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## **Playing a role - but which one? : how public service motivation and professionalism affect decision-making in dilemma situations**

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# Chapter 1

**INTRODUCTION:  
WHAT DRIVES PUBLIC SERVICE  
PROFESSIONALS' DECISION-MAKING  
IN REAL-LIFE DILEMMA SITUATIONS**



‘What am I to do?’ is a frequently heard exclamation. The answer is not always clear, but the question is particularly pressing in dilemma situations. ‘Moral/ethical dilemmas’ – or situations in which important ethical values are in conflict (Cooper, 2001; Maesschalck, 2005) – are a type of dilemma that constitutes a core research topic in public administration literature. In this study, a broader, less normative approach to dilemmas is used. A dilemma is seen as a special form of trade-off, characterized by the fact that the situation has negative consequences no matter what option is chosen (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). Imagine the following situation:

*You are working at an abattoir and it is your task to safeguard animal welfare and public health. You see a weak and crippled animal with an abscess climbing from a truck. What would you do? Would you order the animal slaughtered right away in order to avoid additional suffering and safeguard animal welfare? Or would you decide that the animal had better be isolated in a box, to be slaughtered at the end of the day, ensuring that the slaughter line is not contaminated and public health is not put under pressure? In other words, would you trade off animal welfare in order to ensure public health, or vice versa?*

There is a large body of literature on the question of how individuals deal with dilemmas how–people manage tensions between competing values and demands. In public administration literature, the concept of *coping behaviour* or *coping strategies* is often used when people’s reactions to dilemmas are investigated (e.g., De Graaf, Huberts & Smulders, 2014; Brunsson, 1989; Lawton et al., 2000; Lipsky, 1980; Steenhuisen & Van Eeten, 2013; Tetlock, 2000; Thacher & Rein, 2004). Coping can be defined “as a response to competing values that takes form in the actions and decisions” (Steenhuisen, 2009, p. 20). Coping strategies, therefore, not only describe cognitive processes of how individuals deal with stress, but are also useful to operationalize decision-making in dilemma situations; they help to identify what kind of decisions public service professionals make in dilemma situations. A philosophical tradition (which, however, will not be discussed here) that indirectly describes what kind of decisions individuals make is *pragmatism*. The central argument of this tradition emphasises the notion that “the value of an idea derives from its practical consequences” (Rorty et al., 2004, p. 72) rather than theory, implying that individuals do ‘what works best’.

Another stream of research on dilemmas in public services aims to identify factors explaining decision-making, and ultimately behaviour, of public service professionals who are confronted with dilemma situations. This research goes beyond the most frequently used description of decision-making known as ‘rational choice’. A dilemma is characterised by the fact that the situation has negative consequences, no matter what option is chosen

(Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). This implies that rational reasoning provides no easy way out. What is more, “rules and procedures can never universally fit each individual case and every circumstance [that public servant professionals are confronted with], so judgements must be made” (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, p. 338). Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000, 2003), for example, conclude that street-level workers base their decisions on normative choices (the value for the individual client) rather than rules and regulations. In his work on street-level bureaucrats, Lipsky (1980) argues that civil servants’ behaviour is motivated by their efforts to make their organizational life more consistent with their own preferences, commitments to the service and their conception of the potential of their work to be socially useful (p. xii). Another well-developed field of literature that addresses the question of why people make certain decisions in the face of dilemmas is that of *organizational ethics literature* (e.g., Measschalck, 2004, Sims & Koen, 1999; Stewart et al., 2001). Here, decision-making is traditionally addressed by means of a typology of ethical climates initially developed by Victor and Cullen (1987; 1988).

This dissertation is related to all these research fields, as the research project was intended to increase our understanding of what drives public professionals’ decision-making in real-life dilemma situations. This means that the primary interest is in the question of *why* public service professionals make certain decisions and to a lesser degree in their actual behaviour and decision-making. Because equality before the law is a core value in the public sector (Rainey, 2003), variation in the decision-making of public service professionals, provided the context is similar, should be minimized. A deeper insight into what drives the behaviour of individuals is necessary because it can help to anticipate and adjust unwanted behaviour.

The focus in this dissertation is on *public service motivation* (PSM) and *professionalism*, and the role these two concepts together play in the decision-making of public service professionals facing dilemma situations. There are two reasons to focus on these two concepts. First, PSM and professionalism are two frequently debated concepts in the public administration literature, which are expected to be useful in explaining behaviour (Vandenableele et al., 2006; Andersen, 2009). Second, both concepts are embedded within what March and Olson (1989) describe as ‘the logic of appropriateness’. From this perspective, individual behaviour is guided by institutions which are assumed to play a central role in defining appropriate values and norms. This perspective may be better suited to explain why individuals make certain decisions in the face of dilemmas than a more self-interested approach based on rational choice, which the authors specify as ‘the logic of expected consequences’. According to Weber, Kopelman and Messick (2004), a dominant ‘rational choice’ framework has limitations when applied to dilemmas, such as the presumption of relatively conscious decision-making processes and choices that are preceded by evaluation and judgment.

Interest in and research on PSM, or “an individual’s orientation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society” (Perry & Hondeghem, 2008, p. vii) is relatively young but has increased immensely over the past 25 years. Because PSM seems to be a promising concept by which to identify predictable links between what drives employees and organizational outcomes, both public management scholars and practitioners are interested in it (Brewer, 2008; Vandenabeele, 2009), and is it increasingly recognized in other disciplines such as economics, psychology and sociology (Ritz, Brewer & Neumann, 2013) as well. Individuals scoring high on PSM are expected to perform well, since they are working to provide services they perceive as meaningful (Perry & Wise, 1990; Wright & Grant, 2010). Research on professionalism has a very long history within sociological research (Rainey, 2009). Traditionally, professionalism is perceived as the collective control of specialized theoretical knowledge, applied to specific cases, based on socialized professional norms and values and on institutionalized procedures and ways of working (e.g., Abbott, 1988; Elliott, 1972; Freidson, 2001), which leads to one shared professional identity (Evetts, 2006). One result of this common identity is similarities in work practices and procedures, perceiving problems and solutions, and interacting with clients and customers (Evetts, 2006).

The above introduction to PSM and professionalism shows that both concepts can be used to explain behaviour. They can therefore be assumed to be useful concepts to increase our understanding of what drives public service professionals’ decision-making in daily dilemma situations. However, at the same time, I also found that much work still needs to be done on the theories of PSM and professionalism. These issues – which were explained more in detail in the following paragraph – need to be addressed before assessing the potential role of PSM and professionalism for decision-making in dilemma situations.

Despite the large number of quantitative articles on PSM, addressing the concept as either an independent or a dependent variable, our knowledge of what it ‘really’ means and implies to be public service motivated is limited, especially in dilemma situations. Does being public service motivated then imply supporting efficiency, responsibility, democracy, integrity, transparency or responsiveness? According to Van der Wal, De Graaf, and Van Montfort (2011), these public values are potentially conflicting and can force individuals to choose one above the other. This limitation is reflected in, for example, the observations that studies on the PSM-performance relationship report mixed findings (e.g., Alonso & Lewis, 2001; Naff & Crum, 1999; Ritz, 2009; Vandenabeele, 2009); that it remains unclear how PSM incorporates the different dimensions that are often found to be inconsistent as to how they correlate with other factors under investigation (e.g., Andersen & Serritlew, 2012; Giauque et al., 2012; Taylor, 2007); and by the ongoing effort to improve the PSM

measurement instrument (e.g., Kim 2009; Kim et al., 2013; Vandenabeele, 2008). Another limitation is that little is known about the causal mechanisms that underlie the development of PSM. Longitudinal research on PSM relies on quantitative data which primarily indicate *how* PSM changes, but not sufficiently *why* (especially not why PSM decreases over time).

We also find that there could also be more clarity about the meaning and behavioural consequences of professionalism. There is a great variety of (sociological) approaches, each having their own view on how professionals behave. Some address it as a normative values system (e.g., Parsons, 1951; Goode, 1969; MacDonald, 1995), others as an ideology of occupational power (e.g., Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977) or as a mechanism of professional control (Durkheim, 1992; Freidson, 2001, Fournier, 1999). More recent approaches define professionalism via the way professionals cope with external pressure, by either relying on 'purified' professional norms and values (occupational professionalism), adhering to organizational forces (organizational professionalism), or combining professional and organizational values (hybridized professionalism). As a result, sociological theory on professionalism is vague, because it is not clear what the concept means and which behaviour can be expected from professionals, especially when they are confronted with situations of conflicting demands. For example, depending on the perspective chosen, professionals are expected to go for solutions that benefit their own occupation or follow norms intended for the larger society. Next to the dominant sociology of professionalism, we also see a minor body of literature on professionalism at an individual level (e.g., De Graaf, 2011). This stream of research shows that professionals' behaviour and decision-making are influenced by more than just one overarching occupational norm; the interpretations that individuals bring to their professional role seem to matter as well. This is very interesting, because it contradicts a central assumption in the sociology of professionalism, i.e., that professionals belonging to the same professional group act and perceive in similar ways (Evetts, 2006). Finally, a gap in our knowledge that also deserves closer attention in the context of this study relates to the relationship between PSM and professionalism. In the literature, there is no agreement on what this relationship looks like. Whereas some scholars state that the concepts supplement each other (e.g., Freidson, 2001; Vinzant, 1998), others argue that the two concepts are mutually exclusive. Van Wart (1998), for example, argues that professionals isolate themselves from democratic control by setting their own standards and regulating their professional members.



## 1.1 Primary and secondary research questions

The primary research question of this dissertation is derived from the observation that working in the public sector implies the need to make decisions in the face of dilemmas, and that a better understanding of why public service professionals make certain decisions in such situations would be highly desirable. Two concepts, one native to public administration literature – *public service motivation* – and one introduced from sociology but also central to public administration literature – *professionalism* – seem to offer a promising perspective from which to investigate this problem. At the same time, however, our knowledge about what it really means and implies to be a professional and to be public service motivated is still limited. Especially in dilemma situations, the meaning and implications of PSM and professionalism are unclear. Therefore, using the context of dilemmas to delve into these two concepts and their interrelatedness more deeply, I formulate the following primary research question:

*PRQ: What is the combined impact of public service motivation and professionalism on public service professionals' decision-making in dilemma situations?*

If we want to answer this question, the limitations of current PSM and professionalism research – as pointed out above – need to be addressed first. Next, it is necessary to specify what the dilemma situations are that public service professionals are confronted with and what kind of decisions they make in such situations, i.e., what kind of coping strategies they apply. In order to answer the primary research question, the following five secondary research questions must also be answered:

*SRQ1: What are the dilemma situations that public service professionals are frequently confronted with?*

*SRQ2: What kind of decisions do public service professionals make in dilemma situations?*

*SRQ3: How can the meaning and behavioural consequences of PSM be clarified in dilemma situations?*

*SRQ4: How can the meaning and behavioural consequences of professionalism be clarified in dilemma situations?*

*SRQ5: What is the relationship between PSM and professionalism?*

## 1.2 Research design and the case studied

The empirical part of this dissertation is based on a mixed-methods research design. This design is considered to be best suited to the specific question addressed here – what drives public service professionals’ decision-making in complex real life situations? – and the proposed necessity of developing new approaches to the study of PSM and professionalism that are clearer about the meaning and behavioural consequences of the two concepts. By incorporating the strength of both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms (e.g., adaptation to the specific context of the investigation while at the same time making it possible for the research findings to be generalized), this research design offers the best chances to obtain useful answers to the research questions. Qualitative methods – primarily semi-structured interviews, but also participant observation and document analysis – are used in the first phase of the empirical work to 1) explore the specific working context of public service professionals, in particular to identify dilemma situations (SRQ1) and the kind of decisions individuals make (SRQ2); 2) shed light on the question of how the meaning and behavioural consequences of PSM and professionalism can be clarified (SRQ3, SRQ4); and 3) increase our understanding of the relationship between these two concepts (SRQ5). Interview data were collected at two moments in time, which made it possible to investigate how and why PSM develops over time. The results of the quantitative analysis were then used to develop a questionnaire which enables us to answer the primary research question – what is the combined impact of PSM and professionalism on public service professionals’ decision-making in dilemma situations – by testing a conceptual model. Also, the qualitative data were used to check if the results of the qualitative analysis could be generalized and to further develop the answers to the secondary research questions.

The professionals studied in this investigation were veterinary inspectors working for the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (*‘Nederlandse Voedsel- and Warenautoriteit’, NVWA*) responsible for public health, animal health and animal welfare. I consider them ideal subjects for research into the role of PSM and professionalism in the context of dilemma situations, for a number of reasons: they work in a demanding setting, involving face-to-face interactions with different types of inspectees who have strong economic interests. The veterinary inspectors’ primary task is to enforce European law, national law and rules set by the organization directed at safeguarding public health, animal health and animal welfare. However, in their (prior) work as practicing veterinarian, they are also used to consider economic aspects of farming. As these different aspects of the work of veterinary inspectors are not always compatible, these individuals are frequently confronted with dilemma situations. Their predicaments are exacerbated by the ambiguity

inherent in their work and the high levels of discretion required. Beyond that, especially if any scandals occur, many different parties (e.g., animal and consumer protection societies, political parties, trade unions) make their voice heard, which results in close scrutiny of veterinary inspectors' work. Regardless of these difficult working circumstances, providing reliable and valid judgments is a prerequisite for public sector work in general and inspection services in particular, in order to preserve authority, and gain legitimacy and trust from both inspectees and society at large (Tuijn, Janssens, Robben & Van den Bergh, 2011). For these reasons, veterinary inspectors provide an excellent test case for the question of what drives public service professionals' decision-making in dilemma situations.

### 1.3 Theoretical relevance

Regarding PSM research this study offers several important theoretical contributions. First of all, it aims to enrich public administration literature on PSM by recognizing interdisciplinarity as a way forward in studying PSM. By combining PSM with a theory from a different discipline, *identity theory*, I offer a new approach to the study of PSM that might be clearer about the meaning and predictive power of the concept in dilemma situations. Identity theory is a firmly established sociological theory that offers a line of reasoning via which to explain behaviour, by focusing on the interdependent relations between the self and society (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker & Burke, 2000). The theory can provide insights into the way in which individuals holding specific roles in society attach personal meaning to the public interest – an important aspect of PSM. This new approach could be highly valuable, because it is likely to contribute to the validity of the PSM concept by being clearer about the meaning of the concept of PSM in dilemma situations. Moreover, clarifying the PSM concept also provides insights into the complex and frequently debated PSM-performance relationship: it can help to explain why previous studies on the relationship between PSM and performance have found mixed results. Second, this dissertation goes beyond testing the effects of PSM on self-reported outcome variables such as satisfaction, commitment and performance. The study aims to provide a better understanding of how PSM is realized in public service professionals' self-reported daily decision-making. Third, this dissertation aims to contribute to the discussion about whether the PSM measurement scale is universally applicable across different institutional contexts, by applying it within a case that has not yet been tested: Dutch veterinary inspectors. This case is very interesting, because it presents professionals of the classical type<sup>1</sup> who work within an institutional setting that is different from the setting they were originally educated for; much like, for

1 For more information, see the discussion of the concept of professionalism in Subsection 2.3.1

instance, physicians working for the health care inspectorates. And finally, via the use of qualitative research methods I aim for a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the development of PSM over time, which so far have been tested only quantitatively.

The contribution of this study to the research on the sociology of professionalism is similarly broad. By combining the theory on the sociology of professionalism with insights from identity theory, I aim to offer a new approach to studying professionalism that is clearer about the meaning and behavioural consequences of the concept in complex real-life situations. In particular, this theory can provide insights into the way in which individuals attach personal meaning to their professional role. Offering this new approach is relevant, because it contributes to the validity of the professionalism concept. In relation to this, the study also intends to provide insights into the reasons why not all professionals with the same professional background show the same professional behaviour in practice.

Next to this, this study aims to enrich understanding of the relationship between PSM and professionalism by reviewing traditional research on this relationship, formulating an argument for why previous research has come to different conclusions regarding the relationship between PSM and professionalism, putting forward a 'new' line of reasoning on how this relationship might better be addressed, and investigating this new approach.

At a general level, this dissertation aims to contribute to research on the question of what drives public service professionals' decision-making in real-life dilemma situations by including PSM and professionalism as explanatory variables in the study. As both concepts are embedded within what March and Olson call a 'logic of appropriateness', this study intends to enhance our understanding of the explanatory power of this logic in dilemmas, as a counterweight to the dominant theoretical framework of 'rational choice' (cf. Ledyard, 1995).

## **1.4 Practical relevance**

The analysis and theoretical discussion presented here have relevance beyond their potential contributions to public administration literature. Gaining more insight into the role of PSM and professionalism in dilemma situations is also of practical relevance: it can help to anticipate unwanted or strengthen desired behaviour on the part of public service professionals, by identifying specific HR strategies that have an effect on PSM and/or professionalism. While for the management of NVWA consistent rule enforcement is a core principle, professionals may deviate from rules because they think that it is more important to consider personal circumstances of individuals when choices have to be made. For example, by developing a new approach to PSM that is clearer about the meaning and

behavioural consequences of the concept, we may shed light on the question of whether it is useful to promote PSM directly or whether there are alternative – more promising – ways of indirectly stimulating positive and preventing potential negative effects of PSM. The same is true for a deeper understanding of the mechanism underlying the change of PSM over time. If we know why PSM changes, specific HR strategies can be implemented to either hamper or facilitate this change. If we have a better understanding of what it means and implies to be a professional, these insights can be used when teams are formed or specific bundles of tasks are assigned. Besides, the organization can use HR activities such as training sessions, mentor programmes and performance assessment to stimulate or dampen certain perceptions of the professionalism concept. Insight into the situations in which public service professionals experience dilemmas can help managers to anticipate the negative consequences such as frustration and stress, for example by adapting training programmes to the actual working context. A deeper understanding of the kind of decisions public service professionals make in dilemma situations is useful, because this knowledge can help, for example, to devise strategies outlining how an organization should react to unwanted decisions by these professionals.

## 1.5 Methodological relevance

Next to the theoretical and practical relevance of this dissertation, its methodological relevance should also be highlighted. Most PSM researchers use cross-sectional survey methods to investigate the antecedents and effects of PSM (e.g., Bright, 2008; Camilleri, 2006; Crewson 1997; Leisink & Steijn, 2009; Wright & Pandey, 2008). As a result, the research field lacks in-depth knowledge of 1) what constitutes PSM and what its effects are on actual public service professionals' decision-making, and ultimately behaviour, in complex real-life situations, and 2) how and why the concept changes over time. This study is intended to remedy these shortcomings of current PSM research by its mixed-methods research design and a longitudinal interview panel of newcomers working at the NVWA. The methodological approaches used in research on professionalism are much more varied than those used in PSM research. There is a large body of theoretical writings on professionalism (e.g., Adler & Kwon, 2013; Events, 2003, 2006; Fournier, 1999; Noordegraaf, 2007, 2013). Next, some scholars address professionalism on an occupational level, whereas others view it as an individual-level variable. In the former case, there are scholars who contribute to the state of professionalism empirically by applying qualitative research methods within exploratory research designs (e.g., Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2008; Reay & Hinings, 2009). Others use quantitative methods to study the effect of professionalism on outcome variables

such as performance (Andersen, 2009), career path (Teodoro, 2009), and administrative decisions and actions (Demir, 2011). In the latter category, most public administration scholars view the professionalism concept as entailing professional identification, and measure it by distributing questionnaires (e.g., Perry, 1997; DeHart-Davis, Marlowe & Pandey, 2006). A small number of scholars methods (e.g., Bucher & Selling, 1977; De Graaf, 2011) use qualitative methods to investigate differences between the ways professionals see their professional role. In this study, possible differences in public service professionals' role perception are investigated by a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. The aim is to answer the question of whether different profiles of professionals, which represent different types of professionalism, can be identified among a 'new' case – veterinary inspectors –, and whether these profiles may be generalized.

## 1.6 Research plan

The structure of this dissertation is as follows. Chapter 2 is a theoretical chapter that serves as a guide to the empirical research carried out, and helps to answer the research questions listed in Section 1.1. First, the chapter provides theoretical reasons why working in the public sector implies a regular confrontation with dilemma situations, and briefly discusses decision-making (viewed as coping strategies) in such situations. Second, it summarizes and critiques the literature on PSM and professionalism, and research combining these two concepts, with an emphasis on remaining knowledge gaps. Also, identity theory is introduced as a theory to fill in these knowledge gaps about PSM and professionalism research, and a number of hypotheses and propositions are formulated to clarify the meaning and behavioural consequences of the two concepts in the context of dilemmas. Throughout the book, I differentiate between propositions and hypotheses in order to indicate whether qualitative or quantitative methods, respectively, were primarily used to verify the propositions/hypotheses. Finally, a conceptual model is provided to show the combined impact of PSM and professionalism on decision-making in this particular context.

In Chapter 3, a mixed-methods research design is presented for the empirical part of this study. I provide information about the study sample – veterinary inspectors working at the Dutch Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority – and explain why this is an interesting case to be studied in the context of this research.

Chapter 4 elaborates on the most important qualitative method of this study, i.e., semi-structured interviews. In particular, the chapter describes 1) the structure and coding of the interviews, 2) the selection process of the interviewees, 3) and the strengths and limitations of the research method.

In Chapter 5, the empirical results of the qualitative analysis are presented, and a first step is made to address the questions *what are the dilemma situations public service that professionals are frequently confronted with?* (SRQ1) and *what kind of decisions do public service professionals make in dilemma situations?* (SRQ2). After PSM among veterinary inspectors is described and the question of how and why PSM changes over time is analysed, the question is investigated whether insights from identity theory help to clarify the meaning of professionalism is investigated by analysing how veterinary inspectors interpret their professional role (SRQ4). Next, the question of whether insights from identity theory are also useful for clarifying the meaning and behavioural consequences of PSM is studied by linking the concept with professional role identity (SRQ3). This analysis helps to increase our knowledge about the relationship between PSM and professionalism (SRQ5). Finally, this chapter provides empirical evidence of additional factors (other than PSM and professionalism) that influence decision-making in dilemma situations.

Chapter 6 elaborates on the quantitative research method used in this study, which is a survey that includes real-life dilemma situations. Specific aspects discussed are 1) how the data were collected, 2) who the respondents were, 3) which statistical methods were used to analyse the data, 4) how input from the qualitative results was used to develop the survey questionnaire, 5) how missing values were handled, and 6) the limitations and strengths of the quantitative study.

In Chapter 7 the quantitative results of the study are presented. The descriptive statistics for all variables are presented, together with their correlations, and additional answers are provided for the secondary research questions addressed in Chapter 5. Attention is paid to the question whether some or all of the results of the qualitative analyses could be verified using statistical techniques. Finally, the chapter attempts to answer the primary research question by testing the theoretical model presented in the theoretical chapter (Chapter 2).

Chapter 8 synthesizes and discusses the findings from both the qualitative and quantitative analyses, in order to provide more complete answers to the secondary research questions and to generalize the initial findings of this study. Next to this, the findings of the quantitative analysis testing the theoretical model are discussed, thereby providing an answer to the primary research question. Conclusions are offered for both the scientific study of PSM and professionalism in the context of dilemma situations, and for practical implications. Finally, the limitations of this study are discussed and implications for future research are sketched.

