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AM I A PUBLIC SERVANT OR AM I A PATHOGEN? PUBLIC MANAGERS' SECTOR COMPARISON OF WORKER ABILITIES

CHUNG-AN CHEN AND BARRY BOZEMAN

Political rhetoric in the United States is rife with condemnations of public sector workers. The assertion that public sector workers are less creative, talented, or autonomous than those working in businesses pervades in both academic studies and public opinions. Facing constant criticisms, do public managers also perceive that government workers are less able than their private sector peers? If so, and more importantly, does the perceived inferiority of worker abilities shake their confidence, thereby undermining their work attitudes? The present study employs social comparison theory to answer these questions. Based on state government managers' responses in the United States, the results indicate that a clear majority of public managers perceive public sector inferiority with respect to worker creativity, talent, and autonomy. The findings also show that perceived inferiority is related to lower job satisfaction, job involvement, and pride in working for the current organization. Based on the findings, we provide suggestions to both researchers and practitioners.

INTRODUCTION

Public management scholars have long occupied themselves with a puzzle: does sector context matter? While some scholars, especially sociologists and business management researchers, conclude that sector context either matters little (e.g. Nowell 2009) or that any observed effects are owing to misspecified models (Meyer 1982), public management scholars provide evidence that public and business organizations differ in many important aspects (Rainey and Bozeman 2000). For example, they demonstrate that managerial strategy (Nutt and Backoff 1993), decision-making (Coursey and Bozeman 1990), performance management (Andrews *et al.* 2011), and, perhaps most important, core values (Bozeman 2007) are different in these two sectors.

In at least some instances, the literature suggests that the public organizations' differences with enterprises are to the formers' detriment. For example, organizational red tape tends to be more extensive in public than in private sector organizations (Bozeman and Feeney 2011). Indictments of public sector performance go well beyond issues of red tape. Scholars feel that the public sector is necessarily less efficient, and some conclude from this that it is also, perforce, less effective (e.g. Bartel and Harrison 2005). Typically, the argument for public sector deficiencies follows this line of reasoning: public organizations face little market competition and have reduced incentives for innovation; they receive resources on the basis of monopoly status with little relation of performance to growth; and they suffer from strong political interference with the frequent result being limited ability to plan for the long term.

Administrative reform proponents, both popular (Osborne and Gaebler 1992) and academic (Walsh 1995), believe that these features limit worker abilities such as creativity and autonomy in the public sector. Some scholars (e.g. Dixit 1997) feel that a lack of market and monetary incentives may prohibit talented but risk-seeking individuals from entering the public sector. In sum, public managers in the United States and many other

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countries are often subject to critical comments and distrust, not only from pundits but sometimes from friends and the public who feel that government employees are less creative, talented, and autonomous.¹

Charles Goodsell (2004), among others, has catalogued many of the criticisms of the public sector and suggested some of the effects on public managers. The frequent signalling that public sector workers are 'less able' may have an impact on public managers. Yet while many scholars and policy makers understand the importance of public managers' images of their work, there is surprisingly little empirical research on the topic. With few exceptions (e.g. Feeney 2008), previous research has not focused on public managers' perceptions of their own work in comparison to their perceptions of private sector peers, not to mention attitudinal outcomes of such perceptions. To fill the gap, we examine: (i) how public managers compare worker abilities including workers' talent, creativity, and autonomy in the respective sectors; and (ii) whether these sector comparisons influence public managers' work-related attitudes such as job involvement, job satisfaction, and pride working for the current organization.

At least two reasons endorse our selection of the three abilities. First, they embrace abilities internal (i.e. talent and creativity) and external (i.e. autonomy) to individuals. Workers are motivated when both are reinforced (Ryan and Deci 2000). In addition, administrative reform proponents often question these three aspects of public sector workers and call for the introduction of market mechanisms and public-private partnership. Public managers regularly face private sector comparisons with respect to employee talent, creativity, and autonomy and it would be surprising if these comparisons had no effect on their work attitudes.

Public managers' frequent comparison to private sector counterparts seems a particular category of the intergroup social comparison processes documented by social psychologists (e.g. Brewer and Weber 1994). This comparison of 'we' to 'they' is subtly different from the processes involved in 'I' to 'you'² (Brewer and Weber 1994). Therefore, we employ social comparison theory (Festinger 1954) to explain how public managers may frame their views about public versus private sector context. According to social comparison theory (SCT), comparison with similar others helps people evaluate their own opinions and abilities, especially in those instances when objective, non-social means are unavailable. These social comparisons may affect one's psychological status, bringing either positive effects such as pleasure, self-motivation, and self-enhancement or negative outcomes such as envy, resentment, and derogation (Brickman and Bulman 1977; Wert and Salovey 2004).

In the present study, SCT suggests the following questions: Do public managers who perceive that the private sector is superior in worker abilities differ in their work attitudes from those who do not have such perceptions? If differences exist, are the attitudes more positive or more negative among those who perceive private sector superiority? We answer these questions by testing variables from the National Administrative Studies Project-III (NASP-III). This study begins with a brief introduction of SCT, followed by hypotheses, findings, and implications.

SOCIAL COMPARISON THEORY

Social comparison theory was first proposed by Festinger (1954). As others have further refined and applied the theory, it has become a cornerstone of social psychology (for an overview, see Corcoran *et al.* 2011). In this early research on SCT, Festinger argues

that human beings have a drive to evaluate their abilities. When no concrete or objective indicators are available, individuals evaluate their status or abilities by comparison with others. In some respects social comparison is superior to individual comparisons having little or no comparative base because such subjective evaluations often are unstable and rooted in idiosyncratic personality factors. Festinger contends that people are inclined to compare themselves with those close to their own abilities, and people have a unidirectional drive upward in abilities. When a perceived discrepancy exists between one's own status or ability and that of others, there is a tendency for individuals to seek to move closer to those perceived as superior. However, comparison is sometimes accompanied by unpleasant consequences such as hostility and derogation and, thus, such negative feelings may lead to the cessation of comparison.

Social psychologists have expanded and revised Festinger's initial ideas. Much of the subsequent work focuses on the extensions of the theory. First, although people may intentionally make comparisons in order to evaluate their abilities, social comparisons sometimes happen automatically and unconsciously (Wood 1989, 1996). When people perceive that non-purposeful comparisons of abilities and performances may lead to a feeling of inferiority and disgrace, they avoid potentially unfavourable and painful comparisons (Brickman and Bulman 1977; Goethals 1986). In other words, the motive to avoid comparison is often as important as the motive to seek comparison.

Second, Festinger's original idea about unidirectional drive upward may be misleading. In making comparisons, people seek not only accurate self-evaluation and self-improvement but also self-enhancement (Suls *et al.* 2002). A reliable method of self-enhancement is to make downward comparisons. For example, those low in well-being and those who feel distressed or threatened often compare themselves with those who are even worse off; this often makes the downward comparer feel less unfortunate (Wills 1981; Suls *et al.* 2002). Finally, social comparisons are often imposed or forced (e.g. television commercials portraying happy, beautiful, and wealthy people) (Wheeler and Suls 2005). In cases of forced comparison, people do not have full control over the cessation of comparison. They passively and sometimes unconsciously accept both joy and pain in social comparison (Goethals 1986).

SECTOR COMPARISON AS A TYPE OF SOCIAL COMPARISON

Among public managers, social comparison occurs when these managers make comparisons between public employee attributes and abilities and employees in business organizations. In light of the ubiquitous messages that government is inefficient and should be run like a business (Goodsell 2004), it is practically impossible for public managers to completely eschew such comparisons. This would not pose much of a problem if there were objective bases for such comparisons, but objective evidence is modest and such evidence as exists is not likely to be familiar to most public managers. Therefore, it is essential to know how public managers perceive themselves as compared to their private sector peers and, more importantly, whether such comparisons trigger the changes in psychological status identified in social comparison studies (e.g. Brickman and Bulman 1977).

Public managers making sector comparisons

Our first research question centres on how public managers perceive worker abilities including talent, creativity, and autonomy in the public sector in comparison to worker abilities in the private sector. We speculate that pro-business perceptions (i.e. perceiving

that business sector workers are superior in talent, creativity, and autonomy) are found in greater frequency than pro-public perceptions (i.e. perceiving that public sector workers are superior in talent, creativity, and autonomy). Our expectation is based on two points. First, the context of the public sector may compromise public managers' confidence and accordingly alter their sector perceptions. Empirical studies of public-private comparison show that governmental agencies are subject to public scrutiny, overhead oversight, and formal rule settings (Buchanan 1975; Rainey and Bozeman 2000) and it seems likely that observed conditions as well as popular rhetoric will undermine public managers' perceptions about the degree of creativity and autonomy found in the public sector. In addition, a lack of monetary incentives and underinvestment in skill development may place the public sector at a disadvantage in competing against the private sector for attracting talented labour (Milward and Rainey 1983; Wright and Davis 2003).

A second possibility has to do with reasoning about one's own group being an 'exception to the rule'. Even if the public manager's own organization or work group is performing at a high level, the public manager confronted with citizens' or politicians' criticism about the public sector may assume that her own highly functioning unit is an exception to the allegedly lower quality work in the public sector. Research in psychology (Wilder 1984; Baron 1988) suggests that individuals often maintain such views about their own organization or group being the 'exception to the rule'. In sum, in making public-private sector comparisons of worker talent, creativity, and autonomy, we anticipate that the proportion of pro-business public managers will be greater than the proportion of pro-public public managers.

The change in work attitudes as a result of sector comparison

According to SCT, although self-evaluation is one of the most important purposes of comparison, comparison does not end up with self-evaluation itself, but instead, a change in the comparer's psychological status (Brickman and Bulman 1977). Following this line, we propose our next research question: Is perceived business sector superiority accompanied by a change in public managers' psychological status as well as their work attitudes including job involvement, job satisfaction, and pride working for the current organization? If so, is the change positive or negative?

The literature of SCT first hints that the change need not be negative in nature. Among the literature of upward comparison (i.e. the target is more superior in abilities), Collins (2000) claims that people want to not only improve but also believe that they have positive characteristics, so they conclude that they are 'among the better ones' when they perceive similarity with upward targets. In other words, comparison with those believed to be superior in abilities often provides motivation and incentives for improvement (Collins 1996; Suls *et al.* 2002). For example, a junior tennis player making comparison with superstar professionals may find both incentives for self-improvement and models of effectiveness (Wood 1989; Lockwood and Kunda 1997). In light of this logic, public managers who perceive business sector superiority could in some cases be more likely to demonstrate high levels of job satisfaction, involvement, and pride working for the current organization.

Upward comparison of abilities does not invariably result in mood improvement or more positive attitudes (Buunk *et al.* 1990), and we *do not* anticipate a positive change in work attitudes. Why? A positive change of psychological status brought out by upward comparisons appears only when the comparer perceives that the comparison target is not the comparer's immediate competitor (i.e. 'dissimilar others', according to Collins 1996). For example, to junior tennis players, professional tennis superstars

are obviously not at the same career stage and are not their immediate competitors or threats. In addition, in cases where comparers find upward comparison self-enhancing and motivating, the comparer must perceive that the superior's accomplishments are attainable (i.e. assimilation is possible) (Wheeler and Suls 2005). That is, young tennis players must believe that they have full control over external difficulties and they are capable of catching up with the best professionals in the future.

But in the case of public managers making sector comparisons, the two aforementioned conditions may not exist. We argue that public managers as comparers may regard their peers in the private sector as immediate competitors and, in addition, the private sector's accomplishments in worker abilities may be unattainable as perceived by public managers. Under this circumstance, upward comparison does not lead to encouragement, but instead causes degradation, damage to one's self-esteem, and negative affectivity (Brickman and Bulman 1977; Jagacinski and Nicholls 1987), and accordingly, compromised job satisfaction, involvement, and pride working for the current organization. We elaborate our views below.

First, business sector employees should be competitors, not dissimilar from others such as tennis superstars, in the eyes of most public managers. Elected officials and civil service reformers seem endlessly to focus on the necessity of the public sector becoming more business-like (Nigro and Kellough 2008) and urge public managers to initiate public-private competition, also known as competitive sourcing (Snavelly and Desai 2010). Apparently, when we encourage public managers to learn from business organizations, they are also reminded to compete with their peers in the private sector. This creates the first condition that facilitates mood impairment in upward comparison.

Second, while public organizations are expected to compete with business enterprises and learn from them, it is unlikely that they perceive a high possibility of assimilation. Bureaucratic criticism has remained central to political campaign rhetoric (Garrett *et al.* 2006) and even introductory government textbooks offer few positive comments about bureaucracy and government employees (Cigler and Neiswender 1991). State governments sometimes initiate reforms that seem to promote suspect views of public employees. By introducing at-will employment and pay for performance to remove personnel red tape and enhance managerial autonomy, some states (e.g. Georgia and Florida) have experienced the loss of job attractiveness and employee trust (Kellough and Nigro 2002; Condrey and Battaglio 2007). Findings in theoretical and empirical studies suggest that reform or learning from business may eventually be in vain in terms of improving the public sector's performance as well as the workers' abilities such as creativity, talent, and autonomy.

These two aforementioned conditions may discourage public managers when they make sector comparisons. Discouragement as a negative affective cues' outcome can undermine one's work motivation and attitudes such as job satisfaction, job involvement, and organizational commitment (Thoresen *et al.* 2003). Research and theory also suggest that embarrassment, pressure, pain, envy, and resentment are often the by-product of upward comparison (Brickman and Bulman 1977; Bandura and Jourden 1991). Therefore,

Hypothesis 1: In making public-private sector comparisons of worker talent, creativity, and autonomy, the less public managers perceive the superiority of the business sector, the more positive their work attitudes are.

DATA FROM THE NATIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE STUDIES PROJECT

In order to test our hypotheses, we employ the NASP-III data. NASP-III includes data on public managers in the states of Georgia and Illinois. The sample in Georgia was drawn

from the list of people who had been on a state agency's payroll during the 2003/04 fiscal year, provided by the Department of Audit (DoA). The population included any job titles coded as 'director', 'coordinator', 'official or manager', and 'professional' under the pay grade of 017 and all individuals with a pay grade of 017 or higher. After removing employees and institutions with less than 20 employees, the NASP-III research team obtained the population of 6,161 Georgia public managers. Then, the research team drew a random sample of 1,000 individuals. Regarding the public sector sample in Illinois, the research team placed a request with the State of Illinois for a list of all state employees designated as either 'senior public service administrators' or 'public service administrators'. This list included information on 5,461 state employees, including name, agency, and county. From the population of 5,461 the research team drew a random sample of 1,000 individuals. In other words, there was a total random sample of 2,000 individuals in two states. After deleting from each sample those who had retired and were not at the given address, the research team obtained a reduced sample size (reduced N) of 1,850.

The survey started in April 2005, when the research team ran a pre-test of the mail survey to a random sample of 200 individuals. After the research team shortened the questionnaire based on the results of the pre-test, the first wave of pre-contact letters were sent out in July 2005. There were three waves of the survey: 23 September 2005 – 19 January 2006 (1st wave), 24 October 2005 – 20 February 2006 (2nd wave), and 29 March 2006 – 1 June 2006 (3rd wave). At the end of this survey, the NASP-III research team obtained 790 responses (545 from the 1st wave, 132 from the 2nd wave, and 113 from the 3rd wave) out of 1,850 (reduced N) with a response rate of 43 per cent (47 per cent in Georgia and 38 per cent in Illinois). Among the 790 responses, 432 were from Georgia and 358 were from Illinois.

Variables

Work attitudes including job satisfaction, job involvement, and pride working for the current organization are the main dependent variables (DVs) in the current study. Public administration scholars have extensively used these attitudes as proxies to understand whether public sector employees are motivated to work (Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Chen 2012). Antecedents of these attitudes particularly associated with the public sector context include goal conflict and goal ambiguity (Chun and Rainey 2006), rules and red tape (DeHart-Davis and Pandey 2005), and public service motivation (Pandey *et al.* 2008). Regarding whether these attitudes differ between sectors, Rainey (2009), after reviewing a huge volume of literature, suggests that either public sector employees demonstrate less positive attitudes compared to their private sector peers or public and private employees show no difference with respect to these attitudes. Little evidence shows that work attitudes are more positive among public sector employees. Boardman *et al.* (2010) find that switching from the private sector into the public sector triggers shock and accordingly undermines employees' job involvement and job satisfaction.

While these earlier studies recognize that sector settings are determinative to work attitudes, none of them mentions whether perceptions of sectors influence work attitudes. We use three Likert-scale items (4 = strongly agree; 1 = strongly disagree) to measure each attitude respectively: (i) 'It has been hard for me to get very involved in my current job' (reverse); (ii) 'All in all, I am satisfied with my job'; and (iii) 'I feel a sense of pride working for this organization'.

The main independent variables (IVs) are sector comparisons of worker abilities made by public managers. In one subsection of the NASP-III questionnaire, respondents were asked their perception of work in the public and business sectors and were required to

place a check mark among 'business sector', 'no difference', and 'public sector' in the following statements: (i) Managers have more work autonomy; (ii) Persons doing similar jobs are more talented; and (iii) Employees are more creative and innovative. As 'business sector', 'no difference', and 'public sector' are ordinal in scale, we code them as -1, 0, and +1, respectively, and use them in regression analyses. Public managers who perceive the superiority of the business sector are labelled as 'pro-business' whereas those who perceive the superiority of the public sector are labelled as 'pro-public'.

We control for the following variables. First, we consider the influence of self-determination. According to self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000), people who have strong autonomous motivation are demonstrated to be positive in work attitudes, whereas controlled people are demonstrated to be negative in work attitudes (Tremblay *et al.* 2009; Gagné *et al.* 2010). Reasons for people to choose the current job represent their motivational styles. In the present study, we follow Chen and Bozeman (2013) by integrating 12 job selection reasons into a self-determination index (SDI). We anticipate that SDI positively predicts work attitudes. Every job selection reason is measured by a Likert-scale item where 4 = very important and 1 = not important.

Demographic variables such as age, gender, race (i.e. white vs. non-white), and education are considered in the current study. Empirical studies give support to them being influential predictors for work attitudes (Mathieu and Zajac 1990; Brown 1996). A position obtained from promotion symbolizes one's success and should positively predict work attitudes, so we control for it. Organizational size (as number of employees) is included in controls as it denotes inertia and rigidity (Hannan and Freeman 1984), factors that frustrate managers. We also control for the dummy variable of Georgia/Illinois. The state of Georgia underwent a drastic civil service reform in 1996. The reform has resulted in a majority of Georgia state government employees being at-will (Kellough and Nigro 2002), a factor determinative to work attitudes. Finally, experience such as job tenure (Bedeian *et al.* 1992) and whether one has worked in the private sector (Boardman *et al.* 2010) are influential to work attitudes and should be controlled for. See table 1 for descriptive statistics.

TABLE 1 *Descriptive statistics*

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Job involvement	787	3.31	0.82	1	4
Job satisfaction	786	3.21	0.79	1	4
Pride working for this organization	788	3.18	0.81	1	4
A feeling of underpayment	786	3.14	0.88	1	4
Self-determination index (SDI)	758	-0.46	4.16	-11.33	10
Age	782	49.03	8.56	23	72
Female	784	0.44	0.50	0	1
A move-up position	790	0.69	0.46	0	1
Race (non-white)	768	0.19	0.39	0	1
Job tenure	759	7.28	6.34	1	39
Private sector experience	790	0.30	0.46	0	1
State of Georgia	790	0.55	0.50	0	1
Organizational size (log)	790	7.73	1.43	2.40	9.84
Undergraduate degree	784	0.44	0.50	0	1
Graduate degree	784	0.53	0.50	0	1

TABLE 2 *Sector comparisons of worker talent, creativity, and autonomy*

Sector comparison	Pro-business (-1)	No difference (0)	Pro-public (+1)	N
Talent (T)	278 (35.87%)	427 (55.10%)	70 (9.03%)	775 (100%)
Creativity (C)	507 (65.08%)	224 (28.75%)	48 (6.16%)	779 (100%)
Autonomy (A)	473 (60.88%)	183 (23.55%)	123 (15.57%)	777 (100%)
	-3 ~ -1	0	+1 ~ +3	N
Global comparison (T + C + A)	572 (74.00%)	124 (16.04%)	77 (9.96%)	773 (100%)

Statistical findings

In table 2 we report the 790 respondents' comparisons regarding perceptions of worker talent, creativity, and autonomy. Perhaps the most remarkable finding is the small percentage of public managers who perceive that public sector workers are more talented (9.03 per cent), creative (6.16 per cent), and autonomous (15.57 per cent). In the meantime, more than half of the respondents think that business sector workers are more creative (65.08 per cent) and autonomous (60.88 per cent). Although only 35.87 per cent of the respondents perceive that business workers are more talented, the percentage is far greater than that of pro-public respondents (9.03 per cent). Public managers seem, on the whole, to have bought into the prevalent notion of private sector superiority. Certainly their appraisal is in general in line with inferences derived from much of the public-private comparison literature. It is, of course, worth noting that more than half of the respondents perceive that there is no difference between the public and private sectors with respect to their worker talent (55.10 per cent). One possibility is that public sector jobs are still appealing to talented people, but the public sector context does not allow talented people to make the best use of their abilities.

After summing up the three comparison items, we find that the value of -3 (strongly pro-business) is 178 (23.03 per cent), -2 (fairly pro-business) is 188 (24.32 per cent), and -1 (slightly pro-business) is 206 (26.65 per cent); pro-business in total is 572 (74.00 per cent). However, the value of +3 (strongly pro-public) is only 9 (1.16 per cent), +2 (fairly pro-public) is 8 (1.03 per cent), and +1 (slightly pro-public) is 60 (7.76 per cent); pro-public in total is 77 (9.96 per cent). The value of 0 is 124 (16.04 per cent). In sum, it is fair to say that perceived private sector superiority exists.

Next, we examine whether public managers' perceived outcomes of sector comparison is related to their work attitudes. We first report mean comparisons of work attitudes in table 3 as preliminary findings. Since we are interested in whether the attitudes of 'pro-business' people are particularly different from the attitudes of others, we combine 'no difference' and 'pro-public' and have it compared with 'pro-business' with respect to three different work attitudes. The results first show that the mean values of 'pro-business' are universally smaller than the mean values of 'no difference + pro-public'. In addition, seven out of nine differences are statistically significant. A general message derived from these comparisons is that public managers' positive work attitudes increase when their perceptions depart from 'pro-business', providing support to our Hypothesis 1. It is worth noting that sector comparison of worker autonomy, compared to worker creativity and worker talent, has a relatively minor influence. Only one out of three comparisons of worker autonomy is statistically significant.

Since we treat 'pro-business', 'no difference', and 'pro-public' as ordinal in scale, a t-test based on two-group comparison is limited in its explanatory power. We employ ordinal logistic regression to improve our analysis. We first enter sector comparisons of worker

TABLE 3 Mean comparisons

	Pro-business (PB)	No difference + Pro-public (ND + PP)	t-tests
Job involvement			
Talent (T)	3.49	3.61 (ND=3.61; PP=3.61)	*
Creativity (C)	3.50	3.70 (ND=3.68; PP=3.77)	**
Autonomy (A)	3.55	3.60 (ND=3.61; PP=3.55)	n.s.
Job satisfaction			
Talent (T)	3.11	3.27 (ND=3.27; PP=3.26)	**
Creativity (C)	3.13	3.36 (ND=3.36; PP=3.36)	**
Autonomy (A)	3.15	3.29 (ND=3.32; PP=3.25)	*
Pride working for this organization			
Talent (T)	3.04	3.26 (ND=3.25; PP=3.31)	**
Creativity (C)	3.11	3.31 (ND=3.30; PP=3.31)	**
Autonomy (A)	3.16	3.19 (ND=3.20; PP=3.18)	n.s.

Note: Pro-business = PB; No difference = ND; Pro-public = PP.

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; n.s. = not significant.

TABLE 4 Ordinal logit regression: job involvement

	M 1		M 2		M 3		M 4	
	Coef	p	Coef	p	Coef	p	Coef	p
I V: Sector comparison								
Talent (T)	0.09	0.51	–	–	–	–	–	–
Creativity (C)	–	–	0.37	0.02*	–	–	–	–
Autonomy (A)	–	–	–	–	0.08	0.47	–	–
Global comparison (T + C + A)	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.11	0.08†
Controls								
Self-determination index (SDI)	0.11	0.00**	0.10	0.00*	0.11	0.00**	0.11	0.00**
Age	0.02	0.05*	0.02	0.09†	0.02	0.06†	0.02	0.08†
Female	0.25	0.15	0.20	0.28	0.27	0.13	0.24	0.18
A move-up position	0.60	0.00**	0.62	0.00**	0.60	0.00**	0.60	0.00**
Race (non-white)	0.34	0.14	0.34	0.15	0.33	0.16	0.33	0.16
Job tenure	–0.01	0.68	–0.01	0.70	–0.01	0.69	–0.01	0.67
Private sector experience	–0.03	0.86	0.00	1.00	–0.04	0.81	–0.02	0.90
State of Georgia	0.07	0.68	0.07	0.68	0.08	0.65	0.06	0.73
Organizational size (log)	0.05	0.39	0.05	0.40	0.05	0.37	0.05	0.41
Undergraduate degree	–0.20	0.69	–0.17	0.73	–0.15	0.77	–0.16	0.76
Graduate degree	–0.36	0.47	–0.28	0.59	–0.31	0.54	–0.28	0.58
N	694		694		693		693	
Prob > chi ²	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	
Pseudo R square	0.042		0.047		0.042		0.044	

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † < 0.10 .

talent, creativity, and autonomy separately into the models. Additionally, we create a global comparison measure by summing up the three types of comparisons (ranging between -3 and $+3$) and enter it in the fourth model. We report regression results of job involvement as the DV in table 4, job satisfaction as the DV in table 5, and pride working for the current organization as the DV in table 6.

TABLE 5 Ordinal logit regression: job satisfaction

	M 1		M 2		M 3		M 4	
	Coef	p	Coef	p	Coef	p	Coef	p
IV: Sector comparison								
Talent (T)	0.23	0.06†	-	-	-	-	-	-
Creativity (C)	-	-	0.44	0.00**	-	-	-	-
Autonomy (A)	-	-	-	-	0.17	0.09†	-	-
Global comparison (T + C + A)	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.19	0.00**
Controls								
Self-determination index (SDI)	0.06	0.00**	0.06	0.00**	0.06	0.00**	0.06	0.00**
Age	0.04	0.00**	0.04	0.00**	0.04	0.00**	0.04	0.00**
Female	0.05	0.74	-0.01	0.97	0.09	0.55	0.04	0.80
A move-up position	0.48	0.00**	0.49	0.00**	0.49	0.00**	0.48	0.00**
Race (non-white)	0.18	0.36	0.17	0.38	0.15	0.44	0.15	0.45
Job tenure	-0.02	0.18	-0.02	0.17	-0.02	0.16	-0.02	0.14
Private sector experience	-0.01	0.93	0.01	0.94	-0.02	0.92	0.02	0.92
State of Georgia	0.50	0.00**	0.52	0.00**	0.52	0.00**	0.50	0.00**
Organizational size (log)	-0.09	0.07†	-0.10	0.05*	-0.09	0.10†	-0.09	0.07†
Undergraduate degree	-0.16	0.69	-0.11	0.78	-0.25	0.55	-0.25	0.55
Graduate degree	-0.51	0.22	-0.42	0.31	-0.60	0.17	-0.55	0.20
N	693		693		692		692	
Prob > chi ²	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	
Pseudo R square	0.041		0.046		0.040		0.046	

**p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; † < 0.10.

After controlling for several confounding variables, in table 4, we find that the coefficients of all sector comparison variables, including the global comparison measure, are positive. It implies that the less public managers' perception is 'pro-business', the more positive their job involvement is, basically in line with our speculation in Hypothesis 1. However, among the four coefficients, only one (the comparison of worker creativity) is statistically significant at the level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The coefficient of global comparison measure is 0.11 ($p < 0.08$), approaching the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. In table 5, when job satisfaction is used as the dependent variable, we find that coefficients of sector comparison variables in all models are positive, and two out of four are statistically significant at the level of $\alpha = 0.05$. The results in table 6 resemble the results in table 5: most coefficients of sector comparison are statistically significant at the level of $\alpha = 0.05$ with one exception when the comparison of worker autonomy is used as the main independent variable ($B = 0.09$; $p < 0.36$).

In sum, generally consonant with our speculation, public managers' sector comparisons and their work attitudes are related. When their perceptions depart from 'pro-business' and move towards 'pro-public', their job involvement, job satisfaction, and pride working for the current organization increase. In addition, results also show that perceived inferiority of worker talent and creativity is more influential than perceived inferiority of worker autonomy in compromising work attitudes.

Regarding control variables, age, move-up position, and self-determination positively predict work attitudes. Feeling underpaid is statistically significant in the models of job satisfaction and pride working for the current organizations, but not significant in the models of job involvement. Gender, race, and work experience in the private sector are not significantly related to any work attitudes. Comparatively, employees in the state

TABLE 6 Ordinal logit regression: pride working for this organization

	M 1		M 2		M 3		M 4	
	Coef	p	Coef	p	Coef	p	Coef	p
IV: Sector comparison								
Talent (T)	0.37	0.00**	–	–	–	–	–	–
Creativity (C)	–	–	0.35	0.01*	–	–	–	–
Autonomy (A)	–	–	–	–	0.09	0.36	–	–
Global comparison (T + C + A)	–	–	–	–	–	–	0.18	0.00**
Controls								
Self-determination index (SDI)	0.09	0.00**	0.09	0.00**	0.10	0.00**	0.09	0.00**
Age	0.04	0.00**	0.03	0.00**	0.04	0.00**	0.03	0.00**
Female	0.01	0.95	–0.01	0.93	0.05	0.73	0.01	0.96
A move-up position	0.35	0.03*	0.37	0.03*	0.35	0.03*	0.36	0.03*
Race (non-white)	0.21	0.28	0.19	0.31	0.18	0.34	0.18	0.35
Job tenure	–0.03	0.03*	–0.03	0.03*	–0.03	0.03*	–0.03	0.02*
Private sector experience	0.18	0.26	0.19	0.23	0.15	0.37	0.18	0.26
State of Georgia	0.82	0.00**	0.84	0.00**	0.84	0.00**	0.83	0.00**
Organizational size (log)	–0.11	0.03*	–0.11	0.03*	–0.10	0.05*	–0.11	0.03*
Undergraduate degree	–1.05	0.02*	–0.98	0.03*	–0.97	0.04*	–1.00	0.03*
Graduate degree	–1.21	0.01*	–1.11	0.02*	–1.16	0.01*	–1.12	0.02*
N	695		695		694		694	
Prob > chi ²	0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000	
Pseudo R square	0.065		0.064		0.059		0.065	

** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; † < 0.10 .

of Georgia show more job satisfaction and pride working for their organizations than their peers in the state of Illinois. Organizational size, as we speculated, is negatively associated with work attitudes, especially job satisfaction and pride working for the current organization. Job tenure also negatively predicts the pride working for the current organization, implying the effect of organizational attrition. Finally, public managers who have a college and masters degree are less likely than those who have a high school degree to show pride in working for their organizations.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications of the present study are twofold: theoretical and practical. Theoretically, we address a traditional but still intriguing topic: does sector matter, and how does it matter? Unlike the conventional approach that compares public and private sector employees directly, we apply SCT, a psychological theory underexplored in the field of public administration, to study how public managers perceive their work sector and the abilities of their work peers. Introducing SCT to public administration has at least two important contributions. First, although distrust of government has long been an academic research topic (Butler *et al.* 2011; Jahan and Shahan 2012) and a public discourse (Zeleny and Thee-Brenan 2011) in the United States and in many other countries, scholars seldom empirically examine public managers' sector perceptions under the influence of the public's cynicism. Although descriptive statistics in the current study prohibit us from drawing a clear causation between bureaucratic criticism and public managers' sector perceptions, our preliminary analysis shows that the way public managers perceive their own sector and their work peers is generally in line with the public's opinions. It sheds

at least some light on whether the pervasive negativity colours public managers' views about themselves.

Second, and more importantly, SCT in the context of public–private comparison implies that perceiving the superiority of the private sector can undermine public managers' confidence and accordingly compromise their work morale. Our analysis confirms this view: public managers' work attitudes among those who perceive business sector superiority are apparently more negative than those who perceive no difference and those who perceive public sector superiority. SCT provides an alternative view to understand why public managers' work attitudes are negative. While most contemporary public management researchers tend to attribute the reasons to 'internal' flaws of public organizations such as severe political interference, bureaucratic control, and proliferated rules limiting employees' creativity and autonomy (see Rainey 2009 for an overview), SCT reminds us that public managers who work under the veil of ignorance may not know their current work status and abilities until they compare themselves with 'external' actors, namely enterprise workers. Therefore, we urge scholars to place more emphasis on SCT in the research on public sector organizational behaviour.

Practically, it is worrisome that so many public managers feel that their work sector is inferior to the private sector in terms of worker talent, creativity, and autonomy. This is especially unfortunate when the perceived inferiority of these abilities is accompanied by negative attitudes. In fact, studies have shown that having a dim view of one's work context is associated not only with undermined work attitudes but also with many other negative consequences such as less organizational citizenship behaviour and a sense of workplace isolation (Clark 1972; Gunter and Furnham 1996; Hodson 1998). However, there is no evidence that public managers are indeed less creative, talented, and autonomous than their private sector peers. Instead, studies show that public managers can be proactive and innovative when they receive enough support (Damanpour and Schneider 2009; Vigoda-Gadot and Beerli 2012). They perceive the inferiority of worker abilities in their sector and accordingly lose their confidence perhaps only because of the public's negative image imposed on them. Therefore, we call for more constructive policy suggestions and less destructive rhetoric (Jahan and Shahan 2012), and we also urge more useful training and mentoring programmes that help enhance practitioners' career motivation and rebuild practitioners' confidence as civil servants (Bozeman and Feeney 2009).

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Looking through the lens of SCT, we provide a new perspective for public administration scholars to understand public managers' perceptions of their own sector and how these perceptions are related to work attitudes. However, we encourage readers to use caution in interpreting our preliminary findings as the analysis is limited by the data. We also encourage scholars to develop new research agendas to address this study's shortcomings.

First, the data collection process ended in 2006, three years before the economic recession in 2009. Is it possible that the recession may have influenced public managers' impressions about the private sector and its worker abilities? Has the perceived superiority of the private sector decreased? We are unable to answer this question using NASP-III data, but it would definitely be an interesting research topic. In fact, the influence of recession on the private sector labour market is debatable. A report based on the US Census Bureau's Current Population Survey suggests that recession has led to the decline of corporate productivity, reduced revenue, and altered the way companies plan their long-term

business goals (Hill 2011). However, a report based on the statistics released by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that the private sector in the USA has recovered most of the jobs lost during the recession (*Business Insider* 2012). More directly related to sector comparison, another report in 2011 even shows that most small businesses are not willing to hire ex-public sector employees, and only 11 per cent of the employers considered public sector workers to be as productive as their private sector counterparts (Robert 2011), implying that public managers' perceived superiority of the private sector and its workers may still remain after the recession. Given these inconclusive messages, it would be valuable to discover further post-recession evidence about public managers' sector perceptions.

Second, our public sector sample covers public managers from only two US state governments, Georgia and Illinois. This triggers some concerns for the generalizability of our results and should be treated as a research limitation. However, from another perspective, the two states have very different civil service systems and are thus quite representative. While the state of Illinois has implemented a fairly incremental reform process, the state of Georgia, since 1996, has employed several radical reform practices such as at-will employment, performance-based contingent pay, and decentralization of personnel power, hoping to make government more competitive and business-like (Kellough and Nigro 2006; Condrey and Battaglio 2007). Although one may expect some differences regarding public managers' sector perceptions in these two states due to disparate reform histories, the results from NASP-III show the opposite: the percentages of pro-business, no difference, and pro-public are very similar in these two states.³ This may imply that distinctive features in a state, such as drastic personnel reform practices, do not alter public managers' sector perceptions of worker abilities, making our findings more generalizable. However, we emphasize that our findings are based on the US context. Public managers' sector perceptions may vary according to a nation's public personnel system and the public's impression about civil servants.

Therefore, cross-cultural research could well contribute inasmuch as other countries' populations may not have a history of perpetually negative public images of the public sector. For example, famous for its elitism, the Singapore government has tried, by all means, to attract and retain the most talented and capable people to serve in the public sector. Specific methods include providing scholarships to elite students, fast-tracking them for promotion, and giving civil servants (especially senior ones) wages benchmarked to the business sector (Neo and Chen 2007). One may reasonably suspect that Singaporean civil servants have a low likelihood of perceiving inferiority of worker abilities. They may even feel superior to others in their society and, accordingly, exhibit more positive work attitudes and have less likelihood of switching their career to the private sector.

Finally, questionnaire (cross-sectional) data were used to test our hypotheses. More precise examination of the causality of psychological impacts of sector comparison requires time-series data or experimental data. In the USA, even before entering the public sector, almost all public sector employees are at least somewhat aware of anti-government and anti-bureaucracy strains in American culture. Nevertheless, it certainly seems likely that this climate of negativity would be much less salient prior to entering the public service. Thus, longitudinal research focused on the long-term effects of negative external stimuli, as those stimuli interact with characteristics of individuals and organizations, would be especially beneficial. In sum, we can envision a multi-method, multi-tiered research effort in the future seeking to nail down both the causes and effects of what we might refer to as 'low public sector self-esteem'.

NOTES

- ¹ Lan (1997, p. 31) argues that 'bureaucrat bashing has become the norm', and others tell us that 'bureaucrat bashing has become an international sport' (Butler *et al.* 2011, p. 395). Recently, a report showed that distrust of government in many industrialized and democratic countries is even higher than in the USA (<http://www.slideshare.net/EdelmanInsights/2012-edelman-trust-barometer-global-deck#btnNext>). A majority of criticisms about a lack of creativity, talent, and autonomy among public sector employees comes from non-academic sources. According to many word search websites (e.g. <http://bureaucrats.askdefine.com>; <http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org>), the meaning of 'bureaucrat' today has largely negative connotations fuelled by the perception that bureaucrats lack creativity and autonomy. One report even shows that most small businesses are not willing to hire ex-public sector employees, and only 11 per cent of the employers considered public sector workers to be as productive as their private sector counterparts (Robert 2011). Discussions following this report include comments that the public sector environment places great constraints on creativity, flair, and decision-making.
- ² Social comparisons occurring among in-group members are called interpersonal social comparisons. When intragroup, self-evaluations on ability dimensions are made by contrast to the abilities of other individuals. However, when social identity is engaged (e.g. 'we' are public sector workers but 'they' are private sector workers), contrast effects should originate from performance by out-group members because relative standing of the in-group is determined (Brewer and Weber 1994). This type of social comparison is called intergroup social comparison.
- ³ The statistics are not reported here but are available upon request.

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