

## Factors influencing Public Sector Career Intention among Undergraduate Students: Evidence from a public University in Shandong province, China

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### Abstract

This study examined public-sector career intentions among undergraduate students in China. It aimed to: (1) study students' attitudes toward public-sector employment, subjective norms, job security and welfare considerations, and public-sector career intentions; and (2) analyze the influence of attitudes, subjective norms, and job security and welfare considerations on public sector career intentions. A survey was conducted with 381 students at Shandong Agricultural University using proportionate quotas across five disciplinary groups. Data were collected through a questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale. The instrument had a 0.96 Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) from three experts. A pilot test involving 30 students produced Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.935 to 0.959. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlation, and multiple regression. All four constructs were rated at high levels, with job security and welfare considerations receiving the highest mean score ( $\bar{x} = 4.09$ ). Career intention was positively correlated with attitude ( $r = 0.548$ ), subjective norm ( $r = 0.496$ ), and job security and welfare considerations ( $r = 0.463$ ). The regression model was statistically significant and explained 39.4% of the variance in career intention. Attitude was the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.336$ ), followed by subjective norm ( $\beta = 0.264$ ), while job security and welfare considerations also contributed significantly ( $\beta = 0.170$ ). Therefore, universities and public-sector organizations should promote positive perceptions of public service, strengthen career guidance and social support, and clearly communicate employment security and welfare benefits.

**Keywords:** public-sector career intention; undergraduate students; theory of planned behavior; public-sector employment; China

## Introduction

Graduate employment pressure has intensified in China. The country recorded 11.79 million university graduates in 2024. The number was expected to reach 12.22 million in 2025 (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2023; The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2024a). Public-sector entry has also become more competitive. The 2025 national examination attracted 3.416 million qualified applicants for 39,721 positions (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2024b). About 2.83 million candidates attended the 2026 written examination (Zou, 2025). These figures show the continued appeal of public-sector careers.

In China, employment in the public sector has historically been linked to stability, welfare advantages, social prestige, and enduring security, a concept encapsulated by the phrase "iron rice bowl" (tie fan wan) (Yao & Han, 2024). Yet security alone cannot explain students' career intentions. Students also consider public value, occupational image, family expectations, and career development. Most undergraduates have not entered the labor market. Their career orientation is therefore best examined as an intention.

The Theory of Planned Behavior provides a relevant basis for this analysis. TPB links intention with attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). Its explanatory value is well established across behavioral domains (Armitage & Conner, 2001). This study draws directly on attitude and subjective norm. It treats job security and welfare as a context-specific predictor. Perceived behavioral control was not measured. The study therefore uses a TPB-informed framework rather than testing the full model.

Previous studies have identified public service motivation, family influence, and job security as important determinants of students' public-sector career preferences in China (Liu et al., 2011; Ong & Wang, 2025). However, their relative effects among undergraduates at regional universities remain unclear. This study addresses this gap by assessing three core variables and comparing three predictors of public-sector career intention. It examines the levels of these variables and analyzes how the three factors influence students' intentions to pursue public-sector careers. The findings provide practical insights for universities, career advisers, and public-sector employers seeking to better understand the factors influencing undergraduate students' intentions to pursue public-sector careers.

## Objectives

1. To study the levels of attitude toward public-sector employment, subjective norm, job security and welfare considerations, and public-sector career intention among undergraduate students.

2 . To analyze the influence of attitudes toward government employment, subjective norms, and job security and welfare considerations on students' intentions to pursue government careers.

## Literature Review

### 1. Theory of Planned Behavior and Public-Sector Career Intention

TPB explains intention through attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991) as shown in figure 1. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) explains that an individual's behavior is primarily determined by behavioral intention. Intention is influenced by three factors: attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control may also directly influence actual behavior. Thus, individuals are more likely to perform a behavior when they view it positively, receive social support, and believe they have the ability and resources to do so A meta-analysis confirmed its value across behavioral settings (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Arnold et al. (2006) also applied an extended TPB model to occupational intentions. Public-sector career intention refers to a student's plan to seek civil service, public institution, or related government employment. This focus is appropriate because undergraduates remain at the pre-entry stage.

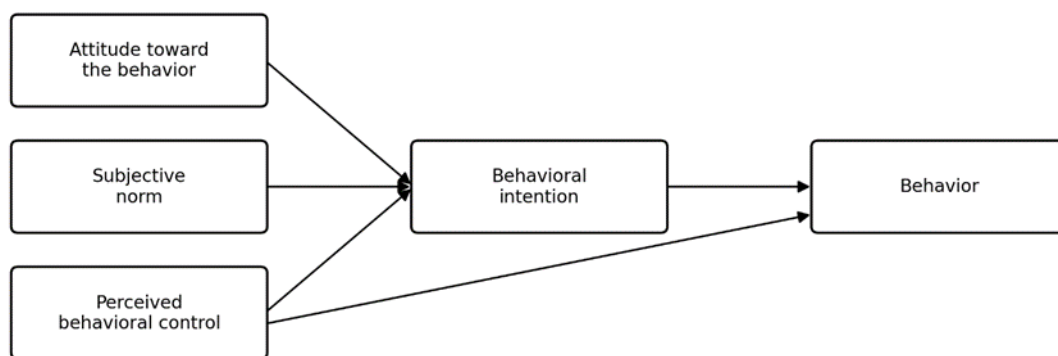


Figure 1 The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

Source: adapted from Ajzen (1991).

### 2. Attitude toward Public Sector Employment

Attitude refers to a student's evaluation of public-sector work. It includes prestige, public value, occupational image, and personal meaning. Organizational image, perceived fit, and employer attraction are associated with career choice (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005; Highhouse et al., 2003). Public-sector attraction also relates to applicants' motivation and intention to apply (Ritz &

Waldner, 2011). Public service motivation and person–organization fit provide further explanations (Perry & Wise, 1990; Carpenter et al., 2012; Christensen & Wright, 2011; Ritz et al., 2016). In China, collectivist values and self–improvement may also inform students’ evaluations (Zhang et al., 2022).

### **3. Subjective Norm**

Subjective norm concerns perceived expectations and support from significant others. Relevant sources include family members, peers, teachers, mentors, and career advisers. Family expectations are associated with career decisions and public service aspirations (Koçak et al., 2021; Stritch & Christensen, 2016). Social cognitive career theory also recognizes social support and contextual conditions (Lent et al., 1994). Chinese studies link career advice and social support with exploration, employability, and career goals (Gao et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2026).

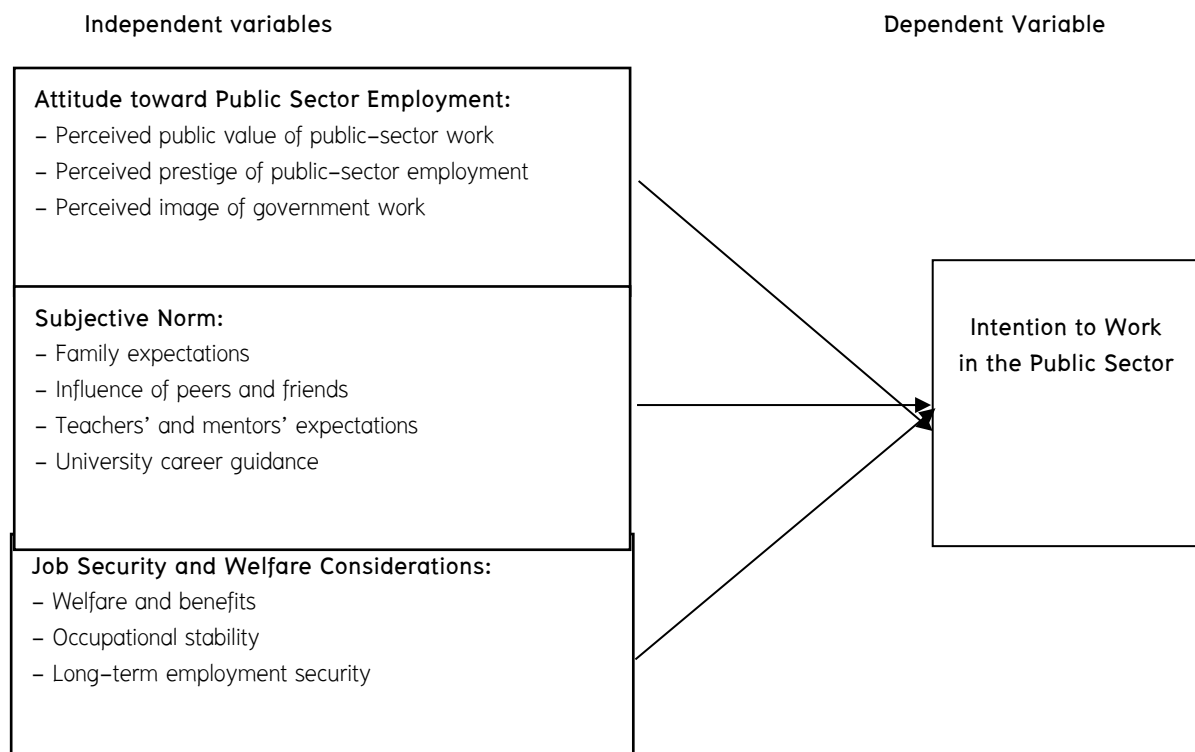
### **4. Job Security and Welfare Considerations**

The construct of Job Security and Welfare Considerations refers to students’ views of welfare benefits, occupational stability, and long–term employment security. Stability and job security are important considerations in public–sector career choice, particularly when students compare employment sectors before entering the labor market (Holum et al., 2024; Santinha et al., 2021). In China, career stability is also positively associated with college students’ willingness to apply for civil service positions (Ni et al., 2022). These studies support the inclusion of Job Security and Welfare Considerations as a separate predictor in the present study.

Previous research on public–sector career choice has covered different countries and student groups. For example, Holum et al. (2024) studied business students in Norway and Poland, while Ritz and Waldner (2011) and Santinha et al. (2021) focused on potential applicants or individuals before entering the labor market. Related studies in China have examined college students’ occupational values, career support, and willingness to apply for civil service positions (Gao et al., 2025; Ni et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2026; Zhang et al., 2022). However, little research has compared Attitude toward Public Sector Employment, Subjective Norm, and Job Security and Welfare Considerations in the same model. Evidence is especially limited for students at regional public universities in China. The present study examines these three predictors among undergraduates at a public university in Shandong Province.

## **Research Conceptual Framework**

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework informed by the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB; Ajzen, 1991). Attitude toward Public Sector Employment and Subjective Norm were drawn from TPB, while Job Security and Welfare Considerations was included as an additional predictor based on previous studies of public–sector career choice and employment security. The outcome variable was intention to work in the public sector.



**Figure 2** Research Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by the authors based on Ajzen (1991),

Holum et al. (2024), Ni et al. (2022), and Santinha et al. (2021).

Based on the conceptual framework and the reviewed literature, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Attitude toward Public Sector Employment positively predicts Intention to Work in the Public Sector.

H2: Subjective Norm positively predicts Intention to Work in the Public Sector.

H3: Job Security and Welfare Considerations positively predict Intention to Work in the Public Sector.

## Research Methodology

### Sample and Data Source

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design at Shandong Agricultural University, China. According to the university’s 2026 graduating-student roster, the target population consisted of 7,811 full-time senior undergraduate students. Yamane’s formula was used as a benchmark to determine a target sample of 381 students (Yamane, 1967). Proportionate quotas were then assigned across five disciplinary categories. The quotas included 167 students from Agriculture and Life Sciences, 84 from Economics and Management, 71 from Science and Engineering, 32 from Arts and Other Fields, and 27 from Natural Sciences. Eligible senior students

in each category were invited through university communication channels until the required quota was reached.

### **Measurement of Variables**

The research instrument was a structured self-administered questionnaire consisting of two parts. The first part collected demographic information on gender, age, academic discipline, family public-sector background, and place of origin. The second part contained 34 items measuring attitude toward public sector employment (9 items), subjective norm (12 items), job security and welfare considerations (9 items), and intention to work in the public sector (4 items). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The questionnaire was developed and administered in Chinese based on the Theory of Planned Behavior and previous literature on public-sector career intention, public-sector attractiveness, public service motivation, social influence, occupational values, and job security and welfare considerations. The initial items were reviewed by the academic advisor and three experts for content relevance, wording clarity, linguistic appropriateness, and alignment with the operational definitions and research objectives. Content validity was assessed using the Index of Item-Objective Congruence, yielding an overall IOC value of 0.96.

### **Data Collection**

The questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 students who had characteristics similar to those of the target population but were not included in the main sample. All Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Cronbach, 1951; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011), with values of 0.944 for attitude toward public sector employment, 0.959 for subjective norm, 0.955 for job security and welfare considerations, and 0.935 for intention to work in the public sector. Data were collected from March to May 2026 through an online questionnaire distributed via university-related communication channels. Because the exact number of students who received or viewed the questionnaire link could not be determined, a conventional response rate could not be calculated. After data screening, 381 complete and eligible questionnaires were retained for analysis. Participants were informed of the study purpose and the voluntary nature of participation. Administrative permission was obtained from the relevant academic unit, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and responses were collected anonymously and used solely for academic purposes.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using a statistical software package. Frequencies and percentages summarized respondent characteristics, while means and standard deviations assessed the levels of the study variables. Pearson correlation analysis examined the relationships among the variables. Multiple linear regression using the Enter method assessed the relative predictive contributions of the three independent variables to intention to work in the public sector. Statistical

significance was set at  $p < .05$ . Before interpreting the regression model, its assumptions were examined. Multicollinearity was assessed using correlations among the predictors, Tolerance values, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values. Homoscedasticity was assessed using a scatterplot of standardized predicted values against standardized residuals. Predictor correlations below 0.80, Tolerance values above 0.10, VIF values below 10, and Durbin-Watson values between 1.50 and 2.50 were considered acceptable (Field, 2018; Hair et al., 2019; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019).

## Result

**Table 1** Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

| Characteristic                  | Category                    | n   | Percent(%) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----|------------|
| Gender                          | Female                      | 198 | 51.97      |
|                                 | Male                        | 183 | 48.03      |
| Age                             | 20 or below                 | 14  | 3.67       |
|                                 | 21                          | 144 | 37.80      |
|                                 | 22                          | 164 | 43.04      |
|                                 | 23                          | 42  | 11.02      |
|                                 | 24 or above                 | 17  | 4.46       |
| Major                           | Agriculture & Life Sciences | 167 | 43.83      |
|                                 | Economics & Management      | 84  | 22.05      |
|                                 | Science & Engineering       | 71  | 18.64      |
|                                 | Arts & Others               | 32  | 8.40       |
|                                 | Natural Sciences            | 27  | 7.09       |
| Family public-sector background | Yes                         | 103 | 27.03      |
|                                 | No                          | 278 | 72.97      |
| Place of origin                 | Rural                       | 197 | 51.71      |
|                                 | Urban                       | 184 | 48.29      |

Table 1 shows that the sample was nearly balanced by gender, with 51.97% female and 48.03% male respondents. Most respondents were aged 21 or 22 years, accounting for 80.84% of the sample. Agriculture and Life Sciences formed the largest disciplinary group at 43.83%. Most respondents had no family public-sector background (72.97%). The distribution by place of origin was also balanced, with 51.71% from rural areas and 48.29% from urban areas.

Objective 1. The findings showed that all four core variables were at high levels.

**Table 2** Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and Levels of the Study Variables

| Variable                                 | $\bar{x}$ | S.D. | Interpretation |
|------------------------------------------|-----------|------|----------------|
| Attitude toward Public Sector Employment | 4.00      | 0.68 | High           |
| Subjective Norm                          | 3.62      | 0.71 | High           |
| Job Security and Welfare Considerations  | 4.09      | 0.61 | High           |
| Intention to Work in the Public Sector   | 3.86      | 0.73 | High           |

Note. N = 381. Mean scores were interpreted using the five-point Likert scale: 4.21–5.00 = very high, 3.41–4.20 = high, 2.61–3.40 = moderate, 1.81–2.60 = low, and 1.00–1.80 = very low.

Table 2 shows that all four variables were at a high level. Job security and welfare considerations had the highest mean score ( $\bar{x} = 4.09$ , S.D. = 0.61), followed by attitude toward public sector employment ( $\bar{x} = 4.00$ , S.D. = 0.68) and intention to work in the public sector ( $\bar{x} = 3.86$ , S.D. = 0.73). Subjective norm had the lowest mean score ( $\bar{x} = 3.62$ , S.D. = 0.71), although it was still interpreted as high.

Objective 2. All three predictors were positively related to public-sector career intention. Attitude had the strongest correlation ( $r = 0.548$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Subjective norm followed ( $r = 0.496$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Job security and welfare considerations also showed a positive correlation ( $r = 0.463$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

**Table 3** Pearson Correlation Matrix among Core Variables

| Variable                                 | 1      | 2      | 3      | 4 |
|------------------------------------------|--------|--------|--------|---|
| Attitude toward Public Sector Employment | 1      |        |        |   |
| Subjective Norm                          | .467** | 1      |        |   |
| Job Security and Welfare Considerations  | .526** | .440** | 1      |   |
| Intention to Work in the Public Sector   | .548** | .496** | .463** | 1 |

Note. \*\* $p < .01$ .

Before conducting the multiple linear regression analysis, the assumptions underlying the regression model were examined. The correlations among the independent variables ranged from 0.440 to 0.526, all below the threshold of 0.80. Tolerance values ranged from 0.655 to 0.730, while VIF values ranged from 1.371 to 1.527, indicating no substantial multicollinearity. Furthermore, the Durbin–Watson statistic was 2.206, suggesting that the residuals were independent and that there was no serious autocorrelation. Therefore, no major violations of the multiple regression assumptions were detected (Field, 2018).

The statistical results of the multiple regression analyses are shown in Table 4. and hypothesis is Table 5. A standard multiple linear regression using the Enter method examined the influence factors of attitude toward public-sector employment, subjective norm, and job security and welfare considerations on public-sector career intention. The model was statistically significant,  $F = 81.588$ ,  $p < .005$ , explaining 39.4% of the variance in career intention ( $R^2 =$

0.394, adjusted  $R^2 = 0.389$ ). Attitude toward public-sector employment was the strongest positive predictor ( $\beta = 0.336$ ), followed by subjective norm ( $\beta = 0.264$ ) and job security and welfare considerations ( $\beta = 0.170$ ). Thus, students with more favorable attitudes, stronger perceived social support, and greater emphasis on employment security and welfare were more likely to intend to pursue careers in the public sector.

**Table 4** Multiple Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Intention to Work in the Public Sector

| Model                                    | B    | SE   | $\beta$ | t     | p    | Tolerance | VIF   |
|------------------------------------------|------|------|---------|-------|------|-----------|-------|
| Constant                                 | .617 | .219 | —       | 2.815 | .005 | —         | —     |
| Attitude toward Public Sector Employment | .359 | .053 | .336    | 6.773 | .000 | .655      | 1.527 |
| Subjective Norm                          | .269 | .048 | .264    | 5.624 | .000 | .730      | 1.371 |
| Job Security and Welfare Considerations  | .203 | .058 | .170    | 3.486 | .001 | .675      | 1.481 |

Note.  $R = .627$ ,  $R^2 = .394$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .389$ ,  $F = 81.588$ , Durbin–Watson = 2.206.

\* $p < .05$ , Statistically significant at the 0.05 level

**Table 5** Outcomes of Hypothesis Testing

| Hypothesis | Prediction                                                                                           | Outcome |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| H1         | Attitude toward Public Sector Employment positively predicts Intention to Work in the Public Sector. | Support |
| H2         | Subjective Norm positively predicts Intention to Work in the Public Sector.                          | Support |
| H3         | Job Security and Welfare Considerations positively predict Intention to Work in the Public Sector    | Support |

## Discussion

Objective 1 showed high levels across all four constructs. Job security and welfare considerations received the highest rating. Stability, welfare, and institutional protection therefore remained prominent in students' career evaluations. This result agrees with studies linking sector preferences with security, rewards, prestige, and public-sector attraction (Asseburg & Homberg, 2020; Holum et al., 2024; Santinha et al., 2021). Similar patterns appear among Chinese civil service applicants (Ni et al., 2022).

Attitude toward public-sector employment was also high. Students generally viewed this work as respectable, meaningful, and socially valuable. This result aligns with research on organizational image, perceived fit, and employer attraction (Ehrhart & Ziegert, 2005; Highhouse et al., 2003; Ritz & Waldner, 2011). Chinese students may also connect public service with collective responsibility and self-development (Zhang et al., 2022). Security and public value therefore appear to coexist in students' evaluations.

The findings related to Objective 2 showed that all three variables significantly predicted public-sector career intention, collectively explaining 39.4% of its variance. Although the model

demonstrated meaningful explanatory power, the remaining variance indicates that other individual, occupational, and contextual factors may also influence students' career intentions. The results is consistent with the attitude and subjective norm components of TPB. They also support the use of a TPB-informed career framework (Ajzen, 1991; Armitage & Conner, 2001; Arnold et al., 2006). However, perceived behavioral control was not measured. The findings should not be treated as a complete TPB test.

Attitude was the strongest predictor of public-sector career intention, indicating that students who evaluated public-sector employment more positively reported stronger career intentions. This finding is consistent with Christensen and Wright (2011) who found that public service motivation influenced individuals' employment-sector preferences; and Ritz et al. (2016) whose review confirmed the importance of public service motivation in shaping public-sector-related attitudes and behavioral outcomes. One reason may be that students close to graduation are more concerned with whether public-sector work suits their own values, academic background, and future plan. In China, family expectations often play a role in students' career decisions, but students approaching graduation also have to consider whether a public-sector career fits their own qualifications and plans. Family, friends, and university guidance still matter, but these influences do not always lead to the same career choice. When making a more definite decision, students may rely more on how they view the value, image, and personal fit of public-sector work.

Subjective norm ranked second. Family expectations, peer views, and institutional guidance may therefore matter at the pre-entry stage. This result aligns with studies of family influence, career support, and career advising (Gao et al., 2025; Koçak et al., 2021; Stritch & Christensen, 2016; Wang et al., 2026).

Job security and welfare considerations also significantly predicted public-sector career intention, although their contribution was relatively smaller. This finding indicates that secure employment remains attractive to students. It is consistent with the historically rooted perception of public-sector employment in China as providing stability, welfare benefits, social status, and long-term security—a view commonly represented by the term “iron rice bowl” (*tie fan wan*) (Yao & Han, 2024).

Previous studies have shown that security and employment rewards are important in public-sector career choice. The present findings show a slightly different pattern. Job Security and Welfare Considerations had the highest mean score, suggesting that stability and welfare were important to most students. However, its regression effect was weaker than those of Attitude and Subjective Norm. A high mean therefore does not necessarily mean that a variable has the strongest predictive role. In this study, students valued employment security, but their overall evaluation of public-sector work was more closely related to differences in career intention.

This study has two main limitations. First, all variables were measured using the same self-report questionnaire at one point in time. This may have increased the relationships found among the variables. Although the survey was anonymous and administered consistently, common method bias cannot be ruled out. Future studies should collect data at different times or use multiple data sources to reduce this bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Second, the study used a TPB-informed career framework but did not measure perceived behavioral control, which is a main component of the TPB. Therefore, the findings should not be considered a complete test of the theory.

### New Knowledge from Research

This study identifies three predictive dimensions of public-sector career intention. The evaluative dimension showed the strongest contribution ( $\beta = 0.336$ ). The social influence dimension ranked second ( $\beta = 0.264$ ). The employment security dimension also contributed significantly ( $\beta = 0.170$ ). This hierarchy shows that career intention reflects evaluation, social context, and practical security.

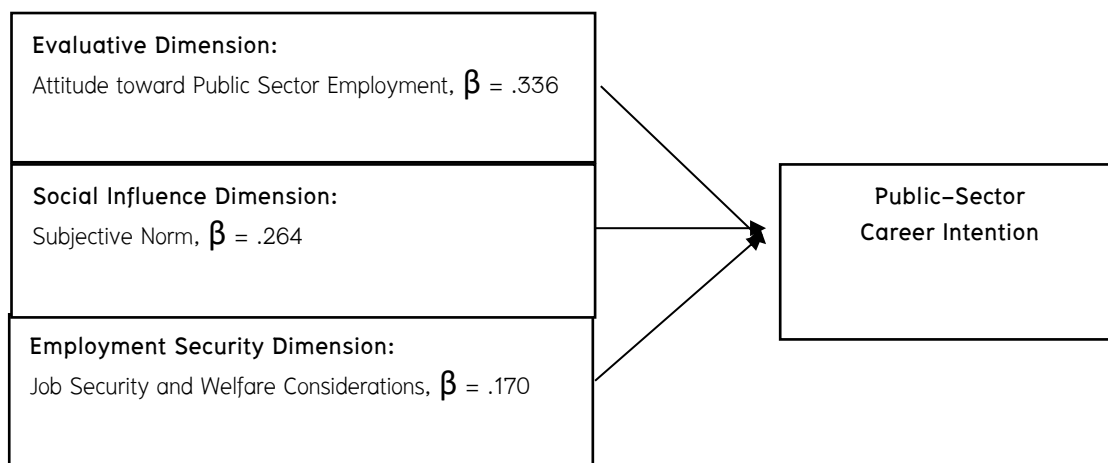


Figure 3 Empirical Hierarchy of Predictive Dimensions of Public-Sector Career Intention

### Conclusion

The survey revealed that students had a high level of intention to pursue public-sector careers. Attitudes toward public-sector employment, subjective norms, and job security and welfare considerations significantly predicted career intention, with attitudes being the strongest predictor. These findings indicate that students' career intentions are influenced by personal evaluations, social expectations, and employment security. In summary, the findings are consistent with the Theory of Planned Behavior, particularly the roles of attitudes and subjective norms, while job security and welfare considerations provide additional explanation within the public-sector career context.

## Suggestions

Based on the research findings, the researchers make the following recommendations:

### 1. Suggestion for Implementing the Research Findings

1.1 Institutions of higher learning ought to enhance career counseling by offering explicit details regarding public-sector career trajectories, hiring processes, employment duties, and promotional prospects. They ought to arrange workshops, internships, site visits, and discussions with public-sector experts to foster constructive and pragmatic perceptions of public-sector careers.

1.2 Public-sector organizations should explicitly convey details regarding employment stability, welfare provisions, professional advancement, and avenues for societal contribution. They ought to collaborate with academic institutions to offer internships, mentorship initiatives, and hiring events to enhance students' comprehension of and enthusiasm for careers in the public sector.

### 2. Suggestion for Future Research

Because participants were recruited through quota-based online invitations at one university, the findings should be generalized with caution. Future research should include different types of universities and regions in China to improve generalizability. Longitudinal studies could examine whether public-sector career intention corresponds with actual employment behavior after graduation. Future studies may also include public service motivation, perceived employability, examination confidence, political efficacy, professional fit, and recruitment information.

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