Bureaucracy vs. the Public Service Ethos:
Contemporary Concepts of Public Service

By Lois Redman-Simmons
Assistant Professor
Department of Public Management
John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY

INTRODUCTION

Why someone accepts a particular kind of employment may be immediately explained as the consequence of available opportunities, financial circumstances, and their relevant ability, knowledge, and skills. The selection of a career, however, is a more complex decision, which has attracted much consideration and scholarship from several fields. Theoretical models have been proposed by scholars of public administration, organizational behavior, and vocational psychology and counseling to enlighten us on the basis of that choice, seen as the product of socialization, intrinsic motivation, career planning, and perceptions of shared values between individuals and organizations in the prospective employment environments.

Perceptions of values reflected by government organizations have been somewhat inconsistent and contradictory over time. From the literature we can deduce both negative and positive concepts. A negative view reveals a bureaucratic culture characterized by constraints within government agencies, portrayed as rigid, stifling, and contributing to organizational ineffectiveness in the delivery of public services. To a great extent this view is compounded by the popular media that satirize those environments.

The *popularized* view of government bureaucracies challenges more positive, *ideological* concepts of government organizations as imbued with the public service ethos, characterized by commitment to the public interest and to the common good. Pittegrew (1979) argued that conflicting ideas about government employment impede entry into public service, because, in order for people to function within any given

setting, they must have a secure sense of that reality. Awareness of a positive organizational culture would provide for that orientation.

In this study, the organizational behavior approach to explaining career decision-making is pursued. The purpose of the study is to investigate *how contemporary concepts of public service reflect the popularized and ideological versions; and how these different concepts influence career choice* among a random sample of MPA and MBA students from 17 U.S. northeast universities. The importance of understanding the underlying principles of a particular career decision can be linked to advancing the command of human resource issues related to the management of productivity and tenure. Indeed, the career decision can be associated with individuals' comfort zones, lifestyle preference, and job satisfaction, all of which are positively associated with performance and tenure. The study of career decision-making is therefore of interest to human resource managers involved with employee recruitment and selection and university enrollment administrators, who, in both cases want to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their function.

BACKGROUND

Over the last twenty-five years there has been considerable effort among public administration scholars to explain the rationale behind entering government public service professions, Perry & Wise (1990); Perry (1996, 1997); Naff & Crum (1999); Lewis & Frank (2002); Knapp & McClean (2003); Macchiavello (2003); Vandenabeele, Hondeghem & Steen (2004); and Redman-Simmons & Holzer (2008). The public service ethos is an organizational culture that has traditionally been referred to in differentiating

government organizations and their employees from other types. It has set the context for public sector employment.

In an era of government outsourcing, however, where the cultural context of public service delivery is changing, the presence of traditional concepts of public service among university students and alumni has been questioned (Chetkovich, 2001; Light, 2003). Through interviews, Chetkovich (2001) surveyed public policy students at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. Her research focused on students views about of public service and their attitudes toward government. She found that many struggled to define public service; they also believed that the only government jobs available to them were routine, narrow in scope, highly constrained, involving little potential for development.

In studies by Light (2003) and by Chetkovich (2001), we read that alumni and students of public administration and public policy are not hearing the call to public service exclusively or predominantly coming from government. According to Light, increasingly they are seeking to realize their desire to be in service to the public outside of government. In a testimony before the United States Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, Light reported (2003) on a data collected by the Wagner School of Public Service, New York University, over the previous five years. The data was collected through random-sample surveys of federal employees, non-profit employees, the American public, human services, workers, college seniors, non-profit executives, civic leaders, presidential appointees, and college professors. According to Light, although the research deals with a variety of questions, the general conclusion is that across the board, the federal government has become the employer of last resort.

The public service ethos is no longer considered unique to government (Light, 2003; Houston, 2000). In the context of New Public Management, the synthesis of traditional public service values (self-sacrificial concern for the community and other non-utilitarian values) and business administration ethics (efficiency, productivity, and more utilitarian values) has been less advantageous to the government than to private businesses. Private businesses are increasingly being contracted to provide public services. This reported shifting in the value base of public administration is also confusing to the public (Simeone, 2004) because it is perceived that these developments could ultimately damage the democratic process itself (Volcker Commission, 1989).

The traditional public service ethos as the cultural reference point of public service professionals needs to be reassessed. This study brings the public service ethos into the spotlight so that an assessment can be made of how it is withstanding the pressures of the market ethos (West, 1999). The study informs on the importance of the need to foster this culture among MPA students and other potential public service professionals.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Public Service Ethos as Positive Public Sector Ideology

The public service ethos is an ideology (Caiden, 1981) applied to the character of public administration (Plant, 2003). Its roots in western democracies have been traced by Plant to the late nineteenth century, when the university began in its role of training young men in the ideals of citizenship and in the service of the common good. According to Plant, they would enter the service of the state, believing the state to be a body with moral purposes and articulating a sense of the common and public good, which they

would then pursue in a disinterested way. Disinterest, in this sense, means without priority given to personal gain. These ideas were traced further back to Plato, and to Hegel. In Plato's *Republic,* the Guardians pursue the public good without private interest, whereas Hegel, in *The Philosophy of Right* (1820), wrote about civil service as the universal class, which satisfied their self-interests while in pursuit of the public interest (Plant, 2003).

The public service ethos is also regarded as a value and as representing values. It is valued for providing an *esprit de corps,* a feeling of camaraderie among public employees: a sense of unity, continuity, and collegiality. When someone describes himself or herself as a "public servant" it is testimony to the power of the ethos (Parliament U.K., 2001). As Caiden (1981) states, the public service ethos is the shaper of integrity and values and many values are associated with it. But according to Gunn (1981), the supreme value is "the public interest" because the public administrator must consider not only those interests pressed before him but also the interests of those not adequately represented in the political process, in this way safeguarding social equity. Producing public goods and services is not simply a question of efficiency; it also involves consideration of side effects on the public at large (Heffron, 1989; Beck Jørgensen et al., 1998).

Some characterize the public service ethos as a myth − a set of vague and ambiguous statements. However, some have sought to assert the reality of the ethos and to make its contents concrete (Brereton & Temple, 1999). It has been expressed, in particular, by the characteristics of public servants: ideally altruistic, community oriented, impartial, professional, and loyal to the public good. Holzer (1993) describes the typical

public servant as dedicated and motivated by a special calling to serve others, to solve challenging problems, and to improve public welfare.

Frederickson and Hart (1985) emphasized that one important distinction of public service, rendered from government, is that the public expect more from bureaucracy. They describe this ideal as the "patriotism of benevolence," the primary moral obligation in the nation. In practice, this is seen as "an extensive love of all people within our political boundaries and the imperative that they must be protected in all of the basic rights granted to them by enabling documents." Frederickson and Hart perceive the importance to citizens that they are loved and cared for by the bureaucracy. In 2001, Frederickson also called for a return to core values and practices within the public service. Frederickson identifies the capacity to care for others and the capacity to love as important personality traits for government employees.

Penelope Furey (2003) refers to public service as a treasured part of a genuinely democratic lifestyle. It begins with an individual willing to make a difference by becoming involved. It expresses how the public can become actively involved in transforming their communities. According to Furey, the personality trait of a disposition toward community involvement is an expression of a willingness to make a difference. Whereas Frederickson saw public service as a personal attribute, from another perspective Furey sees it as a value. From the literature on the public service ethos, we may characterize public service as coming primarily from government organizations. It may be inspired by the desire to improve public welfare or to solve problems in the community; by the spirit of professionalism; or by the sense of duty, integrity, morals,

and responsibility. It is primarily concerned with the common good among the public and its best interest.

As this review of the literature has shown, the public service ethos has ethical, cultural, historical, and philosophical foundations, with significant value attributed to it as a motivator to serve the public interest.

Popularized Bureaucracy Negatively Construed

Contrasting views of government organizations presents guidelines of how such views may vary and contributes to formulating a framework for investigating the differences. Hegel saw bureaucrats as mediating between constitutional norms and concrete situations, subsuming the particular into the universal, and concretizing universal norms, Shaw (1992). Today, this is called problem-solving activity in the interest of the common good. As Downs (1965) explains, bureaucrats make critical decisions that shape the economic, political, social, and moral lives of nearly everyone on earth. In modern times, however, the term "bureaucrat" is universally regarded as an insult (Downs, 1965). Colloquially speaking, bureaucracy means red tape, over-controlling bosses, and apathetic employees (Alder, 1999). All of these are seen as the product of formalized organizations that stifle innovation (Alder & Borys, 1996).   The dilemma is that an important motive of formalization is to protect the public's interests.

In the public sector, the culture (or sources of organizational behavior) is defined as paradoxical (Whorton & Worthley, 1981), as it includes both positive and negative forces. The conflicting ideas about government employment impede entry into public service, because in order for people to function within any given setting, they must have a

continuing sense of that reality (Pittegrew, 1979). According to Pittegrew, culture provides for a general sense of orientation.

Whorton and Worthley point out that the positive force is based on the philosophical expression of high ideals and aspirations, referred to as the public sector (service) ethos. The negative force is characterized by constraints and limitations and is typically labeled "bureaucracy," and that for the public manager, bureaucracy transcends the agency as a legislative instrument of the normative behavior expected of all public employees. Above all, the bureaucratic culture is often presented as depersonalized, rigid, and preoccupied with rules that weaken employees' enthusiasm and initiative (Kets de Vries & Miller, 1986), which is likely to discourage career aspirants.

As a consequence of this paradox, public managers face a schizophrenic existence. They are both agents for social good and incipient wrongdoers (Whorton & Worthley, 1981). Although the positive image of government agencies and their employees might be more conducive to attracting would-be careerists, the negative image receives more attention and is popularized by the arts, the press, and the media, and tends to prevail.

McCurdy (1995) argues that fiction, for example, affects what public managers do and how they do it. It appears to shape the policies that public servants carry out and how they do their duties. McCurdy defines fiction as the term that encompasses works of art portraying imaginary effects and persons as in novels, cinema, and television drama and in the theater. Used positively, fiction and imagination may illuminate the activities of government agencies in other important ways by providing case studies for administrative learning. In a call against bureaucrat bashing, Yarwood (1996) pointed out

that humor and ridicule can bring about positive change if well directed, but otherwise bread cynicism and poor morale when they are employed abusively.

We may summarize from the literature that there are negative views about public service primarily that the constraints within public organizations are portrayed as rigid and stifling to its employees, that contradict the positive principles associated with the public service ethos as discussed above. This study examines the extent to which graduate students perceive government employment as "bureaucracy" versus oriented toward "public service" and how this affects choosing careers in government. From a review of the literature the following research questions are posed:

1. How do the contemporary concepts of "public service" among graduate students reflect the ideological or popularized concepts of government organizations?

2. How do the different concepts of "public service" among graduate students influence their career choice?

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative data was collected for the study using an online survey questionnaire. Survey questions were:

1. What is the name of the graduate program that you are currently enrolled in?

2. What does the phrase 'public service' mean to you?

3. When you graduate, which type of organizations would you like to work for most?

Data was also collected on age, race and gender.

The responses to the first question were subjected to content analysis; the results were classified and quantified, then analyzed through cross-tabulations. The second question was designed to collect data for testing the following hypothesis:

> Individuals' positive conceptualization of "public service" as government employment aimed at the common good is a strong predictor of their choice of a public service profession in government, when compared to the negative perception of public service as "bureaucracy."

The population for the study comprised graduate students of public administration and business administration programs at universities in the northeastern U.S. Participants obtained access to the survey through a URL, where the survey was administered through Zoomerang zPro for Education software. Chairs of public administration and business administration programs at 35 universities in the northeastern U.S. were contacted for their approval, via email. The email contained the URL and a letter requesting their cooperation. The mailing list for this was compiled using university listings on the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) website, which directed the researcher to the individual university websites.

In the nine states of the U.S. northeast region six house universities where both public administration and business administration programs are offered: Connecticut (2), Maine (2), Massachusetts (5), New Jersey (6), New York (11), and Pennsylvania (9) (n=35). The researcher believed that targeting responses from graduate students enrolled in public administration and business administration programs at the same universities would help control for differences in the socio-political and cultural environments. The chairs of the programs were requested to notify their students of the survey via email, including the URL. There were, finally, 17 participating universities, (See Appendix 1).

Probability random sampling was the method used. Although the entire population of students in each university was targeted, respondents themselves decided anonymously whether they wanted to take part in the survey, in this way taking the actual participant selection beyond the control of the researcher. The total number of students to receive the questionnaire was calculated based on the number of visits to the URL recorded in the Zoomerang program (N=448). This is the only actual proof of the reach of the survey.

The survey was accessible online starting January 29, 2007. The initial response period was two weeks, but the deadline was extended to March 20, 2007 in an effort to increase the response. To this end, a second request for cooperation was sent to the universities. In general, the rate of responses was irregular, from a few to as many as 20 in one day. Responses tended to be submitted between 9 and 11 a.m. and between 5 and 7 p.m.

RESULTS

The respondents represented primarily two sampling groups: students enrolled in public administration programs and students enrolled in business administration programs. The distribution of respondents by graduate program registration is 64 for MBA and 227 for MPA students. In both graduate programs, the sample comprised combinations of practitioners and students.

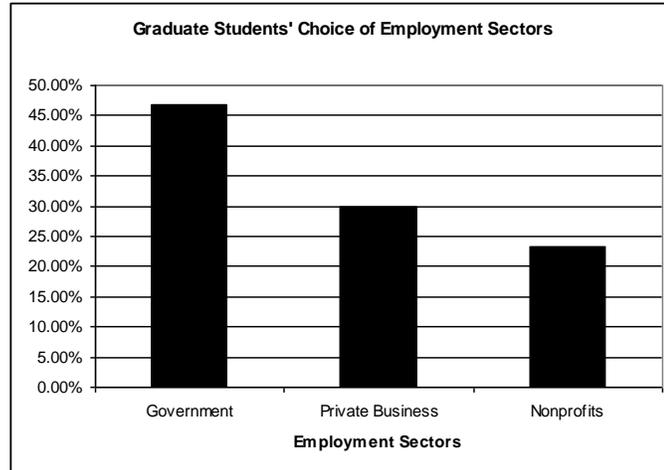**Graduate Students' Choice of Employment Sectors**

Figure 1- Graduate Students' Choices of Organizations to Work for After Graduation

The results of the study indicate that in the U.S. northeast region, the majority of public administration students surveyed consider government the employer of choice, over private businesses and nonprofits. The results show that 47% of the sample would prefer to work for government after graduation – the choice of 58% of the students enrolled in public administration programs. In comparison, 29.9% are planning to work in private businesses, and 23.1% are planning for careers in nonprofits.

Content analysis was conducted on the questionnaire responses (N=291) to observe how concepts of public service were expressed, whether they were predominantly positive or negative – in accordance with the criteria in Table 1., and what themes were prevalent. Based on ideas derived from the literatures under the categories of public service as positive and bureaucracy as negative, 88 percent (N=258)   of the respondents had positive concepts of public service.

Analyzing responses in this way led to the creation of a categorical independent variable to measure positive concepts of public service – one (1), and negative concepts of public service as bureaucracy – zero (0), in order to test the hypothesis. Cross

tabulation indicated that 203/227 of the respondents in public administration programs conceptualized public service positively, as did 55/64 of those enrolled in business programs.

Based on the skewed distribution, it was not expected that the variable differentiating between positive and negative concepts of public service would be very strong in predicting the decision about entering public service among respondents. The study of concepts of public service was useful in better describing and understanding how public service is conceptualized.

Table 1

Concepts of Public Service

Concept	*N*	*%*
Positive	258	88.7
Greater Good	65	22.34
For Betterment/Improvement	42	14.43
To Help	35	12.03
Government Employment	34	11.70
Service	29	9.80
Public Interest	17	5.84
Professional Vocation	10	3.44
Problem Solving	10	3.44
Selfless Occupation	9	3.09
Civic Duty	7	2.41
Negative	33	11.3
Limitations/Constraints	33	11.30

Note. N=291

The results of the content analysis indicated that public service was positively conceptualized along three main themes: public service is associated mainly with government, activities are directed toward communities, and these activities are intended toward betterment and improvement of the quality of life within those communities. The word frequencies through which this was expressed are given in Table 2.

Table 2

Word Frequencies for Content Analysis

Words	Frequency
Betterment/Improvement/Enhancement	79
Community	64
Good	49
Government	47
Society/Humanity/Citizenry	43
Nonprofits/Charities/Volunteering	19

Note. N=291

The following are some of the responses in which students expressed their concepts of public service. These were selected to illustrate the concept of public service as being for the betterment, improvement, and enhancement of society. Many students stated this concisely and simply, in statements very similar to the following: "Public service is improving the way society works"; "Public service is helping to make citizens' lives better"; and "Public service is applying one's talents toward the enhancement of others' well-being."

Some respondents' definitions were lengthier. Those included here were selected because they contribute in some unique way to the concept of public service: "Public service is being in service for the community, improving the way people create a better living together"; "Public service means using your skills and abilities to make government work better for society as a whole"; and "Public service is the dedication of one's professional life and education to the improvement of communities and their citizenry, through public policy development, research, and practice."

The concept of public service involving giving of oneself for the betterment of others was also frequently expressed. For example:

"I view public service to mean holding the ideals of the public above your own, to give my skills to ensure the prosperity of my own community and country."

"Public service is devoting your life to issues of social justice and equity, rather than thinking about how to create more wealth for the already wealthy."

"Public service is to dedicate your life to serving the common good without undue regard for personal financial or social gain."

On the negative side, concepts of public administration were expressed as limited, mainly in relation to the pay benefits to be derived by employees. Public service was described, for example, as low pay, poor pay, do gooders with low pay, working for free or for very little money, slaving away, and making sacrifices of time and money. Based on cross-tabulation, the researcher determined that 24 of the 33 respondents with negative views about public service were enrolled in public administration graduate programs and the other 9 were enrolled in business administration. According to the qualitative data collected, public service is mainly associated with government, involving activities directed toward communities that are intended to improve their quality of life.

Pearson's Chi-square statistic was used in testing the hypothesis to determine whether there was any statistical dependence between the two categorical variables: **pbsvbur1** (concepts of public service) and **sectorgv** (decision to work for government). The tests for correlation between the dependent and independent variables indicated low-to-negligible correlation between **pbsvbur1** and **sectorgv**.

The Chi-square statistic is valid for all types of variables including categorical dependent and independent variables. In this computation, the Chi-square statistic did not indicate significance: its p value of .348 was not less than.05, the significance level established for this study. In this test, the requirements were met for sample size that is neither large nor small and that zero percent of cells had an expected count of less than 5. The expected count statistic was 15.54.

The Phi Cramer's V test for nominal variables, which is based on the Chi-square statistic, also indicated that the relationship between the dependent and independent variables was a weak one (.348). Phi Cramer's V ranges between zero (0, weak) and one (1, strong). This variable was also examined in a logistical regression equation. With the entry of this variable, there was no change to the results from the preliminary table of cases correctly classified from the logistic regression. Neither the model Chi-square (.345) nor the Wald statistic (.349) was significant. We concluded from the results, primarily from the Chi-square statistics, that the variable **pbsvbur1** (concepts of public service, whether positive or negative) was not significant in predicting the decisions on entering a public service profession in government.

Table 3

Cross Tabulation for the Hypothesis for Relationship Between Positive Concepts of Public Service as a Predictor of the Decision to Enter Government Public Service Careers

		pbsvbur1		Total
		0	1	0
sectorgv	0	20	134	154
	1	13	124	137
Total		33	258	291

Chi-sq: 0.882   *DF: 1*   *Sig:* .348   Phi Cramer's V: .348

Logistic Regression

Log Likelihood Ratio: 0.890.   DF. 1   p value: .345

Note. N=291
pbsvbur1- Concepts of Public Service
sectorgv- Decision to Work for Government

Even those who did not indicate a preference to work in government after graduation conceptualized public service positively and along traditional lines such as prioritizing the public and common good, self-sacrificial attitudes, and commitment to the community at both local and national levels. The demonstration of traditional concepts of public service was robust among the respondents, including the negative concepts, which fitted the traditional patterns of constraints and limitations regarding employment conditions.

The study indicates that within the sample, the public service ethos is strong. More information is needed in order to sustain it and to foster it in other geographic areas.

CONCLUSIONS

The demonstration of traditional concepts of public service was robust among the respondents, including the negative concepts, which fitted the traditional patterns of constraints and limitations regarding employment conditions. Although concepts of public service were not a strong predictor (.35) of the decision whether to enter public service professions in government, a large majority of the respondents held positive concepts of public service (88.7%), and this was roughly the same for the MPA and MBA groups. Even students who did not indicate a preference to work in government after graduation conceptualized public service positively and along traditional lines such as prioritizing the public and common good, self-sacrificial attitudes, and commitment to the community at both local and national levels.

For scholars of public administration, the results of this study indicate that the public service ethos may be recognized and valued by the other sectors and by those who

more disposed to working in those sectors. Generally, students' concepts of "public service" very strongly reflect the traditional public service ethos among graduate students, both positively – as public service and negatively – as bureaucracy. The study indicates that within the sample, the public service ethos is strong. Given that the graduate student population is an excellent resource for staffing government organizations, the good news is that this study suggests that it is also an available resource. More information is, therefore, needed in order to uphold it and to foster it in other geographic areas.

In this sample, government organizations were the employment sector of choice for twice as many respondents as nonprofits or private business. This shows that a majority is still hearing the call to public service coming from government, and as revealed in the content analysis, government is still perceived as the prominent deliverer of public services. Indeed, as demonstrated in other studies, the popularity of government as an employer or public service provider is not consistent across the population or overtime, but insight into the underlying principles that foster positive dispositions toward government public service will contribute to sustaining these.

Limitations to this study included the small sample size relative to the population of students enrolled in MPA and MBA programs across the U.S. northeast region. This constricted the study by not allowing for meaningful comparisons between students by program enrollment, and contributed to response bias in the data collected. This study was designed to collect proportionate quantities of data from graduate students currently enrolled in MPA or MBA programs at universities in the U.S. northeast region, by distributing the survey to universities with both types of graduate programs. In both

cases, the same procedures were followed to promote participation. There was, however, a marked difference in the number of respondents from the two groups, with 78.01% MPA students and 21.99% MBA students. Follow-up investigation of non-responses is not possible due to the anonymity of the survey recipients.

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APPENDIX 1

List of Consenting Universities and Graduate Programs

Participating U.S. Northeastern Colleges and Universities (n=17)

Binghamton Universities
Carnegie Mellon University
Kean University
Marist College
Marywood University
Northeastern University
Pace University
Penn State - Harrisburg
Rutgers New Brunswick
Rutgers-Newark
Syracuse University
Universities of Maine
University of Massachusetts-Amherst
University of Pennsylvania
University of Pittsburgh
Universities of Southern Maine
Villanova University

Graduate Programs

Master of City Management, Master of Public Health Science, Master of Public Affairs, Master of Public Administration, Master of Public Policy, Master of Public Service Masters in Business Administration, Executive Masters in Business Administration, MBA Management, MBA Healthcare Management, MBA Systems Management, MBA Global Management, MBA Executive Management, International Executive MBA, Masters in Accounting.