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The High Note of Meaning: A Case Study of Public Service Motivation of Local Government Officials

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Abstract: Public service motivation (PSM) has provided a new breadth to the study of what attracts and retains workers in public organizations committed to the public mission. The present research contributes to the topic by exploring local government workers' motivation for public service, the meaning they attribute to their activity as public servants, and the relations between PSM and the meaning of work (MOW). An adaptation of the PSM scale to the Portuguese language and context and the local level of public administration is proposed based on a sample of seventeen surveyed municipalities involving 252 participants. Within the analyzed context, dedication to the public interest is the most important factor of public service motivation and, alongside self-sacrifice, more common in older public servants and those with higher educational degrees. Workers with temporary job contracts rank higher in indifference and disbelief in politics as opposed to those workers with tenure who show a higher dedication to the public interest. The majority of the participants consider their work to be purposeful and meaningful, a state that is significantly positively correlated with the more altruistic dimensions of PSM, self-sacrifice and dedication to the public interest, suggesting a profitable venue of organizational research and work policy benchmarking.

Keywords: public service motivation; meaning of work; public administration; local government



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1. Introduction

It is argued that public service morale has been declining in many countries due to the pressure of maintaining the same level of efficiency with less resources as well as a perceived lack of opportunity for career advancement and personal growth (UNDP 2014). The centrality of public service employees' intrinsic motives and concern for the common good of society is of such extent that it integrates the definition of public service itself. The actual behavior linked to public service motivation (PSM) is more commonly explained in the light of institutional theory (e.g., Perry and Vandenabeele 2015; Vandenabeele 2007), advocating for a set of common public values that define how society should be organized. While this call for public service is not monolithically altruistic, the valorization of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards by those who have it diverges significantly from their private counterpart. What is more, evidence shows that PSM not only predicts the choice to serve the public good but also attracts to public organizational cultures employees committed to the same vision and values (Perry 2012).

High levels of PSM may also strengthen the workforce resilience to face challenging times, minimizing the impact of other contextual and situational factors. Vandenabeele et al. (2018) aggregated results showing the average PSM variation across nations, and a relatively recent study of PSM adapted to the European context (Vandenabeele 2004), while reflecting similarities in motivational determinants and factors, also mirrored the overarching values of each culture.

With mediation through individual performance, PSM is seen to increase organizational performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Vandenabeele et al. 2018).

Although PSM studies have been recently gaining preponderance amongst European scholars (in particular in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Italy), in other countries, such as Portugal, the PSM antecedents and outcomes are under-researched and overlooked in the political arena. In 2015, the first and only report on government public servants' motivation revealed that almost 40% of the employees felt demotivated to perform their job. Such results were partly explained by the worldwide economic crisis that occurred in the late 2000s with severe impacts on the Portuguese public administration. Despite acknowledging the importance of the topic and that the study only portrayed central government workers, no further surveys were conducted.

Furthermore, despite public servants being perceived as harboring a more idealistic view on the meaning of their work and intrinsic motives (e.g., Thompson and Christensen 2018), little research has been conducted on the actual relation of PSM and the meaning attributed to work. Some research has addressed the relation between PSM and the idea of calling (e.g., Thompson and Christensen 2018; Vogel 2020) and meaningfulness (e.g., Zheng et al. 2020). It was found that PSM is a fundamental driver for workers to justify the meaningfulness of their work, especially in the presence of situational constraints (Zheng et al. 2020). The mediator role of the meaningfulness of work, according to the conceptualization of Lepisto and Pratt (2016) as a realization process (achieving a positive social impact) and a justification process (justifying the work through it having a positive social impact), was confirmed concerning job satisfaction. Other related conceptualization that gained a renewed interest in the field of psychology (Arnoux-Nicolas et al. 2017; Morin 2008; Steger et al. 2012) is the notion of the meaning of work (MOW). Both PSM and MOW not only were overlooked in the Portuguese context, as, to the best of our knowledge, no study has focused on how they may be associated specifically at the local level of public administration. Even though PSM may guide career choices, it is not guaranteed that the sense that meaning and purpose is actually found when working for public service interest (Thompson and Christensen 2018). Providing an overarching framework for the relation between individuals and their socioprofessional environment, the exploration of the relation between MOW and PSM may deepen our understanding of the PSM dimension of meaning. The present study contributes to this topic by aiming at characterizing the PSM (Perry 1996) and the MOW (Arnoux-Nicolas et al. 2017) of local government public servants within the Portuguese context. After more than four decades of democracy, local governments face new challenges and grasp new roles. On the one hand, the 2008 economic downturn and the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified municipalities' role in service delivery, trying to provide citizens social and economic conditions to maintain the minimum standards of quality of life while seeking to sustain costs and increase efficiency and defining new agendas to cope with global challenges. On the other hand, the decentralization process in Portugal since 2018 in sectors such as education, health, and culture has significantly increased municipalities' competences. Such a shifting context requires an appropriate institutional framework and qualified human resources, creating in turn an added pressure on public workers' engagement to such changes and ways of working.

This study is guided by the general research question: what are the main features of the PSM and MOW of local government workers in the Portuguese context? A more specific research question is: how do PSM and MOW interact at the local level of public administration? The notion of meaning and meaningfulness is often conceptually associated with PSM and included in its measurement, referring to public service and duty in abstract terms. We argue that the MOW construct, focusing on the underlying meaning found in the job, work, and tasks, enriches the interpretation of the meaning associated with public service, not only as a goal but also as a process.

A quantitative approach was employed, and local government workers in 17 Portuguese local councils of the NUTSII North region were surveyed.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: The next section is a literature review that includes the state of the art of the research in PSM and the MOW and a brief characterization of the public administration in Portugal, the context of our study. The methods section follows with the sample description and the characterization of the instrument, which includes the principal component analysis of the two scales used (PSM and MOW). The subsequent section presents the results and discussion of the findings, followed by the conclusions.

2. Public Service Motivation and the Meaning of Work

Motivation is a fundamental element for workers' performance, substantially influencing their effort, wellbeing, and productivity (Vandenabeele et al. 2018). This being true for workers of all sectors (e.g., Lévy-Leboyer 2006), the determinants and contextual factors applicable to the public sector, specifically, are a recent topic of interest. Increasingly informed citizens who expect and demand more from public services have challenged the productivity and sustainability of the public administration of OECD countries and, subsequently, from who is performing and offering them. In this regard, a well-known metaphor representing public sector workers is the one portraying them as 'knights or knaves', who are either driven by altruism in serving the public good or acting according to their own self-interest (Le Grand 2006). Even though it is arguable that public servants fall in either of these poles, this representation may shape public servants' expectations, attitudes, and behaviors towards the context of public administration from central to local governments. As a matter of fact, the 'knaves' perspective was considerably strengthened by the new public management (NPM) that was widespread in the 1980s, advocating for little intervention of the state, efficiency, responsibility, and performance. Henceforth, these descriptors of the managerial practices of the private sector ended up describing the workers of that same system (Casebourne 2014).

The measurement of PSM takes both perspectives, altruistic and rational/self-interest-based, into account (Perry and Wise 1990; Perry 1996, 2012). This concept gained traction in the 1990s, first circumscribed to US public servants and gradually expanding to other geocultural contexts (Perry 2014). Its definition relates to positive attitudes and beliefs of a rational, normative, and affective nature towards public service envisaging societal wellbeing (Christensen et al. 2017). The rational motivational drivers encompass the workers' identification with the services and program and the possibility to participate in good public policies, to serve a social interest, and to believe that it will be possible to privilege a specific group through belonging to a public organization (Perry and Wise 1990). The normative dimension of motivation applies to professionals who are driven by giving back to society and by norms to serve the public interest (Wright and Pandey 2008). It is essentially an altruistic desire (Perry 1996; Perry and Wise 1990) that is also connected to affective motives concerning the commitment to a public program as part of an identification and the conviction of its social relevance, a "patriotism of benevolence" fueled by the will to protect everyone's basic rights (Perry and Wise 1990).

The rational and self-interest-based motives, less knight and more knave, also partake in this construct as well as the bias in researching the more altruistic and others-oriented dimension of this value (Ritz et al. 2016). In this regard, a conceptual nuance is proposed to regard PSM as including whichever motives drive people to engage in meaningful public service (Spitzmueller and van Dyne 2013; Thompson and Christensen 2018). According to Asseburg and Homberg (2020) in a recent meta-analysis on the antecedents of public sector choice and public employment, PSM is consistently a significant antecedent (while the results do not allow for causal inference). This finding reinforces the behavioral implications found by Perry and Wise (1990) stating that (i) citizens with a higher PSM will more likely seek membership in a public organization and will have better individual performances and job satisfaction (Zheng et al. 2020) and (ii) public sector institutions that attract workers with high PSM will be less dependent on utilitarian incentives to motivate performance.

The first conceptualization of PSM (Perry 1996) outlined four dimensions, namely, ‘Commitment to Public Values’ (norm-based motive to pursue public values); ‘Compassion’ (affective commitment to protect people from distress and care for others’ welfare); ‘Self Sacrifice’ (prosocial tendency to endure personal sacrifices benefiting the wellbeing of others); and ‘Attraction to politics and policy making’ (instrumental motives resulting from enjoyment in serving the public interest). A similar factorial structure was found in further studies (e.g., Vandenabeele 2008), including a cross-culture survey (Kim 2009).

Strong evidence suggests that, after controlling for several sociodemographic variables, public employees find it more important to help others than their private counterparts. PSM may thus be seen as a particular type of prosocial motivation, encompassing a desire to benefit other people and contribute to society (Grant 2008). Others regard it as a type of intrinsic motivation, with the important difference that it does not imply an inherent enjoyment (Deci and Ryan 2004).

Aggregate findings of PSM research suggest some systematic patterns regarding gender, age, and educational attainment. Women tend to present higher levels of PSM, partially explained by gender stereotypes and processes of socialization that value caretaking and support vis-à-vis a more competitive and dominant male orientation (Bright 2005; Kitay 2015). Higher levels of educational attainment also accompany higher PSM, suggesting a correlation between access to education, abstract thought, and the awareness of the value carried by public service to society as a whole (Bright 2005). Higher levels of PSM are more common in older employees, attributed to a long path of socialization advocating for the superior value of the public service (Bright 2005; Ritz et al. 2016). High levels of PSM are also positively and significantly related to job satisfaction and job performance (e.g., Wright and Pandey 2008; Kim 2005; Steijn 2008), increased organizational commitment (Thompson and Christensen 2018), engagement and performance (e.g., Bellé and Cantarelli 2012; Zheng et al. 2020), and preference for the public sector (Houston 2000; Ritz et al. 2016).

The concept of meaning, either as antecedent, process, or outcome, is key when addressing engaged and motivated activity and in predicting work to be central and important, not just a means to an end (Steger et al. 2012). This is even truer in public sector institutions with more of a committed social impact and public employees motivated by a sense of service and greater chances to enact higher and altruistic motives (Wright 2003). As put forth by Kim (2005), these workers consider that performing work that is helpful to society is more satisfying than other job features. The MOW is known to be influenced by the skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback from the job. Despite the importance of remuneration as an extrinsic factor of necessity, it was found that, even when they have enough money, individual still continue to work, perceiving it as a mean-to-an end as well as a ‘source of personal fulfilment’ and ‘stimulating and/or challenging’ (Morse and Robert 1955).

Recent approaches to MOW highlight the growth in the importance of nonfinancial aspects, encompassing a wide array of factors linked to relational characteristics (e.g., social stability, personal relations, and moral correctness), intra-individual features (e.g., autonomy, affective commitment, mental health, and personal interests), and situational aspects (e.g., task features and excitement) (Lee et al. 2017; Lichtenstein et al. 2017; Morin 2008; Oliveira and de Souza 2014).

Despite gaining a new breadth in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, this topic has been, to the best of our knowledge, relatively overlooked in the Portuguese context (Madureira and Rodrigues 2015; Lira and Silva 2015). We argue that its assessment, besides providing new data of another cultural context to the literature on PSM, thus enabling further comparisons and fine-tuned adaptations of the measurement, is a first step to practical managerial implications that may affect correlated variables such as organizational performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. This is even more important in a context that, besides the heavy impact of the financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, is undergoing a process of public service decentralization whose changes have faced some resistance.

3. The Case of the Portuguese Public Administration

“It is nine o’clock in the morning of July 1980. A mother and her child walk towards the office of the Civil Registry Office in the city of Oporto to obtain his identity card for the first time. A long line of people awaits them in that neighborhood block of the city center. The public servant will attend them luckily before lunchtime. For the mother, who works in a small company, and for all those waiting as well, the morning is already completely lost regarding the job” (Tavares 2019, p. 9).

This description by Tavares (2019) reveals a twofold perspective on the relevance and efficiency of the services provided by the Portuguese public administration. On one hand, the crucial role of public sector institutions in providing services to the citizens is clear, regardless of the ongoing debate about their ways and nature (public vs. private). On the other hand, it reflects how these entities used to function in the first years following the transition to democracy in 1974. In the following years, a process of modernization was set in motion entailing profound changes in the relationship between citizens, politicians, and employees. The increasing state intervention in the fields of health, education, and social security also meant an increase of the number of employees in the public administration, a growth trend that persisted until 2005, reaching 560,000 workers. Since then, a slight decrease was observed following the financial crisis of 2008 and the cuts enforced by the Troika intervention following the logic of “two out, one in”.

In the first ten years after the revolution, the focus on political affairs and socio-economic recovery superseded the restructuring of the public administration, regarded then in a negative light as an inefficient tool of safety and wellbeing for the Portuguese, featuring low education professionals (DGAEP 2013). Its restructuring and the concern for public administration professionalization only began after Portugal joined the European Union, and today it is one of the sectors with better-qualified employees (Tavares 2019).

Following the same trend observed in other countries shifting from an interventionist state to a new paradigm (new public management), systematic efforts were deployed to improve the productivity, quality, efficiency, and competition of public administration through public calls and temporary job contracts to reduce expenses and achieve better results (Virtanen and Kaivo-oja 2015). In Portugal, the National Council for Quality was created in 1992, pushing forth measures allowing for privatization, less bureaucratization, and the need to foster a connection and transparency in the relation between central and local administrations and the citizens (Madureira and Rodrigues 2015). However, the exploration of a traditional public service by the private sector, while reducing costs, lacked quality. Furthermore, the discourse of efficiency, linked to simplifying bureaucratization, was used as a means and target of abusive party nominations, leading to a less efficient administration (Tavares 2019).

In the first decade of this century, the integrated system of performance evaluation in public administration (SIADAP) shifted the focus from processes to results and goals, which in theory should be negotiated between those in charge and workers. According to Tavares (2019), the implementation of this measure fell short of ideal, with specific goals shadowing others that will not be included in the assessment (especially when they have to be quantified). In addition, SIADAP’s assessment quotas constrain access to high evaluation ratings, which may have an impact on the motivation of those without access because of this regulatory mechanism.

In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, many changes were enforced in the organization of service provision, including cuts to overtime hours, subsidies, holidays, and 35 to 40 weekly hours (Costa et al. 2014). These measures aggravated the gap between classes with higher and lower incomes and increased poverty and unemployment, the latter especially in younger groups, generating a vast wave of discontent and strikes in several sectors of public administration, including health and education (Fonseca and Ferreira 2016; Costa et al. 2014).

From 2019 to 2021, with the COVID-19 pandemic it was necessary for the public administration as well as other areas of social and economic activity to adapt to new

models of work organization in order to face the set of challenges ahead. Teleworking was widely implemented in public administration as the only viable option to maintain the work flow, albeit with shortcomings such as social and professional isolation and the lack of contact with colleagues (DGAEP 2013 for a more comprehensive report, see also Forte et al. 2021).

With this analysis of PSM and MOW in civil servants, we argue for the fruitful pairing of the two measurements, considering MOW a very useful complement to the assessment of the meaning entailed by PSM, often in generic terms.

4. Materials and Methods

4.1. Sample and Procedure

This study adopted a nonprobabilistic purposeful sample, contacting all the local government institutions in the NUTS-II North region of Portugal ($n = 86$), chosen as a first assessment of the public service motivation of local government officials with a territorial common denominator. The beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak impaired the process of data collection and, facing the postponement of several municipalities and risking significant and unforeseeable delays due to the pandemic, we imposed a period for data collection within which 17 small and medium-sized municipalities agreed to participate and collaborate. An online questionnaire in google forms was made available from February to June 2020.

A total of 252 public servants were involved in the study. The larger two local government institutions cover about 70% of the sample, with the remaining 30% being distributed among 15 institutions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of participants per NUTSII municipality and total of local government workers.

| Municipality | <i>n</i> | Total of Local Government Workers |
|--------------|----------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | 91 | 2323 |
| 2 | 84 | 593 |
| 3 | 28 | 381 |
| 4 | 17 | 421 |
| 5 | 6 | 262 |
| 6 | 5 | 442 |
| 7 | 5 | 186 |
| 8 | 5 | 216 |
| 9 | 2 | 339 |
| 10 | 2 | 215 |
| 11 | 1 | 229 |
| 12 | 1 | 350 |
| 13 | 1 | 1696 |
| 14 | 1 | 298 |
| 15 | 1 | 520 |
| 16 | 1 | 171 |
| 17 | 1 | 849 |

About 71% ($n = 180$) of the participants were female, and 29% ($n = 72$) were male. The majority of those surveyed (41%, $n = 104$) were between 31 and 45 years old, and 86 were between 46 and 55 years old. A total of 35% worked in the sector for more than 20 years, 25% ($n = 64$) worked for between 11 and 20 years, and 22% worked between 1 and 5 years, while 29% ($n = 73$) worked at the institution for more than 20 years, and 27 % ($n = 68$) worked from 1 to 5 years. A total of 46% ($n = 115$) had graduated, and 35% had secondary education ($n = 75$). The majority (82%, $n = 206$) were tenured.

4.2. Instrument

The applied questionnaire included a section with sociodemographic data (age, sex, years working in public administration, years working at the current institution, type of contract, and qualifications) and two scales:

1. *Public Service Motivation* scale (Perry 1996). This scale comprises twenty-four Likert items (1 corresponding to totally agree and 5 to totally disagree). The translation of the original English version to Portuguese (Appendix A) benefited from the collaboration of a native speaker. A principal component analysis was conducted with the 24 items with orthogonal rotation (varimax) in the sample of 252 participants (Table 2). The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure attested to the adequacy of the sample ($KMO = 0.804$), and the Bartlett sphericity test ($\chi^2(276) = 1732.188, p = 0.00$) indicated that the between-item correlations were adequate. Only the items with coefficients higher than 0.35 were retained, and the analysis resulted in four factors with eigenvalues higher than 1. The distribution of items for the factors only exactly matched the dimension of ‘Self-sacrifice’ ($\alpha = 0.74$). The others, considering the items phrasing in Portuguese and aggregation, were renamed as ‘Dedication to public interest’ ($\alpha = 0.77$), ‘Politics disbelief’ ($\alpha = 0.65$) and ‘Indifference’ ($\alpha = 0.63$), with acceptable indexes of reliability (Pestana and Gageiro 2008). The first factor, ‘Self-sacrifice’, included eight items related to the ability of professionals to ensure citizens’ wellbeing, even at their own expense. The second factor, ‘Dedication to Public Interest’, included seven items focused on the ability of professions to see public service as something essential in their lives in which citizens’ needs should come first. The third factor, named ‘Disbelief in Politics’, included four items related to politics and the ways in which citizens regard it. The fourth factor, ‘Indifference’, was composed of five items searching to understand if the workers were concerned with others’ interest in society (renamed as such in opposition to the previous ‘Compassion’ to facilitate the interpretation in the cultural context).
2. *The Meaning of Work inventory/Inventaire du Sens du travail* (MOW), developed by Arnoux-Nicolas et al. (2017), is composed of 20 items. The version used was the first available translation to the Portuguese language (Cabrita 2017). To assess the psychometric characteristics of the Portuguese version of MOW (*IST—Inventário do Significado do Trabalho*), an exploratory factor analysis was conducted using a principal component analysis with varimax rotation (Table 3). The results from the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure and the Bartlett sphericity test showed that the sampling was adequate for the adjustment of the data ($t_{(252)} = 0.804; p < 0.001$). Two factors were extracted, explaining 43.12% of the variance: purpose of work (PW) (nine items, $\alpha = 0.86$) and uselessness of work (UW) (ten items, $\alpha = 0.73$). These two dimensions were aligned with the results of Demirkasimoglu (2015), where the authors advocated that “working” is a multidimensional concept with both negative and positive sides, considering the psychological terms.

Table 2. Scale of PSM—Saturation of 24 items in four dimensions after varimax rotation and initial statistics (in bold the items corresponding to each factor).

| PSM Items | F1 Self-Sacrifice | F2 Dedication to Public Interest | F3 Disbelief in Politics | F4 Self-Interest |
|---|----------------------|--|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| PSM3—Most social programs are too vital to do without. | 0.264 | 0.134 | 0.189 | 0.243 |
| PSM4—It is difficult for me to contain my feelings when I see people in distress. | 0.423 | −0.068 | −0.134 | 0.263 |
| PSM8—To me, patriotism includes seeing to the welfare of others. | 0.374 | 0.343 | 0.133 | 0.242 |

Table 2. Cont.

| PSM Items | F1 Self-Sacrifice | F2 Dedication to Public Interest | F3 Disbelief in Politics | F4 Self-Interest |
|---|----------------------|--|--------------------------------|---------------------|
| PSM9—Much of what I do is for a cause bigger than myself. | 0.550 | 0.378 | 0.104 | 0.168 |
| PSM12—Serving citizens would give me a good feeling, even if no one paid me for it. | 0.622 | 0.208 | 0.007 | 0.035 |
| PSM17—I feel people should give back to society more than they get from it. | 0.632 | 0.164 | −0.061 | 0.086 |
| PSM19—I am one of those rare people who would risk personal loss to help someone else. | 0.703 | 0.081 | −0.064 | 0.062 |
| PSM26—I am prepared to make enormous sacrifices for the good society. | 0.782 | 0.169 | 0.090 | 0.097 |
| PSM23—I unselfishly contribute to my community. | 0.157 | 0.558 | −0.060 | 0.183 |
| PSM30—Meaningful public service is very important to me. | 0.041 | 0.785 | 0.077 | 0.095 |
| PSM34—I would prefer seeing public officials do what is best for the whole community, even if it harmed my interest. | 0.162 | 0.727 | −0.097 | 0.004 |
| PSM39—I consider public service my civic duty. | 0.203 | 0.722 | 0.034 | −0.022 |
| PSM13—I am often reminded by daily events about how dependent we are on one another. | 0.322 | 0.334 | 0.029 | −0.022 |
| PSM1—Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements. | 0.357 | 0.388 | 0.139 | 0.011 |
| PSM5—I believe in putting duty before self. | 0.445 | 0.550 | 0.111 | 0.017 |
| PSM11—Politics is a dirty word. (Reversed) | 0.007 | −0.072 | 0.800 | 0.001 |
| PSM27—The give and take of public policy making does not appeal to me. (Reversed) | 0.057 | −0.350 | 0.584 | −0.198 |
| PSM31—I do not care much for politicians. (Reversed) | 0.054 | 0.153 | 0.753 | −0.017 |
| PSM40—There are few public programs that I wholeheartedly support. (Reversed) | −0.086 | 0.200 | 0.596 | 0.297 |
| PSM16—It is hard for me to get intensely interested in what is going on in my community. (Reversed) | −0.039 | 0.248 | 0.333 | 0.489 |
| PSM2—I am rarely moved by the plight of the underprivileged. (Reversed) | 0.184 | −0.013 | −0.052 | 0.690 |
| PSM10—I seldom think about the welfare of people whom I do not know personally. (Reversed) | 0.071 | 0.080 | 0.031 | 0.735 |
| PSM24—I have little compassion for people in need who are unwilling to take the first step to help themselves. (Reversed) | 0.018 | −0.115 | 0.383 | 0.458 |
| PSM6—Doing well financially is definitely more important to me than doing good deeds. (Reversed) | 0.172 | 0.027 | −0.107 | 0.642 |

Table 3. Scale of meaning of work: purpose of work and uselessness of work (in bold the items corresponding to each factor).

| MOW Items | F1 PW | F2 UW |
|--|--------------|--------------|
| 1—I find my job rewarding from a personal point of view. | 0.625 | −0.337 |
| 2—I understand the value of my work. | 0.689 | −0.153 |
| 4—My work brings a vital dimension to my life. | 0.583 | −0.017 |
| 5—My current job gives meaning to my life. | 0.708 | −0.296 |
| 6—My work is not at all absurd. | 0.726 | −0.146 |
| 8—The goals I have to achieve in my job are challenging and meaningful. | 0.683 | −0.383 |
| 9—I know what the goals of my work are. | 0.699 | −0.354 |
| 13—My work has a clear and specific direction. | 0.743 | −0.258 |
| 16—I understand the function of my work. | 0.742 | −0.316 |
| 3—My job does not help me have truly clear life prospects. | −0.194 | 0.558 |
| 7—I do not clearly see the meaning of my current work. | −0.217 | 0.544 |
| 10—I do not really understand what my work accomplishes. | −0.169 | 0.743 |
| 11—I often think I do not know where I am going in my job. | −0.372 | 0.673 |
| 12—To not work would not affect the vision I have of my life as a whole. | −0.057 | 0.454 |
| 14—I sometimes think my work is not very useful. | −0.450 | 0.625 |
| 15—No matter what anyone says, I find many jobs to be absurd. | −0.20 | 0.549 |
| 17—I do not understand what effects my work has on the world or society. | −0.310 | 0.617 |
| 18—I frequently do not understand the purpose of my work. | −0.412 | 0.602 |
| 19—My work brings very little to my life. | −0.272 | 0.517 |

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. What Characterizes Public Service Motivation of Local Government Workers?

The analysis of the results regarding public service motivation suggests that, with the exception of ‘Indifference’, all the dimensions presented above average scores. ‘Dedication to public interest’ was the most relevant factor for the local government workers surveyed ($M = 3.94$; $DP = 0.60$), followed by ‘Self-sacrifice’ ($M = 3.70$; $DP = 0.61$), both aligned with the representation of public workers putting the public interest first (Perry 1996). This result was reinforced by the high level of disagreement with items related to ‘Indifference’, a dimension aggregating items that reveal a disregard for others’ wellbeing and instrumental and utilitarian motives ($M = 1.89$; $DP = 0.61$). It is worth highlighting that the phrasing and cultural semantics of the ‘Indifference’ items in Portuguese convey a very negative valence within a value system that still advocates for benevolence, community, and genuineness opposing individualism and excessive utilitarianism (ESS-ERIC e ICS-ULisboa 2022). This is even truer in a context of public service and local government. We did not control for social desirability, but it was not expected that local government employees would condone such a candid affirmation of indifference or self-interest. On the other hand, the considerable agreement with the dimension “Politics disbelief” ($M = 3.4$; $DP = 0.78$) reflects a suspicious attitude towards politics and politicians that is not uncommon to be candidly expressed, often in abstract terms (ESS-ERIC e ICS-ULisboa 2022). Its coexistence with the belief in public service transparency and politics suggests a scattered representation of institutions guided by norms and values as opposed to politics, which are more subjected to personal and parties’ shortcomings. Despite our results being from one NUTSII region, at least taking data on values as a reference, no significant differences were found between different regions, suggesting a relative cultural homogeneity on this matter (ESS-ERIC e ICS-ULisboa 2022).

As evidenced by the most salient items of the dimensions ‘Dedication to public interest’ and ‘Self-sacrifice’, the service and the public system are seen as part of a perspective of social and deontological values (PSM39—I consider public service my civic duty; PSM17—I feel people should give back to society more than they get from it) and individuals, guiding the personal conduct (PSM30—Meaningful public service is very important to me; PSM23—I unselfishly contribute to my community).

Student's *t*-test was applied to compare the differences between the mean scores of the female and male participants on the four subscales of PSM. Even though men ranked slightly higher than women in all dimensions, the differences between groups were not significant. As depicted in Table 4, we may consider that both groups presented high levels of 'dedication to public interest', moderate scores in 'self-sacrifice' and 'politics disbelief', and very low in 'indifference'. This result is not aligned with previous findings (e.g., [Bright 2005](#); [Kitay 2015](#)) in which women presented higher levels of PSM but is partially coherent with [Perry \(1996\)](#), in which men presented higher levels of self-sacrifice. The differences in gender effects may be explained by distinct cultural values affecting gender roles and representations. The lack of systematic patterns strengthens the necessity of exploring different contexts and different samples to test the cultural sensitivity and meaning of the items in a given national and organizational context ([Kim 2009](#)). For the remaining variables, there were no significant statistical differences.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of PSM by sex.

| PSM | Sex | M | DP |
|-------------------------------|--------|------|------|
| Self-sacrifice | Female | 3.65 | 0.57 |
| | Male | 3.80 | 0.66 |
| Dedication to public interest | Female | 3.85 | 0.58 |
| | Male | 4.14 | 0.59 |
| Politics disbelief | Female | 3.37 | 0.76 |
| | Male | 3.48 | 0.81 |
| Self-interest | Female | 1.85 | 0.56 |
| | Male | 1.98 | 0.73 |

A between-subjects ANOVA was conducted to explore the differences in public service motivation according to age, education, years in the organization, years in public administration, and the type of contract.

The results of participants of different ages only differed significantly ($p < 0.05$) in 'Dedication to public interest' $F(4.251) = 4.41$, $p = 0.002$, which was more evident in participants above 55 years old ($M = 4.05$; $DP = 0.56$). The same was true for 'self-sacrifice' ($M = 3.85$; $DP = 0.54$). This result may be explained by the feeling of generativity coming with age alongside the wish to contribute and give back to society ([Leisink and Steijn 2009](#)). It is also coherent with previous findings ([Bright 2005](#); [Kitay 2015](#)).

On a different note, workers between 45 and 55 years old were those with a more favorable attitude towards individualist positions of 'indifference', which may result from privilege ensuring or consolidating their position and wellbeing at the institution where they have invested several years of their career instead of a concern for others.

The differences in educational qualifications (considering that secondary education, graduation, and master degrees corresponded to 93.6%) were significant concerning self-sacrifice ($F(5.251) = 5.09$, $p = 0.000$), with master degree students being more willing to make sacrifices ($M = 3.75$; $DP = 0.58$) and presenting a higher dedication to the public interest ($M = 4.11$; $DP = 0.53$). On the other hand, 'politics disbelief' was more common in graduated participants ($M = 3.43$; $DP = 0.77$), whereas 'indifference', with significant differences between the groups, was more salient in participants with a secondary education. This result aligns with the relation between higher levels of educational attainment and higher PSM ([Bright 2005](#); [Kitay 2015](#)), which can be attributed to the role of education in modeling opinions, beliefs, and citizenship practices.

Different periods of experience within public administration only conveyed significant differences in 'Disbelief in Politics' $F(4.251) = 585$, $p = 0.003$, which was also significantly higher in participants working for a longer time at the institution, namely, between 11 and 20 years and beyond ($M = 3.60$; $DP = 0.81$). These results should be interpreted in light of the recent sociopolitical events that shaped western societies with the 2008 financial crisis

and the aftermath with a great toll on public servants. ‘Self-sacrifice’ ($M = 3.79$; $DP = 0.62$) was also higher among these participants, which may reflect a long-term commitment to the organization.

‘Indifference’, despite the lack of general representativeness, was more advocated by workers with between 11 and 20 years of experience at the institution ($M = 1.97$; $DP = 0.72$). Interestingly, dedication to the public interest was higher in employees working at the institution for less than one year ($M = 4.06$; $DP = 0.57$), and self-sacrifice was higher in those employees at the institutions for between 1 and 5 years ($M = 3.7$; $DP = 0.49$), similar to what was found by [Madureira and Rodrigues \(2015\)](#) regarding central government entities, in which professionals with less than 10 years of working experience reported higher motivation levels.

Interestingly, ‘Politics disbelief’ and ‘Indifference’ were higher in workers with temporary contracts, whereas ‘self-sacrifice’ was more salient in workers holding tenured employment contracts. This result is indicative of the strong influence of job stability on PSM ([Homberg et al. 2014](#)). The ‘dedication to public interest’ was also more salient in appointed tenured job contracts ($M = 4.08$; $DP = 0.47$). The type of job contract may be a proxy of other constructs that are positively and significantly associated to PSM, as in the case of job satisfaction, performance, engagement, and organizational commitment, which are all more likely to occur in secure job positions (e.g., [Wright and Pandey 2008](#); [Kim 2005](#); [Steijn 2008](#); [Vandenabeele 2007](#); [Bellé and Cantarelli 2012](#)).

5.2. Do Local Government Workers Perceive Their Work as Meaningful?

The factorial structure found in the present study follows the results of [Demirkasimoglu \(2015\)](#), with the distribution of items in a dimension related to the purpose of work and another to the uselessness of work, that is, lacking purpose and meaning. Overall, there was a higher agreement with the purpose of work with positive valence and, coherently, a higher competence and mastery of the goals and means to achieve them.

Student’s *t*-test was applied to compare the results between gender, with both agreeing more with their work being purposeful and meaningful and showing no statistically significant differences.

A between-subjects ANOVA was performed to explore differences by age groups, educational backgrounds, experience in the organization, years in the public administration, and the type of employment contract. Although no significant statistical differences were found in any variable, some patterns are worth highlighting: Despite workers of all ages tending to disagree with the absence of purpose and meaning of work, this disagreement was less accentuated between 46 and 55 years ($M = 2.32$, $DP = 0.75$). In parallel, the participants working from one to 10 years were those reporting more purpose and meaning. This may be modelled by some of the predetermining features of MOW, namely, skills variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback ([Arnoux-Nicolas et al. 2017](#)).

5.3. How Do Public Service Motivation and the Meaning of Work Inventory Relate?

In order to understand the association between the four dimensions of public service motivation and the two dimensions of meaning of work, Pearson’s correlations were conducted (Table 5). The perception of work as purposeful and with meaning was positively and significantly correlated with self-sacrifice ($r = 0.281$, $p < 0.001$) and the dedication to the public interest ($r = 0.347$, $p < 0.001$) and, interestingly, negatively correlated with indifference ($r = 0.175$, $p < 0.001$). In the same line of reasoning, the work without purpose and meaning was positively and significantly correlated with indifference ($r = 0.271$, $p < 0.001$) and politics disbelief ($r = 0.329$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Correlations between dimensions of public service motivation and meaning of work inventory.

| Dimensions (PSM and MOW) | | Self-Sacrifice | Dedication to Public Interest | Politics Disbelief | Self-Interest | Purpose of Work | Uselessness of Work |
|-------------------------------|---|----------------|-------------------------------|--------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Self-sacrifice | r | 1 | 0.562 ** | 0.055 | −0.322 ** | 0.281 ** | 0.009 |
| | N | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 |
| Dedication to public interest | r | 0.562 ** | 1 | −0.044 | −0.208 ** | 0.347 ** | −0.094 |
| | N | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 |
| Politics disbelief | r | −0.055 | −0.044 | 1 | 0.202 ** | −0.208 ** | 0.329 ** |
| | N | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 |
| Self-interest | r | −0.322 ** | −0.208 ** | 0.202 ** | 1 | −0.175 ** | 0.271 ** |
| | N | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 |
| Purpose of Work | r | 0.281 ** | 0.347 ** | −0.208 ** | −0.175 ** | 1 | −0.622 ** |
| | N | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 |
| Uselessness of Work | r | 0.009 | −0.094 | 0.329 ** | 0.271 ** | −0.622 ** | 1 |
| | N | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 | 252 |

** Correlation significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

These results suggest that the more prototypically altruistic features of PSM, that is, self-sacrifice and dedication to the public interest, are precisely the ones more likely to provide the sense of direction, purpose, and significance that MOW embodies. These dimensions are not only associated with abstract drives but are also strongly related to the specific tasks that the work requires. This association thus indicates that the work itself is regarded as purposeful and significant besides the justification/drive of self-sacrifice and serving the public interest, as confirmed by the high association of items such as “my current job gives meaning to my life” and “my work has a clear and specific direction”.

One may hypothesize that PSM is an antecedent to the perception of the meaningfulness of the work itself, but further studies are required, with both the bifactorial solution found here (meaningfulness and uselessness of work) and other factorial solutions of MOW that discriminate dimensions such as sense of purpose, significance, and meaning. Considering that PSM may guide career choices but be disconnected from a sense of meaning and purpose when working for a public service interest (Thompson and Christensen 2018), we argue that the concomitant assessment of MOW may strengthen the assessment of PSM. The applicability of this element in relation to all public-serving jobs, whether public, private, or nonprofit, is to be further explored. It may also be of great utility in the accompanying processes of change within the public administration, as the current decentralization process continues in the analyzed context.

6. Conclusions

This study aimed at characterizing the public service motivation and the meaning of work in a sample of local government employees according to sociodemographic variables of interest while exploring their interactions.

Local government employees are a central piece of the public administration. It has been suggested that the public workforce features mirror the mission of the public sector, anchored in a pursuit for a common purpose and higher-order needs (Wright 2003). This abstract and values-driven aim is paired with several tasks and bureaucratic responsibilities assessed by criteria of efficiency, productivity, and satisfaction. Our findings reveal that the more altruistic and other-oriented dimensions of PSM, self-sacrifice and dedication to the public interest, are those more associated with perceiving having meaningful and purposeful work. This association reinforces the strength of the overarching motive to choose the path of public service and should be further explored in future research with other groups and cultural contexts.

What is more, the study points out how crucial job security may be and the related period of commitment to an organization in nurturing PSM, especially when it is conceived as an intrinsic drive.

In this regard, several practical implications of PSM for public administration (Ritz et al. 2016) can be outlined. Despite both public and private sector workers valuing extrinsic rewards (e.g., remuneration), the former presents a higher motivation to help society and serve the public interest (Kim 2009). This drive is so well-regarded that one of frequent recommendation from PSM research is to incorporate it in the process of recruitment and assessment at a pre-entry level, both in graduate programs and public administration positions (Clerkin and Cogburn 2012; Andersen and Kjeldsen 2013), so as to ensure an alignment with values coherent with public service (Houston 2000). Both follow the premise that individuals who feel strongly motivated for public service should work at public organizations to optimize their performance and intrinsic rewards (Santinha et al. 2021). Furthermore, from a practical managerial perspective, the association found here between PSM and MOW reinforces the strategic tactics of motivating employees by highlighting the mission and transformational elements of public-service-based positions. It also reinforces the collateral effects that precarious employment may carry to public institutions, as shown by temporary workers ranking higher in indifference in contrast with tenured workers with higher dedication to the public interest. Recent studies indicate that the representations of the public sector as more stable and with higher job security may be changing, also reflecting the impact on job prospects of the recent financial crisis (e.g., Santinha et al. 2021). Security and stability, alongside the contribution to society, have been two major features of the public sector. However, as shown by a study on the factors that affect people's career choices (Choi 2017), to value job security is no more associated with the public sector than with the other two sectors. Our finding showing a higher dedication to the public interest in tenured workers vis-à-vis the indifference in temporary workers suggests that the preservation and promotion of this fundamental dimension of PSM in public servants may be enabled by policies that give priority to the creation of more stable job positions. This is even more important for the type of job contract, which may be a proxy of other constructs that are positively and significantly associated with PSM, as in the case of job satisfaction, performance, engagement, and organizational commitment, which are all more likely to occur in secure job positions (e.g., Wright and Pandey 2008; Kim 2005; Steijn 2008; Vandenabeele 2007; Bellé and Cantarelli 2012). On the other hand, secure job positions are also prone to assessment quotas limiting higher levels of productivity and evaluation ratings, whose impact on workers' motivation needs further exploration.

Our analysis, providing data according to type of work contract and age groups, may inform tailored strategies to deal with challenges ahead for more satisfied HR. Corroborating the importance of future studies addressing what features drive public service motivation, particularly in challenging times of crisis, the present study also contributes to the validation of the Portuguese version of MOW (Arnoux-Nicolas et al. 2017) (Appendix B) and reinforces the results of Demirkasimoglu (2015), addressing it as a multidimensional concept with both psychological negative and positive sides.

The main limitation of the study concerns the sample size as well as the sampling method, which is not representative of the civil workforce or the territorial NUTSII region analyzed. This reinforces the exploratory character of the study as a first approach of PSM and MOW at the local level. Within the Portuguese context, future studies should expand this research to other NUTSII regions with different socioterritorial specificities to explore intracultural similarities and differences and reflect rural vs. urban and more or less developed contexts. These data are necessary to provide a standardized measure of the motivation and meaning of public servants at the national level.

We also argue for the timeliness of combining different lenses in order to provide relevant insights about how to foster motivation in public administration, especially with the disruptive changes in the socioeconomic environment and the workplace at large. As put forth by Thompson and Christensen (2018), PSM research within public administration

is still lacking articulation with related concepts from other areas. If it is consensual that with intrinsically motivated workers less external rewards are necessary to produce the same effort, motivation, as a multidimensional construct, should thus be a cornerstone in research and public administration practices.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Translation of the original English version of the public service motivation scale to Portuguese.

| Interesse Para Elaboração de Políticas |
|---|
| PSM11—O mundo da política “deixa muito a desejar”. (Inverso) |
| PSM27—Não vejo com bons olhos a troca de favores no sistema público. (Inverso) |
| PSM 31—Não dou grande valor a políticos. (Inverso) |
| Dedicação ao Interesse Público |
| PSM16—O que acontece na minha comunidade interessa-me pouco. (Inverso) |
| PSM23—Eu contribuo para a minha comunidade sem esperar nada em retorno. |
| PSM30—Um serviço público é importante para mim. |
| PSM34—Eu prefiro que os funcionários façam o que é melhor para toda a comunidade ainda que vá contra os meus interesses. |
| PSM39—Eu considero o serviço público como o meu dever cívico. |
| Compaixão |
| PSM2—Raramente me comovo com as dificuldades daqueles mais necessitados. (Inverso) |
| PSM3—A maioria dos programas sociais são demasiado importantes para serem esquecidos. |
| PSM4—É difícil para mim conter os meus sentimentos quando vejo alguém em sofrimento. |
| PSM8—Para mim o Patriotismo inclui assegurar o bem-estar dos outros. |
| PSM10—Raramente penso no bem-estar daqueles que não conheço pessoalmente. (Inverso) |
| PSM13—Sou frequentemente lembrado pelos acontecimentos diários quão dependentes somos uns dos outros. |
| PSM24—Não tenho muita compaixão por pessoas necessitadas que não estão dispostas a dar o primeiro passo para se ajudarem a si próprios. (Inverso) |
| PSM40—Há poucos programas públicos que eu apoie incondicionalmente. (Inverso) |

Table A1. *Cont.*

| Sacrifício-Próprio |
|--|
| PSM1—Dou mais importância a fazer a diferença na sociedade do que às minhas conquistas pessoais. |
| PSM5—Acredito que o dever está acima das necessidades/vontades individuais. |
| PSM6—É mais importante para mim ter sucesso financeiro do que praticar boas ações. (Inverso) |
| PSM9—Muito do que faço é por uma causa maior que a minha. |
| PSM12—Mesmo que não me pagassem para tal, servir os cidadãos far-me-ia sentir bem. |
| PSM17—Sinto que as pessoas devem contribuir mais para a sociedade do que receber dela. |
| PSM19—Sou uma das raras pessoas que arriscaria prejudicar-me para ajudar outra pessoa. |
| PSM26—Estou pronto(a) para fazer enormes sacrifícios em prol da sociedade. |

Appendix B

Table A2. Validation of the Portuguese version of the meaning of work scale.

| Importância do Trabalho |
|--|
| IST1—Considero o meu trabalho recompensador do ponto de vista pessoal. |
| IST2—Eu percebo o valor do meu trabalho. |
| IST3—O meu trabalho não me ajuda a ter uma visão clara das minhas perspetivas de vida. |
| IST4—O trabalho tem uma função vital na minha vida. |
| IST5—O meu trabalho atual dá significado à minha vida. |
| IST6—O meu trabalho não é, de maneira nenhuma, um absurdo. |
| Compreensão do Trabalho |
| IST7—Eu não vejo claramente qual é o sentido do meu trabalho. |
| IST8—Os objetivos que tenho de alcançar no meu trabalho são desafiantes e têm sentido para mim. |
| IST9—Eu sei quais são os objetivos do meu trabalho. |
| IST10—Eu não percebo ao certo quais são as conquistas no trabalho. |
| IST11—Eu penso frequentemente que não sei qual é o rumo do meu trabalho. |
| Direção do Trabalho |
| IST12—O facto de não trabalhar não irá afetar a minha visão sobre a vida como um todo. |
| IST13—O meu trabalho tem um propósito claro e específico. |
| IST14—Por vezes penso que o meu trabalho não é muito útil. |
| Propósito do Trabalho |
| IST15—Independentemente do que os outros dizem, eu considero que há muitos trabalhos que são absurdos. |
| IST16—Eu tenho percebido qual é a função do meu trabalho. |
| IST17—Eu não percebo qual é o efeito que o meu trabalho tem no mundo ou na sociedade. |
| IST18—Frequentemente não compreendo o propósito do meu trabalho. |
| IST19—O meu trabalho tem pouco peso na minha vida. |

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