The Concept of Public Service
Introductory Briefing

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"the administration of the government must be conducted
for the benefit of those entrusted to one's care, not of those
to whom it is entrusted"
— Marcus Tullius Cicero, De Officiis, I:25, 44BC

1 Introduction

Three decades ago, Holzer stated that "the concept of public service... is too often
approached simplistically" (1989, p.585). Despite the term being widely-used in
the academic literature, particularly in the field of public administration, it remains
loosely-defined and poorly understood. Unlike other normative concepts central
to modern democracy and governance, the idea of public service has never been
subject to a comprehensive academic conceptualisation. This may be due to its
fungibility. As Brewer states, the term has a double meaning, referring to both
public sector workers and, more generally, "the act of doing something valuable for
society" (1998, p.417). These meanings have often been confused in the academic
literature.

This is in spite of the concept's importance to its eponymous public admin-
istration subfield of public service motivation (PSM), where "motives grounded
primarily or uniquely in public institutions or organizations" (Perry and Wise,
1990) have been extensively operationalised and measured (Perry, 1996; Wright
and Grant, 2010; Perry et al., 2010; Ritz et al., 2016). However, researchers typ-
ically treat PSM as an independent variable (Vandenabeele, 2011; Bozeman and
Su, 2015), tend to focus on its managerial applications (Wright and Grant, 2010,
p.697) and consider bureaucrats the sample population for their individual-level
data collection. Relatively few studies extend the conceptualisation of PSM to
average citizens (Bouckaert et al., 2005) or elected officials 1. As Bozeman et al.
state, the current PSM literature "provides few explicitly defined concepts... except
directly through empirical measures used" (2015, p.700)

This briefing breaks the concept into its component parts and discusses how
public service has been treated - explicitly and implicitly - in the academic and
practitioner literature. The aim of this briefing is to establish a set of "the right
questions" to ask about the idea of public service as a conceptualisation is devel-
oped in subsequent reports and working papers as part of the John Smith Centre's
interdisciplinary academic project, The Public Understanding of Public Service.
Five questions are identified in the conclusion.

2 Serving the Public vs. “Public Service”

In Perry's highly influential paper on the measurement of public service motiva-
tion, he states that "practitioners and scholars of public administration have long
claimed that public service is a special calling" (1996, p.5). Having examined the

1Exceptions include Perry et al. 2008 and Pedersen et al. 2017 who study citizens, and van der
Wal 2013; Pedersen 2014; Ritz 2015 and Bertelsen et al. 2017, who study politicians.
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academic literature on the topic (McMillan, 2018), I agree that an idealised notion of public service is treated with reverence in the literature. Though authors typically define the ideal in superlative language, however, this enthusiasm is rarely paired with an effort to develop a substantive conceptual framework. There are plenty of theories about public service, but few of public service.

Though dozens of different definitions of public service have been offered, most authors derive their basic themes from the same sources. An influential concept of public service was offered in a speech by the late Elmer Staats, a long-serving Comptroller General of the United States. He described public service as "an attitude, a sense of duty - yes, even a sense of public morality... basic to democratic society" (1988). This conception is threefold, with two descriptive dimensions and one normative. Staats thought of public service as both a mindset people possess and a responsibility people feel, and implied that mass belief in the norm is a foundational democratic value.

The idea of public service as a duty to which certain people are attracted is a pervasive one in the literature, making its way into most definitions of PSM (Bozeman and Su, 2015, p.702). To begin with, the idea of "service" already implies a subject's sense of duty to the individual or group served. But it does not necessarily imply any kind of motivation. Service can be altruistic, but it can also be performed in anticipation of a reward - or even coercively. Public service implies that the service performed entails its own normative specification.

How the "public" part is defined is therefore the more important element in the conceptualisation. The notion of public service implies accountability to (at least a segment of) the mass public - the citizenry - rather than the provision of any service to members of the public for any reason.

For example, supermarket cashiers serve the public, but are they public servants? I argue that they are not, because the public they serve are customers rather than stakeholders. This distinction is what defines the nature of the accountability relationship between the public and the individual providing the service. Supermarket employees may have a duty to customers, but it is a duty specified by a private organisation whose service to the public is a means to an end. That end is to generate value for stakeholders i.e. to make financial profit for its shareholders. To employees, the performance of service is to generate value for themselves i.e. to earn a living.

To public servants, on the other hand, the value is the public good and its stakeholders are the citizenry at large. Public service is the end. Though the scope of the "public" can vary depending on its size, the type of accountability the servant is subject to and the subset of society which benefits from the servant's efforts, the constant is that this public is ultimately who the servant answers to. As Rainey and Steinbauer put it, public servants must submit themselves and their ambitions to "the interests of a community of people, a state, a nation, or humankind" (1999). The descriptive term "public service", as used here, is defined by its normative underpinnings. An official who fails to live up to the normative values is, theoretically, no longer a public servant.

As Dobel points out, although these motivations "may entwine with self-interest and enjoyment of power and achievement" (2003, p.17), the normative ideal of
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Public service, though ill-defined, transcends "rational" individualistic behavioural models. Any conceptualisation must take care to embrace this normative specification and avoid the consumerist logic of much public administration scholarship (Frederickson and Hart, 1985) and the microeconomic underpinnings of "public choice" theories popular in the political science literature (Kelman, 1987). It appears that combining the notion of service with public accountability makes the idea of "public service" greater than the sum of its parts. I now move on to discuss the particular qualities and traits commonly associated with the concept.

3 The Virtues of Public Service

As noted, public service is often discussed in hyperbolic terms e.g. as "a calling, a sense of duty" (Houston, 2000) and a "general altruistic motivation" (Rainey and Steinbauer, 1999) which "must inculcate the patriotism of benevolence" (Frederickson and Hart, 1985). Public service has virtuous connotations, but, just like its conceptual definition, they tend to be implied rather than explicit. Bozeman et al. also noticed this in the PSM literature (2015). They present several vague definitions of PSM from the literature, criticising, *inter alia*, the conflation of the concept with general altruism, the assumption that public institutions/organisations are necessarily good, the idea that PSM is the antithesis of self-interest and that public institutions have no attraction besides whatever is included in an operational definition of PSM (Bozeman and Su, 2015, p.704). What about public service makes it uniquely virtuous?

The literature on PSM measurement may be more helpful in this regard. Though researchers working in the tradition do not interrogate the normative contents of public service *per se*, their measures of PSM provide clues by tapping the traits associated with and prior to an individual's public service orientation. The normative use of "public service" already implies motivation, so it is useful to have access to a body of work which investigates its components. By considering the traits associated with a public service ethic, it should be possible to propose theoretical reasons for term's noble associations.

Devising the first PSM measurement scale, Perry initially suggested that the concept had six dimensions, which he measured using a total of 40 survey items: attraction to public policy, commitment to the public interest, attitudes in favour of civic duty, social justice and compassion and self-sacrifice (Perry, 1996). Testing the scale using confirmatory factor analysis, he found that commitment to the public interest, social justice and civic duty were insufficiently distinct from one another among respondents and combined them. After debating the inclusion of self-sacrifice, Perry eventually settled on a four-dimensional structure. Numerous adaptations to Perry's original scale, with different dimensions and dimensionalities, have been proposed over the years (Coursey, 2007; Vandenabeele and Walle, 2008; Kim, 2011; Kim et al., 2013).

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2 Attraction to public-policy making, commitment to the public interest, compassion and self-sacrifice (Perry, 1996, p.15).
Most of these scales include measures of attraction towards civic duty and public participation, as well as compassion and/or self-sacrifice. The former two categories do not necessarily help us assess the normative virtue of public service; they simply move the goalposts to related abstract concepts. At root, the reason public service enjoys a positive normative reputation is the idea that it relates to virtuous prosocial values which revolve around helping others and subsuming one’s self-interest to a larger cause. The field of public administration is essentially built around the image of the noble bureaucrat foregoing private riches on a mission to improve the common lot (Brewer, 1998, p.414). Riker argued that the job of the political scientist is “the determination of the moral significance of reality” to “encourage the chosen morality” (Riker, 1965, p.vii), which is representative democracy. In parallel, the ideology of the science of public administration has always been the moral necessity of bureaucracy in democratic societies.

This observation is, obviously, far from ground-breaking. The virtue of benevolence as a “regime value” to be built into the government was expressed centuries ago by the founding fathers of the United States (Frederickson and Hart, 1985, p.550), and the history of the US government and its founding precepts strongly influenced the development of the political and bureaucratic sciences. But it is also the case that many different value concepts are paid lip-service in the public administration literature without sufficient differentiation or development (Bozeman and Su, 2015). The development of a theory of public service will necessitate spelling out precisely which values are foundational to the ideal and why they are considered virtuous in the first place, requiring some consideration of moral philosophy.

A final unresolved conceptual issue is the distinction between sectors. Is there a difference between elected and unelected public service? And between civic and official service? The following section considers the application of the concept to groups other than bureaucrats, especially citizens and their representatives.

4 Citizens, Representation and Public Service

Historically, the line between citizens, bureaucrats and politicians was blurred. In classical conceptions, democracy was considered to be a matter of direct citizen participation in government decision-making. This was not accompanied by the idea of universal political equality, however, and citizenship rights were restricted in the ancient societies which pioneered forms of democratic government. Direct democracy is also impractical at the scale of modern societies (Manin, 1997, p.8-9). Democracy is now understood to be representative, in that citizens collectively select political surrogates to create laws on their behalf (Dalton, 1985).

As discussed above, accountability to citizens is an essential aspect of public service. While bureaucrats are indirectly accountable to the public, politicians are directly accountable and their careers are contingent upon citizens’ continuing approval in periodic elections. But does that mean that they are not public servants as such? Are all public sector employees public servants? And, furthermore, if public service can be construed as an act (Brewer, 1998), can private citizens be
public servants?

**Representatives**

Until the latter part of the 20th century thinking about representation was dominated by two normative theories, most commonly known as the "delegate" and "trustee" models (Andeweg and Thomassen, 2005). Both are modelled as principal-agent relationships, in which the voter is the principal and the representative the agent. Delegates are direct proxies for their constituents' views, acting "as if the principal himself were acting" (Pitkin, 1967, p.144). Trustees, meanwhile, disregard their voters' sentiments and behave according to their own conscience in the interests of the state and the public good. Some authors have positioned these as two ends of a theoretical spectrum, with most real-world representatives falling somewhere in between (Eulau et al., 1959).

Pitkin, however, rejected this "mandate-independence" distinction as incoherent, arguing that a pure delegate or trustee relationship was impossible in the real world in her influential book *The Concept of Representation* (1967). She was one of the first political scientists to introduce several "views" of representation, of which she stated "each [is] tempting because it is partly right, but each [is] wrong because it takes a part of the concept for the whole" 1967, p.38. Others have since elaborated on Pitkin's ideas, developing a variety of perspectives on or modes of representation (Mansbridge, 2003; Andeweg and Thomassen, 2005; Rehfeld, 2009). Principal-agent models have not been entirely rebuked, but they are typically folded into more holistic conceptions of representation which also encompass, for example, the ability of representatives to anticipate voters' wishes ahead of time (Stimson et al., 1995) and the representation of demographic or interest groups outwith or not limited to legislators' districts (Mansbridge, 2003). These recent conceptions demonstrate increasing commonalities with the indirect accountability relationship between citizens and bureaucrats. Politicians are both directly and indirectly accountable to the public.

Elected representatives, therefore, qualify as public servants by virtually any normative definition of the term. Yet academics and practitioners have typically confined the definition of "public service" to the bureaucracy and other state employees. This is likely due to conflation of the "dual" concepts Brewer highlighted (1998). Furthermore, the overlap with similar concepts introduces further complications. "Public service" can be used synonymously with "public sector", "civil service" and, as is discussed below, "civic service". I contend that the tendency to separate the act of representation from the act of public service is the result of disciplinary divides and the projection of different normative values onto elected and unelected officials.

There is, after all, considerable tension between legislators and bureaucrats, and not only in the popular imagination. Staats claimed that candidates for

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3This is true in an official sense in Australia, where the civil service is formally known as the Public Service.

4Happily, there is no such thing as the "civic sector" to confuse matters further.

5Popular television shows like *Yes Minister*, *The Thick of It* have sensationalised the relationship
office in America unfairly targeted bureaucrats for political purposes, framing them as obstacles to reform and a symptom of the problems with "big government" (1988). Little seems to have changed in the intervening decades. Meanwhile, the idea of "faceless bureaucrats" subverting the democratic will of the British people has been a recurring theme of Euroceptic discourse on the other side of the Atlantic (Teubert, 2001). Researchers have recently found that a significant number of citizens express "bureauphobic" attitudes in spite of positive experiences with public sector employees and services (del Pino et al., 2016). This could be a knock-on effect of general public suspicion of democratic institutions, or it could be a direct result of politically motivated attacks on bureaucracy. Either way, it suggests that politicians and bureaucrats are both regarded by voters as "cogs in the system" (Marlowe, 2004).

There is also a longstanding difference in the way political scientists and public administration researchers have conceptualised the motivations of elected and unelected officials. Politicians have traditionally been viewed as self-interested rational actors "motivated by their personal desire for... income, prestige and power" (Downs, 1957, p.34), while public administrators have been viewed in the opposite way, as selfless disciples of the "Blessed Saint Bureaucracy" (del Pino et al., 2016, p.725). The few existing studies of PSM among politicians, however, suggest that they have broadly similar public service motives (van der Wal, 2013; Pedersen, 2014; Ritz, 2015; Bertelsen et al., 2017).

The direct representative link clearly confers additional responsibilities and constraints on representatives as compared to public administrators. As Dobel states, "the paradox of doing good in public office hinges on the need to gain and keep office and power in order to achieve durable political success" (2003, p.17). These goals sometimes conflict with each other in a way that they do not for bureaucrats. However, the conceptual distinction ought not to be between "politicians" on the one hand and "public servants" on the other, but between elected and unelected public servants.

Citizens

This briefing has already excluded privately employed servants of the public from an understanding of the term "public service". Whether private citizens can perform public service by e.g. volunteering, however, is a different matter.

"Civic duty" and similar concepts have always been included in PSM scales, providing overlap with political science research, where a sense of civic duty among citizens has been shown to influence electoral participation (Blais and Galais, 2016). Some citizens "feel" a normative obligation to vote, despite the apparent irrationality of the act (Riker and Ordeshook, 1968). This shows that, at the very least, private citizens have the capacity to experience and express similar normative compulsions to those which are said to drive public servants (Staats, 1988). Unfortunately, no research on PSM has been conducted using representative survey samples, so a direct comparison is not possible at this time.
Though citizens have received little attention in public administration scholarship (Bouckaert et al., 2005), existing definitions of public service are ambiguous concerning their role. Citizen volunteers would qualify as public servants according to one of Brewer’s definitions but not the other (1998). Other authors’ conceptualisations touch on public organisations or institutions, general altruistic motivations, and contributions to the public interest (Bozeman and Su, 2015, p.702), but it is often unclear whether this is intended to apply to citizens or not.

Empirically, Perry et al. investigated the antecedents of PSM among citizens who were considered “moral exemplars recognized for their contributions to the public good of their communities” (2008, p.445). By this standard, does public service encompass any “contribution to the public good”? Or must it be underpinned by a chain of official accountability?

Though citizen service does not entail formal accountability to the general public, many voluntary organisations and NGOs specify these in their mission statements and submit to public oversight. Charities, for example, typically have to be placed on an official registry and regulated.

The solution may be to distinguish between “public” and “civic” service, with the stipulation that public service necessitates a direct accountability link and therefore only encompasses officialdom. However, the existing academic definition of civic service is vague - “performing an action that is presumably of benefit to someone or some cause... in the spirit of improving living conditions or general welfare” (McBride et al., 2004, p.10) - while the operational definition is narrow, relating to participation in NGO-run programmes. The development of a coherent conceptual definition of civic service alongside public service may add clarity to both.

5 Conclusion

This project aims to synthesise - rather than conflate - the “dual meanings” of public service, not only to inform the John Smith Centre’s research agenda but to contribute to the conceptual and operational clarity of future academic work on the topic. Based on the the discussion, any conceptual definition of public service must provide answers to the following five questions.

1. What distinguishes public service from any kind of service to members of the public?
2. To what extent is public service a normative ideal rather than a description of an action or vocation?
3. Why is public service considered virtuous?
4. Does public service only apply to unelected officials, or are elected representatives also considered public servants?
5. What is the difference, if any, between public service and civic service?
This briefing summarised existing definitions of public service, identified gaps and weaknesses in these conceptions and proposed several starting points for the development of a coherent definition. A longer conceptual report on the concept of public service will be written in the coming months, expanding on the themes developed here following wider reading and interdisciplinary discussion and consultation.

References


REFERENCES


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