THE NOBLE CAUSE CORRUPTION AS A DARK SIDE OF PUBLIC SERVICE MOTIVATION: HOW CIVIL SERVANTS PRODUCE AN UNJUST END THROUGH UNJUST MEANS FOR NOBLE REASON?

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Abstract

While noble cause corruption (NCC) occurs generally when a person tries to produce a just outcome through unjust methods, for example, police manipulating evidence to ensure a conviction of a known offender (Merrington, Lauchs, Bell, and Keast 1994-1997); in this study we demonstrate firstly that noble cause corruption occurs as well when a person produces an unjust outcome through unjust methods for noble reason, for example, a municipal employee grants a construction permit which does not meet the legal conditions to an old man just because he is old and pathetic. While traditional noble cause corruption aims to benefit the society and the public interest (Crank and Caldero 2000); the addressed type of noble cause corruption in this study is against the public interest but benefits a person or a specific entity. Secondly, we explain how the addressed type of noble cause corruption is caused by high level of public service motivation (PSM).

The results of this qualitative study, during which we interviewed 25 civil servants in Lebanon, confirm that the decision to commit such a type of noble cause corruption, does not depending on accepting the saying "the end justifies the means", but that each individual may or may not
accept to justify the means by the ends according to the circumstances of each case separately, through immediate or not immediate examination of circumstances and reasons surrounding the end and the means that may affect negatively or positively such a decision while the most important factor that affects this decision is the level of Public Service Motivation of the civil servant. Finally, we can say that it has been proven by evidence that the addressed type of noble cause corruption in this study is one of the most dangerous and dark sides of PSM.

**Keywords:** Public service motivation; noble cause corruption, civil servant.

**Introduction**

Public service motivation (PSM) is “an individual's motivation to contribute to society and help other people through the delivery of public services” as Bozeman and Su (2014, p. 3) defined it. Researchers have focused on the desired work outcomes of PSM such as individual performance and satisfaction (Paarlberg and Lavigna 2010), but Perry and Wise (1990, p. 371) had warned that “in some instances, public service motivation, by inducing high levels of commitment, may produce negative outcomes”. Yet, despite that high levels of PSM may lead also to negative results, there are only few studies that addressed the potential “dark sides” of PSM (e.g., Giauque, Ritz, Varone and Anderfuhrren-Biget 2011; Gould-William, Mostafa and Bottomly 2013; van Loon, Vandenabeele and Leisink 2015; Quratulain and Khan 2015; Rayner, Reimers and Chao 2017; Jensen, Andersen and Holten 2017; Weißmüller, De Waele and van Witteloostuijn 2018; Schott and Ritz 2018). In light of the general endeavor to boost levels of PSM, it seems very important to respond to the call of Perry and Wise to be careful of the dark sides of PSM by studying it to avoid, reduce, control, and understand the negative consequences of high levels of PSM.

One of the dark sides of PSM is Noble Cause Corruption (NCC) which is defined as “corruption committed in the name of good ends” (Crank and Caldero 2000). NCC has been limited in literature to corruption among police officers who commit unjust acts of corruption against certain individuals to benefit society and the public interest in their view (Delattre 1989; Miller 1999; Kleinig 2002; Bayley 2010; Cooper 2011; Van Halderen 2016; Caldero, Dailey, and Withrow 2018), i.e. when police officers care too much about their own work and corruption
committed in order to get the bad guys off the streets (Crank and Caldero 2000). Few studies dealt with "Noble Cause Corruption" by focusing on other aspects such as politics (Miller 2007).

Schott and Ritz (2017); Weißmüller, De Waele and van Witteloostuijn (2018); and De Waele (2019) talked about noble cause corruption as being one of the dark sides on PSM among civil servants but there is no dedicated study to it. Schott and Ritz (2017) proposed that “the greater an individual’s PSM, the more likely he or she will be to engage in the process of moral justification (justifying bad means by good ends), which leads to unethical behaviors such as rule bending and/or breaking”. Weißmüller, De Waele and van Witteloostuijn (2018) considered “high-PSM people who, being driven by pro-social motives, are more likely to break the rules for noble causes”. De Waele (2019) argued that high-PSM people are more likely to break the rules for noble causes. So, studies have unanimously agreed that high levels of PSM generate noble cause corruption, but what is the mechanism of this relationship?

In this study, we are dealing with a topic that is quite appropriate to be classified as "Noble Cause Corruption", but it is very different from what was previously treated under this title. We are addressing the individual acts of corruption carried out by civil servants based on their high levels of Public Service Motivation (PSM), especially its two dimensions "Compassion" and "Self-sacrifice" by providing illegal services to pathetic persons at no charge.

This study contributes to the literature by: First, this is the first qualitative study – to the best of our knowledge – dedicated to noble cause corruption among civil servants. Second, defining and explaining by evidences and examples the mechanism of how high levels of PSM generate noble cause corruption. Third, providing a stepping off point for research into an under examined dark side of PSM among civil servants who make up a large proportion of the workforce around the world. Fourth, assisting practitioners in creating policies aimed at combating NCC among civil servants.

To discover the mechanism of NCC among civil servants we conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 civil servants in Lebanon in various positions. Lebanon is very suitable for conducting such interviews due to the widespread prevalence of this type of corruption in it. The economic hardship of many citizens\(^1\) on the one hand, and the lack of control and accountability of civil servants\(^2\) on the other hand, make an appropriate climate for noble cause corruption.

The most explanatory theory for such behavior is the theory of disengagement of Albert Bandura’s (1999), specifically one of its five mechanisms which is “Moral justification”. Highly

\(^1\) Reuters APRIL 28, 2020

\(^2\) AUB/Harvard Joint Research Program on Administrative Reform in the Public Sector of Lebanon
https://almashriq.hiof.no/ddc/projects/pspa/PSAccount/PSAccount-1.html
public-service motivated individuals can exhibit unethical behaviors (e.g., rule breaking and lying), because the process of moral justification psychologically frees them to act inappropriately in order to reach the higher goal of contributing to the public interest and doing good for society (Schott and Ritz 2017). This also applies in the case of our study, i.e. to help one customer (individual or organization) or group of people.

The results of this qualitative study confirm that there is a positive relationship between the augment of the level of PSM, especially its two dimensions "Compassion" and "Self-sacrifice", and the augment of the possibility of committing NCC among civil servants. The results confirm also that the decision to commit such a type of corruption, does not depending only on accepting the saying "the end justifies the means", but that each individual may or may not accept to justify the means by the ends according to the circumstances of each case separately, through immediate or not immediate examination of circumstances and reasons surrounding the end and the means that may affect negatively or positively such a decision; while the most important factor that affects this decision is the level of PSM of the civil servant. Finally, it has been proven by evidence that the addressed type of noble cause corruption in this study is one of the most dark and dangerous sides of PSM.

Studying the Dark Sides of PSM does not mean encouraging the absence of this motivation, but to be careful of its negative outcomes and their reasons to avoid them while maintaining high levels of PSM.

**Theoretical Framework**

Many researchers argue that it is important to increase our knowledge of potential negative behavioral outcomes of PSM (Schott and Ritz 2017). PSM may provoke “unethical and illegal behavior” since too strong commitment to the PSM dimension “compassion” may be in conflict with the public servant’s neutrality and respect for the principles of equity and lawfulness (Maesschalck et al. 2008). Such behavior is highly negative for organizations (Schott and Ritz 2017) as it can lead to inconsistencies in organizational treatment of individual cases.

We can divide the Dark Sides of Public Service Motivation (PSM) into two main parts:

First - Corruption caused directly by high levels of PSM (Noble Cause Corruption)
Second - The negative repercussions on the high-PSM civil servants as a result of their over commitment and extra effort at work.

![Dark Sides of PSM Diagram]

- Turnover Intention
- Resigned Satisfaction
- Involuntary or Long-Term Absenteeism
- Burnout
- Presentism (people going to work even when they feel ill)
- Job dissatisfaction
- Frustration
- Lack of enthusiasm
- Job Switch
- Unauthorized Breaks
- Career Threats
- Inflexibility
- Withdrawal Behavior
- Stress
- Over-Engagement
- Budget Maximization
- Negative Physical Well-Being
- Work–Family Conflict

**Figure 1**: Negative outcomes (dark sides) of high level of PSM of civil servants

Noble cause corruption is a dark side or negative result of high level of PSM suggesting that people will use unethical or illegal means to attain desirable goals (Bayley 2010), a result which appears to benefit the greater good. While traditional corruption is defined by personal gain (Rothlein 2008), noble cause corruption forms when someone is convinced of the righteousness, and will do anything within his power to achieve the desired result. Another example of noble
cause corruption is police misconduct "committed in the name of good ends" (Martinelli 2006) or neglect of due process through “a moral commitment to make the world a safer place to live" (Crank, Flaherty and Giacomazzi 2007). For example, police officers who fight crime in the public interest have been found to bend or break the law, or to use illegal methods such as falsifying testimony, intimidating witnesses, paying informants with illegally obtained drugs, and planting evidence to reach this end (Manning 1977). Therefore, the greater an individual’s PSM, the more likely he or she will be to engage in the process of moral justification (justifying bad means by good ends), which leads to unethical behaviors such as rule bending and/or breaking (Schott and Ritz 2018).

According to Bandura (1999), people do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions. In this process of moral justification, detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy or moral purposes. People then can act on a moral imperative and preserve their view of themselves as a moral agent while inflicting harm on others.

**Materials and Methods**

Lebanon is a very suitable place to conduct such a study due to the availability of a good level of public freedoms that allow us to conduct transparent interviews, in addition to the availability of appropriate factors for noble cause corruption. We have therefore had no difficulty in interviewing in full transparency 25 civil servants in various locations and institutions in Lebanon, some are in high-level administrative positions. The interviews took place either physically, by telephone or by videoconferencing tools (Skype) when physical presence could not take place. Some of the interviews were completed at a later time, so some of the interviews were conducted in more than one of the mentioned methods. The average age of interviewees is 34.5 years ranging from 21 to 64 years.
Preparation for interviews included investigation whether each interviewee is considered to be a highly public-service motivated civil servant or not through personal questionnaires during which we asked questions indicating their level of each dimension of PSM and PSM in general, as well as by reviewing their annual and periodic work assessments and the opinions of their colleagues and managers about them. Therefore, when citing their quotes in this study, we will pre-indicate each civil servant as to whether or not he is considered to be a highly public-service motivated civil servant.

During each of the 25 semi-structured interviews, conducted between August 2019 and March 2020, we were careful to give enough time, to clearly explain to the civil servant we are interviewing each question, to record the answers in detail, and to retain a way to contact him later if necessary.

To answer our research question, qualitative research of an abductive reasoning was carried out. Abductive conclusions are qualified as having a remnant of uncertainty or doubt, which is expressed in retreat terms such as "best available" or "most likely". One can understand abductive reasoning as inference to the best explanation (Sober 2013). For analysis, using of the NVIVO software helps us to organize, analyze and find insights in interviews and other references of this study (McNiff 2016).

Given the sensitivity of the subject in general, and some answers in particular, and at the request of interviewees and the official bodies that helped us to conduct the interviews, we will replace the real names of interviewees with fictitious names.
Results

Based on the aim of this study, we found that it is better to present the results as follows:

The main factor: Public Service Motivation

Here is the main result of this study where we approve positively this hypothesis: “The higher the level of PSM, since too strong commitment to the PSM dimensions compassion and self-sacrifice, increases the likelihood of engaging in “Noble Cause Corruption”. To verify the validity of this hypothesis, we investigated in various places civil servants about whether they had committed this type of corruption, about their main motive for that and its relationship to their level of PSM, especially its dimensions compassion and self-sacrifice.

During this study we noticed that some teachers help some unsuccessful students to succeed illegally, just because their living and family conditions are bad. Fadi a highly public-service motivated teacher spoke to us about his experience: “I am a very emotional person, and you know that the economic situation in Lebanon is difficult. At the beginning of this school year, a father with difficult living conditions registered his three children in the school and recommended me to take care of them because they were in a very low level school in their village. The sight of the miserable father remained stuck in my mind and it affected all my decisions regarding his children. Therefore, I always help them succeed by giving them additional marks and disregarding their mistakes. I am not even satisfied with that, but I also recommend to my fellow teachers to do the same with these children.” Here we asked his colleagues about their reaction to his request to do the same, and about the relationship of their reaction to their level of public service motivation. His colleagues reactions differed, and indeed their different reactions are strongly related to the different level of PSM they have. Whoever has a high level of PSM tended more to accept his request to act like him, and vice versa. For example, Dani who is not considered as public service motivated teacher refused the request of Fadi, telling us: “We have to separate our emotions from our work. I always act according to the law. Anything that may arouse emotion cannot affect my behavior.”
On the other hand, another colleague, Amina who is considered as a highly public-service motivated teacher and has a high level of compassion and self-sacrifice, told us: “When teacher Fadi informed me of the situation of these students, I deeply regretted the previous moments when I was tough in dealing with them. From that time on, I began to treat them with special care and help them more than other students. I felt that I had an obligation to give them a portion of what they lost in this life.”

Another example of this dark side of PSM we got during our visit to a public health insurance center. Here the chaos is evident, and is often caused by noble cause corruption. Although there is a priority to serve specific group of customers before others, such as the elderly people and pregnant women; high public-service motivated employees also offer privileges in dealing with many other people just because of some signs of need appear on these customers, even though the law does not allow this behavior that causes chaos and protest by other customers: “The law allows us to only give privileges to a certain group of customers, such as elderly people and pregnant women, but I also sympathize with some other people, such as those who tell me that they need to end their transactions as quickly as possible to go to work, or who show signs of fatigue and disease. But I admit that in return this will generate intense anger among other customers who do not accept this situation” (Clara). We asked Clara about the relation of her behavior and her level of PSM and its dimensions compassion and self-sacrifice, she said: “Yes, of course, I think that this is the main motive to act like this; but there are also some other factors that influence my behavior, especially the circumstances of each individual case.”

Third example is the case of a traffic policeman. Here in the Bechara El Khoury junction in Beirut, we watched a policeman doing his work before we asked him some questions. First, why did you remit the punishment of a driver that did not stop at the red light? He answered: “He was a taxi driver and his car was in a very bad condition. I don't think he can afford to pay seventy USD” (Ziad). Did you know that what you did is against the laws? "Yes". Do you have a high level of compassion, self-sacrifice, or PSM in general? "Of course, that is what pushed me to do
what I did." Ziad, by doing this, deprives the state treasury of an amount of money, and endangers public safety; but at the same time he helps one person to avoid paying a penalty. This is noble cause corruption caused by PSM.

It is not only about “the end justifies the means”

In addition to the main factor, the PSM; the results of this study confirm that the decision to commit such a type of noble cause corruption, does not depending on accepting the saying "the end justifies the means", but that each individual may or may not accept to justify the means by the ends according to the circumstances of each case separately, through immediate or not immediate examination of circumstances and reasons surrounding the end and the means that may affect negatively or positively such a decision.

No one always justifies the means with the ends and another does not ever. Everyone may resort to this rule in a situation depending on the circumstances of that situation. It appears from our interviews that the majority of employees when they find themselves in a situation in which they have to decide whether or not they will commit this type of noble cause corruption, the first factor that affects their decision is their level of PSM, if it is high they tend toward committing this type of corruption, and vice versa; after that the decision to commit to that act depends on the circumstances in which they find themselves at that moment, for example: To what extent is this customer raising compassion and deserving of sacrifice and risk of violating the law for him? To what extent is this breach of the law dangerous or not? To what extent can an employee be found guilty of this violation by his management or colleagues? Who among his colleagues or managers monitors or listens to what is going on between the employee and the customer? Who among them tends toward ignoring what's going on and who among them tends towards reporting the violation or objecting to it? Here, the level of PSM and other characteristics of colleagues and managers also affect the decision.

Mira, a highly public-service motivated civil servant, works for a charity affiliated with the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs. We asked her about the details of one of the cases in which this type of noble cause corruption was committed by her. Mira said: “On one occasion a poor man came to me asking for immediate help, the institution’s laws obliged us to request some documents before we offered such a help, but that man did not have the documents, I asked him, so he assured me that he did not have them and needed urgent help, here I spoke to him in a low voice and I helped him. I do not hide from you that at that moment I looked around for anyone watching or hearing us, because the hall in which I work is open and crowded with customers, employees and some managers. It is fortunate for me that this incident passed peacefully, because the penalty for that act was to be significant.” On the other hand, her colleague Talal,
who is not considered as a highly public-service motivated civil servant, said by answering the same question: “Often comes to my office citizens who ask for help without having the required documents or conditions, I often refuse; why do I involve myself in breaking the law for the sake of others, if they deserve help then the law must provide for that. Yes, perhaps if I felt that my violation would inevitably pass without punishment or notice from anyone, I would be more tended to do it.” We asked Mira and Talal about their acceptance of the principle: "The end justifies the means," and the relationship of this to whether or not they carry out this type of noble cause corruption. Mira said: “I do not accept this statement absolutely or reject it absolutely; it depends on the circumstances of each case separately.” Talal said: “Often I am against this principle unless the end is very great and the mean is simple.”

**Male and female difference among noble cause corruption**

Since women have stronger commitment to the PSM dimension “Compassion” than men; this increases the likelihood of women to engage in “Noble Cause Corruption” more than men. The directors of several institutions confirmed this to us. Ahmed says: “Indeed we always notice that females are more sympathetic to poor people than males, and are willing to sacrifice more for the sake of others. In our institution, maybe almost two thirds of the noble cause corruption cases detected are committed by females, and one third by males, knowing that the percentage of female workers is slightly lower than that of males.” Amina said: “There is no doubt that there are some strict women in their work, and in contrast some men are very lenient, but the level of sympathy and noble cause corruption is higher for women than for men. I don't know the proportions exactly, we don't usually count it, but it is undoubtedly higher. The reason is clear: unlike men, women are more emotional than rational.”

On the other hand, this also leads to benefit from the high level of PSM of women which is a very positive side. Mohamed said: “I actually feel that my female colleagues at work are higher public-service motivated than my male colleagues.” The positive sides of high PSM are well studied in the literature but the issue of male and female difference among PSM is not addressed in literature as far as we know, and could be an important single study.

**Moral justification of noble cause corruption**

It is clear in all of the above examples that there is a moral justification for the committed corruption. Mira said, “There is no doubt that every time I commit such an act, I would have previously justified in myself that the work I am doing has a moral motive. Without this justification I would not do these acts”. Mira's words are exactly the same as Albert Bandura's idea (1999).
**Terrible results of this type of noble cause corruption**

Of course, this is a very kind and beautiful sympathy the civil servants may deserve to be praised on it, but this is against the laws: “I know very well that this behavior is against the laws and regulations and that I may be punished, but my conscience is relieved because I feel very sympathetic towards these children and I cannot let them fail while their father yearns for their success” (Fadi). This behavior was not classified as unlawful without reasons, it has very negative consequences. It has bad results on the civil servant himself, the customer, and the institution in general.

An employee who commits noble cause corruption will not be comfortable, and may be punished. Fadi said: “Frankly, when some of my colleagues refused my request to help some poor students illegally, I was very afraid of reporting against me to punish me.” Mirna said: “When I help a citizen illegally because of my sympathy for him, other citizens in the place often object to my actions, especially if it comes to allowing that poor person to complete his transaction before others, which causes some chaos, also I am afraid that someone will complain to the management about me.”

As for customers, who are benefited from fraud or corruption may be happy, but who did not benefit will not be satisfied and may justify for themselves in the future the use of illegal ways to get their desire, especially as they felt the absence of justice and equality: “Yes, this point is very important, as some parents of other students who failed felt that their children deserved to be more successful than the children I helped them to succeed. It seems that these failed children have talked to their parents about the existence of injustice, and I am frankly afraid to pursue this issue administratively.” (Fadi).

For the organization as a whole, this will adversely affect it, foster an atmosphere of chaos, mistrust, and encourage other employees to commit corruption. Hannah, an agent in a public health insurance center, said: “A week ago an elderly man came here to ask for help without having the necessary documents. He claimed that the papers were at home. I agreed to his request on the condition that he sent the necessary documents the next day. The next day came and he did not send anything. After a week I saw him again at the center asking for further help, I asked him about the documents he had promised me to send, so it turned out that he did not
have such documents, and he was not worthy of help. My motivation for serving others fooled me. I think that helping people based on compassion will lead to a lot of injustice, it’s better to follow specific rules, but the rules should also take into consideration that some people really deserve compassion”.

Also, this type of noble cause corruption will cause financial losses. Nadia, director of one of the institutions affiliated with the Ministry of Social Affairs, said: “Perhaps ten percent of the institution’s budget goes to provide illegal aids to the needy people because of the high level of compassion of some employees.”

Conclusion

High level of PSM, specifically of its dimension compassion and self-sacrifice, leads to noble cause corruption, but confirming this hypothesis does not mean calling for resistance to high levels of PSM or compassion and self-sacrifice, but rather to benefit from and refine it by making plans to prevent such a corruption.

It is not only accepting that “the end justifies the means” that leads civil servants to commit noble cause corruption as focused in some past studies about noble cause corruption among police. The available conditions in each case have their role. It remains the largest role for the level of PSM.

Because they are more compassionate, women tend to commit noble cause corruption more than men, but this also has a positive side, because high levels of PSM of women have many positive results.

The terrible results of this type of noble cause corruption emphasize the need to study this type of corruption in order to avoid its occurrence without reducing the high levels of PSM.
Further Research

The issue of male and female difference among PSM is not addressed in literature as far as we know, and could be addressed as an important single study. A quantitative study on this point seems more beneficial than a qualitative study.

Managerial Implications

This study leads to reach some possible anti-noble cause corruption reactions and preventive actions. Once managers have a good understanding of the mechanism of how high-PSM leads to noble cause corruption, they will be able to develop and implement appropriate plans.

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