Accountability and Trust among Employees of a Korean Central Government Agency: Antecedent and moderating effects of public service motivation, goal clarity, and person-organization fit

Sung Min Park (Sungkyunkwan Univ.)
Minyoung Kim (Sungkyunkwan Univ.)

Abstract

Using hierarchical regression analysis, this study tests hypotheses about the antecedent and moderating effects of three dimensions of public service motivation (PSM) (rational, normative, and affective motivation) and two types of goal orientation (goal clarity and goal congruence, i.e., personal-organization [P-O] fit) on four different work dispositions (interpersonal trust, organizational trust, internal accountability, and external accountability) among central government officials employed in Korean public agencies. The results show that goal clarity and goal congruence substantially explain trust and accountability. Affective PSM is especially important to the outcomes. Analysis of cross-interaction effects among PSM dimensions, goal clarity, and goal congruence on outcome variables support self-perception theory’s prediction that when individuals are more exposed to unstable and ambiguous organizational environments, the relationship between PSM (especially affective and normative) and outcomes (trust and accountability) becomes more pronounced. Theoretical and practical implications and limitations of this research are also discussed.

Key words: Trust, accountability, PSM, goal clarity, goal congruence, P-O fit, human resource management, public management, moderation, and interaction

I. Introduction

Organizational effectiveness in the public sector can be improved when social capital in
an organization is created, accumulated, and developed through individuals’ formal and informal relationships with the organization, systems, responsibilities, networks, and standards. In this context, the roles of accountability and trust have been drawing a great deal of attention as factors that influence these exchange activities (Coleman, 1998). In general, an organization in which individuals are highly accountable and responsible is durable and resistant to internal and external influences, with positive effects on organizational productivity and effectiveness, as well. In addition, social capital is perceived in terms of public values and necessities. For example, the concept of accountability is frequently discussed in the public sector as a government official’s personal obligation and means to secure legitimacy in a government role. Generally, it is believed that democracy cannot be realized until administrative policy and goal-based administrative control are implemented. However, expansion, specification, and specialization of administrative functions have been observed to lead to limitations in external administrative control. Therefore, internal control in the form of “subjective and voluntary accountability” becomes more important. Because subjective and voluntary accountability is formed after trust has been built among the members of an organization, people have become interested in how to build internal or external trust and how trust can be a mechanism to overcome the limitations of external administrative control. Thus, accountability and trust are understood as critical social capital factors in Korea’s affective, relationship-centered, hierarchical, and group-cultured public organizations. In fact, they are key elements of a new paradigm in management of administrative organizations, which can support the conventional result- and customer-oriented New Public Management (NPM).

Although the theoretical and practical implications of accountability and trust have become more important in Korea’s public sector, it is not easy to find studies on the improvement of accountability and trust from the perspective of human resources and social capital in Korea. Therefore, this study seeks to provide theoretical grounds and feasibility for hypotheses of relationships among the following three concepts: public service motivation (PSM), goal clarity and fit, and accountability and trust. We began by examining the applicability of general theories to Korea’s public sector through a review of theories and studies of accountability and trust. Then, we conceptualized these ideas as interpersonal trust, organizational trust, internal accountability, and external accountability. Next, we developed suggestions from studies of PSM, goal clarity, and goal fit from the Korean perspective through analysis of the factors that enhance accountability and trust in public sector. To achieve this, we defined the concepts of PSM (and its subdimensions of rational,