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

Application for 2018-2019 Graduate Research and Creative Activity (GRACA) Grant

Doctoral Student: Morgan D. Vogel  
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Gary Marshall  
School of Public Administration

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Project Background and Rationale

Over the past several decades, the field of public administration, and particularly scholars and practitioners with a focus in public management, have become increasingly interested in the work experiences of public employees and the extent to which public employees experience meaningfulness in their work. Much of this interest in the meaningfulness of employees’ work experiences resulted from the introduction of public service motivation (PSM) as a theory for the field of public management. As originally defined by James Perry and Lois Recascino Wise (1990), public service motivation refers to “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions and organizations” (p. 368). Simply, the theory of PSM suggests that individuals who work in the public sector are motivated differently than their private sector counterparts. Since Perry and Wise’s seminal piece on PSM was published in 1990, research on PSM has grown exponentially, addressing antecedents of PSM, outcomes associated with PSM, and implications for human resources and managerial practice (Ritz, Brewer, & Neumann, 2016). But perhaps the most significant contribution the theory of PSM has made to the field is its affirmation that work in the public sector is unique and, in many cases, is why individuals choose to enter the public sector in the first place.

Many scholars in the field of public administration have identified this uniqueness as the field’s normative orientation to public service. This normative orientation includes values of efficiency and economy, but also citizenship, equity, fairness, justice, responsiveness, ethics, and patriotism (Frederickson, 1997). As Frederickson (1997) suggests, it is these values in particular that constitute the spirit of public administration. More specifically, the spirit of public administration “is a deep and enduring commitment to the calling of public service and to the effective conduct of public organizations and their work” (Frederickson, 1997, p. 2). Indeed, the calling of public service has been and continues to be a powerful force motivating individuals to pursue work in the field of public administration simply because they are drawn to public service and, consequently, perceive their work as more than “just a job.”

The fundamental ideas of PSM and calling are undoubtedly similar and have been previously connected in the public administration literature (see Perry, 1996; Brewer & Selden, 1998; Brewer, Selden, & Facer, 2000; Houston 2006; Horton, 2008). Specifically, both PSM and calling emphasize others over the individual’s personal needs; both offer normative implications about the meaning of work providing social value; and both fall under the theoretical umbrella of positive organizational scholarship, suggesting that organizations can enhance employees’ work experiences (Thompson & Christensen, 2018). Integrating calling research with PSM research will be beneficial for the field of public administration because there are a plethora of public service jobs that could be considered a calling (Thompson & Christensen, 2018). Since PSM describes an individual’s attraction to a career in public service, the calling literature will inform PSM scholars why some individuals are motivated to work in public service. Furthermore, integrating PSM and calling research would enable scholars to explore the types of calling within public service or even the “dark sides” of having highly-motivated and overly-engaged employees (see Schott & Ritz, 2018).

Nonetheless, PSM and calling remain distinct concepts which offers an opportunity for future research so that these concepts can inform each other. Differences in PSM and calling appear to be in how individuals conceptualize their own motivation. Individuals with high PSM could potentially have many
motivations for their work (i.e., commitment to civic duty, compassion, attraction to public policymaking, etc.; see Perry, 1996), whereas the primary motivation of a calling is personal fulfillment for a higher purpose or destiny. Based on this fundamental difference, the calling literature can supplement the PSM construct in order to gain a better understanding of how public servants are motivated and experience their work (Thompson & Christensen, 2018).

For this research project, I will explore the distinctions between the calling of public service and public service motivation. Specifically, I am interested in how public servants describe these concepts and their work. This research will enable a better understanding of the distinctions between public service motivation and calling, suggesting that both of these concepts provide important lenses for describing the meaningfulness of work among public servants. Finally, this research will provide further evidence that the concepts of PSM and calling are complementary, indicating that, when taken together, these concepts can strengthen and enrich public administration research and practice.

Research Questions and Contributions

In order to understand more about public servants’ work experiences in relation to PSM and calling, it is essential that I hear directly from public servants about their work experiences and how they view their work. My research questions for this project are as follows:

1.) How does the calling of public service differ from public service motivation among city government employees?
2A.) How do city government employees describe public service motivation?
2B.) How do city government employees describe the calling of public service?

These questions focus on understanding the distinctions between PSM and calling. This research will serve as one of the first rigorous qualitative studies integrating the concepts of PSM and calling and, particularly, the implications these concepts have for public employees, public sector managers, and public organizations in general. In short, this research is in a unique position to inform both theory and practice for the field of public administration by reminding scholars and practitioners about the spirit of public administration.

The findings from this research will be shared in a standard research report and at the UNO Student Research and Creative Activity Fair. Additionally, a goal of this research project is to submit the final manuscript to a journal for publication. Potential journals to submit the final manuscript to include Administration and Society, Review of Public Personnel Administration, and Public Administration Review. Finally, the data from this project will contribute to my dissertation research by serving as one sample of public servants’ perspectives on PSM and the calling of public service.

Research Methodology

The research method used to complete this project will be semi-structured interviews. Interviews with city employees will enable me to gain a deeper understanding of how city employees describe their work experiences and how they view their work. Using semi-structured interviews is appropriate for this research project because the format will allow for a standard set of interview questions to ask all interviewees in order to assess major themes of public servants’ work experiences and connect these themes to the academic literature on PSM and calling. Additionally, the benefit of using semi-structured interviews is that I will have the ability to deviate from the interview protocol in the event that an interviewee raises an interesting concept that I would like to probe further. Semi-structured interviews will allow for interviews to seem more conversational in nature, which will further ensure trustworthiness in the research project for participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Research participants for this study will be recruited from cities in the Omaha metro area. Specifically, a diversity of research participants will be recruited from various city departments (i.e., planning, public works, fire, police, etc.) in order to analyze the public servants’ work experiences from a broad level. Research participants will be recruited through the professional networks of myself, my
faculty mentor, and other faculty members in the School of Public Administration since it is more effective to recruit interview participants when there is rapport between the interviewer and interviewee (Maxwell, 2013). Additionally, I will recruit research participants by utilizing online department listings to locate email addresses of city employees and randomly select employees to email requesting an interview. Finally, at the end of each interview, I will ask participants if there is anyone else they would recommend I speak with as a part of this study, in effect adopting a snowball sampling methodology (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). I will continue recruiting interview participants until I reach the point of saturation, which suggests that no new themes or dimensions are needed in order to answer my research questions (Guest et al., 2006).

This research project will build on a preliminary study I am conducting as a part of the School of Public Administration’s core doctoral course PA 9960 Qualitative Research Methods. For this course, I am conducting between eight to twelve interviews with Omaha city employees from various departments. The number of interviews is limited since the project has to be completed within the fall semester time frame. Thus, a major limitation of this preliminary study is that I will likely not reach the point of saturation. Additionally, increasing the sample size of interviewees will also increase the credibility of the study and generate richer data in order for me to answer my research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Maxwell, 2013).

**Project Timeline**
A timeline detailing the schedule of activities for this research project is provided below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Research Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>March/April</td>
<td>Apply for and obtain IRB approval.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 1-31</td>
<td>Review and revise literature review section of manuscript; review preliminary research findings; review and revise interview protocol; generate list of potential research participants; contact research participants to request interviews.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June 1-30</td>
<td>Conduct interviews; transcribe interviews; analyze data; contact additional research participants as needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July 1-31</td>
<td>Continue transcribing interviews; continue analyzing data; write up initial findings and discussion sections of manuscript.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August 1-26</td>
<td>Review and finalize research report; prepare manuscript for journal submission.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>Prepare for presentation at the UNO Student Research and Creative Activity Fair.</td>
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**Project Roles**

*Doctoral student: Morgan Vogel, School of Public Administration*

As the researcher of this project, I am taking responsibility for the following research activities: developing a theoretical framework and research design, applying for IRB approval, conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, analysis of interview data, writing a research report, and writing a full manuscript for journal submission.

*Faculty mentor: Dr. Gary Marshall, School of Public Administration*

Dr. Marshall is my supervisory committee chair for the doctoral program and will serve as the faculty mentor for this research project. He will advise me in reviewing the project’s research design and interview protocol, assisting in identifying research participants, reviewing the collected data and analysis results, and providing feedback on the research report and final manuscript for journal submission.

**Previous Funding**
I have not received any previous funding for this research project.
BUDGET JUSTIFICATION

The budget request for this research project is $5,000, divided into $4,800 for a stipend and $200 for project supplies and expenses. During the summer, I will work 40 hours per week on the research project; thus, the stipend of $4,800 will allow me to devote all of my time to the research project. A detailed budget is provided in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Budget Item</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Justification and Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Personnel   | Review and revise literature review section of manuscript; review preliminary research findings; review and revise interview protocol; generate list of potential research participants; contact research participants to request interviews. | • Partial stipend for living expenses  
• Work load: 40 hours per week  
• Wage: $10 per hour  
40 hrs. x $10 per hr. x 2 weeks = $800 |
| May 2019    | Conduct interviews; transcribe interviews; analyze data; contact additional research participants as needed. | • Stipend for living expenses  
• Work load: 40 hours per week  
• Wage: $10 per hour  
40 hrs. x $10 per hr. x 4 weeks = $1,600 |
| June 2019   | Continue transcribing interviews; continue analyzing data; write up initial findings and discussion sections of manuscript. | • Stipend for living expenses  
• Work load: 40 hours per week  
• Wage: $10 per hour  
40 hrs. x $10 per hr. x 4 weeks = $1,600 |
| July 2019   | Review and finalize research report; prepare manuscript for journal submission. | • Partial stipend for living expenses  
• Work load: 40 hours per week  
• Wage: $10 per hour  
40 hrs. x $10 per hr. x 3 weeks = $800 |
| Supplies    | • Qualitative data analysis (QDA) software  
• Printing and photocopying research articles and reports | • MAXQDA (qualitative data analysis software): $43 for six-month student license.  
• $157 for paper, printing, photocopying, or other office supplies. |
| Total Budget| Amount Requested: $5,000                                                    |
REFERENCES


October 26, 2018

Graduate Research and Creative Activity Committee
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Dear Committee Members:

This letter is in support of Ms. Morgan Vogel's application for a GRACA grant. I have known Morgan since she joined our Ph.D. Program and I serve as the Supervisory Chair of her dissertation committee. She has a well-focused research agenda and is the lead author of a book chapter that is currently in press. Her long-standing interest in public service motivation and work as vocation, began with her undergraduate honors thesis and is the expected topic of her dissertation.

Analysis of viability. Ms. Vogel is currently conducting a preliminary study with employees from the city of Omaha about their workplace experience. The GRACA grant will allow her to expand the scope of her analysis. In addition to reaching more research participants, the project will prove valuable to support a mixed method research approach for her dissertation. Ms. Vogel is a very capable researcher. She has a high degree of self-efficacy and her practitioner experience gives her legitimacy with the public service professionals that she will be interviewing.

Verification of budget. Ms. Vogel seeks funding for her time to work on this research project during Summer 2019. I believe that the projected hours, rate and ancillary expenses for conducting and transcribing the interviews are reasonable.

Mentor support. The academic literature on public service motivation has grown exponentially since a founding article in 1990 by researchers at Indiana University. Ms. Vogel is well versed in this literature and has identified a gap—public service as vocation—that has not been addressed in a systematic way.

I chair Ms. Vogel's dissertation committee and meet with her on a regular basis to support the theoretical development of this research topic. While I have a strong background in public administration theory, my research does not directly overlap with Ms. Vogel's research. Thus, my role will be to: 1) advise on the research design and interview protocol, 2) assist (as needed) in identifying research participants, 3) support the conceptual development during the data analysis phase, and 4) read and comment on manuscript drafts.

Student background. Ms. Vogel is a doctoral student in the School of Public Administration focusing on public administration theory and policy. She is a graduate assistant with the Center for Public Affairs Research, and has primary coordinating responsibilities for a major grant with the Nebraska Department of Transportation. Through her coursework in qualitative research and public administration theory, she is strengthening an already strong capacity for academic research. If she is awarded a GRACA grant, I have no doubt that she will be able to successfully complete the proposed research project and prepare a high-quality manuscript for journal submission.

Sincerely,

Gary S. Marshall, Ph.D.
Professor, School of Public Administration