theory lens, Public Service Motivation is regarded as a type of autonomous motive (Andrews, 2016; Vandenabeele, 2007) with an internal locus of causality similar to intrinsic, integrated, and identified regulation. Corduneanu et al. (2020) pointed out that intrinsic and identified types of regulation address the essence of Public Service Motivation. Therefore, it is logical to predict that there is a relationship between autonomous motivations within Self-Determination Theory and Public Service Motivation. At the same time, Public Service Motivation has been strongly linked to intent to work in the public sector (Breugh et al., 2017; Christensen et al., 2017). Therefore, Public Service Motivation can mediate the relationship between autonomous regulation styles and intent to work in the public sector:

**H2a:** Public Service Motivation will mediate the relationship between identified regulation, and intent to work in the public sector;

**H2b:** Public Service Motivation will mediate the relationship between integrated regulation, and intent to work in the public sector;

**H2c:** Public Service Motivation will mediate the relationship between intrinsic motivation and intent to work in the public sector.

### 3 METHOD

#### 3.1 PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The study data were collected in Arabic through an online survey of undergraduate students of the University of Hail, Saudi Arabia in March 2020. A pilot test involving ten students was undertaken to check the items for comprehensibility and ease of understanding as well as to assess the overall cognitive load of the entire questionnaire. After the pilot study, all items in the questionnaire were retained due to high grades by the participants. The total number of responses from the online survey was 444. The sample was fairly balanced in terms of gender with 210 males (47.3%) and 234 (52.7%) females. The sample represented 14 undergraduate programs, which is indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Sample**

Type	Frequency	Percent
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	210	47.3
Female	234	52.7
<b>Education Program</b>		
Business Administration	61	13.7
Arts	43	9.7
Education	33	7.4
Nursing	17	3.8
Shari'a Law	23	5.2
Public Health	41	9.2
Pharmacy	30	6.8
Medicine	21	4.7
Applied Medical Sciences	38	8.6
Science	28	6.3
Community	34	7.7
Engineering	23	5.2
Dentistry	30	6.8
Computer Science	22	5.0
Total	444	100

The questionnaire consisted of 33 items. The items represented 7 sections, which corresponded to the study constructs and an additional section with the participants' general information. The items related to the study constructs were based on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 - "strongly disagree" to 7 - "strongly agree." Public Service Motivation was represented by 12 items (Kim, 2009) adjusted specifically for the research in an international context. The measure has been previously used in the context of Saudi Arabia organizations, demonstrating high levels of validity and reliability (Alreshoodi, 2018). The measures of motivation were based on theoretical Self-Determination Theory underpinnings (Ryan & Deci, 2000), motivational studies in the public administration, and empirical investigations of motivation to work in the public sector (Chen et al., 2018; Chen & Hsieh, 2015).

The external regulation construct was represented by six items. The items reflected the benefits that work in the public sector brings such as job security, good pay, and benefits as well as external pressures such as peer pressure, family pressure, and social pressure. These are commonly defined in the literature (Chen et al., 2018; Ritz et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Introjected regulation was represented by three items. The items reflected the notion of avoiding a sense of shame, guilt, and

missed opportunity for not taking a public sector position (Ritz et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The identified regulation was represented by four items. These were developed in line with the theoretical underpinnings of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the empirical studies that linked identified regulation to a perception of valuable activity, a sense of obligation to the country, ability to make a positive difference for the society, and an opportunity to engage in meaningful public policies (Chen et al., 2018; Kim, 2009; Lyons et al., 2006). Integrated regulation was represented by three items. The items were developed based on a theory that proposes that this type of regulation is in line with personal beliefs and values, identity, and life goals (Ritz et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Finally, intrinsic motivation was represented by three items. The items were developed from available literature to reflect pure internalized incentives to work in the public sector, which include personal calling, joy, and satisfaction (Houston, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

## 4 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1.1 MEASUREMENT MODEL ANALYSIS

The analyses of data were conducted in SPSS and Amos 26.0 software. Following McDonald and Ho (2002), a measurement model was estimated first, before structural equation modeling analysis and hypothesis testing. A confirmatory factor analysis was performed in three steps to test the model fit. First, Confirmatory factor analysis was performed for the five SDT motivation measurements in the model. Next, the analysis was performed for the mediation variable Public Service Motivation. For each of the tests, items with poor factor loadings were eliminated (6 in total). The final CFA model included all variables in the study. The model demonstrated an acceptable fit based on the Tucker-Lewis Index (.911), Confirmatory Factor Index (.917), and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (.099). Following Kline (2013), further analysis of the modification indices factor loadings suggested that a model could be improved by eliminating two additional items. The new model showed an improvement in terms of fit (Tucker-Lewis Index = .953; Confirmatory Factor Index = .963; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation = .088). All factor loadings were above 0.7.

The common method of bias risk for the model was estimated with Harman's single factor analysis (Podsakoff et al., 2003). After loading all items into a single factor, the model demonstrated a poor fit to data. Therefore, the common method was not a problem in the analysis.

### 4.1.2 DIRECT EFFECT OF MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

The first analysis model was run with the independent variables representing five types of motivation in Self-Determination Theory. The model explained 41.9% variability in the dependent variable intent to work in the public sector. The individual paths are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Direct Effects of Motivations on Intent to Work in the Public Sector.**

Direct effects of motivations on intent to work			Hypothesis	$\beta$	Sig.	Supported?
IntentToWork	←	ExternalReg	H1a	.590	<.001	Yes
IntentToWork	←	IntrojectedReg	H1b	.154	.002	Yes
IntentToWork	←	IdentifiedReg	H1c	.116	.353	No
IntentToWork	←	IntegratedReg	H1d	-.026	.157	No
IntentToWork	←	IntrMotivation	H1e	.011	.213	No

Table 2, external regulation significantly predicted intent to work ( $\beta = 0.590$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Likewise, Introjected Regulation was a significant predictor of intent to work ( $\beta = .154$ ;  $p = .002$ ). On the other hand, there was no significant relationship between identified, integrated, and intrinsic regulation and intent to work. Therefore, H1a and H1b were supported by the study results, while H1c, H1d, and H1e were not.

#### 4.1.3 MEDIATING EFFECTS OF PSM

The second model introduced Public Service Motivation as a mediating variable to test for indirect effects in the study. Following MacKinnon et al. (2002), mediation was measured with a Sobel test with bootstrapped standard errors based on 1000 resampling. The results of the analysis demonstrated that intrinsic motivation had a statistically significant relationship with intent to work through Public Service Motivation (Sobel = 4.41,  $p < .001$ ) thereby supporting H2a. The model explained a 16.1% variation in intent to work in the public sector. The same analysis demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between identified regulation and intent to work via Public Service Motivation (Sobel = 2.646,  $p < .001$ ) thereby supporting H2b. The model explained a 14.1% variation in intent to work in the public sector. Therefore, Public Service Motivation fully mediated the relationship between intrinsic motivation and identity regulation and intent to work in the public sector. The mediation model between integrated regulation, Public Service Motivation, and intent to work was not statistically significant (Sobel = -1.384,  $p > .05$ ); therefore H2c was not confirmed. The mediation model with the paths is shown in Figure 2.

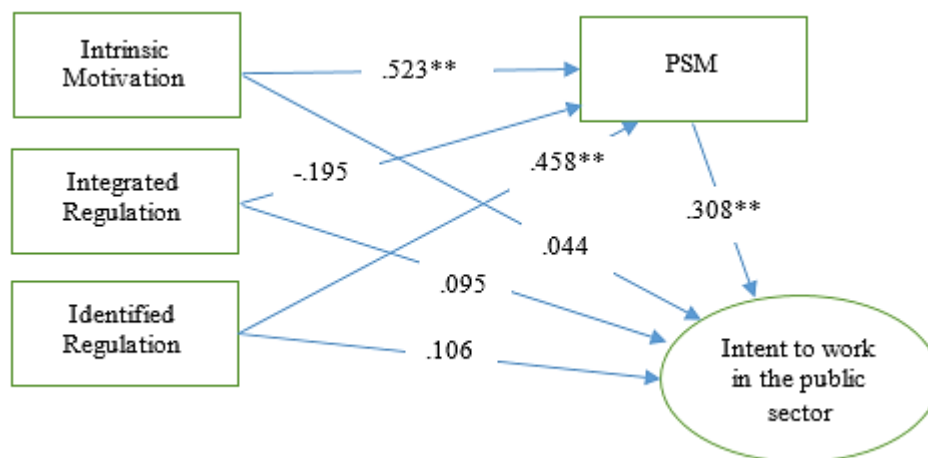


Figure 2. The Mediation Model (\*\* indicates significance at  $p < .001$ )

#### 4.1.4 DISCUSSION

This paper contributes to the public administration literature by examining a wide range of motivational factors that influence individual decision to work in the public sector. An important aspect of the study is that it was undertaken in the context of Saudi Arabia, the country where individuals traditionally prefer jobs in the public sector (Aamir et al., 2012; Kumar et al., 2019). The results of the study demonstrated that an individual who intends to work in the public sector is a function of several types of motivation. Whereas external and introjected regulation directly influenced such intention, the relationship between autonomous forms of regulation (intrinsic motivation and identified regulation) was fully mediated by Public Service Motivation. These

findings allow drawing some important practical implications.

First, it was demonstrated that motivation to work in the public sector is a granulated concept where various forms of regulation are in play, both independently and in combinations. Therefore, even in presence of strong extrinsic factors to take positions in the public sector, other forms of motivation should be considered. Specifically, autonomous forms of motivation demonstrated positive relationships with the intent to work. It is then possible for recruiters to seek individuals with high levels of autonomous regulation that implies a more robust selection process. In the case of Saudi Arabia, likely, a shortage of candidates will not be an issue given the overall attractiveness of the public sector jobs overall.

Second, Public Service Motivation demonstrated strong influence as a mediating variable to extrinsic and intrinsic forms of motivation. However, in order to tap the high potential of Public Service Motivation, it is necessary to not only hire individuals high on Public Service Motivation but also create strong organizational identification mechanisms so that extrinsic motivation does not crowd out Public Service Motivation (Miao et al., 2019). This can be done by reducing the presence of negative institutional factors such as red tape, fixed hierarchies, and limited communication (Belle, 2015) or by engaging workers through mentorship, job enrichment, and skill development in addition to formal training (Chen et al., 2018). All these management approaches are especially important for younger workers such as college graduates because they will likely remain with organizations for a long period.

## 5 CONCLUSION

From the results of this study, the most important types of motivation for Saudi students that determine their intent to work in the public sector are external, introjected, and public service motivation. External and introjected regulation showed strong direct effects on the intent to work, which is not surprising given much better compensation schemes, job security, and work-related perks associated with public sector jobs in Saudi Arabia. The study showed that Saudi students seek public service employment both for the perceived material benefits and to avoid the feeling of a missed opportunity for a lucrative position and secure future. This suggests that the intent to work was not genuine but rather guided by personal motifs.

At the same time, Public Service Motivation fully mediated the relationship between more autonomous regulation styles (intrinsic and integrated) and intent to work in the public sector. On the one hand, this suggests that Public Service motivation matters in the context of Saudi public service organizations. On the other hand, this suggests a more complicated motivational framework for job seekers in the Saudi public sector. Studies using larger samples and applying different methodologies (such as longitudinal study or qualitative study) could offer more insight into the dynamics of motivational factors for Saudi public sector job seekers.

## 6 AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIAL

Information regarding this study is available by contacting the corresponding author.

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