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Private Sector Imprinting: An Examination of the Impacts of Private Sector Job Experience on Public Managers’ Work Attitudes

What are the attitudes of public managers who have had full-time private sector work experience? Public managers with private sector work experience report different perspectives than those who have spent their entire careers in the public sector. Though private sector work experience negatively correlates with job satisfaction, it only does so for the “new switcher,” whose last job was in the private sector. As careers advance, the negative impact seems to wane, leaving a public sector workforce that, in part as a result of their private sector work experience, are relatively more intrinsically motivated and involved in their jobs. We conclude with discussion of implications for human resources management.

The study of differences between the public and private sectors spans various organizational and managerial dimensions, including measures of organizational structure, organizational innovativeness, leadership, incentives and motivation, attitudes and perceptions, as well as behaviors such as absenteeism and outcomes such as turnover, job performance, and organizational commitment (Bozeman and Rainey 2000; Hall and Tolbert 2005; Judge et al. 2001; Moon and Bretschneider 2002; Rainey 2003). Most studies of these differences employ the standard public–private and, in fewer instances, public–private–nonprofit threshold(s); some use more gradated measures of “publicness” (Bozeman 1987).

While studies comparing public and private sector attributes often arrive at diverse and even conflicting conclusions regarding the types and significance of public–private differences, one area of considerable convergence is differences between public and private managers (Rainey 2003). Compared to private sector managers, public managers have been found to be less responsive to pecuniary incentives (Buchanan 1975; Wittmer 1991), more risk averse (Bellante and Link 1981; Bozeman and Kingsley 1998), and more oriented to social goals and public interest (Perry 1996, 1997), and they have lower expectations that good job performance will be rewarded (Rainey 1983).

Most of the foregoing studies are based on cross-sectional assessment of employees working in either the public or private sectors. While quite useful in many respects, these studies have some obvious limitations for understanding the impacts of the “boundaryless career,” characterized by employment with numerous organizations (Arthur and Rousseau 2001), often moving back and forth across the sectors (Light 1999). While there is reason to believe from case study and biographical evidence (Perry and Kraemer 1983) that private sector experience affects public employees, currently, there is a dearth of systematic work documenting these effects.

Our study is part of an emerging public management research agenda focused on “sector switchers” (Light 1999)—here operationalized as public managers who have spent some part of their careers in the private sector. This research agenda differs from most previous examinations of sector switchers in that the latter have been limited to historical analysis or anecdotes (Blumenthal 1983; Hunt 1999; Rumsfeld 1983), in part because the few widely available public management databases do not include sufficient career data to permit examination of career trajectories, especially when there is an interest in simultaneously examining work-related attitudes. Paul Light (1999), whose work is discussed at numerous points in this essay, was perhaps the first to examine private-to-public sector switchers, as we do here, identifying sector switching as
“the defining characteristic of the new public service.” Light found younger generations of public servants having more diverse career paths than their predecessors, with the former experiencing “multi-sector public service as their career reality” (1999, 76).

The key questions of this paper relate past work experience in the private sector to some of the most widely studied outcomes in the field of organizational behavior: job satisfaction (for overviews, see Locke 1976; Staw and Cohen-Carash 2005) and job involvement. We find job satisfaction a natural place to begin our inquiry into sector switching, insofar as employees’ satisfaction with their jobs has been of considerable concern for public (and private) managers (Schneider and Vaught 1993), having been studied since at least the Western Electric studies of the 1930s (Lawler 1981). Since then, various studies (e.g., Boardman and Sundquist 2009; George and Jones 1996; Judge et al. 2001; Shore and Martin 1989; Tett and Meyer 1993) have demonstrated absenteeism, turnover, job performance, the provision of effective public service, and organizational commitment to be directly related to job satisfaction.

In addition to job satisfaction, we also assess the impact of private sector work experience on the job involvement of public employees, which is conceptually distinct from job satisfaction (Brooke, Price, and Russell 1988; Brown 1996; Mathieu and Farr 1991). Job involvement is a proxy for intrinsic work motivation (Cook et al. 1981) that has demonstrated public–private differences (Buchanan 1975). We compare the effects of private sector work experience on job involvement versus job satisfaction, expecting that differences in career trajectory constitute different reference points from which public managers perceive their current work environments (Bozeman and Rainey 2000).

With the analysis of sector switchers comes numerous challenges. First, there are potential selection effects per a number of attitudinal, human and social capital, and stratification variables. Moreover, needed is longitudinal data rich enough to control for cohort effects, including data for sector switchers who have moved from the public to the private sector, in addition to data for the switchers we examine in this paper, who have moved from the private sector to the public. With new career trajectory data from the most recent National Administrative Studies Project (NASP-III), we feel we can speak at least provisionally to whether private sector work experience affects the job satisfaction and job involvement of public sector workers.

We focus on private sector career experience not only because it is underresearched in the study of public personnel, but also because the issues examined pertain to fundamental questions in the social psychology of work. Much current work using measures for cognitive phenomena such as perceptions of the work environment presumes that attitudes such as satisfaction and involvement emerge more or less spontaneously, as products of current beliefs and immediate contexts (e.g., Tracey, Tannenbaum, and Kavanagh 1995). By controlling for private sector work experience in our assessment of job satisfaction and job involvement, we consider the possibility that the proclivity to be satisfied by and/or to become involved in one’s public sector job is partly determined by the work experiences an individual has accrued.

The norms and expectations and experiences of the private sector are in many ways different from those of the public sector (for summaries, see Perry and Rainey 1988; Rainey and Bozeman 2000). Our paper rests on the premise that private sector work experiences have residual effects that are not nullified upon departure for the public sector, or even after having spent some years employed outside the private sector. Accordingly, our analysis of public managers’ career trajectories is informed by explanations from applied psychology, especially the operations of attitude formation, which explain how individuals’ past experiences (Perry and Krosnick 1995; Songer-Nocks 1976) and current beliefs and perceptions (Fishbein and Middlestadt 1995) converge to form new attitudes, including satisfaction with and/or involvement in one’s job. Additionally, this study is informed by explanations of workplace socialization from occupational psychology emphasizing the emotive effects of career transitions (Louis 1980; West and Rushton 1989). Together, these approaches help to consider systematically past work experiences in addition to contemporaneous factors in discussion of antecedents to public managers’ workday attitudes.

Data
Data from our study come from the most recent edition of the National Administrative Studies Project (NASP-III). The data were derived from 787 responses to mailed questionnaires sent to a random sample of 1,853 state-level public managers, upper-level professionals, and technicians in Georgia and Illinois. The response rate was 43 percent, with 431 respondents from Georgia and 356 from Illinois.

In addition to the demographic, attitudinal, and motivational questions, the survey asked respondents to provide information about their recent career history (last four jobs, including the current one). Gathering data on individuals’ full employment history would have been ideal, but doing this in a survey would be infeasible. Even with this limitation, for 303 of the respondents (39 percent), the span of the current job plus three prior jobs was broad enough to cover the entirety of their career histories. Questions about past jobs included start and end dates, number of employees supervised, type of job (managerial, professional, or technical), and type of organization (public sector, private sector, nonprofit sector).

Of 787 respondents, 216 (28 percent) reported that one or more of their prior three jobs was in the private sector. Ninety-two (12 percent) reported that the job they held immediately prior to the current one was in the private sector. These descriptive numbers alone imply that individuals with private sector work experience are fairly common in the public sector workforce.

The models in the analysis here consider three measures of private sector work experience: whether the job immediately before the current job was in the private sector, the quantity of reported private sector jobs, and the
percentage of reported years spent in private sector jobs. We assume respondents' job satisfaction and job involvement to be a function of numerous other factors as well, including length of tenure in the current job, length of tenure in the previous job, and also of perceptual measures demonstrated to be different across the sectors and to have an impact on satisfaction and involvement.

**Literature and Hypotheses**

The hypotheses regarding the effects of past career experience in the private sector on public managers' reported levels of job satisfaction and job involvement are informed not only by prior study of sector differences at the individual level and, more generally, of antecedents to job satisfaction and job involvement, but also by studies from applied and occupational psychology concerned with the operations of attitude formation and workplace socialization, respectively. We present a rudimentary overview of the latter areas of study before presenting the hypotheses. After presentation of the hypotheses, we address in more detail the expectation of divergent effects of private sector job experience on job satisfaction and job involvement. Because it is more familiar, we review prior study of sector differences, sector switchers, and of antecedents to job satisfaction and job involvement in the context of the hypotheses only.

**Past Experiences, Present Perceptions and Beliefs, and Attitude Formation and Change**

The study of attitude formation—how individuals arrive at a particular attitude, not simple identification of antecedents to that attitude (which characterizes much of the work in public administration outlets)—influences our thinking in this paper about the effects of past private sector work experiences. In applied psychology, the conceptualization of “attitude” is an individual’s “summary evaluation of a psychological object” captured in attribute dimensions with ranges such as “good–bad,” “harmful–beneficial,” “pleasant–unpleasant” (Azjen 2000). For the attitudes we are interested in, one can isolate an attribute dimension per survey item. For instance, we measure the attitude “job satisfaction” along the range “I am satisfied with my job–I am not satisfied with my job,” using a Likert-type scale.

Operative to this conceptualization of attitude is the evaluation of beliefs. Explanations from applied psychology of how attitudes develop emphasize the spontaneous evaluation of an object (e.g., a job) along multiple attribute dimensions (e.g., satisfying–not satisfying, involving–not involving) which, in turn, gives rise to beliefs about that object (e.g., unsatisfying but involving, satisfying and involving) (Azjen and Fishbein 2000). Further, upon subconscious consideration of numerous beliefs in aggregate, one arrives at an attitude toward the object (e.g., I am satisfied by the job, I am not involved with the job). Of course, this is a simplification of highly developed and nuanced psychological theory that has been evolving from its beginnings 50 years ago (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum 1957). The fundamental point is that some scholars consider this process of belief evaluation to explain the totality of attitude formation. Specifically, Fishbein and Middlestadt (1995) have asserted that beliefs are the sole predictors of attitude formation and change.

While we acknowledge the relevance of perceptions and beliefs to attitude formation and change, we are influenced by assertions and demonstrations that beliefs and their simultaneous and subconscious evaluation constitute but just one component of a larger equation explaining attitudes (Haugtvedt 1997; Miniard and Baron 1997; Priester and Fleming 1997). This approach emphasizes the importance of noncognitive processes by which attitudes may develop and differentiate (Azjen 2000). Past experiences, including but not limited to past job experiences, may play a significant role in the formation of attitudes (Petry and Krosnick 1995; Songer-Nocks 1976), including attitudes toward one’s current occupational position. This reasoning constitutes the rationale that underlay our hypotheses about the effects of private sector work experiences on the job satisfaction and job involvement of public managers.

**Workplace Socialization**

In occupational psychology, there is additional evidence that prior job experiences affect perceptions and attitudes toward current employment. Louis (1980) observed that transitioning to a job that expects roles and behaviors that are inconsistent with prior work experiences has negative emotional effects. Such “person–role mismatch” may occur when individuals do not experience in their current position “confirmations” of their past work experiences; it may also occur as a result of “surprises” concerning the current work environment and expectations (West and Rushton 1989). Other studies addressing the duration of such experiences suggest that they are a function not only of a mismatch between past and present work experiences, but also of the length of time spent in past jobs (Reichers, Wänous, and Steele 1994).

Reichers, Wänous, and Steele (1994) consider person–role mismatch as well as the immediacy and duration of previous work experiences that define the mismatch to develop a typology of workers, including “neophytes” with no prior career experiences, “initiatives” with some but not extensive career experiences similar to current occupation, “veterans” who have worked for an extended period in

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**Table 1 Descriptive Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Obs.</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>Min.</th>
<th>Max.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private sector tenure: last job was in the private sector</td>
<td>759</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>0.327</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>Private sector tenure: number of jobs in the private sector</td>
<td>759</td>
<td>0.452</td>
<td>0.812</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector tenure: percentage of years in the private sector</td>
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<td>0.354</td>
<td>1.221</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job tenure: number of years in current job</td>
<td>751</td>
<td>7.096</td>
<td>6.009</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior job tenure: number of years in last job</td>
<td>702</td>
<td>6.517</td>
<td>4.917</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job perception: red tape</td>
<td>744</td>
<td>7.085</td>
<td>2.106</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job perception: risk averse</td>
<td>750</td>
<td>2.783</td>
<td>0.778</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job perception: trust</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>2.601</td>
<td>0.966</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>0.566</td>
<td>0.496</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>49.092</td>
<td>8.412</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>4.758</td>
<td>1.208</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>759</td>
<td>0.545</td>
<td>0.498</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
their current position or in positions quite similar to their current ones in terms of expectations and work environment, and “converts” whose prior job experiences were quite different in work role expectations and/or work environment. Converts require more “proactive” socialization strategies. The absence of such strategies may explain in part the negative relationship between private sector work experience and length of public service (Nigro and Meier 1975).

**Hypotheses for Job Satisfaction**

The theoretical and empirical studies of attitude formation and change and workplace socialization discussed earlier suggest that the immediacy and length of exposure to such variation may affect personal assessments (e.g., satisfaction, involvement) of the contemporaneous workplace. Accordingly, we use three operationalizations of private sector work experience. The first addresses whether the respondent’s previous job was in the private sector.

\[ H_1 \]: Having worked in the private sector immediately prior to one’s current public sector employment, all else equal, is associated with lower reported levels of job satisfaction.

We suggest that public managers with private sector work experience will have internalized, to an extent, private sector “norms and expectations.” Accordingly, those with more immediate work experiences in the private sector are more likely to have “residual internalization” than those who have had a series of public sector jobs. A public manager whose previous job was with a private company will be less satisfied by his or her job than counterparts who are further removed from their private sector work experiences or who have not worked in the private sector (for their last four positions).

Extant research and commentary regarding differences between public and private organizations constitute a starting point for considering how the norms and expectations of public and private firms may differ. While recent empirical research demonstrates that public agencies do not differ from private firms in all of the ways that stereotypes of government suggest (Rainey and Bozeman 2000), government organizations and agencies are distinct from private firms primarily in ways related to higher levels of centralization and formalization (Bozeman 2000; Bretschneider 1990; Marsden, Cook, and Kalleberg 1994), which may beget variable norms and expectations for workplace attitudes and behavior across the sectors.

Thus, individuals who are professionally socialized in the private sector may experience dissonance between the norms and expectations they have already internalized and the norms and expectations of the new workplace—possibly experiencing professional discomfort that could be at least partially manifested in their job satisfaction levels (Louis 1980; Reichers, Wanous, and Steele 1994; West and Rushton 1989). For example, transitioning from an organizational environment characterized by relatively few rules and regulations, particularly in relation to personnel and purchasing decisions (Rainey and Bozeman 2000), to an environment with a greater level of perceived red tape provides one scenario, among many possible scenarios, for reduced job satisfaction as a result of misalignment between past experiences and current workplace. This explanation takes a new step toward making sense of the findings by Light regarding the job satisfaction of private-to-public sector switchers, which as a career trajectory cohort Light demonstrates to have the second-lowest level of being “very satisfied” with their current public sector jobs (1999, 89).

We remain tentative in this expectation because those who have made the private-to-public sector transition perhaps were highly motivated to do so. Typically, when sector switching occurs, it is the reverse, whereby one leaves the public sector for the private sector because of wage differentials and/or more challenging work (Sousa-Poza and Henneberger 2004). A move from private to public sector work could be for reasons such as promotion (Bozeman and Ponomarov 2008), or perhaps for reasons that are related to intrinsic motivations and mission valence (e.g., public service motivation). In these cases, one would expect a positive impact of recent private sector work experience on affective measures like job satisfaction.

However, it is important to recognize that a positive impact on job satisfaction is not necessary. First, the “voluntary turnover” literature demonstrates numerous decision paths for changing jobs. Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner (2000) suggest that attitudinal variables, including dissatisfaction with the job an individual plans to vacate (therefore implying an increase in job satisfaction upon occupation of a new position), explain just 4 percent to 5 percent of the variation in reports of intention to turn over. Moreover, an intrinsic motivation to switch from private to public sector employment need not correlate positively with reports of job satisfaction (Janssen 2003; Weissenberg and Grunfeld 1968). Last, even if a desire for increased job satisfaction motivates job change, this does not guarantee that such an increase will occur after changing jobs (as suggested by the literature on workplace socialization reviewed earlier).

We also operationalize private sector work experience in terms of the reported number of private sector jobs the respondent has occupied and the percentage of reported work years the respondent has spent in private sector jobs. The number of jobs, as an indicator of the “degree” of private sector work experience, has its limitations. An individual can have numerous jobs over a relatively short time span. Because of this shortcoming, we also include a measure of the percentage of work years spent in the private sector.

\[ H_2 \]: The higher the number of private sector jobs, the lower the reported level of job satisfaction, all else equal.

\[ H_3 \]: The higher the percentage of reported work years spent in private sector jobs, the lower the reported level of job satisfaction.

The rationale and qualifications from hypothesis 1 apply here. The greater the number of jobs (H2) and the percentage of time spent (H3) in the private sector, the more internalized private sector
norms and expectations become. Accordingly, a public manager
with a relatively high number of private sector experiences will be
less satisfied by his or her public sector job. The reverse assump-
tion, that private-to-public sector switching correlates with increased job
satisfaction, is inconsistent with theories of attitude formation and
change (Ajzen 2000; Petty and Krosnick 1995; Songer-Nocks 1976)
and with research findings demonstrating numerous paths to career
change not explained by job satisfaction (Griffith, Hom, and Gaert-

As with hypothesis 1, the direction of effect proposed by hypoth-
eses 2 and 3 is tentative. It is perhaps more tentative for the count
variable than for the percentage time operationalization of private
sector work experience, insofar as a high number private sector
jobs may signify a lack of satisfaction with private sector jobs more
generally (i.e., an employee may move around a lot because of job
dissatisfaction). Therefore, public managers who have had numerous
private sector jobs may not have internalized private sector norms
and expectations—for instance, in comparison to those with private
sector work experience who spent most of their private sector tenure
with a single firm. The possibility of a reverse finding (i.e., a positive
correlation between private sector work experience and job satis-
faction) seems greatest for the variable counting the private sector
positions held per respondent.

Hypotheses for Job Involvement

The foregoing hypotheses propose a negative relationship between
private sector work experiences and job satisfaction, based on the
idea that the private sector and public sector differ in ways that
affect job satisfaction. The public sector, for instance, has been
shown to be perceived to have more red tape (Pandey and Kingsley
2000; Pandey and Scott 2002) and to be more risk averse than
the private sector (see Bozeman and Kingsley 1998 for an overview).
We control for these and other measures in our model specification.
The hypotheses also are consistent with formal theories of attitude
formation and change (suggesting that variable work experiences
result in variable attitudes), as well as with studies of workplace
socialization (demonstrating career transitions to result in negative
emotive responses, at least initially).

Our thinking about the effects of “residual” norms and expectations
from private sector work experience is quite different regarding job
involvement, a concept reflecting a cognitive belief state indicat-
ing the degree of psychological identification with one’s job (Cook
et al. 1981; Locke 1976; Kanungo 1983) and formally shown to be
distinct from job satisfaction (Brooke, Price, and Russell 1988;

Changing sector of employment involves barriers, which, whether concrete (e.g.,
certification requirements) or perceptual (e.g.,
differences in organizational cultures), will
disourage sector switching unless the payoff
is high—for instance, in terms of new and
challenging work (Light 1999), satisfaction
of public service motives (Crewson 1997;
Perry 1996; Perry and Wise 1990), and/or
promotion (Bozeman and Ponomariov,
2009). Because job involvement is tied to

The divergence between job
satisfaction and job involvement
... is plausible insofar as people
become more involved in
a particular activity when
they perceive its potential for
satisfying salient psychological
needs.
satisfaction with an overall employment situation (particularly given that these two attitudes have different referents; see Brooke, Price, and Russell 1988).

Perhaps the best-known articulation of the possible disconnect between satisfaction and involvement is Herzberg’s (1968) “two-factor” theory. Although empirically inconclusive in its original form, the theory suggests that satisfaction and motivation are explained by different factors—reasoning supported by research demonstrating that workers may be “highly satisfied but not involved” or “highly involved but not satisfied.” For instance, Weissenberg and Gruenfeld (1968) report that “motivator” but not “hygiene” variables correlate with job involvement. They also articulate the need to keep the concepts of involvement and satisfaction conceptually distinct. Similar, Gechman and Weiner (1975) observe that devoting personal time to work-related activities is positively associated with job involvement, but unrelated to job satisfaction. Janssen (2003), moreover, shows that employees with higher job involvement also engage in more innovative behaviors and as a result are more likely to report dissatisfaction with their coworker relations.

Control Variables
In addition to variables measuring private sector work experiences, we control for a number of additional variables. Particularly important, we control for time effects, specifically public managers’ length of tenure in the current job as well as that for the job they had immediately prior to the current job. We also control for the “activation” of residual private sector norms and expectations by including a measure determining if respondents’ current jobs require that they interact with private companies. Mentioned earlier, we control for perceptions of the work environment that have been shown to diverge across the sectors, including perceptions of organizational rules and procedures as red tape, of public sector managers as risk averse, and of public sector managers as trusting. Finally, we control for stratification variables including gender, age, level of education, and whether the respondent works for the state of Georgia or for Illinois.

Results
Because the dependent variables are ordinal (Likert-type) responses, we estimate two ordered logit models. Model 1 uses “job satisfaction,” a single-item indicator based on responses to “All in all, I am satisfied with my job” (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree somewhat, 2 = disagree somewhat, 1 = strongly disagree). Single-item measures of job satisfaction have been demonstrated to correlate quite highly with multiple-item indicators while avoiding the latter’s face validity problems (Nagy 2002; Wanous, Reichers, and Hudy 1997). Model 2 similarly uses a single-item indicator for “job involvement,” based on responses to “It has been hard for me to get involved in my current job” (using the same Likert-type response scale as used for job satisfaction). We ran this model with both the single-item and with a scale indicator (created using principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation). The results for both versions were the same in terms of statistical significance and direction of effects, so for consistency with the job satisfaction model, we use the single-item indicator. Job involvement was reverse-coded because of the negative wording of the item.

The dependent variables constitute the only distinction between model 1 and model 2. Each model includes three independent variables operationalizing private sector work experience: a binary indicator coded 1 if the respondent’s last job (the one immediately preceding her current job) was a private sector job, 0 otherwise; a variable indicating the number of private sector jobs the respondent has held, with a range of 0–3 (the survey asks only about the current job plus the previous three jobs); and another variable indicating the percentage of time spent working in private companies, based on the years spent in private firms divided by the total years encompassed by the respondent’s current job and (up to) three previous jobs. The results for the two ordered logit models are presented in table 2.9

The results show that private sector work experience decreases reports of job satisfaction and increases reports of job involvement. Among the statistically significant control variables, years spent in the job immediately preceding the current job increase job satisfaction, the perception of red tape decreases job satisfaction, the perception of coworkers being risk averse decreases job satisfaction and also job involvement, and the perception of management displaying high levels of trust increases both job satisfaction and involvement.

In model 2, the effect of private sector work experience on job involvement is examined. Here, we again see a statistically significant effect, but this time regarding the percentage of years spent working in the private sector rather than for the “immediacy” of private sector work experience. Therefore, private sector work experience seems to operate variably to affect public sector workers’ attitudes toward their jobs, depending on the nature of those attitudes.

For attitudes such as job satisfaction that encompass a broad range of facets both intrinsic and extrinsic (Nagy 2002), past experiences such as occupying a private sector job may have an impact, but one that is relatively short-lived when compared to its effect on attitudes that involve more exclusively intrinsic motivational facets. For these types of attitudes, like job involvement, the relative proportion of total experiences represented by said past experiences—here private sector work experience—seems more important. The residual norms and expectations left over from private sector careers seem to affect job involvement more than they affect job satisfaction.

The human resource management implications of these findings are not straightforward. Though private sector work experience negatively correlates with job satisfaction, it only does so for the “new switcher,” whose last job was in the private sector. As careers advance and this type of worker gets promoted, which is likely (Bozeman and Ponomariov, 2009), the negative impact seems to wane, leaving a public sector workforce that, because of managers’ private sector experiences, are relatively intrinsically motivated and “involved” in
their jobs, no matter their satisfaction levels. This represents an extension of the work begun by Light (1999), one that accounts for the changing effects of private sector work experience throughout one’s career.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The results for our hypotheses, for the most part, are aligned with our initial expectations. Despite some limitations, this paper seems to hold some promise for providing systematic understanding of the effects of private sector work experience on public sector workers. What we understand, so far, is that public managers with private sector work experiences are, at least upon switching to the public sector, less satisfied with their public sector jobs relative to their public sector colleagues with no private sector work experience. More generally, public sector managers with private sector work experiences are more involved with their jobs, potentially because, among other probable intrinsic reasons (insofar as job involvement signifies intrinsic interest and motivation), their current public sector jobs were promotions (Bozeman and Ponomariov, 2009).

More broadly, what we additionally understand is that perceptual measures continue to have strong effects on public managers’ attitudes, but that they are not the only predictors. This differs sharply from strong currents of public administration research that presume that work attitudes such as job commitment and involvement are first and foremost products of current beliefs and immediate contextual factors. (Studies have urged the importance of the individual’s social and work experience on related concepts such as public service motivation; see Perry 2000). Many of these previous studies may have failed to emphasize the life course components of work attitudes because such studies generally have included no historical or longitudinal data, with Light (1999) being a notable exception.

Much work remains to account for the impact of career trajectory factors in explaining public managers’ attitudes…. Most important for present purposes, not all private sector experiences are the same.

An unavoidable limitation of our research design points the way to a potentially interesting avenue for future research. We cannot by this design and in the absence of comparable private sector data determine selection effects. That is, even though it certainly appears that private sector imprinting occurs, it is important to remember that the people who have entered public sector employment from the private sector are not a random set. They are likely to differ from those who have elected to stay in the private sector in a number of ways ranging from interest in public service to lack of job opportunities in market-based organizations. It is only with a longitudinal design including career trajectory and life course data from both public and private sector workers that it will be possible to develop a truly satisfactory theory of private (and public) sector imprinting.

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**Table 2 Ordered Logit Regression Outputs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private sector tenure: last job was in the private sector</td>
<td>-0.779** (0.353)</td>
<td>-0.374 (0.348)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector tenure: number of jobs in the private sector</td>
<td>-0.051 (0.170)</td>
<td>-0.197 (0.174)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector tenure: percentage of years in the private sector</td>
<td>0.114 (0.102)</td>
<td>0.321** (0.160)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job tenure: number of years in current job</td>
<td>0.003 (0.015)</td>
<td>0.004 (0.018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior job tenure: number of years in last job</td>
<td>0.039** (0.018)</td>
<td>-0.001 (0.021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector activation: Percentage private (above) *on-the-job communication with private firms</td>
<td>0.006 (0.009)</td>
<td>-0.002 (0.010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job perception: red tape</td>
<td>-0.136*** (0.045)</td>
<td>-0.009 (0.052)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job perception: risk averse</td>
<td>-0.338*** (0.127)</td>
<td>-0.275** (0.126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current job perception: trust</td>
<td>0.973*** (0.119)</td>
<td>0.439*** (0.114)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-0.142 (0.162)</td>
<td>-0.367** (0.179)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.015 (0.011)</td>
<td>0.014 (0.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.080 (0.065)</td>
<td>-0.005 (0.075)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>0.050 (0.181)</td>
<td>0.030 (0.189)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>663</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. We acknowledge that there is nothing inherently “bad” about rules and regulations. However, if the data did include these “inverse” observations, the theoretical argument that workers must be socialized into their current workplaces and that the socialization process takes time would remain unchanged. Therefore, for the “inverse” observations that the data do not include, we would expect private sector workers with past experience in public sector jobs to be less satisfied with their jobs than their counterparts without public sector work experience—at least until they have spent a sufficient amount of time in the private sector to become socialized into the norms and expectations of the private sector.

5. Organizational “norms and expectations” are considered a function of organizational context and climate. Specifically, organizational contexts pose for individual workers unique sets of “opportunities and constraints” that affect workday behaviors in ways that depend on contextual attributes (Hall 2002; Mowday and Sutton 1993). Because organizations can differ from one another, the organizational contexts they pose differ, providing alternate sets of constraints and opportunities. Private sector affiliation represents a contextual feature characteristic of some, but not all, organizations that may facilitate particular activities but hinder others on the part of workers. The concept of organizational climate helps to explain how contextual attributes such as sector affiliation operate to affect worker attitudes. Organizational climate is essentially the collective norms and expectations for individual behavior that emerge over time in an organization as a result of the opportunities and constraints posed by an organizational context (Glick 1985). These norms and expectations develop because of organizational members’ common and prolonged exposure to the same organizational context, the selection and exclusion of members based respectively on adherence to and defiance of norms and expectations—resulting in a homogenous set of workers, and social interaction among “selected” workers that result in shared experiences and meanings (Schneider and Reichers 1983). Accordingly, it is plausible that public servants with private sector work experience will hold different attitudes than career public servants.

4. Unfortunately, the data used for this paper do not include observations of individuals who switched from public sector careers to private sector jobs. Even if the data did include these “inverse” observations, the theoretical argument that workers must be socialized into their current workplaces and that the socialization process takes time would remain unchanged. Therefore, for the “inverse” observations that the data do not include, we would expect private sector workers with past experience in public sector jobs to be less satisfied with their jobs than their counterparts without public sector work experience—at least until they have spent a sufficient amount of time in the private sector to become socialized into the norms and expectations of the private sector.

3. As one reviewer pointed out, for the purpose of comparing the attitudes of switchers versus nonswitchers, a balanced sample featuring 50 percent of each would be ideal and could possibly strengthen the observed differences (if any). However, given that the sample is representative, there was no way to identify switchers a priori.

2. Specifically, Light (1999) found that graduates of public administration and public policy programs in 1993 were four times as likely to switch sectors as graduates in 1973.

1. Workers may also “switch” from the public sector to the private. We discuss this at numerous points later.