

Public-Sector Work Motivation: A Review of the Current Literature and a Revised Conceptual Model

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the literature on work motivation in the public sector, with careful attention to the underlying theoretical assumptions of this body of work and the empirical evidence it has generated. The topic of work motivation has received relatively little attention in the public sector; the research that does exist has been largely data driven, guided at best by theories that have not incorporated more contemporary research. In this article I will draw on current psychological research on work motivation, as well as the theory and empirical evidence regarding the unique characteristics of public organizations and employees, and develop a revised public-sector model of work motivation that emphasizes variables such as procedural constraints, goal content, and goal commitment.

In a recent article, Behn (1995) urged scholars to focus their research on the big questions in public management. One of the most important of these questions, according to Behn, concerns motivation. Specifically, the field needs to learn how "public managers [can] motivate public employees (and citizens too) to pursue important public purposes with intelligence and energy" (p. 319). This observation, however, is not new. Perry and Porter (1982, 97) noted nearly two decades ago that "the literature on motivation tends to concentrate too heavily on employees within industrial and business organizations." Perry and Porter proposed, as did Behn, a research agenda to improve the understanding of the motivational context in public-sector organizations. Unfortunately, very little research has fulfilled this agenda. While work motivation has been a prominent area of interest in organizational behavior (Cooper and Robertson 1986) and continues to be one of the most frequently discussed topics in psychology (Rousseau 1997), it has been (Balk 1974) and continues to be (Behn 1995) largely ignored by public-sector scholars.

J-PART 11(2001):4:559-586

559/*Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*

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Admittedly, work motivation is a difficult concept to define or study (Rainey 1993). While numerous definitions of work motivation have been developed over the years, some consensus can be found around Jones's (1955, vii) assertion that work motivation concerns "how behavior gets started, is energized, is sustained, is directed, is stopped, and what kind of subjective reaction is present in the organism while all this is going on." Such a broad definition is slightly misleading, suggesting that motivation is studied as an end in itself. In actuality the primary objective of work motivation research has not been to learn why employees act as they do but, instead, to learn how to motivate employees to perform the duties and responsibilities assigned by the organization. Consistent with this emphasis, work performance often has been used as a proxy for work motivation, ignoring other determinants of performance such as employee (e.g., ability or task comprehension) and environmental (e.g., situational constraints or task demands) characteristics (Kanfer 1990).

In recognition of a primary concern with performance and the limited role of motivation in determining that performance, however, work motivation is considered here as inclusive of such aspects as the direction, intensity, and persistence of work-related behaviors desired by the organization or its representatives (Mitchell 1997). Although this definition emphasizes the determinants and processes that underlie behavior, such constructs cannot be measured directly but must be inferred from a larger theory in which the antecedents of motivation are linked to purported behavioral consequences. Even though there has been some agreement on a definition there has been little agreement on how to operationalize or measure work motivation, and there are a number of competing theories of work motivation. While no single, dominant theory exists, many recent attempts to develop a unified theory of work motivation have emphasized the importance of goal structures as the immediate regulator of behavior (Kanfer 1990; Katzell and Thompson 1990; Mitchell 1997).

As I have noted, however, work motivation has failed to achieve similar interest among public-sector scholars. This lack of attention to work motivation in the public sector is surprising. Public-sector organizations are under constant pressure to improve their productivity and reduce their costs. Because public-sector employees frequently are stereotyped as lazy, self-serving, and misguided (Baldwin 1984; Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976), a better understanding of work motivation is essential to any efforts to describe, defend, or improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations.

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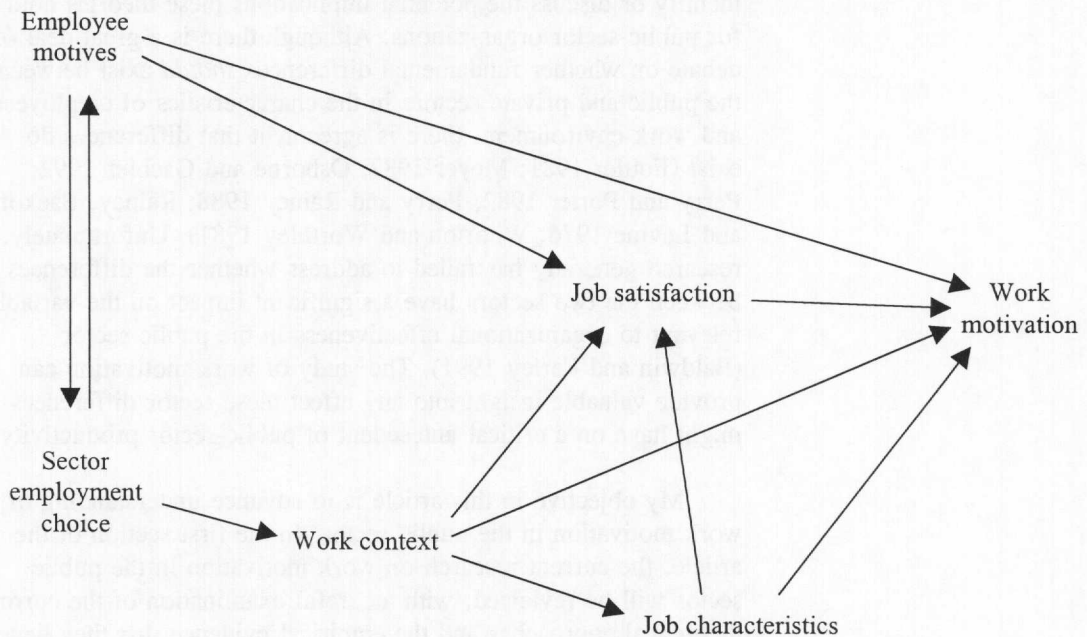
Furthermore, recent research on motivation has emphasized how the interaction of environmental and personal forces influences individual motivation, but little effort has been made to identify or discuss the potential implications these theories hold for public-sector organizations. Although there is a great deal of debate on whether fundamental differences *should* exist between the public and private sectors in the characteristics of employees and work environment, there is agreement that differences do exist (Fottler 1981; Meyer 1982; Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Perry and Porter 1982; Perry and Rainey 1988; Rainey, Backoff, and Levine 1976; Whorton and Worthley 1981). Unfortunately, research generally has failed to address whether the differences between the two sectors have a significant impact on the variables relevant to organizational effectiveness in the public sector (Baldwin and Farley 1991). The study of work motivation can provide valuable insight into any effect these sector differences might have on a critical antecedent of public-sector productivity.

My objective in this article is to advance understanding of work motivation in the public sector. In the first section of the article, the current research on work motivation in the public sector will be reviewed, with a careful examination of the current theoretical approaches and the empirical evidence that they have generated. Previous reviews of this literature have been conducted, but they are either dated (Gibson and Teasley 1973; Perry and Porter 1982) or they were intended to compare the attributes of public- and private-sector organizations (Baldwin 1984; 1987; 1991; Baldwin and Farley 1991; Rainey, Backoff, and Levine 1976; Rainey 1989; Rainey, Traut, and Blunt 1986). I will conclude the article by combining theory and empirical evidence regarding the unique characteristics of public organizations and employees with contemporary psychological theories of work motivation in order to develop a revised public-sector model of work motivation. The resulting model will provide a theoretical framework for future public-sector research on work motivation that may be able to identify specific leverage points that can increase work motivation and, therefore, productivity in the public sector.

CURRENT CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Although insufficient attention has been given to work motivation within the context of the public sector, relevant research does exist. To facilitate an understanding of the existing work motivation literature, some attempt must be made to place these studies within a theoretical framework. One such framework is

Exhibit 1
Public-Sector Model of Work Motivation



suggested in exhibit 1. In addition to the focal construct of work motivation, the framework contains five sets of antecedent variables that are purported to determine the extent of work motivation in the public sector: sector employment choice, employee motives, job satisfaction, job characteristics, and work context.

Research on the determinants of work motivation in the public sector can be further classified into two major streams, one that focuses on employee characteristics and the other that focuses on the organizational environment. Two basic types of employee characteristics have been suggested to be determinants of work motivation: *employee motives* and *job satisfaction*. While employee motives represent what employees want or expect from their jobs, job satisfaction reflects the employees' reactions to what they receive. Similarly, two characteristics of the environment have been suggested to influence work motivation: *job characteristics* and *work context*. Job characteristics describe aspects of the job or task an employee performs, while work context pertains to characteristics of the organizational setting (e.g., the organization's reward systems, goals, or degree of formalization) in which the employee must perform the work.

Although the constructs studied in the public sector represent two basic forces that influence work motivation, the employee and the environment, in both streams of research a prior construct has been implied—*sector employment choice*. Sector employment choice—whether an individual joins and maintains either public- or private-sector employment—is critical to understanding the current public-sector literature on work motivation, because the very premise of this literature is that the motivational context in one sector is in some way different from that of the other. In fact, two fundamental assumptions are inherent in the approach public-sector scholars have taken to study work motivation:

- The characteristics of the public sector employee or work environment are different from the private sector.
- These differences have a meaningful impact upon work motivation.¹

To aid in an understanding of the current state of knowledge and theory regarding work motivation in the public sector, each of these assumptions will be discussed within the framework provided in exhibit 1.

Sector Differences

An underlying premise of the public-sector literature on work motivation is that characteristics of employees and their work environments in the public sector are different than those in the private sector. As is depicted in exhibit 1, sector employment drives the model, suggesting that the public-sector employee motives and work context differ from motives and work context in private-sector counterparts and, as a result, job characteristics and job satisfaction also may differ. Since these sector differences lay the foundation for the public sector model of work motivation, I will discuss each relationship in detail.

Employee motives. The majority of research related to work motivation in the public sector has been from the perspective of need-based or drive-based theories. While many theorists have distinguished between individual needs, values, and reward preferences, these concepts are treated together for the purpose of this study, as they have a common focus on the desirability of work-related opportunities and outcomes as characteristics of the employee. Research generally has suggested that employees in one organization may differ from employees in another as a result of attraction-selection-attrition (Schneider 1987) or even adaptation processes (Hall, Schneider, and Nygren 1975;

¹This does not suggest that public administration must have its own theories of human motivation. A general theory of organizational behavior should be able to incorporate, if not account for, meaningful differences across sectors. It is expected, however, that these sector differences in employees or environment should have important implications for the application or interpretation of any theory used to describe and improve work motivation in the public sector.

Hinrichs 1964). The double arrow between employee motives and sector employment choice in exhibit 1 illustrates that although employees may select an employment sector that is consistent with their own motives, their motives also may change as a function of employment sector choice. Some empirical evidence of this potentially bidirectional relationship has been found in research on employee values and job choice. In a study that measured college students' values before and after they took their first jobs, Rosenberg (1957) found that, although individuals may change their jobs to coincide with their values, some individuals change their values to coincide better with their jobs.

Although employee characteristics may be shaped by the organization (Cherniss and Kane 1987; Guyot 1960; Posner and Schmidt 1996; Rainey 1983; Wittmer 1991), public administration scholars have tended to view employee motives as inputs "brought to the work situation" that represent "the raw materials in the public sector motivational processes" (Perry and Porter 1982, 90; see also Bozeman 1987; Lawler 1971; Perry and Wise 1990; Rainey 1982; Rawls, Ullrich, and Nelson 1975). Indirect support for this emphasis on self-selection (i.e., that individuals sort themselves into employment sectors) has been provided by studies indicating that employees tend to work for organizations that they feel will satisfy their most important needs (Graham and Renwick 1972; Lawler 1971). Unfortunately, little research has directly tested the hypothesis that sector employment choice is a consequence of employee motives. While studies have found evidence to support the assertion that individual characteristics such as personality (Rawls, Ullrich, and Nelson 1975) and values (Edwards, Nalbandian, and Wedel 1981; Nalbandian and Edwards 1983; Perry 1996 and 1997; Posner and Schmidt 1982) predict sector employment preference, this research has studied employee characteristics only in postemployment choice settings. Any causal inferences made from research conducted after employment choice has been made are highly suspect, as they have confounded the effects of selection, attrition, and adaptation processes. As a function of this temporal sequence in measurement, the theoretical basis for the relationship between employee motives and sector employment choice has been largely unanalyzed.

Although few researchers have attempted an empirical validation of the causal direction of the purported relationship between the employee motives and sector employment choice, a substantial number have investigated whether or not a relationship does exist. Under the assumption that employees are more likely to be in organizations that are consistent with their own values or needs, the public sector often has been expected to

employ individuals with motives that are grounded primarily or uniquely in that which public organizations can provide (Baldwin 1984; Crewson 1997; Perry and Wise 1990; Perry 1996 and 1997). Charged with promoting general social welfare, as well as the protection of the society and every individual in it, public organizations often have missions with broader scope and more profound impact than is typically found in the private sector (Baldwin 1984). The composition of the public workforce has been expected to reflect the nature of the work in the public sector, attracting employees who desire greater opportunities to fulfill higher-order needs and altruistic motives.

Empirical research, however, has provided mixed support for this expectation. While some initial studies found that public-sector employees have higher achievement needs than their private-sector counterparts (Guyot 1960; McClelland 1961), more recent studies have suggested that, even if public employees rank achievement as one of the more important work-related rewards, they value achievement less than do employees in the private sector (Khojasteh 1993; Posner and Schmidt 1996). No significant difference has been shown between public- and private-sector employees on other higher-order needs such as accomplishment (Maidani 1991), autonomy (Jurkeiwicz, Massey, and Brown 1998; Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976), or self-actualization (Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976). The very assumption that supports the existence of stronger higher-order needs among public employees was challenged by Gabris and Simo (1995), who found that public employees viewed the private sector as having a better capacity to provide exciting, challenging, and fulfilling work.

Findings also have been mixed in comparisons of other need characteristics. While no difference in power needs was identified between sectors (Guyot 1960), public employees have been found to view the importance of status or esteem needs as lower (Jurkeiwicz, Massey, and Brown 1998; Rainey 1982; Wittmer 1991), higher (Maidani 1991), or no different (Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976) than do private-sector employees. The need for job security also has been found by some researchers to be similar in the two sectors (Gabris and Simo 1995; Rainey 1982; Rawls and Nelson 1975), while others have found that private-sector employees place a greater value on it than do their public-sector counterparts (Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976; Wittmer 1991). Some discrepancies in the research findings may have been due to confounding the effects of sector employment with the effects of other variables such as profession (Baldwin 1991). For example, Crewson (1997) found that, while public-sector employees may generally value job security less than private-

sector employees do, its salience to public-sector engineers did not differ significantly from its salience to private-sector engineers.

The importance that employees attach to various rewards has been expected to coincide with the sector in which they are employed. Again, it has been assumed that the very missions of public organizations are reflected in the composition of their workforces. Studies have provided some empirical support for this assertion by suggesting that employee reward preferences seem to coincide with the function each sector serves. Some researchers have found that managerial employees in the public sector place a lower value on financial rewards (Cacioppe and Mock 1984; Jurkiewicz, Massey, and Brown 1998; Khojasteh 1993; Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings 1964; Lawler 1971; Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976; Rainey 1982; Rawls, Ullrich, and Nelson 1975; Wittmer 1991) and a higher value on helping others or public service (Buchanan 1975; Cacioppe and Mock 1984; Crewson 1997; Kilpatrick, Cummings, and Jennings 1964; Rainey 1982; Wittmer 1991) than do their private-sector counterparts.

Empirical support for these differences, however, has not always been consistent. Several studies have failed to find differences in preference for monetary rewards (Crewson 1997; Gabris and Simo 1995; Maidani 1991; Schuster 1974), while others have suggested that, regardless of how public employees may value monetary rewards relative to private employees, such financial incentives still are valued highly by public employees (Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976; Rainey 1982; Wittmer 1991). Evidence also has suggested that public employees do not value opportunities to benefit society (Jurkiewicz, Massey, and Brown 1998) or to help (Gabris and Simo 1995) any more than those in the private sector.

In sum, the research on sector differences in employee motives should be viewed with some caution. Although some evidence has suggested that a relationship exists between employee motives and sector employment, these findings have not been entirely consistent and the causal direction remains uncertain.

Work context. The work context of public-sector organizations often has been perceived to be fundamentally different from that of organizations in the private sector (Baldwin and Farley 1991; Fottler 1981; Rainey 1989; Whorton and Worthley 1981). Such differences typically have been attributed to the function each sector serves in society. Public organizations address complex social functions, providing goods and services that cannot

be easily packaged for exchange in economic markets (Baldwin 1987; Rainey 1983). Public-sector organizations sometimes are driven by supply and demand, but these forces do not necessarily converge toward optimal efficiency in the public sector because the purchasers of public-sector goods and services are often different from the users of such products (Kettl 1995; Wagenhiem and Reurink 1991). Consequently, economic indicators of efficiency, such as prices and profits, are unavailable. Furthermore, because public programs are funded largely by individuals who do not receive the direct benefit of these programs, there is a demand for equity, accountability, and responsiveness, in addition to a demand for economic efficiency. As a result of the absence of market information and incentives and the presence of greater influence of external forces, public organizations are perceived to have multiple and even conflicting goals. Such conflict and complexity not only make organizational performance expectations appear to be ambiguous, they often culminate in greater formal procedural constraints on employee action and compensation (Baldwin 1984; Buchanan 1975; Fottler 1981; Perry and Rainey 1988). In other words, the public-sector work context may find it easier to constrain employees from doing anything wrong than to motivate them to do something right (Behn 1995; Whorton and Worthley 1981).

Although the assumption of sectoral differences in work context has been accepted generally in the public-sector literature, surprisingly little empirical research has established these differences empirically (Baldwin and Farley 1991; Rainey 1989). Much of what does exist provides conflicting evidence. For example, while Baldwin (1987) found that private-sector employees perceived greater clarity of organization goals than did public-sector employees, several studies conducted by Rainey and his colleagues have found no differences between sectors in either organizational goal clarity (Rainey 1983) or goal ambiguity (Rainey, Pandey, and Bozeman 1995). Similar disagreement can be found in research comparing the prevalence of procedural constraints in the two sectors. While several studies found that public employees experience similar (Pugh, Hickson, Hinnings, and Turner 1969) or even lower levels of procedural constraints (Buchanan 1975), only the more recent findings suggest that public employees experience higher levels of procedural constraints as predicted (Baldwin 1990; Bozeman, Reed, and Scott 1992; Rainey 1983; Rainey, Pandey, and Bozeman 1995). Regarding organizational rewards, two studies have shown that employees in public organizations perceive a weaker relationship between extrinsic rewards—such as pay and job security—and performance than do employees in private-sector organizations (Porter and Lawler 1968; Rainey 1983). In the end, however,

even though the hypothesized differences in work context between sectors play an important role in the public-sector model of work motivation, the few empirical tests of the existence of such differences have not been entirely consistent.

Job characteristics. If sector differences occur in work context, they may, in turn, influence important aspects of the job or task² an employee performs at work. For example, some theorists have suggested that public employees may experience greater task significance and job challenge than private-sector employees because public organizations provide employees with opportunities to address important social issues (Baldwin 1984; Perry and Wise 1990). Other scholars, however, have suggested that any benefits of such missions are offset by the multiple, ambiguous, and conflicting goals held by public-sector organizations, which make performance difficult to direct and measure (Baldwin 1984). The prevalence of formal constraints, associated frequently with the public sector, also is expected to reduce the autonomy, variety, difficulty, and task identity of public-sector jobs.

Although the relationship between work context and job characteristics has not been studied directly, several studies have investigated potential differences in job characteristics across sectors. Implicit in these studies is an assumption that differences in job characteristics between employment sectors exist as a result of differences in the work context of each sector. In perhaps the most comprehensive study that has investigated the effects of public-sector jobs on motivation and job satisfaction, Emmert and Taher (1992) found that professional public employees did not differ from national norms on skill variety, task identification, task significance, autonomy, or feedback. Similarly, Rainey (1983) failed to find a significant difference between public and private sectors in terms of task variety. Posner and Schmidt (1982) found contradictory evidence that suggests that public-sector jobs not only have greater variety but they also have more task significance. In a survey that compared public employees pursuing graduate degrees in public administration and private sector-employees pursuing graduate degrees in business administration, Posner and Schmidt (1982) found that public employees perceived that their jobs provided greater variety and more worthwhile accomplishment than did employees in the private sector. This latter finding, however, is in conflict with other work that has found that public-sector employees experience lower personal significance reinforcement (Buchanan 1974) and less ability to exert influence on their organizations (Cacioppe and Mock 1984). Public-sector scholars also have mixed findings when differences in task difficulty or job challenge between

²This is usually operationalized in terms of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback.

employment sectors have been investigated. While one study found that public-sector employees perceived that the private sector had the best capacity to provide exciting and challenging work (Gabris and Simo 1995), other studies have found that public employees experienced the same level of task difficulty as (Rainey 1983) or even greater job challenge than their private-sector counterparts (Posner and Schmidt 1982). These studies provide some, albeit inconsistent, evidence that job characteristics differ directly as a function of sector.

Job satisfaction. A number of researchers have studied the public-sector employees' attitudes about work or organizational systems, with job satisfaction perhaps the most commonly assessed attitude. These particular attitudes represent a degree of interaction between the employee and the environment by gauging the congruence between what employees want from their jobs (employee motives) and what employees feel they receive (work environment). While no direct relationship between sector employment choice and job satisfaction is shown in exhibit 1, there is an implicit assumption that the sector differences in the characteristics of the employee and work environment are important in influencing work attitudes such as job satisfaction (Rainey 1989). Public employees, for example, generally have been viewed as more dissatisfied with their jobs than are their private-sector counterparts (Baldwin and Farley 1991; Rainey 1989; Steel and Warner 1990). One purported cause of this dissatisfaction has been that, while public organizations have missions that may provide greater opportunity for employees to achieve altruistic or higher-order needs, the very structure of these organizations hinders the realization of these opportunities. Public goals are often ambiguous or even conflicting, making it difficult for employees to understand or make their contributions to the accomplishment of these goals (Baldwin 1984). It also has been argued that the compensation policies of public organizations contributes to the lower satisfaction among public employees, especially if compensation is lower in certain public-sector organizations (Blank 1985; Fogel and Lewin 1974).

Regardless of the rationale used to predict sector differences in job satisfaction, there is empirical evidence of such differences. The direction of these differences has varied, however, making difficult any consistent interpretation in terms of sector employment. For example, studies using a single-item, global measure of job satisfaction have tended to show not only that public employees are generally satisfied with their jobs (Gabris and Simo 1995; Lewis 1991) but also that they have been either more satisfied (DeSantis and Durst 1996; Maidani 1991; Steel and Warner 1990) or at least as satisfied (Emmert and Taher

1992; Gabris and Simo 1995; Lewis 1991) as private-sector employees. Empirical research that has assessed specific aspects of employee satisfaction, on the other hand, has been far less consistent. For instance, while studies have found that public employees are less satisfied with the fulfillment of esteem, autonomy, and self-actualization needs (Paine, Carroll, and Leete 1966; Porter and Mitchell 1967; Rhinehart, Barrell, DeWolfe, Griffen, and Spaner 1969; Solomon 1986), other studies have found contrary evidence (i.e., Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976).

The trend is less discernable if one looks at other sources of satisfaction such as pay and job security. While several studies appear to indicate that public employees have been less satisfied with pay (Blunt and Spring 1991; Solomon 1986), others have found no difference (Rainey 1979 and 1983), and still others have found greater satisfaction with compensation (Khojasteh 1993; Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976). Similar inconsistency appears in regard to employee satisfaction with job security: studies have found greater satisfaction (Khojasteh 1993), less satisfaction (Paine, Carroll, and Leete 1966; Porter and Mitchell 1967; Rhinehart et al. 1969), and similar satisfaction (Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976) among public-sector employees relative to those in the private sector. Although such mixed findings severely restrict the ability to infer a great deal about public-sector employees in general based solely upon their attitudes toward their organizations or jobs, they certainly do not suggest a widespread pattern of dissatisfaction with public-sector employment.

Summary. Although a strong theoretical rationale for sector differences may exist, surprisingly little empirical evidence shows consistent sector differences in the characteristics of the employees or work environment. Such findings may well be the result of weaknesses that plague this literature. For example, private-public distinctions require researchers to develop a typology of organizations to distinguish between sectors. Several scholars have noted that private-public distinctions have been ill-defined in this research (Baldwin 1990; Perry and Rainey 1988; Rainey, Traut, and Blunt 1986). The comparative nature of the research also requires random samples across a broad section of organizations and employees before researchers can generalize differences across populations. In the sector employment comparisons conducted in public-sector motivation research, samples must be randomized at the sector, organization, and employee levels to avoid confounding sector differences with demographic, cultural, occupational, or even industry differences. Such samples are not only difficult to obtain, they also are largely missing in this literature (Baldwin 1991), where convenience samples are

taken from a small number of organizations without the careful use of controls (Baldwin 1991; Rainey, Traut, and Blunt 1986). Improved research may resolve these discrepancies; however, even if differences do exist, they may be minimal (Rainey 1982). Consequently, while the comparative nature of this research certainly contributes to the theory-building process in public administration and has helped to dispel potentially harmful negative stereotypes (Baldwin 1991), it also has placed additional demands upon the theory and research design.

Work Motivation Determinants: Public-Sector Implications

Although the existing empirical evidence has not consistently confirmed the hypothesized existence of public-private distinctions in employee motives or work context, the possible existence of such differences provides much of the theoretical foundation for studying work motivation in the public sector. If differences do exist, it is important to understand their impact on variables relevant to the effective operation of public and private organizations such as work motivation. Even if differences do not exist, however, the study of the impact that characteristics of public-sector employees and environments have on work motivation may still be instrumental in identifying and understanding the determinants of work motivation. To that end, the research regarding each of the four employee characteristics and organizational environment variables identified in exhibit 1 will be reexamined in terms of its implications for work motivation in the public sector.

Employee motives. Much of the variation in the motivation to perform at work has been expected to be a result of individual differences in needs, values, and reward preferences either directly or indirectly through their effect on job satisfaction. It is these differences that often are perceived as the key to motivating behavior because “understanding the values and reward preferences of public managers is essential in structuring organizational environments and incentive systems to satisfy those preferences” (Wittmer 1991, 369). For example, the few studies that have measured work motivation have found no differences between public and private employees at the managerial level (Baldwin 1984 and 1987; Emmert and Taher 1992; Posner and Schmidt 1982; Rainey 1979 and 1983). This finding may imply that the importance public employees place on the opportunities thought to be more readily available in the public sector, such as performing altruistic acts or receiving intrinsic rewards, may compensate for the low levels of extrinsic rewards associated with the public sector. Unfortunately, differences in public-sector

employee motives have not been linked to any specific behavioral consequences such as work motivation.

The failure to find, or even test, these underlying relationships is due in part to the theoretical basis for this stream of research. Much of the research on motivation in the public sector has been grounded in humanistic theories such as *needs hierarchy* (Maslow 1954) or *two-factor theory* (Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman 1959).³ These theories, which focus on the identification of employee motives, largely assumed, rather than tested, the relationship between attitudes or values and behavior. These theories have been mostly discredited by more contemporary research (Gibson and Teasley 1973). As one prominent scholar suggests, “theories of human needs or drives deal only with why outcomes such as pay, promotion, and job security are sought while others are avoided. This kind of theory should not be confused with a theory of motivation that tries to fully explain or predict behavior . . . [these theories] cannot explain how a person will behave in order to obtain or avoid a particular outcome” (Lawler 1994, 4-5).

Job satisfaction. In an extension of the literature on employee motives, many studies of work motivation in the public sector have asked individuals to assess their levels of satisfaction with the work environments’ fulfillment of important needs or its provision of desired rewards (Gabris and Simo 1995; Jurkiewicz, Massey, and Brown 1998; Khojasteh 1993; Maidani 1991; Newstrom, Reif, and Monczka 1976). If need fulfillment and reward attainment represent motives that drive behavior, then satisfaction with these facets of the job identifies the necessary conditions for optimal employee motivation. In other words, job satisfaction is important because “examining what employees want from their jobs and comparing it to what they are getting reveals the need deficiencies that instigates goal directed behavior” (Jurkiewicz, Massey, and Brown 1998, 233). Several studies have attempted specifically to identify leverage points that may assist public-sector organizations in their efforts to motivate employees. In a variant of Maslow’s (1954) prepotency principle, a need has high motivating potential if it is both potent (important to the individual) and unsatisfied. To identify which needs or rewards will best motivate the employee, motivating potential scores (MPS) have been calculated by combining the degree to which a particular item is important and not satisfied. For example, Newstrom and his colleagues (1976) found that compensation and working conditions had high motivation potential, while social needs had low potential. Conflicting evidence was reported by Khojasteh (1993), who found that interpersonal relations, recognition, achievement, and advancement were considered to have high

³Two studies (Jurkiewicz, Massey, and Brown 1998; Rainey 1979) have been based on expectancy theory (Vroom 1964), which still enjoys some popularity outside of public administration. The classification of these studies under expectancy theory rather than humanistic theory, however, may be questionable as these studies focused on employee reward preferences (valence) and availability (instrumentality) without measuring the third component of the theory, the strength of employee beliefs that a particular performance outcome is possible (expectancy).

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motivating potential, while the potential of pay and working conditions was substantially lower.

Only one study has attempted to link job satisfaction directly to work motivation. In their statewide survey of civil service employees, Emmert and Taher (1992) found that, while satisfaction with social relations at work was related to an employee self-reported measure of intrinsic work motivation, satisfaction with pay and job security were not.⁴ While it provides some support for a relationship between job satisfaction and work motivation, this finding and its theoretical underpinnings run counter to work outside the public sector. A review of empirical evidence would suggest that although job satisfaction may be related to employee attraction and retention (Heneman, Schwab, Fossum, and Dyer 1983), no direct relationship exists between job satisfaction and productivity (Iaffaldano and Muchinsky 1985; Kahn and Morse 1951; Katz and Kahn 1978; Mitchell 1979; Vroom 1964; Wechsler, Kahane, and Tannenbaum 1952). At first glance this may seem counterintuitive; some scholars continue to believe that “a basic and strong correlation exists between job satisfaction and job productivity” (Steel and Warner 1990). This finding, however, merely reiterates what has been known already about reward systems: rewards only enhance productivity if they are contingent on desired performance (Lawler 1981 and 1986). Employees can be satisfied with a job that pays well but requires them to do very little. In these cases, satisfaction is contingent on maintaining organizational membership rather than on performing organizational duties. Thus, while job satisfaction is related to one type of work-related behaviors of interest to work motivation theorists identified by Barnard (1938)—the motivation to join and stay in the organization—it is not necessarily related to the other—that is, the motivation to work hard and well within the organization.

Work context. Work context, as previously defined, refers to the characteristics of the organizational setting in which individuals are employed. While organizational variables more commonly have been investigated because of their presumed relationship to organizational outcomes, a relationship also has been expected between the working conditions provided by the organization and employee attitudes and behaviors. Such work context factors as an organization’s goals, structure, and reward systems have been expected to influence employee work motivation directly, but also indirectly through their effect on job characteristics and job satisfaction.

⁴Emmert and Taher (1992) also found that employee satisfaction with job fulfillment of their intrinsic needs was related to work motivation but this finding is largely tautological, given the questions used in the intrinsic measure of work motivation.

Given the purported importance of the work context for work motivation in the public sector, there has been surprisingly

little empirical investigation of this relationship: only two studies could be identified. Building on the findings that employees in public organizations are less likely to feel that extrinsic rewards in their organizations depend on performance (Porter and Lawler 1968; Rainey 1983), Alonso and Lewis (1999) have suggested that employee performance will be less likely to be improved by these rewards. Consistent with this explanation, they have found that public employees perform better, as measured by their grade level and performance ratings, if they believe that there is a strong link between pay and performance. In a study of federal, state, and local government employees in the Atlanta area, Baldwin found that while the clarity of organizational goals was related to work motivation (1987), the levels of job security and procedural constraints were not (1990). While these studies seem to validate the influence of the work context on behavior, the lack of research in this area hinders a more comprehensive understanding of the fundamental link between work context and work motivation.

Job characteristics. Research on job characteristics has suggested that “what a person does at work—that is, the nature of the job or the collection of tasks that comprise the job” (Perry and Porter 1982, 90) can influence work motivation. According to the job characteristics model, if specific job characteristics are present, employees will be able to achieve three critical psychological states: knowledge of results, responsibility for work outcomes, and meaningfulness of work. When employees have performed well on a task that is important to the organization (Hackman and Lawler 1971), these psychological states facilitate self-generated, positive responses that reinforce continued efforts at good performance. A number of job characteristics have been perceived as necessary to facilitate the attainment of these psychological states in public employees; these include autonomy, feedback, variety, task significance, task identity, and challenge. Consequently, the presence of such job characteristics has been expected to improve employee job satisfaction and work motivation.

Although the job characteristics model has received some empirical validation in the business administration literature (Fried and Ferris 1987), only one public-sector study has investigated the presumed relationship between job characteristics and work motivation. In a study of state civil service employees, Emmert and Taher (1992) found no relationship between the degree of skill variety, task identity, autonomy, task significance, and feedback public employees experience in their jobs and their self-reports of intrinsic work motivation. Although one must be cautious about giving too much weight to the findings of a single

study, available evidence does not support the existence of a relationship between these particular job characteristics and work motivation in the public sector.

Summary. Research generally has failed to address whether any sector differences have a significant impact on the variables, such as work motivation, that are relevant to the effective operation of public and private organizations. This failure to test the impact of sector differences on work motivation, however, cannot be completely attributable to a lack of sector differences. While the specific findings regarding how sectors differ have not been consistent, sector differences have been commonly, if not consistently, found. The domination of much of this research by humanistic theories of work motivation that have traditionally assumed, rather than tested, the relationship between employee motives or attitudes and behavior has resulted in a nearly complete failure to test the impact of sector differences on work motivation, whether hypothesized or proven. Such humanistic theories focus exclusively on employee motives and their satisfaction, identifying outcomes that are thought to motivate behavior because employees find them desirable. Consequently, studies that investigate the contextual factors that may affect the psychological or behavioral processes that mediate the relationship between the desire for outcomes and behavior are noticeably lacking. The few studies that have looked at contextual factors (Emmert and Taher 1992; Baldwin 1987 and 1990) have failed to do so within the broader framework of a psychological theory of work motivation. As a result, these studies have done little to identify what motivates public employees to perform their work with intelligence and energy, regardless of whether the determinants of work motivation differ in some meaningful way across sectors.

TOWARD A REVISED CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The two fundamental assumptions that provide the theoretical basis for public-sector literature on work motivation have not been convincingly substantiated. Not only have no consistent sector differences been found, little has been done to identify whether *any* differences have a meaningful impact upon work motivation. The failure of this research to support these assumptions may be due in large part to the difficulty of conducting public-private comparisons and the literature's continued reliance on the use of dated, humanistic theories of work motivation. As a result, however, our understanding of work motivation in public-sector organizations remains limited. To advance our understanding of work motivation in the public sector, the conceptual

models of work motivation must be updated by incorporating more contemporary theories.

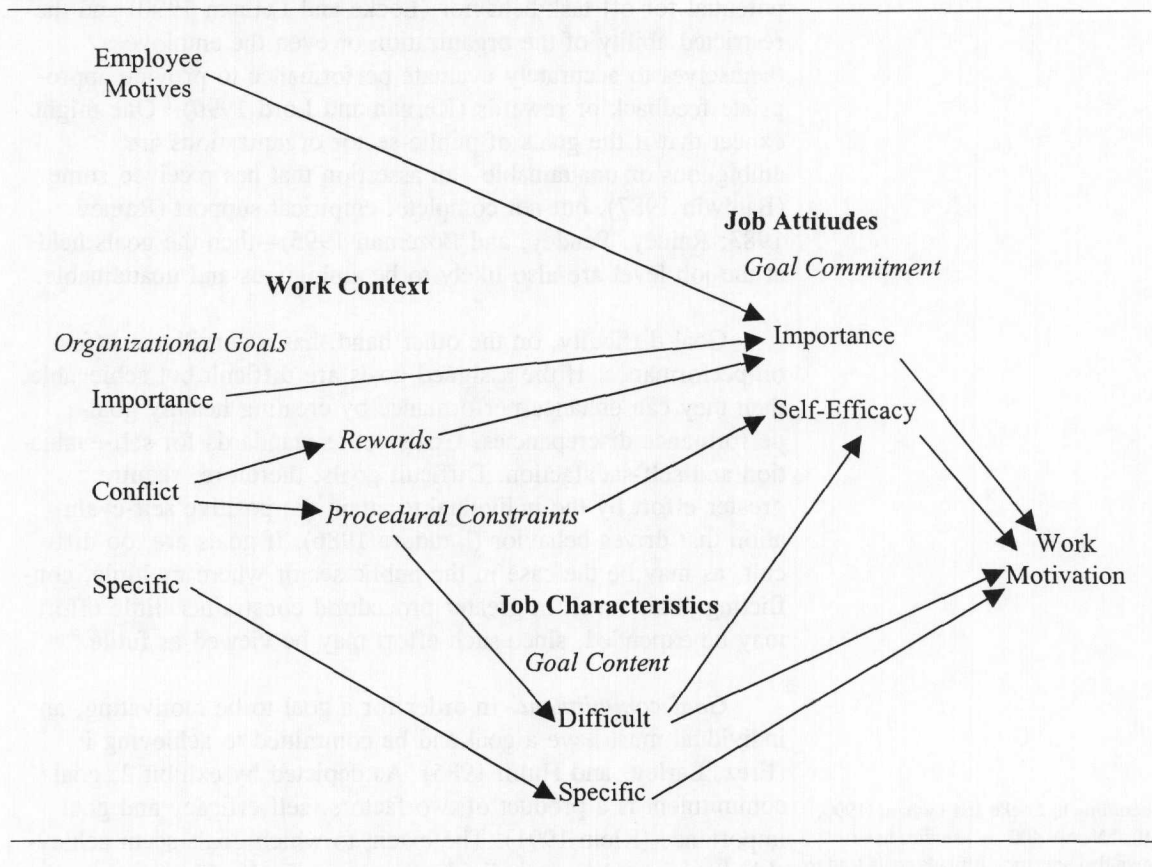
While a comprehensive review of the vast work motivation literature is a prohibitively extensive undertaking, some general understanding of this literature is necessary to identify critical omissions in the public-sector work motivation model. One approach to organizing the numerous and diverse theories of work motivation has been to classify these theories in terms of their conceptual proximity to action, ranging on a continuum from distal to proximal. The humanistic theories that currently dominate much of the public-sector research on work motivation have been classified as more distal theories, because they are intended to predict other constructs such as intentions or goals rather than behavior or performance (Kanfer 1992). By contrast, proximal theories that focus on motivational constructs at the level of purposive action dominate current motivation research outside of public administration. Such theories may provide better opportunities for advancing an understanding of work motivation in the public sector. Contemporary motivation theories such as goal theory are of particular interest, since they concentrate on the processes and constructs that mediate the relationship between more distal constructs commonly studied by public-sector scholars and subsequent behavior and performance of interest to organizations.

Goal Theory

Nearly twenty years ago, Perry and Porter (1982) suggested that goal theory may be relevant to the public-sector motivational setting. While few scholars have attempted to incorporate goal theory into the public-sector model, some empirical support for Perry and Porter's (1982) assertion exists. For example, Wilk and Redmon (1990) found that goal setting significantly increased performance of the administrative processes of a public university. Similarly, a recent metanalysis of management-by-objective programs, a technique based on goal setting and feedback, found it to be as successful in increasing performance at the group or organizational level in the public sector as it is in the private sector (Rodgers and Hunter 1992).

Recent reviews of work motivation theories have suggested that any model of work motivation should contain the underlying processes that explain how goals affect work motivation (Kanfer 1992; Katzell and Thompson 1990; Mitchell 1997). These processes are of two types: *goal content* and *goal commitment*. Goal content, a job characteristic, refers to how certain characteristics of goals, such as goal difficulty, specificity, and conflict, can

Exhibit 2
Revised Public-Sector Model of Work Motivation



influence the goal-performance relationship. Goal commitment is a job attitude that concerns the conditions under which the individual accepts the goal and is determined to reach it, even if confronted with setbacks or obstacles. Research examining goal content and goal commitment has identified a number of constructs that are important to understanding work motivation. These have been integrated into a revised model of public-sector work motivation depicted in exhibit 2. Although work motivation is still explained in terms of employee motives, job attitudes,⁵ work context, and job characteristics, the revised model provides an additional level of detail as suggested by the research on goal setting in conjunction with the findings of the research conducted within public administration.

Goal content. Numerous reviews (Locke and Latham 1990) and meta-analyses (Latham and Lee 1986; Mento, Steel, and Karren 1987; Tubbs 1986) of this literature have found strong support for the hypothesis that specific and difficult goals

⁵Job attitudes in exhibit 1 were represented by job satisfaction.

improve performance.⁶ According to goal theory, ambiguity weakens the goal-performance relationship because of the greater potential for off-task behavior (Locke and Latham 1990) and the restricted ability of the organization or even the employees themselves to accurately evaluate performance to provide appropriate feedback or rewards (Kernan and Lord 1990).⁷ One might expect that if the goals of public-sector organizations are ambiguous or unattainable—an assertion that has received some (Baldwin 1987), but not complete, empirical support (Rainey 1983; Rainey, Pandey, and Bozeman 1995)—then the goals held at the job level are also likely to be ambiguous and unattainable.

Goal difficulty, on the other hand, has a curvilinear effect on performance. If the assigned goals are difficult but achievable, then they can enhance performance by creating healthy goal-performance discrepancies. Goals act as standards for self-evaluation and self-satisfaction. Difficult goals, therefore, require greater effort by the individual to attain the positive self-evaluation that drives behavior (Bandura 1986). If goals are too difficult, as may be the case in the public sector where multiple, conflicting goals result in greater procedural constraints, little effort may be expended, since such effort may be viewed as futile.

Goal commitment. In order for a goal to be motivating, an individual must have a goal and be committed to achieving it (Erez, Earley, and Hulin 1985). As depicted by exhibit 2, goal commitment is a product of two factors: self-efficacy and goal importance (Klein 1991). The extent to which goals seem achievable is reflected in an individual's sense of self-efficacy, the individual's judgment of his or her own "capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura 1986, 391). Higher levels of self-efficacy often are associated with better performance, because individuals who believe that they can accomplish a goal are more likely to expend the necessary effort and persist in the face of obstacles (Bandura 1988; Bandura and Cervone 1983 and 1986; P.C. Earley and Lituchy 1991). Self-efficacy has been shown to enhance certain types of performance in the public sector. Frayne and Latham (1987; Latham and Frayne 1989) found that enhancing employee self-efficacy to overcome obstacles affecting the ability to come to work can increase job attendance among public employees.

Research has identified a number of factors by which organizations can influence employee self-efficacy (Bandura 1986; Bandura and Wood 1989; P.C. Earley 1986; W.N. Earley 1986; Meyer and Gellatly 1988; Podsakoff and Fahr 1989). Two of these factors are included in exhibit 2: goal difficulty and

⁶According to Locke and Latham (1990, 240), "Nearly 400 . . . studies have shown that specific, difficult goals lead to better performance."

⁷Although the research findings suggest that setting specific job goals generally results in increased performance, Locke et al. (1989, 272) have recognized that "under some circumstances . . . vague goals could conceivably be more effective than specific goals in that the manager would have more flexibility in responding to environmental contingencies." In fact goal setting has been found to increase feelings among some participants of being excessively constrained by formal environments (Raia 1965; Tosi and Carroll 1968). Goals must be developed carefully so that they are appropriately defined in the specific job context. This is not an easy task, especially given the multiple, conflicting goals in the public sector. Future research should be directed at identifying the factors that moderate the relationship between job goal specificity and work motivation.

procedural constraints. Assigning difficult but achievable goals has been found to raise an individual's self-efficacy (P.C. Earley and Lituchy 1991), perhaps because such goals often are perceived as a signal that others believe or expect that the individual can perform at the assigned level (Bandura 1986; Eden 1988; Salancik 1977). Although there has been little attempt to measure goal difficulty in the public sector, several studies suggest that public-sector employees experience the same level of task difficulty (Rainey 1983) or even greater job challenge (Posner and Schmidt 1982) than their private-sector counterparts. However, as indicated in exhibit 2, if public organizations do experience multiple and conflicting goals, then employee self-efficacy is likely to decrease because goal achievement will be seen as severely limited. Achieving some of the organizational goals will restrict the ability to reach others.

Procedural constraints also can affect employees' perceptions of potential goal attainment. For example, Bandura and Wood (1989) found that managers who believed that organizations were controllable displayed a stronger sense of self-efficacy and even set more challenging goals when difficult organizational standards eluded them. Considerable evidence supports high levels of perceived procedural constraints in the public sector (Baldwin 1990; Bozeman, Reed, and Scott 1992; Rainey 1983; Rainey, Pandey, and Bozeman 1995), suggesting that public-sector employees may exhibit lower levels of self-efficacy, viewing tasks as impossible or performance as outside their control. Although there may be no direct relationship between procedural constraints and work motivation (Baldwin 1990), relationship indirectly may exist through the effect of constraints on self-efficacy.

Goal commitment requires that goals be not only achievable but that they be viewed as important. If individuals do not perceive goals to be important, they have little reason to strive for achievement. Organizations can affect the employee's perceptions of goal importance in a number of ways. Managers, for example, might link job goals to organizational goals. If employees can see how their work contributes to achieving important organizational goals, then they are more likely to see their work as meaningful (see exhibit 2). This may be a very effective strategy in the public sector if a high degree of congruence between organization goals and employee motives exists. If achieving assigned goals can satisfy personal employee motives, such as performing public service, then those goals are more likely to be perceived as important and accepted as personal goals. The strength of this relationship is not assured, however, since the concept of public service is similar to that of public

interest. It is easier to agree that public services are important than it is to agree on what services are important to the public. The inconsistent empirical evidence regarding the degree of task significance (Emmert and Taher 1992; Posner and Schmidt 1982) and personal significance reinforcement (Buchanan 1974) public employees experience on the job suggests that specific tasks or performance goals may not seem to be associated directly with key personal or organizational goals.

The revised model (exhibit 2) also suggests that organizations can make assigned performance goals important to the employee by providing appropriate rewards for goal attainment (Klein 1991; Mowen, Middlemist, and Luther 1981; Wright 1989). The assigning of difficult goals, for example, has been found to improve performance merely because such goals are perceived to be associated with more beneficial outcomes or rewards than easy goals (Mento, Locke, and Klein 1992). Although the type and amount of reward is important, rewards can act as performance incentives only when they are contingent on performance. If, as evidence suggests, public-sector employees perceive a weak link between performance and rewards (Porter and Lawler 1968; Rainey 1983), then the utility of this method for enhancing goal importance is severely limited.

CONCLUSION

The performance of public organizations and their employees should be at least as important, if not more important, to our society than the performance of employees in private-sector organizations such as Microsoft, Ford, or McDonalds. Although work motivation is just one factor that influences performance, it is a critical moderator between performance and such other factors as ability or situation. Productivity improvement requires more than just customer service, technology, decentralization, or process reengineering. Whether these approaches succeed or fail will depend largely on the motivation of the employees who have been asked to implement them. In recognition of this, work motivation has been and continues to be a prominent area of interest to both psychologists and business scholars. Unfortunately, work motivation has failed to achieve similar interest among public-sector scholars. Greater attention should be given to work motivation if for no other reason than that a better understanding of work motivation is essential to any efforts to understand or even improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999).

Much existing research in the public sector that is relevant to work motivation has been grounded primarily in humanistic

theories, attempting to identify sector differences in the outcomes that employees want or receive from their environments without regard to how or even if these differences have a significant impact on work motivation. Contemporary theories of work motivation that investigate the contextual factors that may affect the psychological or behavioral processes that mediate the relationship between the desire for outcomes and goal-directed behavior have largely been ignored.

In order to advance our understanding of work motivation in the public sector, theory and empirical evidence regarding the unique characteristics of public organizations must be combined with contemporary psychological theories of work motivation. In particular, the framework provided by goal theory suggests that sector differences in performance rewards, procedural constraints, and goal content may influence work motivation directly as well as indirectly through their effect on goal commitment. Public employee perceptions of weak relationships between rewards and performance (Porter and Lawler 1968; Rainey 1983), greater procedural constraints (Baldwin 1990; Bozeman, Reed, and Scott 1992; Rainey, Pandey, and Bozeman 1995), and goal ambiguity (Baldwin 1987; Fottler 1981) may have a detrimental effect on their work motivation. Greater perceived mission valence or task importance that may be associated with contributing to the provision of a valuable public service (Buchanan 1975; Cacioppe and Mock 1984; Rainey 1982; Wittmer 1991) may enhance worker motivation. The multiple levels at which goal processes such as goal content and goal commitment may occur are consistent with recent suggestions that work motivation is influenced both by an organization's mission and by factors related to job tasks (Rainey and Steinbauer 1999). This revised model of work motivation not only provides a strong theoretical framework for future public-sector research on work motivation, it may also identify specific leverage points that can increase work motivation and therefore productivity in the public sector.

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