

Article

The Public Sector Personality: The Effects of Personality on Public Sector Interest for Men and Women

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Abstract: An important factor in vocational choice is whether to pursue a career in the public sector or the private sector. The perception of each sector impacts career choice, attracting individuals with certain traits. This perception-based attraction is important for public sector managers to understand what the ramifications of their branding are on recruitment, and whether it is impacting their workforce or ability to attract appropriate talent. Despite this importance, existing literature is very limited and presents contradictory findings. The present study investigated the impact of the Big Five personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) on interest in public sector employment generally, as well as separately for all three levels of government (local, provincial, and federal), for men and women enrolled in a first-year management program. Extraversion was negatively related to an interest in the public sector for all three levels of government. Men and women did not differ significantly in their level of attraction to the public sector, and no statistically significant differences in personality-based interest were found between the three levels of government. An exploratory analysis of general interest in each level of government found that interest in the federal government was significantly higher than the municipal and provincial governments, although still low for all three levels of government. These results indicate potential challenges for public sector managers to attract candidates for highly social roles requiring an extraverted character.

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Citation: Dufault, Aiden, Kristi Baerg MacDonald, and Julie Aitken Schermer. 2023. The Public Sector Personality: The Effects of Personality on Public Sector Interest for Men and Women. *Administrative Sciences* 13: 158. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci13070158>

Received: 15 May 2023

Revised: 19 June 2023

Accepted: 20 June 2023

Published: 28 June 2023



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Keywords: public sector; management; recruitment; personality; Big Five; interest

1. Introduction

Young children are often asked what they want to do when they get older, garnering responses such as a teacher, an astronaut, or an artist. However, seldom is a child asked for whom they want to work. This question can be simplified by splitting the economy into two sectors: the public sector and the private sector. The public sector is defined as the part of the economy, and all the jobs that come with it, that the government owns and controls, while the private sector is all aspects of the economy that fall outside of this realm. Examples of exclusively public sector jobs include firefighters and police officers, while examples of exclusively private sector jobs include sales managers and architects; however, most jobs can be found in both sectors. Each sector comes with different perceptions; the public sector is generally seen by the populace as having high job security, work-life balance, and teamwork, while the private sector is seen as more competitive, innovative, and intellectually stimulating (Ng and Gossett 2013; Santinha et al. 2021). With different values, each sector may attract different applicants.

Often the term ‘public sector’ is used as a blanket term, but that label does not consider different perceptions for different levels of government; the public sector consists of local-, provincial- (or state-), and federal-level employers. Naturally, one can expect these perceptions to influence where one wishes to pursue a career, particularly for young adults

who are just beginning their careers. For some, job security is crucial, while others seek out a fast-paced, competitive environment. These core features that individuals look for in a career are often driven by individual personality differences. This paper will explore the effects of personality differences on employment choice, specifically, whether certain personality types are attracted to building a career in the public sector.

An absence or excess of certain personality factors can have negative effects in the workplace; for example, low conscientiousness is correlated with poor work outcomes (Barrick and Mount 1991). Consequently, recruitment that effectively attracts a diverse candidate pool is a prerequisite for a strong public service. Certain jurisdictions such as the European Union consider good public administration a human right, both substantively and procedurally, requiring impartial, fair, and timely service (Srebalová and Peráček 2022). These fundamental building blocks of public administration require thoughtful recruitment strategies to be realized, as Cooper (2018) notes for example, that merit-based public sector recruitment increases the ability for public administration to be impartial. Building an excellent public sector workforce differs from the private sector in that it is a public expectation and sometimes a right, rather than merely a necessity for profitability.

Despite its importance, practices regarding the building of a public administration and the necessary recruitment protocols vary significantly between countries, with some countries such as South Korea having rigorous centralized exams, while others more closely follow private sector norms (Lee and Choi 2016). For example, the Canadian government, regulated under the Public Service Employment Act, 2003, gives sole discretion to department heads regarding the selection of candidates, merely requiring that the recruited candidate possess the essential job qualifications (Cooper 2018). However, effective recruitment does not only consist of procedural strategies to ensure merit and fit, but also of branding and portraying an image that attracts the right candidate to apply. Therefore, it is important to determine whether the public sector's image and public perception is attracting a workforce that lacks diverse personalities, and whether this varies based on the level of government.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

2.1. Personality Measurement

The most widely used and researched personality model is the Big Five model, which suggests that most differences in personality can be classified into five broad traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Gosling et al. 2003). These traits encompass many different sub-traits, although generally, openness reflects a wide imagination and deep intellect, conscientiousness a sense of self-discipline and competence, extraversion an outgoing and gregarious nature, agreeableness a high level of compliance and trust, and neuroticism an anxious and vulnerable emotionality (Rammstedt and John 2007). Varying levels of each of these traits affect the way a person approaches many aspects of their life, including their vocational choice. For instance, the perception of what an organization will offer an employee may attract a specific personality type.

2.2. Perceptions of Public Sector Employment

Previous studies on the perception of public sector employment suggest people tend to view the public sector as having higher job security, and this perception seems to be based in truth (Kopelman and Rosen 2016; Ng and Gossett 2013; Santinha et al. 2021). In addition, Ng and Gossett (2013) reported that careers in the public sector are perceived to provide a better work–life balance, Gorsira et al. (2018) reported that the public sector was perceived as more ethical than the private sector, and Santinha et al. (2021) found that the public sector is perceived to have more teamwork and to promote the development of society. These findings demonstrate that individuals hold varying views contrasting the public and private sectors.

2.3. Public Sector Interest and Personality

Building on the perception of high job security, existing single-factor research has found a positive correlation between aversion to risk and public sector interest (Bellante and Link 1981). An individual seeking secure employment is more likely to be anxious regarding the risk of job loss, and this anxiety towards risk may be a manifestation of a broader personality trait. The existence of a relationship between aversion to risk and personality is supported in further research by Oehler and Wedlich (2018) who found aversion to risk and neuroticism to be related traits, with aversion to risk being correlated with higher neuroticism and lower extraversion. Similarly, Banks and Pearson (2021) reported that nurses scoring lower on emotional stability (higher neuroticism) also had higher attendance in public sector hospital settings. With respect to agreeableness, Carpenter et al. (2012) found agreeableness to be a predictor of perceived public sector fit and interest, partially attributing the finding to the conceptual overlap between agreeableness and compassion—key elements of public service motivation.

Research examining the relationship between public sector interest and a comprehensive personality model is minimal. Schermer (2012) reported that, for the Big Five personality dimensions, only agreeableness had significant positive correlations with an interest in pursuing a career in social services, a vocational interest dimension which also has strong correlations with an interest in teaching (Schermer and MacDougall 2011). Notably, Bourantas and Papalexandris (1999) examined individual behaviours and reported that public sector workers were more likely to be intolerant of ambiguity, have an external locus of control, have a lower sense of competence, and have lower physical activity levels. Linking ambiguity intolerance to the Big Five Inventory, Xu (2020) found that ambiguity aversion has a positive relationship with neuroticism, and negative relationships with agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness. Similarly, Horner (1996) found an external locus of control to correlate with high rates of neuroticism. In contrast, when specifically examining personality traits of those currently working within the public sector, Maczulskij and Viinikainen (2021) found that higher extraversion and lower conscientiousness along with lower neuroticism were associated with a greater probability of working in the public sector. Notably, however, the study was not peer-reviewed, and thus the quality of the research is unknown. In the only existing study, to our knowledge, investigating the personality of undergraduate students interested in pursuing a career in the public sector, Korac et al. (2020) found that higher extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness were the only direct predictors of attraction to the public sector and only for women. Neuroticism and openness had no significant direct effects. The two studies specifically looking at personality traits showcase either a lack of a significant or a negative relationship between high neuroticism and public sector interest, directly contradicting the findings one would expect given previous research on aversion to risk. The studies also disagree about the effect of conscientiousness which may be driven by the perceptions of careers. For example, Larson et al. (2002) reported that conscientiousness was positively correlated with conventional careers based on their meta-analytic results. Possibly, the students in the Korac et al. (2020) study perceived the public sector positions as conventional careers. The sum of this past research presents some trends; however, the significant disagreement between sources showcases the need for further research.

2.4. Present Study

The present study aims to help public sector managers better understand the ramifications of the sector's image and incentive structure on their workforce. Personality and demographic traits can impact the services provided, the perspectives voiced, and the needs of employees. Understanding the personality traits of a certain workforce can allow management to design workplace practices and compensation in a way that maximizes return on investment, and if undesirable trends are found, reposition the organizational image to attract a different candidate pool in recruitment. However, existing research is minimal; thus, this study adds validation and extends existing knowledge by measuring the

relationship between personality and public sector interest at all three levels of government individually.

2.4.1. Relationship of Personality with Public Sector Interest

Due to the lack of research on openness, the investigation of this trait in the present study will be exploratory in nature; however, the following was hypothesized for the remaining four traits of the Big Five personality model:

H₁. *Based on existing research showing lower conscientiousness and higher aversion to ambiguity in public sector workers, we expect to see a negative relationship between conscientiousness and interest in the public sector.*

H₂. *Based on existing research showing higher extraversion in public sector workers and interested students, we expect to see a positive relationship between extraversion and interest in the public sector.*

H₃. *Based on existing research showing a nonsignificant relationship between neuroticism and interest in the public sector, we expect to see a nonsignificant relationship between neuroticism and interest in the public sector.*

H₄. *Based on existing research showing higher agreeableness in those interested in the public sector, we expect to see a positive relationship between agreeableness and interest in the public sector.*

2.4.2. Sex Differences

Existing data on the effect of sex on public sector interest have yielded mixed results, with [Ng and Sears \(2015\)](#) finding that women are more likely to work in and be attracted to the public sector; however, [Lewis and Frank \(2002\)](#) claim that while women are more likely to work in the public sector, they are no more attracted to the sector than are men. An examination of sex differences in personality provides some context for possible reasons this difference in interest may exist. In a meta-analysis of existing research on sex differences in Big Five factors, [Lippa \(2010\)](#) found that women have moderately higher rates of agreeableness and neuroticism. These differences do not mirror existing public sector personality research, suggesting that sex alone is not the driving force behind public sector interest. Nevertheless, higher rates of agreeableness overlap with previously mentioned research on public sector interest, suggesting that personality differences may affect the magnitude of interest by sex. Accordingly, the following was hypothesized:

H₅. *Based on existing research showing higher interest and participation in the public sector for women, and higher agreeableness among women, we expect to see a higher interest in the public sector for women.*

2.4.3. Government-Level Variation

To our knowledge, there is no existing research measuring whether the level of personality-based interest in the public sector varies based on the level of government. Of the very minimal research that has been conducted on examining the difference in perceptions of public sector jobs at different levels of government, one study from the 1960s found that local and state government jobs were perceived as more monotonous and routine than federal jobs ([Frederickson 1967](#)). Routine, bureaucratic jobs are also seen as appealing to those who possess higher levels of risk aversion and conformity, potentially linking back again to a connection with higher neuroticism and lower extraversion ([DeHart-Davis 2007](#)). Regarding interest levels, a study measuring the linkages between demographic factors and interest in different levels of government found significant differences in choice between local, state and federal jobs, again implying that employment at each level was perceived differently and pointing towards a need for more research ([Blank 1985](#)). The gap in existing research measuring the variation in public sector interest at each individual

level of government is one that the present study aims to fill. Due to the lack of pre-existing knowledge on this topic, this study's investigation of government-level differentiation in public sector interest is exploratory in nature.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Students ($N = 603$) enrolled in a first-year management course at a Canadian university participated in the present study for a partial course credit. After screening for incomplete responses, those who did not agree to engage in the study, those who did not have a specific career in mind, those who were not considering building a career in Canada, and those who stated that their desired career did not exist in both the public and private sectors, the remaining sample included 129 females and 148 males. The mean age of the participants was 18.31 years and ranged from 17 to 23. The data are available on the Open Science Framework: DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/CUKRX.

3.2. Procedure

The survey items were combined into a single online questionnaire. Participants were first presented with a letter of information summarizing key information about the study and were asked to provide their consent. Upon giving their consent, participants were asked to provide their age and biological sex at birth, and to complete an anonymous online questionnaire using the survey platform Qualtrics. Participants were presented with 10 Big Five Inventory personality questions, followed by screening questions regarding their future career ambitions, and then finishing with four questions regarding government-level specific interest and overall sector-specific interest. Data from the current study were collected during fall 2022, after receiving ethics approval from the university's Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (REB #121316).

3.3. Materials

3.3.1. 10-Item Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI-10)

The 10-item Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI-10), developed by [Rammstedt and John \(2007\)](#), was used to measure personality. Specifically, this scale measures openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism with two items for each trait, making it more succinct than traditional scales. Each item is a self-report measure that presents participants with a general statement, asks participants to reflect on their general behaviour, and then select how much they agree that the statement reflects themselves on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = disagree strongly to 5 = agree strongly. For example: "I see myself as someone who tends to find fault in others". The BFI-10 has high generalizability with the longer length inventory, with an overall mean correlation of 0.83. The scale also has respectable test-retest stability ($r = 0.72$) over a 6–8-week period. For the present study, the correlation for the item pairs was 0.30 for extraversion, 0.20 for agreeableness, 0.25 for conscientiousness, 0.40 for neuroticism, but 0.01 for openness. Because of the low inter-item correlation for openness, no further analyses were conducted with this sub-scale.

3.3.2. Public Sector Interest

Participants were asked a series of self-report questions to rate their interest in working for a certain level of government (local/municipal, provincial, and federal) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all interested to 5 = very interested). Participants were also asked whether they would rather work in the public sector or the private sector if given a choice.

4. Results

4.1. Interest in Government Careers

Table 1 shows the frequencies of each response when measuring interest in pursuing a career in the municipal/local, provincial, and federal level. The mean interest for each level of government was 2.12 for municipal/local, 2.31 for provincial, and 2.55 for federal.

Although not hypothesized upon, we investigated this finding by conducting an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the mean interests, finding the variance to be significant ($F_{(827)} = 9.82, p < 0.01$). Through post hoc Tukey tests, a significant difference in interest was found between municipal and federal levels ($p < 0.01$), and between the provincial and federal levels ($p = 0.04$); however, the difference in interest between municipal and provincial careers was not significant. This indicates that the federal government is viewed more favourably than lower levels of government, even though the level of interest for all three levels of government is low. A similar disinterest in the public sector was displayed when presented with the dichotomous choice of pursuing a career in the public or private sector, with most participants choosing the private sector (79.78%).

Table 1. Frequency of responses measuring career interest in each level of government.

Response	Municipal/Local	Provincial	Federal
Not at all interested (1)	88 (31.77%)	88 (31.88%)	79 (28.52%)
Not interested (2)	100 (36.10%)	69 (25%)	53 (19.13%)
Not sure (3)	60 (21.66%)	72 (26.09%)	77 (27.80%)
Interested (4)	26 (9.39%)	40 (14.49%)	51 (18.41%)
Very interested (5)	3 (1.08%)	7 (2.54%)	17 (6.14%)
Mean (SD)	2.12 (1.00)	2.31 (1.14)	2.55 (1.25)

4.2. Public Sector Interest and Personality

A *t*-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of each personality trait when categorized into the dichotomous preferences of the broader public or private sector, as seen in Table 2. The only statistically significant finding was that extraversion was lower for those who preferred the public sector, $t(275) = -2.29; p = 0.023$; Cohen's $d = 0.34$.

Table 2. Results of *t*-test measuring personality-based differences in public/private sector interest.

Big Five Scale	Mean (SD)		df	t	Sig. (2-Tailed)	Cohen's d
	Public	Private				
Extraversion	6 (1.83)	6.62 (1.82)	275	-2.29	0.023 *	0.34
Agreeableness	7.15 (1.78)	7.08 (1.62)	273	0.26	0.798	-0.04
Conscientiousness	6.51 (1.8)	6.73 (1.51)	274	-0.95	0.345	0.14
Neuroticism	6.21 (2.06)	6.4 (2.02)	275	-0.61	0.545	0.09

* $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

4.3. Public Sector Interest between Men and Women

Examining for any differences in public/private sector preference between the sexes, men were found to be more likely to choose the public sector (22.30%) than women (17.83%); however, in conducting a chi-square test, this difference was found to be statistically non-significant, $X^2(1, N = 277) = 0.60, p = 0.44$.

4.4. Government-Level Variations

Table 3 reports the correlations between each personality trait and interest in building a career at each level of government. Mirroring the broader public sector findings, extraversion was found to be the only personality trait with a statistically significant relationship, with a negative relationship for the municipal/local, provincial, and federal government. Further examining level-specific government interest, a *t*-test was conducted to measure any differences in interest between men and women, as seen in Table 4. Contradicting the broader public sector findings, women were found to have higher interest in all levels of government; however, none of the differences were found to be statistically significant. Although interest in each level of government varies significantly, these variations do not appear to be related to personality or sex.

Table 3. Correlations between Big Five scales and government-level-specific career interest.

Level of Government	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism
Municipal/Local	−0.20 **	0.07	0.00	−0.03
Provincial	−0.17 **	0.01	−0.05	0.02
Federal	−0.17 **	−0.03	−0.03	0.05

** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed).

Table 4. Results of *t*-test measuring sex-based differences in government-level-specific career interest.

Level of Government	Mean (SD)		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	Sig. (1-Tailed)	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Male	Female				
Municipal	2.06 (0.97)	2.19 (1.03)	1	−1.04	0.30	0.13
Provincial	2.3 (1.16)	2.32 (1.12)	1	−0.13	0.89	0.02
Federal	2.52 (1.25)	2.57 (1.25)	1	−0.35	0.72	0.04

5. Discussion

This study aimed to determine whether there are certain personality traits that lend men and women to be more attracted to a career in the public sector, and whether this varied by level of government. Overall, a relationship between personality and public sector interest was established, with lower extraversion correlating with higher public sector interest. Conversely, no relationship between the sex of the participant and public sector interest was found. Although interest in each level of government was consistently low, it varied significantly between levels, with interest in the federal government being significantly higher than that of the provincial or municipal government; however, this relationship was not found to have any relation to personality or between men and women. These results demonstrate that the public sector attracts more introverts (lower extraversion) than the private sector, and that public organizations may need to change their public image and recruitment strategy if they aim to build a more extroverted workforce.

5.1. Hypothesis Testing

Due to a lack of existing research, the investigation of openness in this study was exploratory in nature. However, because the correlation between the two openness items in the BFI-10 scale was close to zero, the scale was not used in any of the analyses and no conclusions could be drawn from the data collected in this study measuring this trait.

H₁ hypothesized a negative relationship between conscientiousness and public sector interest based on existing research, showing lower conscientiousness and higher ambiguity aversion among current public sector employees (Bourantas and Papalexandris 1999; Maczulskij and Viinikainen 2021). This hypothesis was not supported by the results of this study, finding a nonsignificant relationship between conscientiousness and public sector interest. Given that the research supporting this hypothesis examined existing public sector staff, these traits could potentially be a byproduct of working within the public sector rather than pre-entry traits, a limitation noted by Maczulskij and Viinikainen (2021). For example, Chen and Bozeman (2012) found, in a study comparing public and non-profit organizations, that public sector management and merit reward systems encourage risk aversion. Consequently, an employee in a public sector setting may begin to embody the traits their organization rewards or those who do not have certain personality characteristics may leave the organization. The study by Maczulskij and Viinikainen (2021) was also not peer-reviewed, thus the quality cannot be assured.

H₂ hypothesized a positive relationship between extraversion and public sector interest based on existing research, showing higher extraversion among current public sector employees and interested pre-entry females (Maczulskij and Viinikainen 2021; Korac et al. 2020). This study found the opposite relationship to be true; introversion was found to have a positive relationship with public sector interest. This finding is surprising given the

agreement among existing similar research; however, it does support research by [Bellante and Link \(1981\)](#) and [Oehler and Wedlich \(2018\)](#) who found a relationship between risk aversion and public sector interest, and a relationship between risk aversion and introversion. Cultural differences could play a role in this finding as well, with Canadians potentially perceiving government employment as more risk averse than other countries and thus attracting more introverted individuals. Regardless, this finding indicates challenges ahead for public managers who aim to recruit highly social roles that may be better suited for an extroverted individual. For example, [Wilmot et al. \(2019\)](#) report that extraversion is linked with higher work motivation, performance, and positivity; traits that would clearly be beneficial in government settings. Public sector management may need to assess their public branding, particularly around risk aversion, and whether it should be adjusted to attract a more balanced talent pool.

H₃ hypothesized a nonsignificant relationship between neuroticism and public sector interest based on existing research by [Korac et al. \(2020\)](#) who reported a nonsignificant relationship between the two variables. This hypothesis was supported by the results of this study, with no significant relationship between neuroticism and public sector interest. Notably, however, this finding does not support previous research by [Maczulskij and Viinikainen \(2021\)](#) who found a negative relationship between neuroticism and public sector employment; again, however, that paper was not peer-reviewed, and it measured current employees rather than pre-entry candidates.

H₄ hypothesized a positive relationship between agreeableness and interest in the public sector based on existing research, showing a positive relationship between agreeableness and public sector interest and attraction ([Carpenter et al. 2012](#); [Korac et al. 2020](#)). This hypothesis was not supported by the present study as we found a nonsignificant relationship between agreeableness and public sector interest. [Korac et al. \(2020\)](#) provides some potential reasoning for this discrepancy, noting in their research that while agreeableness was a direct driver of public sector attraction, the effect size was very minimal, and only among women; agreeableness was instead found to largely drive public service motivation, a mediating combination of compound traits that is influenced by personal history and culture, which then drove attraction to the public sector. If the sample of the present study did not include a significant representation of those with public service motivation, the relationship between agreeableness and public sector interest may have been weaker. However, it should be noted that [Carpenter et al. \(2012\)](#) largely disagrees with this conclusion, finding in their study that public service motivation did not entirely account for the effect of agreeableness on attraction to the public sector. Further research in this area is needed to clarify the role of public service motivation between personality and public sector interest, particularly in differing cultural contexts, which could also play a role.

H₅ hypothesized a higher interest in pursuing a career in the public sector among women based on research by [Ng and Sears \(2015\)](#), indicating that women have higher interest and employment in the public sector, as well as personality research showing higher agreeableness among women ([Lippa 2010](#)). The present study did not support this hypothesis, finding a nonsignificant relationship between public sector interest for men and women. Given that the present study did not find a significant relationship between agreeableness and public sector interest, the theory that sex differences in personality are driving public sector interest among women is unlikely. [Lewis and Frank \(2002\)](#) offer insight noting that although women are more likely to work in the public sector and prefer it, this is because many roles that make up a large portion of the public sector are female-dominated and nearly exclusive to the sector, particularly teaching. Given that the sample for the present study was business students, and specifically excluded those whose desired careers only exist in a single sector, the sample restrictions may have muted possible effects.

The present study also explored whether individuals with certain personality traits are more attracted to one level of government versus another. In exploring these relationships, no statistically significant findings arose, with introversion maintaining a strong positive

relationship with public sector interest across all levels of government. Through this exploration however, it was discovered that interest in federal government was significantly higher than that for the municipal or provincial levels. These findings support existing research by [Frederickson \(1967\)](#) and [Blank \(1985\)](#), which both found that local- and state-level governments were perceived differently, particularly the former study which found that the federal government was seen as more dynamic and interesting. While there are differences in interest for each level of government, they do not appear to be due to any of the Big Five personality traits.

5.2. Practical Implications

For public managers, perhaps the most consequential and potentially concerning finding of the present study is the universally low interest in government employment across all levels. With only 10.47% and 17.03% of the sample showing any level of interest in the local and provincial government, respectively, these sectors in particular can expect to face significant challenges recruiting high-quality talent. [Frederickson \(1967\)](#) provides a potential explanation for this disinterest, finding that government employment across all levels was seen as reflecting less overall success than private sector work, particularly for those pursuing business-oriented roles. Similarly, [Borst and Knies \(2023\)](#) reported, based on Dutch public sector employees, that job demands, including aggressive citizens and organizational restructuring, lead to a decrease in overall well-being, suggesting that these positions may not be perceived as attractive to employment seekers. Based on this evidence, public managers aiming to attract talent will need to take steps to raise the level of prestige attached to the public service, as well as combat perceptions of monotonicity and dullness that are associated with local and provincial governments.

5.3. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There are several limitations to this study, one being the small sample size. Due to the nature of the sample (first-year undergraduate business students), many were still undecided on their future careers and thus were unable to complete the survey, cutting the initial sample size by over half. Additionally, there may be certain motivators within those who choose to study business that could be skewing results. For example, when compared to psychology students, [Robak et al. \(2007\)](#) found business students were more motivated by salary when considering a future career. A future study with a larger, more diverse sample may be able to catch differences in personality that were deemed insignificant in this study due to the smaller, more homogenous sample size.

The selected personality scale, the BFI-10, also had many limitations. The items measuring openness were found to lack internal consistency, rendering all data for that trait unusable. Although the items for the other traits correlated significantly with each other, they often also had strong correlations with other traits, possibly distorting the measurement of participants' personalities. Furthermore, given that the BFI-10 is a self-report questionnaire, there is potential bias in that participants may be more inclined to answer in a way that they wish to be perceived rather than how they behave. Future research may want to include a more robust measure of personality and possibly include additional individual difference characteristics such as humility, described as a key trait of public sector leaders, or personal growth, a dimension reported to predict career development ([Wu and Zhou 2023](#); [Zahid et al. 2023](#)).

This field has several possible avenues for further research. The examination of whether global trends in public sector perception apply within the Canadian context would be particularly helpful in narrowing down whether there are any specific perceptions that are attracting more introverted personalities in Canada. Clarity in this area could allow public organizations to better understand what element of their image they may want to alter, as well as whether there are local perceptions causing the generally low interest in government careers in Canada. Breaking down this analysis of perceptions by each level of government could also help uncover why municipal and provincial governments

are viewed less favourably than the federal government (see, for example, [Bankins and Waterhouse 2019](#)).

The present results add to our understanding of how students perceive and express interest in careers in the public service. In their review of the literature, [Korac et al. \(2019\)](#) report that most studies take place in the United States, Asia, and Central Europe, and researchers, such as [Chen et al. \(2019\)](#), report that perceptions of public service careers differ across countries. The present results help by adding a Canadian perspective to this field of research and, ideally, the research questions could be examined in other countries to explore whether certain cultures are attracted differently to the public sector. This could be particularly helpful in accomplishing diverse representation within the public sector, determining whether there are certain culturally based perceptions of the public sector that could be hindering the efforts of many public organizations to increase diversity in their workforce. For example, [Korac et al. \(2019\)](#) found that those from countries with governments perceived as more corrupt or lethargic were less interested in public sector employment. In a South Korean context, [Lee and Choi \(2016\)](#) reported that students are interested in public service positions for job security, and that prosocial behaviours and public service motivation were not significantly associated with an interest in a public sector career.

Going forward, public sector management could likely attract desired personality types through altering organizational characteristics or marketing certain traits. [Anitha and Madhavkumar \(2012\)](#) found that certain organizational traits attract people of different personalities, and that companies perceived as advantageous to career development and promoting recognition attract those higher in conscientiousness, openness, and agreeableness. [Rentsch and McEwen \(2002\)](#) reported that people are more attracted to organizations that they perceive as similar to themselves, suggesting that the perception of public sector careers may play an important role in attracting people with certain personality profiles. In an examination of job attitudes, [Markovits et al. \(2007\)](#) reported that Greek public sector employees scored higher than private sector employees on measures of intrinsic satisfaction, organizational identification, job involvement, and loyalty, but that the two groups did not differ significantly on extrinsic satisfaction. Although job attitudes do not directly translate to personality differences, knowing that attitudes differ may impact the perception of the different career types. Knowing both how public sector careers are perceived by others, in addition to understanding what personality traits predict an interest in public service positions, adds to our understanding of who may pursue a career with the government, and why.

6. Conclusions

This study built on existing research by determining whether personality traits have an impact on an individual's attraction to a career in the public sector for men and women, and whether this differs by level of government. The results indicate that those who are more introverted are more attracted to all three levels of government; however, general interest in government employment is very low, with municipal and provincial governments garnering the least interest. This knowledge helps public sector management better understand challenges in recruitment they can expect to face, as well as the consequences of the reputation the public sector has built. Public sector managers will need to assess their public branding and recruitment strategies if they aim to attract extroverted personalities and top talent.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, A.D., K.B.M. and J.A.S.; formal analysis, A.D. and K.B.M.; investigation, A.D., K.B.M. and J.A.S.; methodology, A.D., K.B.M. and J.A.S.; supervision, K.B.M. and J.A.S.; writing—original draft, A.D.; writing—review and editing, J.A.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Non-Medical Research Ethics Board of Western University (protocol code REB #121316, 5 October 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: All participants provided informed consent.

Data Availability Statement: The data are publicly available on the Open Science Framework: DOI 10.17605/OSF.IO/CUKRX.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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