

# Beyond Compliance: A Qualitative Meta-Synthesis of Public Service Motivation, Ethical Behavior, and Employee Performance in Public Organizations

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## ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review employs a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to examine the interconnected relationships between Public Service Motivation (PSM), ethical behavior, and employee performance within public organizations. Drawing from 64 peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2026, sourced from Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, and SAGE Journals, this study synthesizes empirical findings to develop an integrated conceptual framework. The analysis reveals five major themes: (1) PSM as a moral foundation of public employees; (2) ethical behavior as a mediating mechanism between motivation and performance; (3) employee performance beyond administrative compliance; (4) organizational climate and ethical leadership as contextual moderators; and (5) tensions between bureaucratic compliance and public values. The findings demonstrate that PSM serves as an intrinsic motivational foundation that shapes prosocial orientations, which are subsequently translated into meaningful performance outcomes through ethical behavior. Organizational contextual factors particularly ethical leadership and organizational climate significantly moderate these relationships. This review contributes theoretically by integrating PSM theory, social exchange theory, ethical leadership theory, and institutional theory into a unified framework. Practical implications suggest that public organizations should move beyond compliance-based governance toward value-based governance that emphasizes integrity, ethical leadership cultivation, and intrinsic motivation development to enhance public service quality.

**Keywords:** Public Service Motivation, Ethical Behavior, Employee Performance, Public Organizations.

## I. Introduction

Public organizations across the globe are experiencing growing pressure to move beyond administrative compliance, formal procedures, and routine bureaucratic obligations. In contemporary governance, public institutions are expected not only to follow rules and deliver services efficiently, but also to demonstrate ethical responsibility, responsiveness, accountability, transparency, and a genuine commitment to societal well-being (Chol et al., 2025). This shift reflects a broader transformation in the meaning of public administration, where organizational success is no longer measured solely by procedural accuracy or technical efficiency, but also by the extent to which public organizations create public value,

strengthen citizen trust, and respond to complex social needs. Consequently, understanding the factors that encourage public employees to perform beyond minimum requirements has become an important concern for scholars and practitioners in public management.

Within this changing governance environment, Public Service Motivation (PSM) has emerged as a central concept for explaining why individuals are committed to serving the public interest. PSM refers to the intrinsic motivation of public employees to contribute to public welfare, respond to societal needs, and participate meaningfully in activities that benefit the wider community (Royhan, 2025). Unlike conventional work motivation, which often emphasizes material incentives, career advancement, or external rewards, PSM is rooted in prosocial values, moral commitment, compassion, and dedication to collective interests. Employees with strong PSM tend to view their work not merely as an occupational responsibility, but as a meaningful contribution to society. Prior research has shown that high levels of PSM are associated with stronger work engagement, organizational citizenship behavior, and commitment to organizational missions (Ryan & Khatimah, 2023). These findings suggest that PSM can serve as a motivational foundation for public employees to act beyond formal job descriptions and support the broader goals of public service.

However, motivation alone is not sufficient to ensure high-quality public service. In public organizations, ethical behavior is equally essential because public employees exercise authority, manage public resources, and make decisions that directly affect citizens' lives. Ethical behavior refers to actions guided by moral principles, integrity, accountability, fairness, transparency, and responsibility (V, 2026). In the public sector, ethical conduct is particularly important because it shapes institutional legitimacy and public trust. Citizens expect public employees to act not only according to legal and administrative rules, but also in ways that reflect justice, honesty, and concern for the public good. Ethical behavior should not be understood narrowly as mere compliance with regulations. Rather, it involves active moral judgment in situations where employees must balance procedural requirements with substantive responsibility toward citizens (Kardiat et al., 2025). This perspective highlights the importance of examining ethical behavior as a bridge between public service values and actual employee performance.

Employee performance in public organizations is also more complex than performance in many private sector contexts. Public sector performance cannot be reduced only to productivity, task completion, or efficiency indicators. It also includes service quality, citizen satisfaction, responsiveness, organizational commitment, integrity, and contribution to broader public value outcomes (Rosario et al., 2026). This multidimensional nature makes the study of employee performance in public organizations particularly challenging. A public employee may complete administrative tasks efficiently but still fail to deliver meaningful public value if the work lacks fairness, responsiveness, or ethical sensitivity. Therefore, performance in the public sector needs to be understood as both an operational and normative construct. It reflects not only what employees achieve, but also how they achieve it and whether their actions support democratic values, public accountability, and societal welfare.

Although there has been extensive research on PSM, ethical behavior, and employee performance, the existing literature remains fragmented. Many studies have examined the relationship between PSM and employee performance, yet they often pay limited attention to the role of ethical behavior as a possible mechanism through which motivation is translated into meaningful public service outcomes. Conversely, studies on organizational ethics in the public sector frequently focus on ethical leadership, codes of conduct, or institutional control systems, while giving less attention to motivational antecedents such as PSM (Lee et al., 2023). This separation creates a conceptual gap in understanding how public employees' motivation, moral conduct, and performance outcomes interact within public organizations. Furthermore, previous systematic reviews have often concentrated on individual constructs rather than integrating motivation, ethics, and performance into a unified analytical framework.

To address this gap, the present systematic literature review employs a qualitative meta-synthesis approach to examine the interrelationship between Public Service Motivation, ethical behavior, and employee performance in public organizations. Specifically, this review aims to analyze how previous studies explain the connection between PSM and ethical behavior, examine how both constructs contribute to employee

performance, identify organizational factors that strengthen or weaken these relationships, and develop an integrated conceptual model based on synthesized findings. Through this approach, the article seeks to advance theoretical understanding of public sector behavior while offering practical insights for human resource management, ethical governance, and organizational development in public institutions.

## II. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

### 2.1. Public Service Motivation

Public Service Motivation represents an individual's predisposition to respond to motives grounded primarily in public institutions and oriented toward serving the public interest (Zhang et al., 2022). The construct was originally conceptualized by Perry (1996), who identified four foundational dimensions: attraction to public policy making, commitment to public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice. These dimensions capture the rational, norm-based, and affective motives that drive individuals toward public service careers and sustained engagement with public missions.

Research across multiple cultural contexts has validated these dimensions while identifying contextual variations in their expression and relative importance. Studies in Asian contexts have emphasized the prominence of compassion and self-sacrifice dimensions, reflecting collectivist cultural values that prioritize group welfare over individual interests (Yerbatyrov et al., 2026). The dimension of commitment to public interest consistently emerges as a dominant factor across studies, representing the core motivational orientation toward collective welfare that distinguishes PSM from general work motivation (Pratama & Tikson, 2026). Cross-cultural validation studies have demonstrated that while PSM maintains its fundamental structure across diverse national contexts, the relative salience of specific dimensions varies according to cultural, institutional, and political environments (Mikkelsen et al., 2020).

The antecedents of PSM include both individual characteristics and organizational factors. Research indicates that PSM is significantly influenced by socialization processes, organizational culture, leadership practices, and person-environment fit (Florczak et al., 2022). Importantly, PSM has been linked to numerous positive outcomes including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, work engagement, and extra-role behaviors that benefit both organizations and citizens (Tang et al., 2024). However, scholars have also cautioned about potential "dark sides" of PSM, where excessive commitment to organizational or public goals may lead to unethical pro-organizational behavior or personal burnout (Schott & Ritz, 2017).

### 2.2. Ethical Behavior in Public Organizations

Ethical behavior in public organizations encompasses actions guided by moral principles, professional standards, and commitment to public accountability (Buot-Dacayo, 2026). Unlike private sector ethics that may prioritize shareholder interests, public sector ethics must balance multiple stakeholder expectations while maintaining democratic accountability and procedural fairness. Key dimensions of ethical behavior include integrity, honesty, transparency, accountability, fairness in decision-making, and responsible use of public authority (Msakila & Mseti, 2026).

The significance of ethical behavior in public administration derives from the unique position of public employees as stewards of collective resources and agents of democratic governance (Sesbino, 2026). Public servants exercise considerable discretion in implementing policies and delivering services, creating opportunities for both ethical leadership and potential misconduct. Research demonstrates that ethical behavior positively influences organizational performance, citizen trust, and institutional legitimacy (Nwachuku et al., 2025). Conversely, ethical failures, whether through corruption, abuse of authority, or neglect of duty, undermine public confidence and governance effectiveness.

Studies examining ethical behavior antecedents have identified individual moral development, organizational ethical climate, leadership modeling, and institutional control mechanisms as significant

predictors (Makanga et al., 2025). The ethical work climate, characterized by shared perceptions of organizational norms and expectations regarding ethical conduct, plays a crucial mediating role between individual predispositions and behavioral outcomes (Erten & Türkmen, 2024). Organizations with strong caring climates that emphasize stakeholder welfare and professional codes of conduct demonstrate higher levels of employee ethical behavior and reduced misconduct.

### 2.3. Employee Performance in Public Organizations

Employee performance in public organizations constitutes a multidimensional construct that extends beyond traditional productivity metrics (Aprilin et al., 2025). Performance encompasses task performance (fulfillment of formal job requirements), contextual performance (discretionary behaviors supporting the organizational and social environment), and adaptive performance (capacity to respond to changing demands and circumstances). In the public sector, performance evaluation must additionally consider public value creation, service quality, citizen satisfaction, and contribution to democratic governance outcomes.

Research has identified numerous factors influencing public employee performance, including individual characteristics (competency, motivation, commitment), job-related factors (role clarity, autonomy, resources), and organizational context (culture, leadership, climate) (Dotulong et al., 2025). Organizational commitment has emerged as a particularly significant predictor, with affective commitment, emotional attachment to the organization, demonstrating stronger performance effects than continuance or normative commitment (Yusuff & Shokory, 2025). Job satisfaction similarly contributes to performance, though this relationship operates partially through commitment mechanisms (Osei et al., 2024).

The measurement of public sector performance presents unique challenges due to the complexity of public service objectives and the difficulty of attributing outcomes to individual contributions (Alakoum & Nica, 2026). Service quality indicators, citizen feedback mechanisms, and stakeholder assessments increasingly complement traditional efficiency metrics in comprehensive performance evaluation systems. Recognition of performance multidimensionality has shifted attention toward understanding the behavioral and motivational foundations that enable sustained high performance beyond minimum compliance requirements.

### 2.4. Theoretical Foundation

This review draws on four complementary theoretical frameworks to analyze the relationships among PSM, ethical behavior, and employee performance:

- a. Public Service Motivation Theory provides the foundational lens for understanding intrinsic motivational forces that orient public employees toward public interest and prosocial outcomes (Royhan, 2025). The theory posits that individuals with high PSM derive satisfaction from contributing to society and find meaning in public service work beyond material rewards. This motivational orientation shapes attitudes, behaviors, and sustained engagement with organizational missions.
- b. Social Exchange Theory explains how reciprocal relationships between employees and organizations influence ethical behavior and performance (P, 2026). When organizations demonstrate support, fairness, and ethical treatment, employees reciprocate through increased commitment, discretionary effort, and ethical conduct. Perceived organizational support and organizational justice serve as key mechanisms through which social exchange dynamics operate.
- c. Ethical Leadership Theory illuminates the role of leaders in shaping ethical climate and employee behavior through modeling, communication, and reinforcement of ethical standards (Satia, 2024). Ethical leaders serve as behavioral role models whose conduct influences subordinates through social

learning processes. Leadership ethics establish organizational norms and expectations that guide employee conduct across ethical situations.

- d. Institutional Theory addresses how organizational structures, norms, and environmental pressures shape employee behavior in public organizations (Sarmigi & Wahyuni, 2026). Institutional isomorphism creates pressures for conformity to established practices, while institutional logics provide meaning systems that influence how actors interpret situations and appropriate responses. This perspective highlights how bureaucratic structures may create tensions between formal compliance and substantive ethical responsibility.

### III. Research Method

#### 3.1. Research Design

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology with a qualitative meta-synthesis approach. Qualitative meta-synthesis transcends mere aggregation of findings to achieve interpretive integration that generates new insights from existing research. This approach involves identifying patterns, themes, and relationships across studies to develop higher-order interpretations and conceptual frameworks. The methodology aligns with established guidelines for conducting systematic reviews in public administration research while emphasizing depth of analysis over statistical aggregation.

#### 3.2. Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted across six major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, and SAGE Journals. These databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage of public administration, organizational behavior, and management literature. The search employed Boolean operators combining the following keyword strings:

- a. "Public Service Motivation" AND "Ethical Behavior" AND "Employee Performance"
- b. "Public Service Motivation" AND "Public Organization"
- c. "Ethics" AND "Public Sector Employees" AND "Performance"
- d. "Ethical Leadership" AND "Employee Performance" AND "Public Sector"
- e. "Public Values" AND "Work Performance" AND "Government"

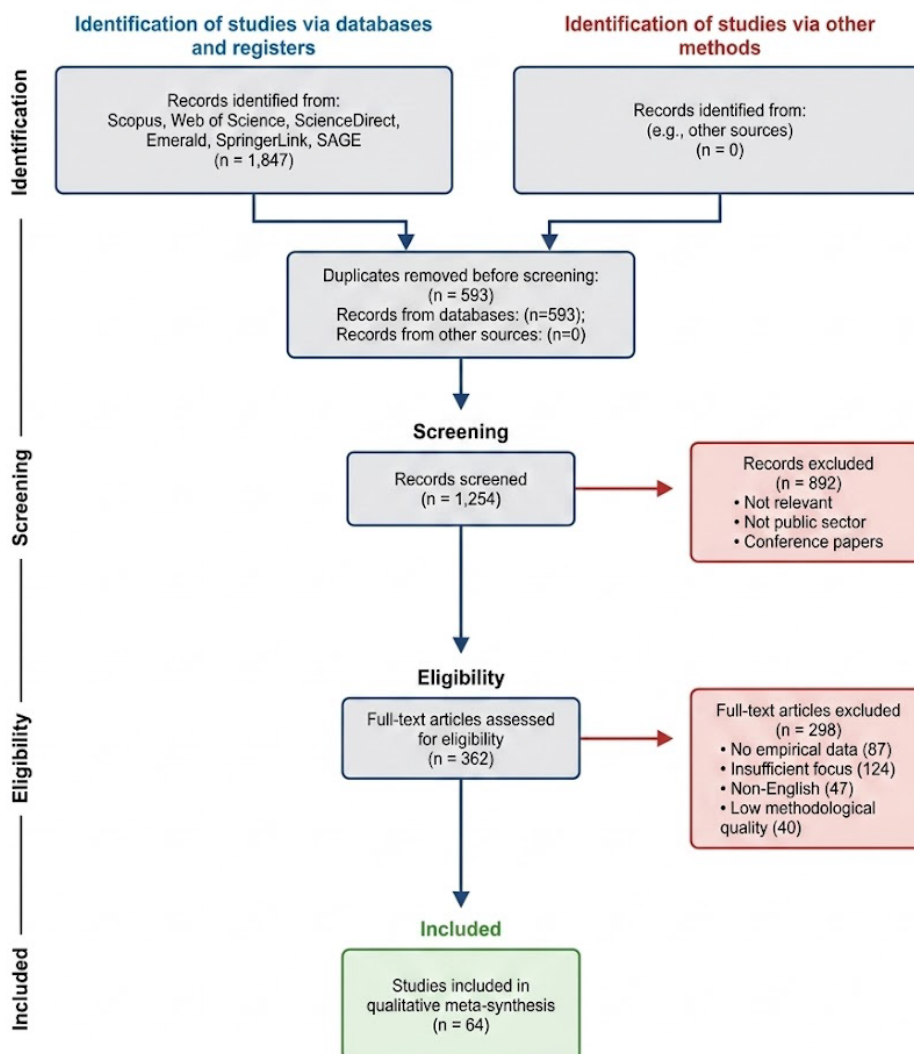
Searches were limited to peer-reviewed articles published in English between 2019 and 2026 to capture the most current empirical and conceptual developments while maintaining practical scope.

#### 3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

- a. Inclusion criteria: - Peer-reviewed journal articles - Published between 2019 and 2026 - English language - Focus on public sector or government organizations - Addressing PSM, ethical behavior, employee performance, or relationships among these constructs - Providing empirical findings or substantive conceptual contributions
- b. Exclusion criteria: - Non-academic publications (editorials, commentaries, book reviews) - Conference proceedings without full peer review - Studies exclusively focused on private sector organizations - Articles lacking clear methodological description - Studies not providing findings relevant to the research questions

### 3.4. Article Selection Process

The article selection followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The process proceeded through four stages:



**Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for Article Selection Process**

### 3.5. Data Extraction

Systematic data extraction captured the following information from each included article: author(s) and publication year, country/context of study, research objectives, theoretical framework, methodology and sample characteristics, key variables examined, main findings, and implications for understanding PSM-ethics-performance relationships. Extracted data were organized in a structured matrix facilitating cross-study comparison and thematic analysis.

### 3.6. Data Analysis

Analysis employed thematic synthesis procedures involving three iterative stages. Open coding identified initial concepts and categories emerging from study findings. Axial coding organized these concepts into broader thematic categories by examining relationships and patterns across studies. Thematic

interpretation synthesized coded material into overarching themes representing the major findings of the meta-synthesis. Throughout analysis, attention was given to convergent findings, divergent results, and contextual factors explaining variations across studies.

## IV. Result and Discussion

### 4.1. Analysis Result

**Table 1. Summary of Key Studies by Theme**

Theme	Representative Studies	Key Findings
PSM as Moral Foundation	Pratama & Tikson (2026); Trinh et al. (2023); Baharuddin (2026)	PSM dimensions (commitment to public interest, compassion, self-sacrifice) serve as foundational moral orientations driving prosocial behavior
Ethical Behavior as Mediator	Lee et al. (2023); Hussain & Siddiquee (2025); Ha & Doan (2025)	Ethical behavior mediates PSM-performance relationship; PSM promotes ethical conduct which enhances performance outcomes
Performance Beyond Compliance	Park & Kim (2025); Fitriani et al. (2023); Ofobruku (2024)	Public sector performance encompasses service quality, OCB, innovation, and public value creation beyond task completion
Ethical Leadership & Climate	Al-Fayez et al. (2024); Tabiu (2023); Satia (2024)	Ethical leadership strengthens PSM-ethics-performance relationships; organizational climate moderates outcomes
Compliance-Values Tensions	Kardiat et al. (2025); Mert & Burlacu (2026); Giang (2025)	Bureaucratic compliance may conflict with ethical responsibility; moral discretion needed to balance rule adherence with public values

#### a. Public Service Motivation as a Moral Foundation of Public Employees

The literature consistently portrays PSM as a foundational moral orientation that shapes how public employees approach their work and responsibilities. Studies demonstrate that employees with high PSM exhibit stronger identification with organizational missions, greater willingness to exert discretionary effort, and deeper commitment to serving citizen needs (Pratama & Tikson, 2026). The compassion and self-sacrifice dimensions particularly connect PSM to ethical considerations, as these orientations reflect concern for others' welfare and willingness to subordinate personal interests for collective benefit. Research examining PSM across diverse contexts reveals that commitment to public interest emerges as the most consistently dominant dimension, representing the core value orientation distinguishing public servants (Yerbatyrov et al., 2026). This commitment manifests in prosocial behaviors, ethical decision-making, and sustained engagement even under challenging circumstances. Studies in Indonesian local government contexts found that PSM significantly influenced both job performance and public service quality, with structural equation modeling confirming strong path coefficients linking motivational dimensions to behavioral outcomes (Tahili, 2018).

The relationship between PSM and organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) provides evidence for PSM's role as a moral foundation. Meta-analytic findings indicate that PSM positively predicts various OCB dimensions, including helping behavior, civic virtue, and organizational compliance (Park & Kim, 2025). These discretionary behaviors extend beyond formal requirements, reflecting internalized values that motivate contribution to organizational and social welfare. Importantly, PSM influences OCB through affective mechanisms, as employees with high PSM derive meaning and satisfaction from serving others, creating emotional commitment that sustains prosocial conduct. However, research also identifies potential boundary conditions and limitations. Cultural values shape PSM expression, with collectivist societies demonstrating stronger compassion orientations while individualist contexts may emphasize policy-making attraction (Duan

et al., 2023). Organizational environments that fail to support PSM expression may lead to frustration, cynicism, or withdrawal among motivated employees. Furthermore, extremely high PSM may paradoxically contribute to unethical pro-organizational behavior when employees rationalize rule violations in pursuit of organizational goals (Baek & Han, 2026).

#### b. Ethical Behavior as a Bridge Between Motivation and Performance

A central finding across the reviewed literature is the mediating role of ethical behavior in translating PSM into meaningful performance outcomes. Studies employing structural equation modeling consistently demonstrate that PSM influences performance both directly and indirectly through ethical behavioral mechanisms (Lee et al., 2023). This pattern suggests that while PSM creates motivational energy for performance, the realization of this potential depends significantly on how motivation is channeled into ethically appropriate actions. The mechanism operates through several pathways. First, employees with high PSM demonstrate greater ethical awareness and sensitivity to moral dimensions of workplace situations (Bian & Wang, 2024). This heightened ethical consciousness guides decision-making toward actions that serve both organizational and public interests. Second, PSM promotes internalization of professional standards and codes of conduct, reducing reliance on external monitoring for ethical compliance (Ha & Doan, 2025). Third, employees motivated by public service values are more likely to resist pressures for unethical behavior, even when such behavior might produce short-term benefits.

Research on ethical leadership provides complementary evidence for the mediation mechanism. Ethical leadership influences employee ethical behavior through social learning processes, with leaders serving as role models whose conduct is observed and emulated (Rachman, 2025). Studies demonstrate that ethical leadership positively affects PSM, which subsequently enhances ethical conduct and performance outcomes (Hussain & Siddiquee, 2025). This finding suggests a cascading effect wherein ethical leadership cultivates PSM among followers, who then demonstrate ethical behavior resulting in improved performance. Importantly, the mediating role of ethical behavior helps explain inconsistent direct effects of PSM on performance reported in some studies. When ethical behavior is included as a mediator, previously nonsignificant direct effects often become significant indirect effects (Oladimeji & Abdulkareem, 2023). This pattern indicates that PSM requires behavioral expression through ethical channels to achieve performance benefits, highlighting the importance of organizational conditions supporting ethical conduct.

#### c. Employee Performance Beyond Administrative Compliance

The reviewed literature reveals an evolving conceptualization of public employee performance that extends substantially beyond traditional administrative compliance metrics. Studies increasingly emphasize service quality, citizen satisfaction, organizational commitment, innovation, and public value creation as essential performance dimensions in public organizations (Park & Kim, 2025). This expanded view reflects recognition that public sector effectiveness requires outcomes meaningful to citizens and society, not merely procedural adherence. Research demonstrates that PSM-driven performance manifests particularly strongly in extra-role behaviors and service quality dimensions. Employees with high PSM engage more actively in helping behaviors, take initiative to solve citizen problems, and demonstrate greater responsiveness to community needs (Miarni & Ibrahim, 2025). Structural equation modeling studies confirm that PSM significantly predicts both in-role task performance and extra-role contextual performance, with stronger effects on discretionary behaviors that benefit service recipients (H. D. Nguyen et al., 2024).

The distinction between formal compliance and substantive performance emerges as a critical theme. Studies examining bureaucratic organizations note that hierarchical structures and procedural emphasis may produce "formal compliance", adherence to rules without genuine commitment to public purposes (Kardiat et al., 2025). In contrast, environments fostering PSM and ethical values cultivate "substantive compliance" characterized by internalized commitment to service quality and public welfare. This distinction has significant implications for performance management, suggesting that metrics emphasizing rule adherence may miss meaningful performance dimensions. Innovation represents an

increasingly important performance dimension in public organizations. Research indicates that PSM contributes to innovative work behavior through enhanced work engagement and psychological empowerment (Rafique et al., 2021). Employees motivated by public service values demonstrate greater willingness to propose new ideas, experiment with service improvements, and adapt to changing citizen needs. However, bureaucratic constraints including red tape and procedural rigidity may suppress innovation potential even among highly motivated employees (Fitriani et al., 2023).

#### d. Organizational Climate and Ethical Leadership as Contextual Factors

Contextual factors, particularly ethical leadership and organizational ethical climate significantly moderate the relationships among PSM, ethical behavior, and performance. Studies consistently demonstrate that supportive organizational conditions strengthen positive effects while unsupportive environments weaken or negate PSM benefits (Al-Fayez et al., 2024). This pattern underscores the importance of organizational-level interventions complementing individual-level motivation development. Ethical leadership emerges as a particularly influential contextual factor. Leaders who model ethical conduct, communicate ethical expectations, and reinforce ethical behavior through reward systems create climates conducive to ethical employee conduct (Syahrani et al., 2022). Research demonstrates that ethical leadership directly influences PSM levels, ethical behavior, and performance, while also moderating relationships between these constructs. Studies in multiple national contexts confirm that ethical leadership positively predicts employee organizational citizenship behavior, with ethical climate mediating this relationship (Tabiu, 2023).

Organizational ethical climate, shared perceptions of organizational norms regarding ethical conduct, functions as both an outcome of ethical leadership and a predictor of individual ethical behavior. Studies examining public sector organizations identify multiple climate dimensions including caring (concern for stakeholder welfare), law and codes (emphasis on professional standards), and rules (adherence to organizational procedures) (Makanga et al., 2025). Each dimension contributes uniquely to ethical behavior, with caring climates demonstrating particularly strong effects on prosocial conduct. The role of institutional support in enabling PSM expression represents another significant contextual factor. Organizations that provide resources, autonomy, and recognition for public service efforts reinforce employee motivation and enable performance contributions (Westover, 2025). Conversely, organizations characterized by excessive bureaucracy, inadequate resources, or politicized decision-making may frustrate motivated employees and suppress potential performance benefits. These findings highlight the reciprocal relationship between individual motivation and organizational context.

#### e. Tensions Between Bureaucratic Compliance and Public Values

A recurring theme across studies is the tension between bureaucratic compliance requirements and genuine orientation toward public values. Public organizations operate within institutional frameworks emphasizing procedural regularity, hierarchical authority, and rule-based administration (Mert & Burlacu, 2026). While these structures serve legitimate purposes of ensuring accountability and equal treatment, they may also create constraints that limit ethical discretion and suppress value-driven behavior. Research documents the "paradox of conformity" wherein strict adherence to formal rules functions as a substitute for genuine ethical engagement (Mert & Burlacu, 2026). Employees may focus on procedural compliance while neglecting substantive responsibility toward citizens and public purposes. This dynamic is particularly problematic when regulations fail to address novel situations or when rule application produces outcomes misaligned with public welfare. Studies suggest that moral discretion, the capacity to exercise ethical judgment within bureaucratic constraints, is essential for effective public service.

The tension manifests differently across organizational contexts. Organizations with rigid hierarchical structures and emphasis on control tend to produce formal compliance behavior, while organizations fostering trust, professional autonomy, and participatory decision-making cultivate substantive ethical engagement (Kardiat et al., 2025). Reform efforts emphasizing digital transparency and merit-based systems

may help bridge compliance-values tensions by aligning procedural requirements with ethical purposes. Adaptive capacity represents a critical organizational capability for managing these tensions. Research on bureaucratic adaptation in uncertain environments demonstrates that effective organizations enable employees to exercise judgment while maintaining accountability (Giang, 2025). This balance requires leadership that clarifies ethical priorities, organizational cultures that support responsible discretion, and institutional mechanisms that enable learning from ethical challenges. Studies highlight that sustainable compliance depends on embedding integrity and ethical values within organizational culture rather than relying solely on external controls.

#### 4.2. Discussion

The findings of this qualitative meta-synthesis demonstrate that relationships among Public Service Motivation, ethical behavior, and employee performance are complex, interdependent, and significantly shaped by organizational context. Rather than simple linear relationships, the evidence reveals mediated and moderated pathways through which motivation translates into performance outcomes. These findings have important implications for both theory development and practical applications in public administration. The consistent finding that ethical behavior mediates PSM-performance relationships suggests that motivation alone is insufficient for realizing performance potential. Employees may possess strong intrinsic motivation to serve public interests yet fail to translate this motivation into effective performance if organizational conditions do not support ethical conduct (Lee et al., 2023). This mediation mechanism implies that public organizations must attend not only to motivation development but also to creating environments where ethical behavior is expected, modeled, and reinforced. Without such conditions, PSM may remain latent potential rather than actualized contribution.

The prominence of ethical leadership as a contextual moderator points toward the critical role of organizational leadership in shaping PSM-ethics-performance dynamics. Ethical leaders influence employees through multiple mechanisms: modeling ethical conduct that employees emulate, communicating expectations that establish behavioral norms, and creating climates that support ethical decision-making (Satia, 2024). These leadership effects extend beyond direct supervisor relationships to shape broader organizational culture and institutional practices. The implication is that leadership development represents a strategic lever for enhancing public sector performance. The tensions between bureaucratic compliance and public values identified across studies reveal fundamental challenges in public administration that resist simple resolution (Mert & Burlacu, 2026). Bureaucratic structures serve important functions, ensuring accountability, promoting equal treatment, and constraining arbitrary authority, yet may simultaneously suppress the ethical discretion and value-driven behavior that distinguish excellent public service. Managing this tension requires organizational designs that balance structure with flexibility, accountability with autonomy, and compliance with ethical engagement. Reform strategies emphasizing only efficiency or compliance may inadvertently weaken the motivational and ethical foundations of effective public service.

The findings support a conceptual shift from compliance-based governance toward value-based governance in public organizations. Compliance-based approaches emphasize rules, monitoring, and sanctions to control employee behavior, assuming that self-interested actors require external constraints. Value-based approaches instead emphasize cultivating intrinsic motivation, ethical commitment, and internalized identification with public purposes (V, 2026). The evidence suggests that value-based approaches more effectively promote sustained high performance and ethical conduct, particularly for the discretionary behaviors that distinguish excellent from merely adequate public service.

## V. Conclusion

This systematic literature review employing qualitative meta-synthesis has examined the interconnected relationships among Public Service Motivation, ethical behavior, and employee performance

in public organizations. The synthesis of 64 studies reveals that PSM serves as a foundational moral orientation that shapes prosocial commitment and ethical sensitivity among public employees. However, the translation of motivational potential into meaningful performance outcomes depends critically on ethical behavior as a mediating mechanism and organizational contextual factors as moderating conditions. The findings demonstrate that public organizations must move beyond compliance-based governance approaches that rely primarily on rules, monitoring, and sanctions toward value-based governance emphasizing intrinsic motivation cultivation, ethical leadership development, and organizational culture transformation. While procedural compliance remains necessary for accountability and equal treatment, effective public service requires employees who internalize public purposes and exercise ethical judgment in service of citizen welfare.

The proposed conceptual framework integrating PSM, ethical behavior, performance, and contextual moderators provides both theoretical foundation and practical guidance for research and application. Theoretically, the framework advances understanding of the mechanisms through which motivation influences performance while identifying conditions that enable or constrain these relationships. Practically, the framework suggests intervention points for enhancing public sector effectiveness including recruitment practices, leadership development, climate cultivation, and performance management reform. Ultimately, the review affirms that public administration effectiveness requires attention to the human dimensions of governance—the values, motivations, and ethical commitments that shape how public employees approach their responsibilities and serve citizens. In an era of increasing demands for government accountability, responsiveness, and effectiveness, cultivating Public Service Motivation and supporting ethical behavior represent essential strategies for achieving governance that truly serves the public interest. Public organizations that successfully integrate motivation development, ethical leadership, and supportive cultures will be best positioned to deliver the quality public services that citizens deserve and democratic governance requires.

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