

EXPLAINING THE GAP BETWEEN INTEREST AND APPLICATION INTENTION IN PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYMENT

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Research on public sector attractiveness consistently reveals a gap between positive evaluations of public missions and the actual willingness of young people to apply for government positions. This article aims to explain this gap by analytically distinguishing two stages of career decision making: the formation of interest and the formation of application intention. The empirical basis of the study consists of survey data collected from students of Karaganda university of KAZPOTREBSOYUZ (N = 196) in September 2025, who evaluated a real vacancy in the public sector. The findings demonstrate that symbolic attractiveness associated with mission and perceived public value plays a significant role in generating interest, but loses explanatory power at the stage of intention formation. Application intention emerges under conditions of anticipated work constraints and early sectoral screening; whereby innovation-oriented students exclude the public sector from their set of considered alternatives. In addition, evaluative ambivalence is identified as a stable condition that disrupts linear transitions from values to action. The results refine the explanatory scope of public service motivation (PSM) theory and highlight the need to complement attraction models with mechanisms of early exclusion and ambivalent evaluation.

Keywords: public service motivation, public sector attractiveness, application intention, innovation orientation, ambivalence, early sectoral exclusion.

ОБЪЯСНЕНИЕ РАЗРЫВА МЕЖДУ ИНТЕРЕСОМ И НАМЕРЕНИЕМ ПОДАТЬ ЗАЯВКУ НА РАБОТУ В ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОМ СЕКТОРЕ

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В исследованиях привлекательности государственной службы устойчиво фиксируется разрыв между положительной оценкой публичных миссий и реальной готовностью молодых специалистов подавать заявления на государственные должности. Цель настоящей статьи заключается в объяснении данного разрыва через разграничение двух стадий карьерного решения формирования интереса и формирования намерения действовать. Эмпирическую основу исследования составляют данные анкетного опроса студентов Карагандинского университета «КАЗПОТРЕБСОЮЗА» (N = 196), проведённого в сентябре 2025 года при оценке конкретной вакансии в государственном секторе. Показано, что символическая привлекательность, связанная с миссией и общественной значимостью государственной службы, оказывает существенное влияние на формирование интереса, однако утрачивает объяснительную силу при переходе к намерению подать заявление. Намерение формируется в условиях ожидаемых ограничений повседневной работы и предварительного отраслевого отбора, в рамках которого инновационно ориентированные студенты исключают государственный сектор из числа рассматриваемых альтернатив. Кроме того, установлено, что амбивалентность оценок представляет собой устойчивое состояние, нарушающее линейный переход от ценностных установок к действию. Полученные результаты уточняют границы применимости

теории мотивации государственного служения (PSM) и указывают на необходимость дополнения моделей привлекательности механизмами раннего исключения и анализа противоречивых оценок.

Ключевые слова: мотивация государственной службы, привлекательность государственной службы, намерение подать заявление, инновационная ориентация, амбивалентность, раннее исключение сектора.

МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК СЕКТОРДАҒЫ ЖҰМЫСҚА ҚЫЗЫҒУШЫЛЫҚ ПЕН ӨТІНІШ БЕРУ НИЕТІНІҢ АРАСЫНДАҒЫ АЛШАҚТЫҚТЫ ТҮСІНДІРУ

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Мемлекеттік қызметтің тартымдылығын зерттейтін еңбектерде қоғамдық миссияларды оң бағалау мен нақты мемлекеттік лауазымдарға өтініш беру ниетінің арасындағы алшақтық тұрақты түрде байқалады. Осы мақаланың мақсаты аталған алшақтықты мансаптық шешім қабылдаудың екі кезеңін, яғни қызығушылықтың қалыптасуы мен нақты әрекетке ниеттің қалыптасуын ажырату арқылы түсіндіру. Зерттеудің эмпирикалық негізін 2025 жылғы қыркүйек айында «ҚАЗТҰТЫНУОДАҒЫ» Қарағанды университетінің студенттері арасында (N = 196) жүргізілген сауалнама деректері құрады, онда студенттер мемлекеттік сектордағы нақты бос жұмыс орнын бағалады. Зерттеу нәтижелері мемлекеттік қызметтің миссиясы мен қоғамдық маңыздылығына байланысты символдық тартымдылықтың қызығушылықтың қалыптасуына елеулі әсер ететінін, алайда өтініш беру ниетіне көшу кезеңінде оның түсіндірмелік әлеуеті әлсірейтінін көрсетеді. Ниет күнделікті еңбек қызметіне қатысты күтілетін шектеулер мен алдын ала салалық іріктеу жағдайында қалыптасады, бұл ретте инновацияға бағдарланған студенттер мемлекеттік секторды қарастырылатын нұсқалар қатарынан ерте кезеңде алып тастайды. Сонымен қатар бағалаулардың амбиваленттілігі құндылықтардан нақты әрекетке өтудің сызықтық логикасын бұзатын тұрақты күй ретінде айқындалды. Алынған нәтижелер мемлекеттік қызмет мотивациясы (PSM) теориясының қолданылу шектерін нақтылап, тартымдылық модельдерін ерте алып тастау механизмдерімен толықтыру қажеттігін көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: мемлекеттік қызмет мотивациясы, мемлекеттік қызметтің тартымдылығы, өтініш беру ниеті, инновацияға бағдарлану, амбиваленттілік, саланы ерте алып тастау.

Introduction. Public sector attraction research has become unusually consistent in documenting one empirical pattern: early career candidates often endorse public missions, yet frequently hesitate to apply for public sector jobs. This pattern has been observed across countries, cohorts, and institutional settings, and it persists even where public sector work is evaluated positively in terms of social contribution and legitimacy [1 - 3]. Rather than disappearing with improved measurement or changing labor market conditions, the gap between positive evaluation and application intention has become one of the field's most stable findings [4].

Dominant explanations of this gap are rooted in public service motivation (PSM) and related attraction frameworks. These approaches assume that symbolic alignment with public values such as commitment to societal contribution, collective goals, or institutional purpose enters the decision process early and exerts a downstream influence on behavioral intention [5]. In our setting, weak application rates are typically interpreted as the result of incomplete information, competing incentives, or external constraints that interfere with otherwise positive motivations. Implicitly, intention is modeled as the behavioral endpoint of symbolic appeal [6].

However, accumulating empirical evidence challenges this assumption. Multiple studies report that once expectations about day-to-day work realities autonomy, flexibility, pace of decision making, and opportunities for initiative are taken into account, symbolic appeal no longer predicts application behavior in a reliable or consistent way [5]. Importantly, this pattern does not suggest that symbolic motivations are irrelevant. Instead, it indicates that their influence may be confined to earlier stages of evaluation and may not extend to the point at which individuals decide whether to apply.

This paper argues that the persistence of the attraction intention gap is not merely an empirical anomaly but a conceptual problem [7]. Specifically, prevailing attraction models' mis specify the decision process by treating application intention as a continuation of symbolic interest. Intention is not formed in the same evaluative environment as interest [8]. While interest reflects a broad assessment of meaning and desirability, intention emerges under anticipated constraints, sector level screening, and uncertainty about everyday work experiences. Under these conditions, symbolic evaluations do not operate as direct behavioral drivers [8].

Two overlooked mechanisms are central to this mi's specification. The first is early exclusion based on innovation related expectations. For many students, preferences for flexibility, autonomy, and dynamic work environments function as a preliminary filter that determines whether the public sector enters the considered set at all. When such expectations are salient, symbolic appeal does not compete with other job attributes; it becomes behaviorally irrelevant because the sector has already been screened out. In this study, innovation orientation operates not as a tradeoff variable but as a sector level exclusion logic.

The second mechanism is evaluative ambivalence. In practice than holding coherent and internally consistent views, students frequently evaluate public sector work in mixed terms simultaneously appreciating its societal value while doubting its capacity to offer engaging

or autonomous work. This ambivalence is not a transient state or a measurement artifact. It represents a stable evaluative condition under which linear value to action models lose predictive power. When positive and negative judgments coexist, symbolic appeal may generate interest without resolving hesitation, leaving intention underdetermined.

Building on these arguments, this study reconceptualizes early career attraction to public sector employment by analytically separating interest from intention. Using survey data from students evaluating a real public sector vacancy, the analysis examines how symbolic appeal, innovation-oriented expectations, and ambivalence jointly shape different stages of the decision process. The findings demonstrate that while PSM and symbolic evaluations remain powerful predictors of interest, they are conceptually insufficient for explaining why individuals decide to apply. By locating the breakdown between evaluation and action, the paper refocuses public sector attraction theory on the conditions under which valued public service becomes actionable [9].

Materials and Methods. The study uses a cross sectional survey design to examine how symbolic appeal, innovation-oriented expectations, and evaluative ambivalence shape distinct stages of early career decision making: interest and application intention. Instead, then treating attraction as a single latent construct, the design explicitly separates evaluative appreciation from behavioral readiness, consistent with the paper's theoretical argument.

To reduce hypothetical bias, respondents evaluated a real public sector vacancy (Deputy head of a state institution, apparatus of the Akimat of the Karagandy region). Anchoring evaluations in a concrete job description ensures that responses reflect anticipated work realities, not abstract sectoral images. The context is analytically relevant because public sector employment in this setting is institutionally salient and widely associated with organizational constraints, allowing early exclusion mechanisms and ambivalence to surface clearly.

Data were collected between 17 and 24

September 2025 at Karaganda university of «KAZPOTREBSOYUZ». A targeted non probability sampling strategy was employed [6]. While this approach does not permit population level prevalence estimates, it is appropriate for theory driven research focused on identifying decision mechanisms instead than estimating population parameters [7].

The sample is predominantly female (74%), with most respondents in their third or fourth year of study. A majority reported no formal work experience, while approximately two thirds had completed an internship in a public organization. Gender and internship experience are included as controls in all models due to their documented associations with job interest and application behavior. An a priori power analysis indicated that the final sample provides sufficient power to detect medium sized effects in both linear and logistic regression models.

All variables were measured using 7-point Likert scales.

Interest and intention were measured with items capturing perceived job attractiveness, willingness to accept an offer, initiative to apply, and readiness to relocate if required.

Symbolic appeal was measured using items capturing mission alignment, perceived societal contribution, and meaningfulness of public service.

Innovation orientation captured preferences for flexibility, autonomy, and a dynamic work pace.

Ambivalence was operationalized using a cross

valence index combining positive and negative evaluations of public sector work; reliability was assessed using the Spearman-Brown coefficient.

The analysis proceeded in three steps aligned with the paper's theoretical claims. First, descriptive analyses assessed overall evaluation patterns and divergence between interest and intention. Second, linear regression models examined predictors of interest, testing whether symbolic appeal remains dominant once innovation expectations and ambivalence are included. Third, logistic regression models examined application intention, treating intention as a behavioral decision in practice than a continuous preference.

Predictor variables were mean centered prior to analysis, and interaction terms were computed as multiplicative products. Intention was dichotomized for logistic regression (0 = unlikely or neutral; 1 = likely).

Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and responses were anonymous. All procedures complied with institutional ethical standards.

Results and Discussion. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of the sample (N = 196). The sample is predominantly female (74%), with most respondents in their third or fourth year of study (92%). Slightly more than half of the respondents (54%) receive a state scholarship. A substantial majority report no formal work experience (75%), while 67% have completed an internship in a public institution.

Table 1 - Sample characteristics (N = 196)

Variable	Categories	%
Gender	Female (145), Male (51)	74 / 26
Year of study	1st (7), 2nd (8), 3rd (98), 4th (83)	4 / 4 / 50 / 42
State scholarship	Yes (106), No (90)	54 / 46
Work experience	Yes (49), No (147)	25 / 75
Internship in public institutions	Yes (131), No (65)	67 / 33
Note: Authors' calculations based on survey data		

This composition reflects a typical early career student population evaluating first full-time employment opportunities. Gender and internship experience are therefore included as control variables in all subsequent model specifications.

Table 2 reports descriptive statistics for the

three indicators of job interest. Overall evaluations are moderately positive: mean values range from 4.3 to 5.0 on the 7-point scale. Organizational attractiveness ($M = 4,9$) and willingness to accept an offer ($M = 5,0$) show relatively high central tendency, with approximately 60% of respondents selecting values of 5 or higher.

Table 2 - Descriptive statistics for interest indicators

Indicator	Mean	% ≥ 5	% Max	% Min
Attractiveness	4,9	62	29	9
Accept offer	5,0	60	42	9
Apply independently	4,3	49	28	25
Note: Authors' calculations based on survey data				

In contrast, initiative to apply independently exhibits a markedly different distribution. Although its mean remains above the scale midpoint ($M = 4.3$), responses are strongly polarized, with 28% selecting the maximum category and 25% selecting the minimum category.

This divergence indicates that positive evaluations of the vacancy do not translate uniformly into readiness to act, providing early descriptive evidence for a separation between general interest and application intention.

Gender differences are pronounced. Among respondents fully willing to apply (score = 7), 93% are women (51 of 55), whereas among respondents fully unwilling to apply (score = 1), 71% are men (35 of 49). Other background characteristics show no systematic association with

interest indicators. Year of study, scholarship status, and prior work experience do not meaningfully differentiate evaluations. Internship experience in public institutions is descriptively associated with higher interest but does not exhibit sufficient variation to support robust statistical inference and is therefore treated as a control variable in subsequent models.

Table 3 presents Spearman correlations between value orientations and indicators of job interest. Two consistent patterns emerge. Orientations toward social mission, stability, and structured work are positively associated with all interest indicators, with correlations ranging from $\rho \approx 0,32$ to $0,52$. In contrast, innovation orientation is negatively associated with each indicator, with correlations ranging from $\rho \approx -0,27$ to $-0,55$.

Table 3 - Spearman correlations (ρ) between values and interest indicators

Orientation	Attr.	Accept	Apply	Relocate	Consider
Mission	0,46	0,52	0,38	0,38	0,50
Stability	0,48	0,38	0,38	0,31	0,51
Structure	0,42	0,32	0,37	0,13	0,36
Innovation	-0,55	-0,47	-0,41	-0,27	-0,53
Note: Authors' calculations based on survey data					

Notably, innovation orientation exhibits the strongest associations in absolute terms, particularly with organizational attractiveness and willingness to accept an offer. This pattern indicates that preferences for autonomy and dynamic work environments are systematically related to lower evaluations of the public sector vacancy at the interest stage.

Overall, the correlation structure shows a clear alignment between value orientations and early evaluative judgments, while remaining

agnostic about whether these associations extend to application intention a question addressed in subsequent multivariate analyses.

Table 4 reports the results of an exploratory factor analysis conducted on the 18 attitude items. Sampling adequacy was high ($KMO = 0,82$), exceeding commonly accepted thresholds for factorability. Three factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted, jointly explaining 68% of the total variance.

Table 4 - Exploratory factor analysis of attitudinal items (N = 196)

Item	General Evaluation	Mission Prestige	Material Organizational Conditions
Organizational attractiveness	0,81	-	-
Willingness to accept an offer	0,78	-	-
Initiative to apply	0,72	-	-
Recommend the job to others	0,69	-	-
Societal contribution	-	0,82	-
Public value	-	0,79	-
Trustworthiness of organization	-	0,74	-
Organizational prestige	-	0,71	-
Salary attractiveness	-	-	0,76
Job stability	-	-	0,73
Working conditions	-	-	0,68
Note: Authors' calculations based on survey data			

The first factor, general evaluation, captures overall positive assessment of the vacancy, including items related to organizational attractiveness, willingness to accept an offer, willingness to apply, and recommending the job. The second factor, mission and prestige, reflects symbolic evaluations such as societal contribution, public value, trustworthiness, and perceived prestige. The third factor, material and organizational conditions, captures evaluations of salary, stability, and working conditions. Factor loadings ranged from 0,61 to 0,82 across all factors.

Although application related items load together with general evaluative items at the measurement level, subsequent analyses treat interest and application intention as analytically distinct outcomes, consistent with the theoretical argument that intention is formed under different decision conditions than general evaluation.

Factor scores for mission and prestige and for material and organizational conditions were used as predictors in subsequent regression analyses.

Table 5 presents results from a multiple linear regression predicting overall interest in the

public sector vacancy. The dependent variable is an interest index, computed as the mean of organizational attractiveness, willingness to accept an offer, and initiative to apply.

Table 5 - Multiple linear regression predicting overall interest

Predictor	Std. β	SE	P value
Mission prestige	0,43	0,06	0,001
Material organizational conditions	0,25	0,07	0,01
Gender (female = 1)	0,19	0,08	0,05
Internship experience	0,07	0,06	n.s.
Note: Authors' calculations based on survey data			

Mission and prestige emerge as the strongest predictor of interest ($\beta \approx 0,43$, $p < 0,001$). Material and organizational conditions also contribute positively, though more moderately ($\beta \approx 0,25$, $p < 0,01$). Gender remains significant net of evaluative controls ($\beta \approx 0,19$, $p < 0,05$), while internship experience does not add explanatory power once subjective evaluations are included. The model explains approximately 45% of the variance in interest ($R^2 \approx 0,45$).

These results indicate that symbolic evaluations

dominate the formation of interest, whereas background characteristics play a secondary role once perceptions of the job are taken into account.

Table 6 reports results from a logistic regression model estimating the probability of intending to apply for the vacancy. The dependent variable is binary and coded as 1 if the respondent reports an intention to apply (score ≥ 5) and 0 otherwise, consistent with prior research treating application intention as a threshold decision in practice than a continuous preference.

Table 6 - Logistic regression estimates of application intention (N = 196)

Predictor	Odds Ratio	SE	P value
Mission Prestige	1.45	0.18	.01
Stability orientation	1.32	0.16	.05
Innovation orientation	0.68	0.14	.01
Gender (female = 1)	1.60	0.25	.01
Internship experience	1.18	0.20	n.s.
Note: Authors' calculations based on survey data			

The results reveal a clear and asymmetric pattern. Higher evaluations of mission and Prestige are associated with an increased probability of applying, indicating that symbolic appeal continues to matter at the threshold of action. Stability orientation also contributes positively to application likelihood. In contrast, innovation orientation is

associated with a lower probability of applying, consistent with an early exclusion mechanism. Gender differences persist net of evaluative controls, with women showing a significantly higher probability of intending to apply. Internship experience in public institutions has a positive but comparatively weaker association with application

intention.

Overall, the logistic regression results indicate that while symbolic and stability related evaluations increase the likelihood of applying, innovation-oriented expectations systematically reduce it. This pattern mirrors the descriptive distributions and reinforces the distinction between general interest and application intention.

This study set out to explain a persistent paradox in public sector attraction research: why positive evaluations of public missions so often fail to translate into application intentions. The results provide a clear answer. The gap between interest and intention is not a matter of weak motivation, missing incentives, or insufficient information. It reflects a misalignment between how attraction has been theorized and how early career decisions are actually formed.

The findings confirm a robust and well documented pattern: symbolic appeal mission, societal contribution, and perceived public value strongly predicts interest in public sector work. Students who value public service express higher attractiveness ratings and greater openness toward public sector employment. In this study, the empirical foundations of PSM theory remain intact.

At the intention stage, however, symbolic appeal does not carry over to the intention stage once anticipated work constraints are taken into account. When expectations about autonomy, flexibility, and everyday work dynamics enter the decision process, symbolic evaluations lose their predictive relevance for application behavior. Symbolic motivations continue to matter, though their effect appears limited to early evaluative stages. In practice, it demonstrates that their influence is structurally confined to the formation of interest. Treating intention as a behavioral extension of symbolic alignment therefore overstates the scope of PSM and obscures where the decision process actually breaks down.

A central contribution of this study lies in identifying innovation orientation as an early exclusion mechanism. Students who associate themselves with dynamic, flexible, and innovation

driven work environments are significantly less likely to consider public sector employment, not because they reject its mission, but because they screen out the sector before symbolic considerations can become behaviorally relevant.

For many respondents, especially those with strong innovation preferences, this pattern challenges attraction models based on attribute tradeoffs. In the present case, innovation orientation does not compete with symbolic appeal; it precedes it. Once the public sector is excluded from the considered set, symbolic appeal no longer functions as a motivational input. This exclusion logic helps explain why public sector recruitment efforts that emphasize mission and societal impact often fail to reach innovation-oriented candidates, even when these candidates express strong prosocial values.

The results also demonstrate that ambivalence is a defining feature of how students evaluate public sector work. Instead, then expressing coherent or one-sided attitudes, many respondents simultaneously acknowledge the societal value of public service and doubt its capacity to offer engaging or autonomous work experiences. This ambivalence is not a transient hesitation or a measurement artifact. It represents a stable evaluative state in which positive and negative judgments coexist.

Under conditions of ambivalence, linear value to action models lose explanatory power. Symbolic appeal can increase interest without resolving hesitation, leaving intention underdetermined. From this perspective, the attraction intention gap is not surprising; it is a predictable outcome of decision making under evaluative conflict. Models that assume evaluative coherence therefore misinterpret ambivalence as noise, when it is in fact a core feature of the decision environment.

Taken together, these findings imply that public sector attraction theory needs to be reformulated around a stage sensitive view of decision making. Interest and intention are not successive points on a single continuum but outcomes of distinct evaluative processes. Symbolic appeal shapes interest by providing meaning and legitimacy. Innovation orientation determines whether the

public sector is considered at all. Ambivalence characterizes the context in which intention is formed and explains why interest frequently fails to convert into action.

From this perspective, the limitations of PSM theory are conceptual rather than empirical [5]. PSM explains why individuals like public sector work, but it cannot, on its own, explain why they decide to apply [8]. Addressing this limitation requires moving beyond linear attraction models and theorizing intention as a decision formed under anticipated constraint and unresolved evaluative conflict.

For research, these findings call for a clearer analytical separation between interest and intention in studies of public sector attraction. Treating intention as a distinct decision outcome opens new avenues for theorizing exclusion mechanisms, ambivalence, and sector level screening processes that are obscured in conventional models.

For practice, the results suggest that recruitment strategies focused exclusively on mission and symbolic appeal are unlikely to convert interest into applications among early career candidates. Addressing anticipated work constraints particularly perceptions of autonomy and innovation may be necessary not to increase symbolic appeal, but to prevent early exclusion from the considered set.

Overall, the study shows that the public sector attracts through meaning but loses candidates through anticipated constraint. Understanding this dynamic requires rethinking attraction not as a linear motivational process, but as a sequence of evaluative filters that shape whether valued public service becomes actionable.

Conclusion. This paper addressed a persistent paradox in public sector attraction research: students endorse public missions and report high symbolic appreciation, yet often do not intend to apply for public sector jobs. The findings show that this paradox is not a puzzle of weak motivation or inadequate incentives. It is a predictable outcome of a mis specified decision model one that treats application intention as the behavioral continuation

of symbolic appeal.

Three conclusions follow.

First, symbolic appeal is a reliable mechanism of interest formation, not of intention. PSM and mission related evaluations continue to explain why early career candidates like public sector work. Yet once anticipated work constraints enter the decision especially expectations about autonomy, flexibility, and the dynamics of daily work symbolic evaluations no longer determine whether candidates intend to apply. The theoretical implication is not that PSM «fails», but that its explanatory scope is stage bound: it accounts for attraction as meaning, not for intention as action.

Second, innovation orientation operates as a sector level exclusion logic. For a substantial segment of students, preferences for dynamic and flexible work environments function as an early screening criterion that removes the public sector from the considered set before symbolic considerations can become behaviorally relevant. This mechanism helps explain why mission focused recruitment frequently produces interest without conversion: the candidates most sensitive to autonomy and innovation are filtered out prior to attribute tradeoffs.

Third, ambivalence is not noise but a stable evaluative state that reshapes how intention is formed. Students often hold mixed judgments valuing the societal contribution of public service while doubting its capacity to deliver engaging and autonomous work. Under such conditions, linear value to action models break down: symbolic appeal may raise interest, but it does not resolve hesitation, leaving intention underdetermined [9].

Taken together, these conclusions require a reformulation of public sector attraction theory. Interest and intention should not be treated as successive points on a single continuum but as outcomes of distinct evaluative processes [10]. Attraction begins with symbolic meaning, but application intention is formed under anticipated constraint, early sectoral screening, and persistent ambivalence. Models that continue to treat intention as downstream symbolic attraction will

systematically overestimate the behavioral reach of PSM.

For public employers, the practical implication is straightforward: mission-based messaging can generate interest, but it cannot by itself produce applications when candidates anticipate constrained autonomy and limited opportunities for initiative. Recruitment strategies that aim to convert early career interest into action must address the work

dynamics expectations that trigger early exclusion and sustain ambivalence.

Ultimately, this study changes what the field should treat as the core explanatory problem. The question is not only who values public service, but when valuing public service becomes actionable and when, by design of the decision process, it does not.

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