MILLENNIALS AND PUBLIC SERVICE: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF GRADUATE STUDENT CAREER MOTIVATIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Canada’s public service workforce is aging, and all levels of government will experience a large number of retirements in the coming years. In an increasingly competitive labour market, governments face challenges in attracting and retaining new recruits, particularly among the “Millennial generation,” who are entering the workforce, and whose outlook on work appears to differ significantly from previous generations. What motivates Millennials to pursue a public service career? What are their expectations concerning the benefits of a career in the public sector? This study explores these questions through a qualitative analysis of written statements of Canadian Master’s students seeking a career in the public service. The findings demonstrate that Millennials are motivated both by perceived intrinsic benefits, such as the opportunity to make a difference in society, as well as extrinsic rewards, such as opportunities for career advancement. In addition, many identify a public service career as a “calling”—a sense of obligation to contribute to the public interest—and the analysis reveals various events and experiences that inspire this “call to serve.” Implications for public sector recruitment and retention of Millennials are presented.

INTRODUCTION

In Canada, as in many other Western countries, governments at all levels are facing a shift in the demographic profile of the public service workforce. The first of the “baby boomers”—a large cohort of employees born between 1946 and 1965—has reached the age of 65, beginning what is expected to be a wave of retirements over the next two decades (Public
Policy Forum, 2011). In light of this challenge, governments need effective recruitment and retention strategies based on an understanding of what motivates potential employees to choose public service as a career path. A particularly important target group is the “Millennial” generation, who are entering the workforce and constitute the bulk of the talent pool for public service recruitment (Chester, 2002; Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010).

What motivates Millennials to pursue a public service career? What are their expectations concerning the benefits of a career in the public sector? In this paper, we explore these questions, drawing on and contributing to the rich scholarly literature on public service motivation (PSM), which analyzes the motives that impel individuals to serve the public good (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008). Our study adds a Canadian dimension to extant studies of university students conducted in the United States (e.g., Carpenter, Doverspike, & Miguel, 2012; Horton & Hondeghem, 2006) and Australia (e.g., Taylor, 2005, 2008)—countries that are similar to Canada with respect to their demographic profile and public sector recruitment challenges, including multiple levels of government vying for “the best and the brightest.” Complementing the survey-based research in this area, our study inferences students’ PSM through a qualitative discourse analysis of statements of interest submitted by applicants to a Canadian Master’s program designed explicitly to prepare graduates for a public service career. Our analysis of the written texts reveals personal and professional experiences that underpin elements of PSM, such as a perceived “call to serve” and a passion to “make a difference.” It also identifies personal and societal benefits that students expect to be associated with a public service career. Understanding student motivations to pursue public service, and the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that they associate with public sector employment, may inform government strategies to recruit and retain Millennial employees.

The paper begins by examining the work-related attitudes and expectations typically ascribed to the Millennial generation. It then draws on scholarly literature about PSM to identify factors that are believed to attract individuals to public service. The third section outlines the study’s methodology,
followed by a discussion of the data analysis. The study findings are presented next, organized according to the research questions. Finally, we consider the implications of the findings for public service recruitment and retention, and offer suggestions for further research in this area.

MILLENNIALS AND PUBLIC SERVICE

The Millennial generation refers to the children of the baby boomers, a demographic cohort that includes people born between 1980 and 1995, though some analysts use different birth years to circumscribe its boundaries (Conference Board of Canada, 2009; Levenson, 2010; Thompson & Gregory, 2012). Numbering approximately 7.5 million in Canada, these young people constitute about 31% of the labour force (Statistics Canada 2013a, 2013b) and merit study to better understand what potentially draws them to a public service career.

Many analysts have observed that Millennials have characteristics that differ from previous generations, which influence their attitudes and expectations concerning work (Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2010; Ng, Lyons, & Schweitzer, 2012). Millennials are believed to be prone to self-serving behaviour, exhibit less loyalty to employers, desire a more casual work environment, and exude a strong sense of entitlement, often perceived as “inflated self-esteem, unrealistic and grandiose expectations for prime work, promotions, and rewards, and a general lack of patience and willingness to drudge through unglamorous components of work” (Thompson & Gregory, 2012, p. 241). Compared to the baby boomers and members of “Generation X”—a small demographic cohort with birth years from about 1966 to 1979—Millennials perceive less intrinsic value from employment and express a desire for greater freedom at work, including autonomy from supervision, minimal overtime, and a healthy work-life balance (Twenge, 2010). One Canadian study of Millennials indicated that they also place a high priority on rapid career advancement (promotion and pay increases), good colleagues, and variety in their work (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010).
Horton and Hondeghem (2006) suggested that there has been a generational shift in the way potential recruits view government as an employer, arguing that young people today are more likely to be attracted into the public sector by the specific job, pay, and work conditions than by “a normative or affective commitment” (p. 2). In what appears to be the only study that analyzes the attitudes of Canadian Millennials toward public service, Ng and Gossett (2013) explored the considerations behind their career choices, what they find attractive about employers, and how public service employment fits with their expressed career goals and work values. Drawing on data from a large, nationwide survey of post-secondary students, the researchers found that only about 29% of respondents would choose a public service career over the private sector. Among this group, the desire to contribute to society, the ability to pursue further education, job security, and a healthy work-life balance rated highly as important career goals. These attributes are more commonly associated with public sector jobs, so there appears to be a good fit between the benefits that government jobs offer and the career goals of interested Millennials (Ng & Gossett, 2013).

In summary, studies suggest that the work-related values, attitudes, and beliefs of Millennials differ from previous generations, which presents potential challenges for public sector recruitment. The next section draws on scholarly literature about PSM to identify factors that typically attract people to public service.

PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION

In a seminal paper, Perry and Wise (1990) defined PSM as “an individual’s predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily in public institutions and organizations” (p. 368). Some motives are considered rational, such as a desire to contribute to public policy, a personal commitment to a particular government program, or a wish to advocate for a special interest or cause. Other motives are more norm-based, such as a desire to serve the public interest, a sense of loyalty and duty to government, or a commitment to advancing social
justice. Still others are affective—“triggers of behavior that are grounded in emotional responses to various social contexts”—such as compassion for fellow citizens (Perry & Wise, 1990, p. 369). Perry (1996) later summarized these motives into four key categories—attraction to public policy making, commitment to civic duty and the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice. These intrinsic values are most commonly associated with public sector work, so he posited that individuals who are motivated by these factors are more likely to seek employment in a public sector organization. Building on this work, Perry and Hondeghem (2008) distinguished between intrinsic motives associated with serving the public good and more specific, extrinsic motivators that individuals might associate with public sector organizations, such as a competitive salary, job security, opportunity for advancement, or flexible work hours. They concluded that both intrinsic and extrinsic factors influence an individual’s pursuit of a particular career path.

Inspired by the PSM construct, various analysts have investigated the factors that attract young people to public service and their perceptions of the benefits associated with a public sector career. Carpenter, Doverspike, and Miguel (2011) surveyed university students in the United States to determine the extent to which PSM—that is, strong identification with values associated with public service, such as attraction to policy making and a commitment to the public interest—serves as a predictor of an individual’s interest in public sector employment. They found that students who exhibited high PSM were more likely to perceive a fit with, and indicate an intention to work for, a public sector organization.

Similarly, studying Master’s-level graduate students in Belgium, Vandenabeele (2008) hypothesized that a high level of PSM is positively correlated with attraction to government as an employer. Vandenabeele found support for this hypothesis, stating “potential employees who possess a high level of public service motivation are more likely to prefer prospective public sector employment (and even dislike private sector employment)” (2008, p. 1101). With respect to extrinsic motivators, the study found that those who valued job security, a fair wage, and a good work-life balance were more inclined to
pursue a government career, reflecting a perception that public sector jobs are secure, pay well, and accommodate non-work commitments.

Graduate students in a U.S. public policy program, surveyed by Chetkovich (2003), differed in their preference to work for a public or private sector organization, and offered different motivations to explain their choice. Whereas those who aimed to seek public sector employment were motivated primarily by a desire to make a social contribution or to participate in a particular area of public policy, private sector-oriented students identified financial rewards and skills development as their chief motivators. Similarly, drawing on a survey of work preferences, motivations, and expectations of undergraduate students in Australia, Taylor (2010) found that students who favoured public sector employment were motivated more by intrinsic rewards, such as opportunities to engage in work that benefits the entire community, than by extrinsic rewards such as a high salary.

Finally, in a comparative study of career preferences among Master of Public Administration (MPA) and Master of Business Administration (MBA) students in the Netherlands, researchers found significant differences in work-related motivations, values, and perceptions between the two groups (van der Wal & Oosterbaan, 2013). The MPA students identified much more strongly with qualities typically associated with PSM, including intrinsic rewards and the opportunity to make a difference. Interpreting student responses to an open-ended question about their reasons for pursuing a public or private sector career, the researchers concluded that “motivation for the private sector often stems from career options and better reward. The motivation for the public sector largely comes from the desire to contribute to society and to be of service to the general public” (p. 252).

In summary, university students differ in their preferences for public or private sector employment, and associate these career paths with different benefits and rewards. Survey-based research about PSM suggests that some young people are more attracted to public sector employment than others, and that these individuals are motivated by both intrinsic
and extrinsic rewards that they associate with public sector organizations. However, these studies reveal little about the factors that inspire PSM in university students and the events or experiences that give rise to their intention to pursue a public sector career. Further, they provide little insight into how and why students identify with the various elements of the PSM construct, namely attraction to public policy making, commitment to civic duty and the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice.

As a complement to the survey-based studies, we sought to better understand PSM by examining focused samples of students’ written words. In doing so we adopted a linguistic lens that is increasingly prevalent in social science research, which views social institutions and identities as “discursively constructed ensembles of texts” (Alvesson & Käareman, 2000, p. 137). Alvesson and Käareman (2000) suggest that language-based analysis offers insights about complex social phenomena that are not accessible through survey-based responses. Discourse analysis, as one primary instrument of this “turn to language,” has been used to explore many individual, organizational, and societal issues, including leadership (Broadbridge, 2010), organizational strategy (Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004), racism (Hastie & Rimmington, 2014), and identity (Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas, & Davies, 2004). Our intent was to analyze a sample of texts generated by Millennials to reveal experiences and understandings that ground individual constructions of PSM. In particular, we sought to uncover explanations for the “call to serve” and the rationales behind attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

Our exploratory study was motivated by two key questions: What motivates Millennials to pursue a public service career? What are their expectations concerning the benefits of a career in the public sector? To investigate these questions, we examined written statements of interest submitted by students as part of their application to the Master of Public Service (MPS)
program, a two-year multidisciplinary professional degree at a Canadian university. The program was started in 2010 with the goal of transitioning undergraduates from different academic disciplines into entry- and intermediate-level positions in federal, provincial, and municipal public service. In the statements, students were asked to reflect on why they wanted to work for the government, what interested them in public service work, and their reasons for starting graduate studies in a public service program. Our objective in analyzing the statements was to draw inferences about the factors that motivate Millennial students to pursue public service, as well as the benefits that they associate with a public service career.

Out of a total population of 107 MPS students and alumni, 92 were Millennials born between 1980 and 1995. In accordance with University Research Ethics Board guidelines, these potential participants were contacted by email with information about the study and a request for consent to have their statements included. Among this group, 40 participants consented to have their statement included, yielding a response rate of 43%, which was consistent with other studies in this field (e.g., Taylor, 2005, 2008). The statements were anonymized by a program staff member, who also coded each sample text by the participant’s gender and cohort at the time of the study (alumni, senior, or junior depending on whether they had completed the program or were in the second or first year of study). This categorization was used for organizational purposes only: all students submitted their statement of interest before entering the program. In the final sample, 26 participants were female (65%) and 14 were male (35%), which is consistent with the gender distribution of all Millennials admitted to the program (females 64%; males 36%). Cohort representation in the sample included: 7 alumni (17.5%), 20 senior (50%), and 13 junior (32.5%). By pursuing a two-year graduate program specifically tailored to facilitate entry into public sector employment, these Millennials had demonstrated substantial commitment to this career path.
DATA ANALYSIS

The data set consisted of 40 statements of interest, which ranged from 277 words to 1,193 words, with an average of 682 words. A separate document for each statement of interest was created, and these were examined independently by both authors, who read and re-read them to identify and code “emergent themes” that were apparent across excerpts (Huberman & Miles 1994; Wood & Kroger, 2000). As Williams (2008) explained, emergent themes are insights derived from the words or documented experiences of research participants, captured through interactive reading and a process of abstraction, which involves creating categories from complex data. Although aware of the PSM literature, we followed what Patton (1990) referred to as an inductive approach to identify “patterns, themes, and categories of analysis [that] come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection” (Patton, 1990, p. 390). This approach was employed effectively by Baxter (2012, p. 90) who “allowed insights to emerge inductively as [she] coded the data”; this served as a model for our analysis.

In analyzing the students’ written words, we noted catalysts, such as personal and professional experiences, that motivated students to pursue public service as a career. We also found evidence of student expectations concerning public service work, including the various elements of PSM—attraction to public policy making, commitment to civic duty and the public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice—as well as more extrinsic rewards such as compensation and job security. When a potential theme was noted by a researcher (e.g., comments from numerous candidates about past experience that inspired the desire to work in the public sector), a document with text samples illustrating the theme was created. Following the individual work on the statements of interest, the researchers met and compared the themes and the textual examples believed to support the themes.

Upon comparison there was strong congruence between the sets of findings, and two broad thematic categories were evident. The first, which we label “retrospective reflections,”
was evidenced in frequent comments identifying personal, educational, volunteer, and employment experiences that served as catalysts for pursuing a career in the public sector. The second thematic category, “prospective possibilities,” was marked by forward-looking assessments of the perceived values and opportunities afforded by public service work.

Once the broad themes were identified, and working from the premise that individuals use language to create understandings, identities, and positions (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wood & Kroger, 2000), the authors performed a finer-grained analysis, to identify discursive strategies (e.g., expression of beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, convictions, identity construction) and to interpret what is accomplished through those strategies. The following section presents the findings, which are organized into the two broad themes noted above, and examples of text relating to student motivations and expectations are provided.

FINDINGS

Retrospective Reflections: Catalysts and Inspirations for the “Call to Serve”

A large number of participants identified personal experiences as catalysts for their interest in a public sector career, and many were candid in describing personal circumstances that motivated their pursuit of public service. Several students pinpointed a specific event or experience and described how it affected their career aspirations. For example, one student wrote:

I can narrow down with absolute certainty the point at which I felt a call to public service: visiting Ottawa in August 1999 with my family and coming upon Parliament Hill for the first time, I was filled with a sense of purpose and direction that I would only later come to recognize as a call to serve. (Female, senior)

The student’s use of specifics (date, event, location) and declaratives (“absolute certainty”) convey a sense of authenticity around the description of this motivator. The phrases “call to
“public service” and “call to serve” suggest a strong intrinsic motivation, reflecting more than simply a desire for a job or employment. These phrases are imbued with a sense of deep personal conviction to pursue a vocation, rather than a job, that is focused on serving others—a message that is notable in subsequent excerpts from other samples.

A female student in the junior cohort was very clear regarding the personal catalyst for her desire to work with Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada:

...after my grade 11 year I had a life-changing experience. I participated in a mission trip to a remote First Nations community...It was there that I discovered a passion for working with people and trying to help them, as well as for Aboriginal culture...This is why I believe that a career in the Federal Government (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development) would be ideal for me.

As with the first excerpt in this section, this student identified, with precise reference to location and time, the experience that inspired her interest in public service work. The phrase “life-changing” to modify the term “experience” is a strong and unequivocal descriptor, emphasizing the profound impact this experience had on her life and proposed career path. The statement also indicates compassion as a motive for pursuing public service, a theme that was common in other statements as well.

A number of students described witnessing people’s disadvantage or hardship as a catalyst for their desire to pursue careers that would allow them to contribute to social justice initiatives to improve the well-being of others. One student was inspired by his family experience, noting that public service would allow him to contribute to the development of public policy related to persons with disabilities:

I believe that my personal interest in this field has been sparked by my experience of growing up with a brother with [special needs]. The challenges of raising a child with special needs, ranging from providing a loving and understanding environment to securing the right
school and program to suit his needs, has greatly shaped the way I view the nature of disabilities...In effect, my experience of living with a brother with special needs has given me insight into the value of the supportive role that the government plays. In turn, I have developed a desire to learn about the inner workings of government, and the various factors that drive the construction of disability policy. (Male, senior)

This short narrative speaks passionately about the personal motivation for pursuing a public service career. The student’s detailed account of his experiences with a special needs sibling indicates first-hand knowledge of social challenges and, by extension, underpins the authenticity of his desire to contribute to public policy solutions. These textual elements—vivid description and first-hand knowledge—serve to create a position that is convincing, making it difficult for a reader to challenge the writer’s evaluation of a situation (Potter, 1996). Similarly, a female student in the senior cohort focused on her past experiences as a visible minority and, using a discursive strategy of vivid description, outlined how her experiences have motivated her pursuit of public service:

My interest in cultural diversity has originated from my childhood where I witnessed many accounts of newly-arrived immigrant children being treated differently by their classmates. I soon began to feel deeply offended by their remarks, even though they were not directed at me. I felt a sense of duty to stand up to my classmates and to tell them to imagine themselves moving to a different culture where English was not the first language.

Exposure to discriminatory treatment inspired this student to seek public sector employment, and specifically with Citizenship and Immigration Canada. Both students described above lived with these experiences for many years, suggesting that the roots of public service motivation can be long and deep. The phrase “sense of duty,” like “a call to serve,” reflects a
deeper level of personal commitment than would be typically associated with a “job.” Another senior, female student whose family immigrated to Canada noted:

My specific field of interest lies in Canada’s immigration policy and how it is shaped and influenced by international and domestic factors. The field of immigration is one that largely appeals to me, as I come from a family of all immigrants who chose to come to Canada to live a better and fulfilled life. My intent is to maintain, and at the same time, improve certain aspects of our immigration system while continuing to represent Canada as a place for immigrants and refugees to call home.

In this case, the student supports her interest in immigration policy with specific reference to her family background. Her personal identity as an individual who came from a “family of all immigrants” justifies her understanding of immigration issues and provides her with a unique lens of authentic, lived experience, from which to engage in immigration issues. Like the two previous participants, this student self-identifies with a particular segment of the population, claiming a sort of “experiential expertise” that validates her perspective on an issue, but also serves as an impetus for pursuing a career in public service.

These excerpts illustrate the influential role of personal experience, whether first-hand, connected to a family situation, or as a witness to those who are seen to be disadvantaged, which serves as a powerful catalyst for choosing public service. For these individuals, public service is more than just a job—it is a “calling.” Perry (1996) identified compassion as one of the factors associated with a desire to engage in public service, and these excerpts illustrate some of the ways in which this is borne out of experience. These comments also support the survey-based work on desired work-related attributes, which suggests that Millennials want the opportunity to “make a difference.”
Employment experiences were cited by some students as a motivating factor behind their decision to seek a public service career. A male student in the senior cohort wrote:

I have an active interest in exploring and researching government programs across multiple ministries. This was affirmed for me in my work as a Case Aid Assistant in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) during the summer of 2010. I fully enjoyed serving people in this front-line public service position with the Ministry of Community and Social Services…I was responsible for designing and constructing a visual representation of the modernization project [which was] utilized by the Central West Region ODSP Managers and aided them with reallocating positions across the region. This positive and educational experience with the Ontario government confirmed my desire for a career in public service.

This excerpt highlights the importance of meaningful work, which Millennials typically indicate is an important factor in their career choices (e.g., Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Rawlins, Indvik, & Johnson, 2008). The student above related his experience in spearheading a project that resulted in broader uptake and utility, which served as positive reinforcement for the student’s chosen career path. His characterization of the work as “positive and educational” highlights the critical role that internships and summer employment opportunities can have on future career interests in the public sector. The importance of meaningful work is similarly reflected in the words of a female student in the senior cohort who wrote:

My four months at the [International Mail Processing Centre for the Canada Border Services Agency] were a success, an experience I would never forget, and a job I was very upset to leave. I learned that the job meant more than sorting out pieces of mail, it meant enforcing almost every possible Customs law and policy created to protect hazardous and dangerous goods from entering Canada…I gained profound
knowledge on how the government worked, how its agencies co-operated together, and how each set of laws and policies were implemented to protect the safety of Canadians. Working as a Border Services Officer reinforced my interest and desire to work for the government.

This student’s storytelling approach to describe the skills, knowledge, and awareness she acquired through her work experience is a sense-making strategy (Weick, 1995), which explains the factors that contributed to a sense of accomplishment, as she engaged with customs law and policy and developed skills central to public service employment. In discussing the value of the experience, the student’s statement also pointed to opportunities for learning and developing new skills, which is another work-related attribute typically valued highly by Millennials (Ng & Gossett, 2013).

Previous studies indicate that Millennials are attracted to organizations where there are good people to work with. The statement of interest from a female student in the junior cohort grounded her PSM in a previous government employment experience that gave her the opportunity to work with interesting people:

I have also had first-hand experience in the public service through summer positions in the Ontario Public Service (OPS), working in the Justice Sector in a variety of roles. I could see from my brief time in those roles that there was much compelling work to be done in the OPS and that there were many opportunities. The staff and management I worked with were dedicated professionals, the work environment was positive, and I was encouraged by those around me to think about developing a career in the OPS.

She describes the work as “compelling” and the work environment as “positive.” Not only were her co-workers “professionals,” connoting a cadre of well-trained experts, conforming to codes of conduct and recognized in society as belonging to a particular occupational group, but they were also
“dedicated,” which constructs an image of loyal, hard-working contributors.

As demonstrated in the following excerpt, volunteer experiences were formative in shaping some students’ understandings of government and society, and influenced the choice to pursue a public service career:

After volunteering for a local [Member of Parliament], I soon realized that a career in the public service is another crucial way to create positive change. Many of the initiatives that I have undertaken are reflective of my desire to provide a service and commitment to making a difference. (Female, senior cohort)

In summary, personal, work, and volunteer experiences appear to be important antecedents of PSM for these Millennials. Family circumstances and catalytic events are powerful agents of socialization, work experiences provide guidance for career mapping, and volunteering shapes values and beliefs about society and the role of government within it. All of these factors appear influential in pointing young people toward public service, motivating their desire to be involved in public policy making and, on a broader level, inspiring them to seek to make a difference in society.

Prospective Possibilities: Expected Benefits of a Public Service Career

In addition to the retrospective reflections described above, the statements of interest also included prospective comments that provided insights about the benefits and rewards students expected to be associated with public sector work. Some students described norm-based motives, such as a desire to serve their country, enhance the lives of the next generation of Canadians, serve as agents of change, and make a difference in society. Others identified more pragmatic expectations, most notably the career opportunities afforded by the anticipated retirement of current public sector employees. We identified several key themes among the students’ stated motivations, which dovetailed with three aspects of PSM described by Perry (1996), namely attraction to public policy making, commitment
to civic duty and the public interest, and compassion. The following sections address these elements in turn, drawing illustrative excerpts from the statements. This is followed by analysis of a fourth theme—pragmatic career considerations—which relates more to the extrinsic factors that motivate individuals to pursue a career path.

**Attraction to Public Policy Making.** Many students expressed an interest in public service as a pathway to participating in public policy development, both in a general sense and with reference to particular policy issues they were passionate about. They cited various reasons for these aspirations, including a desire to serve as agents of change, to work toward solutions to social problems, to improve government programs and services, and to enhance the lives of fellow citizens. One female participant in the alumni cohort stated simply that, “Pursuing a career in public policy, namely assisting in policy making in the area of environment and a sustainable future, would allow me to contribute to the betterment of the world.” Another female student in the junior cohort wrote about her attraction to the policy process:

> I have a passion for the creation of public policy as well as policy evaluation, which is an extremely important aspect of public policy. By examining the strengths and weaknesses of a policy, one can determine if a program is running effectively and efficiently. If governments more thoroughly engaged in these practices, they would have the ability to ensure accountability and value for money, while also identifying any areas in need of policy improvements.

The term “passion,” similar to “calling” noted in the previous section, suggests a strong intrinsic motivation to pursue policy work. Characterizing policy evaluation as “extremely important” is an unequivocal assessment of its significance. The three-part list (accountability, value, policy improvements) offers the reader a complete, moral imperative underpinning the student’s motivation to participate in policy evaluation.

A male student in the junior cohort expressed a similar rationale for his desire to engage in policy development, stating:
“…my primary interest is health care policy, analyzing the effectiveness of our health care system and generating more effective features, while creating innovative responses…” The desire to contribute to good public policy was also echoed in the comments of a female student from the junior cohort, who wrote:

What appeals to me most about pursuing a Masters in Public Service and working for the government is the possibility of playing a significant role in shaping Canada into an even stronger nation where policies are made to be effective and efficient.

This student’s stated aspiration to “play a significant role” reflects a common finding in research on Millennials, which notes that they value opportunities to take on meaningful and challenging work (e.g., Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Rawlins et al., 2008). More broadly, the students’ association of public policy making with accountability, innovation, and program improvement suggests that they view public service work as noble and honourable.

Commitment to Civic Duty and the Public Interest. Perry (1996) observed that the “desire to serve the public interest is essentially altruistic” (p. 6). A male student in the junior cohort clearly identified altruism as part of a broader set of values underpinning his interest in public service:

Public service work is bound to altruism and I hope that my work in both the MPS [Master of Public Service] and any subsequent career will incorporate this altruism. In this way a career in public service becomes mutually beneficial, complementing my own values and motivations while promoting public good. My pursuit of the MPS is an effort to balance my own altruism and thorough, honest work ethic with the need for dedicated individuals to be active in public service.

The strong declarative that “public service work is bound to altruism” is notable, as it unequivocally links public service with an unselfish devotion to the welfare of others. The student further suggests that his value system and identity are
similarly tied to altruism, explaining his attraction to public service. He also identifies other honourable work attributes such as “promoting public good” and dedication. Clearly, to this student, public service work is characterized by integrity and a focus on others, rather than self.

Some students framed their pursuit of public service as a patriotic duty, as illustrated in the words of a female participant from the alumni cohort, who noted, “I believe that being a patriotic Canadian means looking at the country critically, acknowledging our shortcomings, and finding ways to make it better.” Another student wrote:

I genuinely care about and believe in our Canadian institutions, and want Canada to continue to be a world leader in governance, respected for its professional and highly ethical public servants. I believe I can help contribute to the preservation of this reputation domestically and internationally. (Female, senior cohort)

These students’ comments reflect many of the work-related attributes Millennials seek when evaluating potential employers, such as opportunities to have a personal impact, to engage in meaningful work, and to make a difference in society.

Compassion. In explaining their attraction to public service, numerous students expressed an interest in helping others, particularly those in need. This motivation is evident in the statements of two female students from the senior cohort. The first wrote, “I possess a strong passion for equality and safeguarding cultural identities that make Canadian society so unique”; the second stated that “working for the public service sector will satisfy my need to make a contribution to combat poverty and promoting human rights.” Similar sentiments are reflected in the following excerpts:

I always knew that I wanted to work in the social sector and that I wanted to take the knowledge I had gained, my compassion for others, and my eagerness to help people and find a career that had an impact on the
people around me; a job that made a difference to actual lives on a daily basis. (Female, alumna)

A career in public service struck me as a way to bring my varied skills and interests together and use them to help people and make a difference. It has always been very important to me to find a field where I can work for positive change in the world. (Female, alumna)

These participants’ “passion for equality,” “need to combat poverty,” and desire to “help people” and “make a difference in others’ lives” illustrate how the pursuit of public service is motivated by compassion—an affective motive grounded in emotional responses to social conditions.

**Pragmatic career-oriented motivations.** In addition to identifying intrinsic motivations such as altruism, patriotism, and compassion, some students premised their pursuit of public service on a pragmatic awareness (or optimism) concerning the potential for employment and career development. A male student in the alumni cohort noted, “With the forthcoming retirement of a generation of valued employees who created Canada’s reputation, I want to continue on the same path that they set before us and work towards becoming as valued in Canada’s public service.” In a similar fashion, a male student in the junior cohort wrote:

I am interested in working for the Canadian Public Service because of the range and scope of available opportunities. Careers in the Public Service span many departments, providing ample room for career growth and flexibility. Moreover, options exist to serve at the different levels of government to influence policy and practice. Perhaps most appealing, working for the Public Service will enable me to have a career that can impact economic and social life in Canada.

Although these quotes largely reflect motives grounded in pragmatic career considerations, they also convey an expectation that public service will be the vehicle to make an impact in society.
DISCUSSION

The success of government efforts to recruit Millennials into the public service workforce will depend on prospective employees’ perceptions of the fit between their values and those of the employer. The findings about work-related motivations and expectations of Millennials that we have presented here suggest that government recruitment efforts should emphasize the ways in which public service work aligns with the Millennials’ passion to make a difference, and the opportunity it provides to be involved in projects that have a social impact. It also suggests that recruiters should frame government jobs as the means to answer one’s “call to serve,” perhaps by publicizing personal experiences that served as catalysts for existing public employees, with which prospective recruits might identify. This seems particularly important for campaigns targeting new recruits for policy development work, since Millennials appear to see their participation in public policy making as a route through which to channel their compassion for others and fulfill their aspirations to solve social problems.

Framing public service as an opportunity to make a difference in society is a means to tap into the intrinsic motivations of Millennials. But here public sector recruiters face competition from the non-profit sector, which also offers work that can have a direct and positive social impact (Mann, 2006). Since Millennials also cite traditional, extrinsic motivations for pursuing a particular career path, it seems fruitful for government recruiting campaigns to emphasize that jobs in the public service also offer career mobility and a competitive salary and benefits. The key message for Millennials might be that a public sector career provides the most attractive balance between meaningful service to society and tangible rewards.

Student internships are an important stepping stone, because they can reinforce young people’s interest in public service and can demonstrate the ways in which these potential recruits can draw on their educational, employment, and volunteer experiences to transition into a public service career. Internships that provide meaningful work, the opportunity to report to good people, and an opportunity to develop new
skills—work-related attributes typically desired by Millennials—serve public service recruitment efforts well.

Although outside the scope of our study, strategies to retain new Millennial recruits also warrant attention, in light of their apparently weaker loyalty to employers and expectations concerning career mobility. Grant (2008) argues, for example, that public managers can maintain and increase the motivation of employees by periodically demonstrating the “prosocial impact” of their work—that is, providing opportunities for public service employees to interact with beneficiaries in order to see how their work is producing positive outcomes in other people’s lives. Based on our findings, the desire to make a difference in society appears to be one of the most powerful motivations for pursuing a public service career, so enabling public service employees to observe the positive impacts of their work seems a fruitful strategy to cultivate PSM.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Over the next two decades, Canadian governments will face a large number of retirements in the public service workforce, coupled with a tightening labour market and increased competition from other sectors of the economy looking to attract new recruits. The upside is that there is a generation of highly-educated, technologically-savvy, and multi-skilled young people, the Millennials, who are eager to make a difference in society and whose values appear to align with the opportunities afforded by public service work. The challenge for public sector organizations will be to market themselves as the destination of choice for young people seeking meaningful work, good colleagues, and opportunities for skills development and career advancement.

Our study makes a unique contribution to the research on PSM and Millennials. Unlike most studies in this area, which typically survey established public servants and private sector employees, our research focused on young people who have chosen public service as a career path, have committed to advanced graduate education in pursuit of this goal, and are just entering the workforce. Understanding the work-related
motivations and expectations of these potential employees is important for public sector organizations looking to attract and retain new recruits. In addition, our qualitative analysis of students’ written words allowed us to probe deeper into the motivations and expectations of the participants concerning public service work.

It is prudent here to note a few limitations of our exploratory study. First, our analysis was cross-sectional, limited to three cohorts of students, including alumni who had graduated only very recently. Future research could include an expanded study that incorporates data from students in other, similar graduate programs that typically attract students interested in a public sector career, such as Master of Public Administration and Master of Public Policy programs. The methodology could also be used to analyze the motivations and expectations of applicants to other professional degrees, such as Master of Business Administration programs.

Second, because the statements of interest were submitted by students as part of their application to the program, the sample may reflect biases of the program’s admissions committee. In addition, there is some risk of “social desirability bias” (Spector, 2004), in that some applicants might avoid identifying extrinsic motives for pursuing public service, such as a high salary, which could be interpreted as “selfish.” Although the fact that students described personal experiences in such detail suggests authenticity, this could explain, in part, why we found comparatively few references to extrinsic motives in our analysis of the statements.

The findings presented here suggest avenues for future research. With this baseline of data established, it would be beneficial to undertake a longitudinal study that examines how the public service motivation and expectations of students at the pre-employment stage compare with those of graduates who are established in public sector careers. A future study could also examine whether and how public sector organizations employ the various elements of PSM to attract new recruits and distinguish themselves from other competitors in the employment marketplace.
REFERENCES


