

# Profile of Motivated Social Workers: Evidence from the Philippines

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## Abstract

Empirical evidences have shown the many antecedents that may increase or dampen the altruistic motive of government workers. This article investigates the public service motive of Filipino social workers and how their individual characteristics such as age, education, length of service, and pursuit of pay might affect motivated work. Employing quantitative method, the study used Eta squared to measure the association between variables and the effect size. Findings suggest the high motivation of Filipino social workers to serve. Results also indicate that PSM is associated with both age and length of service. These insights can support policy initiatives to further improve the design and implementation of holistic intervention programs that will renew and increase the motivation to serve of aging and long-tenured employees. The non-association with pursuit of pay conforms with the autonomous perspective of PSM.

**Keywords:** Public Service Motivation, Filipino Social Workers, Pursuit of Pay

## Introduction

Through the years, scholars have explored public service motivation (PSM) from a variety of perspectives. In their study of the motivation of frontline service workers in the Philippines, Alcoba and Phinaitrup (2020, p. 80) affirmed that as a predictor variable, “PSM influences and shapes behavior and outcomes of public employees” and that highly-motivated individuals tend to be more satisfied with their jobs and less susceptible to workplace stress. The positive effects of PSM were also found evident on the relationships between the likelihood to blow the whistle against erring officials and transformational

leadership (Caillier, 2013); the tendency to leave jobs and demands of work (Shim et al., 2017); the satisfaction with training and their perceived competence gains (Thaler et al., 2016); and the employee engagement, accountability, and work stress (De Simone et al., 2016; Kim, 2016; S. M. Park et al., 2016), among others.

Filipino social workers “have high level of public service motivation that translates to positive outcomes” (Alcoba & Phinaitrup, 2020, p. 81). As studies suggest, there is a positive correlation between motivation and job satisfaction, and a negative relationship with workplace stress (Alcoba & Phinaitrup, 2021). This implies that high-PSM social workers not only derive greater satisfaction from their roles but are also more resilient to stress. While it is noteworthy to have empirical data that validated the presence of PSM among Filipino social workers, it might also be significant to public administration practice to understand motivation and its antecedents. Understanding the association of individual characteristics with the altruistic motivation of social workers can help inform the interventions that are necessary for increasing, sustaining, or renewing their motivation to serve.

This study takes a closer look at the Filipino social workers and examines how their demographic characteristics, including age, length of service, education and pursuit of pay, could be associated to their motivation for public service. Many government employees tend to work in the same office until the retirement age of 65 (Diaz, 2019). It will be interesting to learn how age and length of service link to the PSM. On the other hand, studies found that the variables, education (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007) and aspiration for high salary (Tang, 2007), also matter in public service-oriented motives.

The study aims to examine 1) the level of public service motivation of respondents according to different PSM dimensions and 2) the extent of association of PSM with age, education, pursuit of pay, and length of service.

## **Social Work in the Philippines**

Social work, as defined by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), is a profession dedicated to social change, advocating for equality, social justice and human rights, and empowering individuals and communities to improve their well-being. “Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (“Definition of Social Work,” 2000; Henrickson, 2013).

The local government units (LGUs) in the Philippines play a key role in addressing the needs of the people within their jurisdiction, especially through the social welfare programs. Social welfare employees, operating under the LGUs, implement a range of services aimed at enhancing the quality of life, including child welfare, family support, community development, and sustainability initiatives, specialized support for vulnerable groups like older adults, women, children, people with disabilities, and those facing mental health challenges ("Social Work in the Philippines Today," n.d.).

Being part of the municipal bureaucracy, Filipino social workers encounter problems and difficulties, including organizational politics brought on by the influence of mayors on local social welfare and development work and political patronage, and the lack of professional autonomy stemming from dependence on the mayor for funding (Yu, 2014). Social workers often contend with political influences, bureaucratic constraints, resource limitations, and policy shifts that complicate efforts and affect service delivery to communities. Despite the challenges, the study of Alcoba and Phinaitrup (2020) showed that respondent social workers in the Philippines are highly-motivated to serve which positively affects their commitment and satisfaction and buffers against burnout. These findings suggest that government organizations can significantly benefit from employees with high public service motivation (PSM).

### **Dimensions of Public Service Motivation**

The public service motive (PSM) is considered as the “motivational force that induces individuals to perform meaningful public service” (Brewer and Selden 1998, 417). Empirical studies show that PSM represents an individual motivation to serve public interest rather than self-interest and is dominated by collective altruistic values. High-PSM individuals are usually characterized by benevolence and a desire to serve others and affect the community (Houston and Cartwright 2007, 89). Public service motivation has direct positive impact on individual behavior and outcomes, citing this as possible reason why people enjoy public service work and find meaning and purpose in doing good for others (Alcoba & Phinaitrup, 2020).

There are six sub-dimensions that consist PSM: “attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest, civic duty, social justice, self-sacrifice, and compassion” (Perry, 1996, p. 5). Kim (2009, p. 159) condensed this into more robust, four-dimension construct: “attraction to policy-making, commitment to public interest, compassion and self-sacrifice”. These dimensions are classified as either rational, norm-based or affective motives. Rational motives are about utility maximization, example of which is the motivation to satisfy personal interest in policy making (Kim, 2009). Norm-based motives are the aspiration for common good such as the commitment and loyalty to public duty (Perry, 1996). Affective

motives are about human emotions, such as compassion and self-sacrifice. People with this motivation find meaning and value in the joy and satisfaction of helping other people.

### **Antecedents of PSM**

In a comprehensive review of non-Western PSM literatures published within a period of five years from 2015-2020, Mussagulova and van der Wal (2020) identified 22 antecedents employed in 83 empirical studies. Some of the most commonly-studied antecedents included leadership, work stress, ethical climate, and extrinsic motivators, among others. Of these, there was only one study pertaining to demographic characteristics of age, education and gender.

When Perry (1997) first introduced the concept of PSM as a unique attribute that sets public employees apart from private employees, he identified the different antecedents that could have caused it. He suggested that PSM could be a by-product of one's life experiences. A person's childhood, religious beliefs, and professional life inculcates a character of benevolence, compassion, selflessness, and empathy, among others. As a social construct and a response variable, experiences and upbringing are some of the factors that mold an individual to be more compassionate and selfless (Perry, 1997; Anderfuhren-Biget, 2012). The motivation to serve are also most likely to be associated with individual characteristics such as age, education, length of service and pursuit of pay (Camilleri, 2006; Midlarsky & Hannah, 1989; Kim, 2020; Chen and Hsieh, 2014). Although these variables have been often used as demographic control or mediating factors in different PSM studies, it is worth examining how they are associated with the public service motivation of Filipino social workers in the Philippines.

### **PSM, Age and Length of Service**

Aging refers to the changes that an individual undergoes biologically, psychologically and socially over time which affect him at personal, organizational and societal levels (Kooij, Lange and Dijkers, 2007). This makes the conceptualization of age complex and multidimensional. The generativity theory (Erikson, 1963) suggests that as people age or become older, their desire to leave a positive impact on society and to guide and serve the next generation increases (Erikson 1963; McAdams 2001). This linear relationship between generativity concerns and age (Midlarsky & Hannah, 1989) may explain the PSM-age relationship. It could be anticipated that the public service-oriented motives will be developed as people

age. Looking at the PSM dimensions, some studies found that compassion was positively related with age (Camilleri, 2006; Liu et al., 2008), as well as the attraction to policy making dimension (Giauque et al., 2012; Ritz, 2009; Taylor, 2007).

Alternative perspectives on ageism, however, reported that older workers pale in comparison to younger ones in terms of performance, innovativeness, cognitive ability and engagement. They are perceived as “plateaued employees” (Guillen & Kunze, 2019; Rice, Near and Hunt, 1980; Shore & Goldberg, 2005) as their engagement and motivation reach a certain level of passivity after reaching a certain age. Job content plateau where “one’s job is experienced as routine, boring, and unchallenging” (Weber, Angerer and Muller, 2019) was related with age stereotyping and increasing retirement intentions. It was also found to have other deteriorating effects such as organizational disidentification, work disengagement and lower learning and development intentions (Weber, Angerer and Muller, 2019). The discussions on age and PSM links to the PSM-tenure relationship. As people get older and working in the same organization for a long time, the level of engagement and motivation to serve may not be the same as time goes by. This may eventually lead to frustration among public sector employees who encounter frequent reforms and conflicting orders from superiors (Desmarais & Gamassou, 2013). The length of service was found to be negatively associated with public service motivation (PSM), particularly concerning the attraction to policy-making (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007). This implies that PSM may decline as the number of years in service increases which could mean a number of things. It suggests that there might be a gap on effectively communicating and acknowledging the valuable contribution of employees to their organization, hence their eagerness to participate in policy making wanes. The authors suggested that their respondents who were health workers may feel discouraged over time as they see limited progress in solving the problems of poverty and inequality, inadequate health and other social issues. This feeling of fatigue for doing the same work over and over again could result to the gradual lesion of compassion and loss of interest and enthusiasm on helping others. While this may not be true in other work areas, employees who have worked for many years in public service, including those in the health care sector, social welfare, teachers, police officers and other people whose occupations are on serving and caring for others are exposed every day to these stressors and at risk of compassion fatigue (Cocker & Nerida, 2016).

Building on the above, it is hypothesized that:

H1: PSM is associated with age.

H2: PSM is associated with length of service.

### **PSM and Education**

Education aims for people to actualize their social roles as beneficial and responsible members of society. Two of the three general functions of education in society are focused on values formation and the development of desirable behavior patterns into becoming better human beings (Türkkahraman, 2014). In the study of Turkish education, Dolgun and Dolgun (2018, p. 551) stated that “the teachers emphasised the importance of values education to be able to guide the children to good and right behaviors....”. The same study cited the findings of Powney (1995) of the values that are important for the students: kindness, honesty and respect, truthfulness, fairness, tolerance, self- control, self-discipline, and self-esteem. The formative experience an individual gets from education institutions shapes his or her character, beliefs and value system. This explains why Moynihan and Pandey (2007) predicted that education is, among all the socio-historical variables, the most powerful predictor of PSM. Related studies also found that the level of education and PSM are significantly related (Perry, 1996). Institutional socialization that comes with education, such as leadership experience, peer collaboration and volunteering positively influences PSM (Kim, 2020). These processes of institutional socialization that come with education cultivate PSM.

This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: PSM is associated with education.

### **PSM and Pursuit of High Pay**

Reflecting on Maslow's theory of needs, these two types of motivation, public service and high pay, are not totally dichotomic. The hierarchy of needs explains the patterns and stages through which motivation moves, whereas the fulfillment of basic needs leads to the satisfaction of higher-level needs. As the fulfillment of the pursuit for higher pay meets the basic physiological and safety needs, the individual moves to pursuing goals that are beyond himself. Hence, the motivation to serve others and the desire for money may not be disparate concepts after all, but step-by-step processes that complement each other. However, the argument based on the theory on the love of money points out that the desire for higher pay is not out of one's needs but actually is merely a want (Chen & Hsieh, 2014). Empirical evidences show that having money as motivator is incompatible with the altruistic values of PSM and can even lead to

unethical behavior (Tang, 2007). Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory argues on the contradicting relationship between PSM and the desire for external incentives. PSM is an autonomous type of motivation inherent to the person and is driven solely by the selfless desire to help and care for others. This autonomous motivation, however, may erode and get crowded-out by the desire for money (Frey & Osterloh, 2005). A study of South Korean civil servants suggests that the foundation for better work performance is extrinsic rewards such as pay increases. Although civil servants place more importance on meaningful work than higher pay, the author posits that the government must pay enough to hire civil servants with high levels of PSM

The study, therefore, hypothesizes that:

H4: PSM is associated with pursuit of pay.

## **Methodology**

The research is designed to expand knowledge by empirically testing the relationships between defined variables among respondent local government social workers in the Philippines. To address the research questions, the study utilized perceptual data, which were gathered directly from the participants. Many scholars use the perceptual method because it is an effective and expedient way to obtain the respondent's views directly (Carlos & Rodrigues, 2015). Data on the respondents' level of motivation to serve the public, including their "attraction to policy-making, commitment to public interest, compassion and self-sacrifice" (Kim, 2009, p. 159), were collected using a self-reported survey.

The research sample was derived from the officers of the social workers development office in the seven provinces composing the MIMAROPA region in Southern Luzon, Philippines: Batangas, Laguna, Marinduque, Occidental Mindoro, Oriental Mindoro, Palawan, and Romblon. The selection of these provinces as the area of study was based on the commonalities in their demographic, economic, and social conditions, ensuring a more controlled and comparable analysis. The first five provinces are small island provinces and the last two are annexed to the island of Luzon. Despite the relative differences in economic development of some provinces, the demands for social welfare are generally the same, with many residents across these provinces still living below the poverty threshold levels.

The research survey was conducted in 2019. To reach the respondents in remote municipalities, the study used a multi-method data collection approach, ensuring broader coverage and participation. The

study employed online surveys, post-mail, and face-to-face interactions to accommodate various accessibility levels for the social welfare officers.

Out of a total population size of 144, the study achieved a high response rate of 85%, which indicates a good representation of the population. The respondents were social welfare officers at all levels of local government – city, municipal, and provincial. 119 valid responses were obtained after cleaning the data, providing a solid dataset for analysis.

A number of scales have been developed in the past to measure PSM taking into account statistical validity, theoretical dimensions, and international relevance. The original scale had six sub-dimensions consisting of 24-items (Perry, 1996). Kim (2011) developed a version which is more applicable internationally and is more relevant, specifically to the context of the Philippines. It was a 12-item construct that measures each of the four PSM components, with three items constituting every component. The full measurement construct can be found in the Appendix. The questionnaire was pretested and piloted to ensure ease of use and validity, achieving a Cronbach's alpha of .83 across all variables. This result indicated a high level of internal consistency and reliability. The pre-testing process helped the researchers to refine the instrument to make them more relevant and understandable within the context of social work.

Information on the personal characteristics of the respondents were collected, including age, years of service, education and pursuit of pay, in order to examine the association of these characteristics to each of the PSM dimensions using eta-squared. The statistical tool eta-squared is a "descriptive measure of the strength of association between independent and dependent variables in the sample" (Fay, K. & Boyd, M., 2010, p. 423). Eta-squared is commonly used in ANOVA and *t* test designs as an index of the proportion of variance attributed to one or more effects (Salkind, 2010).

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents**

Almost half (45%) of the respondents were 51-60 years of age, 13% were 61 years old and above, while the rest were aged 50 and below. 23% were 41-50 years old, 15% were 31-40 years old, and 4% were 30 years and below. Majority (44%) have been on long tenure in the organization, having worked for over 26 years. The rest of the respondents have worked for only 15 years of or less. 60% indicated that salary was important, 32% indicated said that it was extremely important, while 8% said that it was not important at all.

### Descriptive Analysis of Variable

Table 1 shows the level of agreement of the respondents to each construct within the four PSM dimensions. The overall mean score is 4.33 indicating the respondents' agreement to the variables measured. At the dimension level, Attraction to Policy Making received the highest mean score of 4.67 suggesting that most respondents have strong interest in participating in public programs. The score for commitment to public interest was 4.47, Self-sacrifice was 4.23, and Compassion was 3.98.

**Table 1.** PSM Mean

Construct	Mean	SD	Level of Agreement
Attraction to Policy Making	4.67		Strongly Agree
Commitment to Public Interest	4.47		Agree
Compassion	3.98		Agree
Self-sacrifice	4.23		Agree
Overall Mean	4.33		Agree

### Socio-demographic factors per dimension

The eta and eta-squared values in Table 2 show that age and length of service are significantly related with PSM, thereby accepting hypotheses 1 and 2. In particular, age has small effect to commitment to public service ( $\eta^2 = .0658$ ), and small to medium effect to compassion ( $\eta^2 = .1265$ ). Age is not associated with self-sacrifice nor with being attracted to policy making. Length of service has small to medium effect on attraction to public service ( $\eta^2 = .1199$ ), and small effect on compassion ( $\eta^2 = .0671$ ).

Results show that education and pursuit of pay do not have effect or association with any of the four PSM dimensions, thereby rejecting hypotheses 3 and 4.

**Table 2.** Eta Values of PSM Dimensions

DV: PSM Dimensions	Eta	Eta Squared	Interpretation
IV: Age			
Attraction	0.08695	0.0076	No Effect/No Association
Commitment	0.2565	0.0658	Small Effect
Compassion	0.35572	0.1265	Small to Medium Effect
Self Sacrifice	0.13324	0.0178	No Effect/No Association
IV: Length of Service			
Attraction	0.3462	0.1199	Small to Medium Effect
Commitment	0.17375	0.0302	No Effect/No Association
Compassion	0.25904	0.0671	Small Effect
Self Sacrifice	0.12523	0.0157	No Effect/No Association
IV: Education			
Attraction	0.13881	0.0193	No Effect/No Association
Commitment	0.13036	0.017	No Effect/No Association
Compassion	0.14466	0.0209	No Effect/No Association
Self Sacrifice	0.11255	0.0127	No Effect/No Association
IV: Pursuit of Pay			
Attraction	0.16059	0.0258	No Effect/No Association
Commitment	0.13739	0.0189	No Effect/No Association
Compassion	0.12811	0.0164	No Effect/No Association
Self Sacrifice	0.18017	0.0325	No Effect/No Association

## Discussion

The novelty of this research study is that while many existing studies investigated cross-cutting population across a broad arena of public service (Van der Wal, 2015), this study offers a contextual view of a non-western setting, particularly in one of the primary agents of public service delivery, the social work. The results confirm existing empirical studies on the altruistic and autonomous nature of PSM.

Findings suggest that the Filipino social workers are highly motivated in doing public service. This may not come as a surprise anymore because only people with such altruistic motive can withstand the demands of the job of a social worker.

The association of commitment and compassion with age, as shown in the findings of this research, is important especially in the context of the Philippine government sector where there are many who choose to keep working until the mandatory retirement age of 65 to receive the maximum level of retirement benefits (Diaz, 2019). The demographic profile of respondents shows that more than 50% are 50 years old and above, and 43% have worked in the same organization for two decades or more. It is interesting to note that both age and length of service are particularly associated with the PSM sub-dimension compassion. These findings can provide insights to policy interventions and policy discussions to further improve the design and implementation of holistic intervention programs that will increase or renew the motivation to serve among aging and long-tenured employees. As employees age and accumulate years of service, their priorities, motivations, and engagement levels may shift, potentially impacting their commitment to public service values. Implementing intervention programs to manage the effects of age and tenure on public service motivation can benefit both the organization and the people it serves.

The non-association of pursuit of pay with any of the four PSM dimensions aligns with the autonomous perspective about PSM. It is in conformance with the self-determination theory explaining how PSM is inherent to the person and is driven by selfless desire (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, while civil servants may value meaningful work than pay, it is still important to have an attractive salary offer to hire highly-motivated employees

## **Conclusion**

This study offers valuable empirical evidence on the varying levels of public service motivation according to dimensions. Highest levels of PSM are attributed to commitment to public service and attraction to policy making. These findings suggest the importance of personal characteristics as explanatory elements of PSM. As it turned out, age and length of service are associated with the motivation to serve. Government agencies can investigate ways to renew and increase motivation in order to continue to benefit from their experienced and loyal employees. Intervention programs to help renew public service-oriented motives among social service workers even as they age can be in various forms, such as by providing opportunities to make their jobs more enjoyable with some measures of autonomy, control, and variations;

acknowledging their contribution to the organization and to society; and creating emotional connectedness in the workplace, among others.

Based on this preliminary study, it is recommended that further research be conducted to discover the dynamics of the relationship between PSM and other socio-demographic antecedents. A more specific and sectoral examination will help give a better and more in-depth understanding of public organizations and their employees.

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Alcoba, R. C., & Phinaitrup, B. (2021). What Makes Government Workers Tick? Reinforcing Motivation through Workplace Trust to Attenuate Effects of Perceived Politics on Outcomes. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 46(4), 291–301.

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