Antecedents of Public Service Motivation

James L. Perry


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ABSTRACT

The public administration literature has long emphasized the distinctive character of motives associated with public institutions. The recent development of a public service motivation (PSM) construct and an instrument to measure it opens the way for systematic empirical research. This study investigates the relationship of PSM to five sets of correlates: parental socialization, religious socialization, professional identification, political ideology, and individual demographic characteristics. The results generally confirm the hypotheses, but several anomalies were identified. The findings suggest that research using the PSM construct can be fruitful for understanding motivation. Among the directions for further research are studies of the influences of educational and bureaucratic socialization on PSM and the effects of PSM on individual and organizational behavior.

Public administration practitioners and educators have long contended that public employees are different from employees in other sectors of American society (Perry and Porter 1982; Wittmer 1991). In fact, an increasing number of empirical studies suggest that public employees differ from their private sector counterparts with respect to work-related values and needs. For example, Wittmer (1991) analyzed differences in the rankings of eight reward categories for a sample of 210 employees in public, private, and hybrid organizations. He found that public and private employees differed significantly with respect to preferences for higher pay, helping others, and status. He concluded that "the public service ethic appears to be alive and well . . ." and ". . . extends beyond core public organizations (government) to more hybrid groups" (1991, 380).
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Wittmer's findings reinforce the results of earlier empirical research by Rawls, Ulrich, and Nelson (1975), Rainey (1982), and Nalbandian and Edwards (1983). The cumulative pattern of findings is consistent with Perry and Porter's (1982) conclusion that the public motivational context is indeed different from the private.

Conventional wisdom and empirical evidence that public employees are different led Perry and Wise (1990) to define a construct, public service motivation (PSM), intended to capture the distinction. They defined PSM as an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily or uniquely in public institutions. Four dimensions—attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest and civic duty, compassion, and self-sacrifice—are empirically associated with the construct (Perry 1996).

The goals of the present study are twofold. First, the research seeks to advance the validation (Schwab 1980) of a measure of public service motivation by reporting correlates of the scale (Perry 1996). A second goal is to investigate several hypotheses about the antecedents of public service motivation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are few examples in empirical public administration research that provide guidance about the antecedents of public service motivation (PSM). The construct itself is new, and no analogous constructs have any history in the public administration literature. Potential antecedents, however, can be identified from other sources. One source is research about the four constituent dimensions of PSM (i.e., attraction to public policy making, commitment to the public interest and civic duty, compassion, and self-sacrifice). For instance, psychologists and social psychologists have studied compassion and, more generally, altruism. Prior empirical research related to civic duty and attraction to public policy making provides additional clues. Thus, research on these subjects offers some insights about antecedents of PSM.

At a more abstract level, the grounding of PSM in three types of motives—rational, normative, and affective—suggests another source for insights about PSM. To the extent that existing research indicates how different types of motives, such as those that are norm based, evolve, or are inculcated, it can also be useful for identifying antecedents of PSM.
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This initial investigation of antecedents could not hope to explore all potential antecedents. It instead focuses on a few plausible correlates of PSM such as parental socialization, religious socialization, professional identification, political ideology, and individual demographics.

Parental Socialization

The primary context for socialization within American society is the family, particularly parents. A small body of research has established empirical relationships between childhood experiences and altruistic behavior in adulthood (Clary and Miller 1986; Rosenhan 1970). In a retrospective study, Rosenhan identified sources for differing levels of altruism exhibited by civil rights workers. One source was the affective relationship between parent and child. Rosenhan found that warm, positive relationships with at least one parent accounted for higher levels of altruism among civil rights workers. Parental modeling of altruistic behavior also was related significantly to higher altruism by their children in adulthood.

Rosenhan's research was replicated and extended by Clary and Miller (1986). In a prospective study of volunteers at a telephone crisis-counseling agency, Clary and Miller studied the effects of parental modeling and nurturance on sustained altruism (defined as the fulfillment of the volunteer's commitment). They found that volunteers who reported warm and positive relationships with parents who modeled altruism were more likely to sustain their volunteer commitments.

Two dimensions of public service motivation, compassion and self-sacrifice, are closely aligned with altruism. Thus they might reasonably be the product of parental socialization. Two aspects of parental socialization are expected to be related to public service motivation (Clary and Miller 1986). The extent to which parents model helping or altruistic behavior should be positively related to public service motivation. A second dimension, parental relations, involves the extent of positive relations with parents, especially during high school. Favorable parental relations is also expected to be positively related to public service motivation.

Religious Socialization

Another potentially important influence on PSM is an individual's religious exposure and experiences. In Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah and his colleagues observed: "Religion is one of the most important of many ways in which Americans..."
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involved' in the life of their community and society" (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985, 219). Religion is an institution within which Americans develop beliefs about their obligations to others and are provided the opportunity to enact those beliefs.

The pluralistic character of American religion assures diverse results regarding where the line is drawn between public and private motives. The central conflict, as depicted by Bellah and his associates (1985, 248), is "between withdrawal into purely private spirituality and the biblical impetus to see religion as involved with the whole of life." This distinction is characterized by Benson and Williams (1982) as religious worldview, which represents the foundational beliefs of an individual's religious thinking. They distinguish between two polar worldviews, agenetic and communal. The agenetic worldview perceives religion in relation to individual problems and religious solutions to them. The communal worldview sees religion in terms of problems shared by people and their relationships with one another. In a study of religious predictors of sociopolitical attitudes, Welch and Leege (1988) defined a related concept, closeness to God. It represents an individual's perception of closeness to God when engaged in both spiritual and social activities.

Religious foundational beliefs are related directly to several facets of public service motivation, specifically commitment to the public interest/civic duty and compassion. People who profess the agenetic or individual worldview are anticipated to exhibit lower public service motivation than individuals who espouse a communal worldview. A positive relationship is expected between closeness to God and public service motivation.

Apart from the influence of religious doctrines, public service motivation is likely to be affected by involvement in church activities. Church membership, active participation in its programs, and training in church schools or classes should facilitate the transmission of and commitment to religious doctrines. Higher levels of involvement in church activities should be associated with higher public service motivation.

Professional Identification

The profession is another institution that is likely to influence public service motivation. Professionalism typically is associated with several characteristics: a clear-cut occupational field; specialized technical knowledge acquired from a formal educational program; ethical responsibility for the use of
expertise, including making it available for the common good; and a lifetime career for its members (May 1980; Mosher 1982).

Professions historically have been a repository for public service values. The professions of medicine, law, and the clergy advanced such social norms as caring, social justice, and the common good. Many of these values took root in public administration with creation of the city management plan and the evolution of public service professions (Mosher 1982) during the Progressive era. Organizations such as the International City Management Association and, later, the American Society for Public Administration were founded on principles of the worth of public service and the member’s obligation to serve the public well.

Over the years, several prominent scholars have noted that professionalism is a double-edged sword, cutting both toward and away from democracy. In an early review of the progression of public service professionalization, York Willbern (1954) posed the question: too little or too much? He enumerated advantages and disadvantages associated with public service professionalization. Among the disadvantages were the tendencies of professional loyalty to displace loyalty to larger portions of the population, and insulation from political control. Willbern’s critique of professionalism was pursued in depth by Frederick Mosher (1982), who dubbed the dominance of professions in government "the professional state." Mosher’s analysis was reminiscent of Willbern's for his conclusion that, for "... better and worse—much of our government is now in the hands of professionals" (142).

A professional’s socialization to his or her ethical responsibility should positively influence public service motivation. The degree to which professionalism influences public service motivation is likely to be constrained by tension between professional self-interest and the ideal of professional responsibility to higher ethical and moral standards. Despite the tension, identification with a profession is expected to be positively related to public service motivation.

Political Ideology

The beliefs that individuals acquire through their political affiliations also are antecedents of public service motivation. Although American political parties are not organized on ideological grounds, historically they have taken distinct positions on issues such as the role of the state and of free enterprise. Their
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ideological differences have become more pronounced in recent years.

Political beliefs should bear on an individual's public service motivation. A direct measure of political beliefs is conservatism-liberalism. Increasing liberalism should be positively related to public service motivation.

**Demographic Correlates**

Four demographic variables were included in the analysis, primarily for control purposes. Education, age, and income were expected to be positively associated with PSM. No predictions were made for gender.

**METHODS**

Data were gathered using a self-administered survey. Survey design, administration, and sampling are discussed in Perry (1996).

**Measures**

Exhibit 1 presents the survey items used to measure public service motivation. Coefficient alpha for the composite scale was .90. The appendix provides descriptions of other measures used in the study. Each of the scales attained acceptable reliabilities as measured by coefficient alpha.

There were 375 useable survey responses, but listwise deletion of cases used in the regressions resulted in 295 cases for the analyses.

**RESULTS**

Exhibit 2 presents means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations for each of the study variables. Only a few of the independent variables were correlated at .50 or higher, but none of the intercorrelations was higher than .66. In each case, the high intercorrelations were intuitively reasonable (e.g., a high correlation between parental modeling and parental relations). Thus, multicollinearity was not a factor in the analysis.

As a whole, the antecedent variables explain a modest amount of the variance, as reported in exhibit 3. The $R^2$ for the overall scale is .13. For the subscales the $R^2$ ranges from a low of .07 for attraction to policy making and compassion to a high of .18 for commitment to the public interest/civic duty.
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Exhibit 1
Public Service Motivation Items by Subscale

**ATTRACTION TO POLICY MAKING** (coefficient alpha = .77)
- Politics is a dirty word. (Reversed)
- The give and take of public policy making doesn’t appeal to me. (Reversed)
- I don’t care much for politicians. (Reversed)

**COMMITMENT TO THE PUBLIC INTEREST/CIVIC DUTY** (coefficient alpha = .69)
- It is hard for me to get intensely interested in what is going on in my community. (Reversed)
- I unselfishly contribute to my community.
- I consider public service my civic duty.
- Meaningful public service is very important to me.
- I would prefer seeing public officials do what is best for the whole community even if it harmed my interests.

**COMPASSION** (coefficient alpha = .72)
- It is difficult for me to contain my feelings when I see people in distress.
- Most social programs are too vital to do without.
- I am often reminded by daily events how dependent we are on one another.
- I am rarely moved by the plight of the underprivileged. (Reversed)
- To me, patriotism includes seeing to the welfare of others.
- I have little compassion for people in need who are unwilling to take the first step to help themselves. (Reversed)
- There are few public programs that I wholeheartedly support. (Reversed)
- I seldom think about the welfare of people I don’t know personally. (Reversed)

**SELF-SACRIFICE** (coefficient alpha = .74)
- Doing well financially is definitely more important to me than doing good deeds. (Reversed)
- Much of what I do is for a cause bigger than myself.
- Serving other citizens would give me a good feeling even if no one paid me for it.
- Making a difference in society means more to me than personal achievements.
- I think people should give back to society more than they get from it.
- I am prepared to make enormous sacrifices for the good of society.
- I am one of those rare people who would risk personal loss to help someone else.
- I believe in putting duty before self.

Four variables—closeness to God, parental modeling, education, and age—are significant in at least one equation in the direction predicted. Religious worldview and parental relations are the only variables not significant in any of the four equations.

187/J-PART, April 1997
## Exhibit 2
### Means, Standard Deviation, and Zero-order Correlations

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N=295
Correlations > |.09| are significant at the .05 level
### Exhibit 3
Regressions for the Antecedents of Public Service Motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Public Service Motivation</th>
<th>Attraction to Policy Making</th>
<th>Commitment to the Public Interest/Civic Duty</th>
<th>Compassion</th>
<th>Self-sacrifice</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BETA (Std. Error)</td>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>BETA (Std. Error)</td>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>BETA (Std. Error)</td>
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<td>.01 (.77)</td>
<td>-.04 (.07)</td>
<td>.58 (.07)</td>
<td>-.07 (.07)</td>
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<td>.00 (.07)</td>
<td>-.01 (.07)</td>
<td>.86 (.07)</td>
<td>-.30 (.07)</td>
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<td>-.04 (.06)</td>
<td>.48 (.06)</td>
<td>.03 (.06)</td>
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<td>Parental modeling</td>
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<td>.00 (.07)</td>
<td>.03 (.07)</td>
<td>.72 (.07)</td>
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<td>.60 (.06)</td>
<td>-.21 (.06)</td>
<td>.00 (.06)</td>
<td>.16 (.06)</td>
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<td>Liberalism/conservatism</td>
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<td>.95 (.06)</td>
<td>.16 (.06)</td>
<td>.01 (.06)</td>
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<td>.03 (.06)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>.10 (.08)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.01 (.08)</td>
<td>.96 (.08)</td>
<td>-.18 (.08)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>.19 (.06)</td>
<td>.05 (.06)</td>
<td>.42 (.06)</td>
<td>-.15 (.06)</td>
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</table>

R² | .13 | .07 | .18 | .07 | .15 |
F  | 3.96 | 2.01 | 5.68 | 2.07 | 4.55 |
Sig.| .00 | .03 | .00 | .02 | .00 |
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Professional identification is significant for three of the four dimensions of PSM, but the direction of the relationship varies. It is negatively related to attraction to policy making and positively associated with civic duty and self-sacrifice. As the earlier discussion indicated, these variations across the PSM dimensions were not unexpected.

The political ideology variable also exhibited a mixed association with the PSM dimensions. Liberalism-conservatism was significantly associated with attraction to policy making and self-sacrifice. The latter relationship was negative, as predicted, but the former association was positive.

The results also exhibit two unequivocal anomalies. Church involvement was negatively, rather than positively, associated with PSM. The association was significant for the composite scale, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Income was significantly and negatively related to public interest/civic duty, and the sign was negative in four of the five regressions.

The PSM-gender relationships, for which no predictions were made, were significant in two equations. Both the public interest/civic duty and self-sacrifice equations were negative, indicating that the scores for these two dimensions were likely to be higher for men than for women.

DISCUSSION

This study looked at several hypothesized antecedents of public service motivation. The results suggest that an individual’s public service motivation develops from exposure to a variety of experiences, some associated with childhood, some associated with religion, and some associated with professional life. The modest R^2s (ranging from .18 to .07) for the five regressions indicate that the variables studied here fall far short of providing a comprehensive explanation for the variance in PSM. The regressions nonetheless identify several factors that significantly affect variations in PSM.

One of the most interesting results of the analysis involves the professional identification variable. The finding that professional identification is negatively related to attraction to policy making accords with Frederick Mosher’s (1982) observations about the alienation of professionals from politics. Given the generally accepted belief that power is the lifeblood of administration (Long 1949), the finding that professionalism potentially undercut...
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...professional training indeed inculcate a disdain for politics? If professional socialization results in undesirable side effects, what can be done about it? Can professionals be developed in ways that are conducive to democratic responsibility?

Although the direction of the relationship between church involvement and PSM was contrary to expectations, the joint pattern of relationships for church involvement and closeness to God suggests a possible explanation. Church involvement could be a proxy for several variables, including religious fundamentalism, which was not measured in the study. The negative relationship for church involvement suggests that individuals who spend large amounts of time in church have less time to devote to civic commitments. The relationship also suggests that individuals who are more indoctrinated in religious teachings (because of their involvements in religious instruction classes and education by religious groups) may respond to the PSM survey items in more doctrinaire ways. An individual's familiarity with and adherence to religious doctrines does not assure acceptance of the Judeo-Christian ethics of love and compassion and may, in fact, produce the opposite result. At the same time, individuals who see themselves as close to God in a variety of contexts (e.g., being with a person they love, obeying church rules, working for peace and justice) are likely to be associated with significantly higher levels of PSM. Thus the relationships affirm the underlying importance of religion to PSM but suggest that the linkages, just as they were in the case of professional ideology, are more complex than originally hypothesized.

The anomalous results for income are more difficult to explain. It appears that individuals with higher incomes are less likely to be motivated by commitment to public interest/civic duty. This implies that, all other things being equal, public service motivation declines with increasing wealth. Upon initial examination, the finding seems to contradict other facts and stereotypes about the influence of income on public service and philanthropy. Income is generally reported to be positively related to philanthropy (Ostrower 1995). We also generally believe that income draws wealthy individuals to public service careers as a way of "giving something back." These impressions may, however, be misleading. The income-philanthropy relationship does not control for ability to pay. Lower income individuals may, in fact, donate more of their resources relative to total income. Similarly, the well-known examples of public service motivation among the wealthy (e.g., the Kennedys and Rockefellers) may contribute to a stereotype that is at odds with the relatively low proportion of the wealthy who are deeply engaged in civic commitments.

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The income-PSM relationships are consistent with the late Christopher Lasch’s (1995) critique of American society in *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. Lasch argues that America is divided along class lines. Elites have abandoned their historic commitment to the middle class and instead are world citizens, inattentive to the practice of citizenship. Lasch writes:

Instead of supporting public services, the new elites put their money into the improvement of their own self-enclosed enclaves. They gladly pay for private and suburban schools, private police, and private systems of garbage collection; but they have managed to relieve themselves, to a remarkable extent, of the obligation to contribute to the national treasury. Their acknowledgment of civic obligations does not extend beyond their own immediate neighborhoods (1995, 47).

Lasch’s scenario of elite abandonment of the middle class accounts for the income-PSM relationships, and his thesis, as the broader relationship between income and PSM, merits further study.

As noted at the outset of this section, the antecedents investigated in the present study explain small but significant parts of the variance in PSM. What practical implications, if any, can be drawn from the results? Probably the broadest implication involves the findings for parental, religious, and professional socialization. The results (together with the results for the education variable) suggest that an individual’s formative experiences are significant for inculcation of public service motivation. This indicates the importance of experiences within the family, schools, and profession for subsequent development of public service motivation. To the extent that PSM is valued, the results suggest that efforts should be made to introduce appropriate experiences within the socializing institutions. It also might be inferred from the results that to the extent institutions like the family are less able than they once were to provide appropriate models for children (for reasons ranging from both parents working outside the home to larger number of single-parent families) then substitutes that nurture and reinforce sentiments and values supportive of public service need to become part of our way of life. Without such substitutes we risk further erosion of citizens’ commitments to public service. It is conceivable that innovations such as schools dedicated to public service themes and national service programs such as AmeriCorps*USA will fill gaps not adequately served by the family and other traditional institutions.

The implications for socializing experiences seem plausible in the context of theories of moral development and empirical
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research. Kohlberg's (1969) stages of moral development and Colby and Damon's (1992) research about lives of exemplary moral commitment are part of a body of evidence suggesting the importance of socialization processes.

CONCLUSION

This study is a first step in a long-term research program about public service motivation. It found that PSM is related to many of the antecedents in the ways hypothesized. At the same time, the investigation uncovered several anomalous relationships and more-complex relationships between antecedents and dimensions of PSM and also more-complex relationships between antecedents and dimensions of PSM than originally had been predicted. The results provide a rich foundation for future research.

The analysis of the antecedents of PSM should be expanded significantly beyond the variables investigated in the present study. Expanding the variables investigated will help to explain larger parts of the variance of PSM and should help to identify interventions to change it. One line of investigation might look in greater depth at the role that educational experiences play in the development of public service motivations. This includes whether and how different approaches to education for the public service influence PSM.

A second line of investigation could focus on organizational influences on PSM. To what extent do an individual's motivation upon entry into an organization and subsequent experiences influence PSM? Do organizational policies or leadership practices influence levels of PSM among members? Recent and past organizational experiences may be powerful influences on PSM. Investigation of organizational influences should seek to assess the effects of organizational experiences and policies on the public service motivation of members over time.

Educational and organizational factors are but two types of antecedents that could be pursued in future research. A distinct direction for future research entails the effects of PSM rather than its antecedents. Perry and Wise (1990) argued that PSM influences individual and organizational outcomes. Their general argument is borne out in a recent study by Brewer (1995). In a sample of federal employees, Brewer found a significant relationship between indicators of PSM and willingness to blow the whistle on wrongdoing. Future research should seek to identify and investigate a range of behaviors that might be associated with PSM.

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APPENDIX
MEASUREMENT OF STUDY VARIABLES

Religious Socialization

Religious Worldview
Respondents were asked to choose from pairs of alternatives:
1. "The best way to address social problems is to change the hearts of individuals" (individualist) OR "The best way to address social problems is to change social institutions" (communal).
2. "Individuals are poor because of their inadequacies" (individualist) OR "Individuals are poor because of social, economic, and political factors" (communal).

Individuals who responded to the individualist option for both questions were given a score of 1 (individualist), those who responded to a combination of individualist and communal options were scored 2 (mixed), and individuals who responded to the communal option for both questions were scored 3 (communal).

Closeness to God (coefficient alpha = .89)
How close to God do you feel while? (responses ranged from not close = 1, to extremely close = 5)
1. Being with a person you love
2. Gathering with the congregation during services
3. Obeying church rules
4. Helping individuals in need
5. Being absolved or anointed, etc.
6. Working for justice and peace

Church Involvement
A count of "yes" responses to four items were summed to form the scale:
1. Are you a member of a church or synagogue? (yes/no)
2. Do you take part in any of the activities or organizations of your church (synagogue) other than attending service? (yes/no)
3. Did you get any of your grade or high school education in parochial or other schools run by religious groups? (yes/no)
4. When you were growing up, did you attend Sunday school or religious instruction classes regularly, most of the time, some of the time, or never? (regularly and most of the time were counted as a "yes" response)

Family Socialization
Following Clary and Miller (1986), scales were created for modeling of altruistic behavior by parents and parental relationships.

Modeling (coefficient alpha = .78)
Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement-disagreement. The modeling scale consisted of eleven items selected from fifteen items used by Clary and Miller (1986):
1. My parents rarely donated money to charitable causes.
2. My father treated his job as one in which he tried to help other people.
3. My parents actively participated in volunteer organizations (such as the Red Cross, March of Dimes, etc.)

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APPENDIX (continued)

4. My mother treated her job (in home and/or out-of-home) as one in which she helped other people.
5. In my family, we always helped one another.
6. My parents very frequently donated money to people who collected money door to door (such as March of Dimes, Heart Fund, MS, etc.)
7. Concerning strangers experiencing distress, my parents generally thought that it was more important to "not get involved."
8. My parents frequently discussed moral values with me (values like the "Golden Rule," etc.)
9. When I was growing up, my parents told me I should be willing to "lend a helping hand."
10. My parents often urged me to donate money to charities.
11. When I was younger, my parents very often urged me to get involved with volunteer projects for children (for example UNICEF, walkathons, MD).

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS (coefficient alpha = .87)
Past relationships with parents were measured using seven items on scales ranging from very seldom to very often:
1. In high school, to what extent did you discuss important and/or intimate matters with one or both of your parents?
2. In high school, how frequently did you feel your parents were angry at you?
3. During your high school years, how frequently did you feel angry at your parents?
4. To what extent did your parents spontaneously show affection to you?
5. How frequently did you share your true thoughts and feelings with your parents?
6. During your high school years, to what extent did your parents really understand what you were saying?
7. How frequently did your parents show an interest in and/or work with you on your projects (school and non-school projects)?

Professional Identification
Five items (coefficient alpha = .60) from the professional identification subscale of Bartol's professionalism scale (1979) were used for the scale.
1. I systematically read the professional journals.
2. I regularly attend professional meetings at the local level.
3. In my view, professional organizations are of little benefit to the average member. (reversed)
4. I regularly attend professional meetings at the national level.
5. I believe that the professional organization(s) should be supported.

Political Ideology

CONSERVATISM-LIBERALISM
Where would you place yourself on the following scale of different political points of view?
1. Very liberal
2. Liberal

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APPENDIX (continued)

3. Moderate, middle of the road
4. Conservative
5. Very conservative

Demographic Information

1. Gender
   a. Male
   b. Female
2. What is your current age?
   a. under 25
   b. 26-35
   c. 36-50
   d. 51-65
   e. over 65
3. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
   a. Grade school or some high school
   b. High school diploma or GED (Graduate Equivalency Degree)
   c. High school diploma plus some college or technical training
   d. College degree (BA, BS, or other bachelor's degree)
   e. Master's or higher degree
4. What is your annual income?
   a. less than $20,000
   b. $20,000—$29,999
   c. $30,000—$39,999
   d. $40,000—$49,999
   e. $50,000 or greater

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