

# THE HIDDEN TOLLS OF NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT IN FRANCE: REFORM PERCEPTIONS, EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION AND TURNOVER

**Victor Noble, & Evelyne Fouquereau**  
*University of Tours/QualiPsy, UR1901 (France)*

## Abstract

Since the 1990s, and in line with most Western public administrations, the French civil service has experienced the gradual introduction of New Public Management (NPM) (Bezes, 2012). This reform agenda aimed to promote the adoption of private-sector management practices within public organizations. By the early 2000s, a variety of counter-models emerged, seeking to address the shortcomings of NPM (Klenk & Reiter, 2019), but they generally represent a continuity rather than a clear distinction from it (Christensen & Fan, 2018; Reiter & Klenk, 2019). Accordingly, reforms stemming from these paradigms have been associated with a continuous and accelerated transformation process, sometimes described as a structural crisis, profoundly affecting both public organizations and their civil servants (Guenoun & Matyjasik, 2019; Mouele, 2023; Rossano, 2018). Indeed, reforms inspired by NPM have fostered the development of new professional demands, notably an increased workload, and have contribute to the emergence of a climate of psychological strain (Abord de Chatillon & Desmarais, 2012; Diefenbach, 2009; Rivière et al., 2019), with significant consequences for employees' psychological health (Abord de Chatillon & Desmarais, 2012; Kirkpatrick et al., 2005). These health impacts have, in turn, been consistently linked to professional disengagement and turnover (e.g., Ducharme et al., 2007; Kim, 2015) which are critical issues for the French civil service. Indeed, in the context of a broader crisis of workforce attractiveness, retention and employee commitment have become major strategic priorities as attested to by several official administrative reports. This study examines the extent to which perceptions of NPM-related changes lead French civil servants to consider leaving their organizations, with emotional exhaustion as a mediating mechanism. Data were collected from a sample of 1851 civil servants across the three branches of the civil service (i.e., state, territorial, and hospital). The analysis relies on a mediation model to test the indirect influence of reform perceptions on turnover intentions via emotional exhaustion. The results confirm the presence of significant indirect effects, whereby perceptions of managerial reforms heighten emotional exhaustion, subsequently increasing the intention to leave the organization. These findings emphasize the importance of considering the psychological repercussions of public-sector transformations, which can paradoxically undermine retention goals. They highlight the need to rethink human resource and change management strategies to safeguard employees' psychological well-being while reducing turnover in the public sector.

**Keywords:** *French civil service, New Public Management, emotional exhaustion, turnover intention.*

---

## 1. Background

In a context of a widespread decline in attractiveness affecting all three branches of the French civil service (Prouet et al., 2024), the French public administration is increasingly confronted with a major challenge: retaining its workforce. In recent years, numerous public bodies have highlighted in various institutional reports the extent of this issue and its strategic implications for the continuity of public services. Turnover constitutes a critical organizational concern, as it leads to substantial losses in knowledge and expertise, disrupts work group dynamics, and may ultimately undermine overall organizational functioning and effectiveness (Heavey et al., 2013). These effects are added to substantial direct and indirect costs (Bae, 2022), which place considerable pressure on already constrained public budgets.

These retention challenges emerge within a broader context of profound transformation of the public sector over recent decades. Beginning in the late 1990s, NPM gradually diffused throughout the French civil service (Bezes, 2012). NPM refers to a managerial paradigm aiming to align public-sector governance with private-sector management practices (Emery & Martin, 2008). According to Abord de Chatillon & Desmarais (2012), NPM primarily rests on three pillars: 1) managerialism, oriented toward

performance enhancement and cost reduction, 2) accountability, manifested through increased reliance on management by objectives, evaluation systems and reporting tools, and 3) contractualization, which embeds public organizations within broader networks of stakeholders. Although alternative models subsequently emerged, they largely represent continuations rather than breaks with the principles of NPM (Christensen & Fan, 2018; Reiter & Klenk, 2019).

A growing body of research shows that the successive reforms inspired by these paradigms have had substantial effects on public organizations and their workforce (Guenoun & Matyjasik, 2019). These transformations have been associated with an intensification of job demands, including increased workload as well as the development of a climate of emotional abuse (Abord de Chatillon & Desmarais, 2012; Dussuet et al., 2017; Rivière et al., 2019). Such new working conditions constitute well-established risk factors for employees' health, notably contributing to emotional exhaustion, the central component of burnout, defined as a state of intense fatigue accompanied by reduced energy and the perception that one's emotional resources are depleted (Arens & Morin, 2016). Emotional exhaustion is, in turn, a robust predictor of turnover intentions, including in public-sector contexts (e.g., Lee & Youm, 2024). It may reflect a form of psychological withdrawal, leading employees to consider leaving as a coping strategy in the face of work environments perceived as excessively demanding.

In this context, the present study examines the extent to which perceptions of NPM-related changes influence turnover intentions among French civil servants and assesses whether emotional exhaustion constitutes the mediating mechanism through which these perceptions translate into intentions to leave the organization.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 1,851 French public-sector employees, including 690 from the local civil service (37.26%), 595 from the national civil service (32.13%), and 566 from the hospital civil service (30.58%). Women represented 55.15% ( $n = 1,044$ ) of the sample compared to 13.89% ( $n = 263$ ) for men, while 30.90% ( $n = 586$ ) of respondents selected “non-binary/other” or did not provide a response. The mean age was 45.63 years ( $SD = 10.09$ ), and average organizational tenure was 14.41 years ( $SD = 10.91$ ). In addition, 25.88% ( $n = 490$ ) of participants held managerial responsibilities, whereas 74.12% ( $n = 1,403$ ) were non-managers. Employees belonged to category A (34.39%;  $n = 651$ ), category B (37.30%;  $n = 706$ ), or category C (21.82%;  $n = 413$ ), while 5.71% ( $n = 108$ ) reported not knowing their employment category (these categories correspond to specific employment grades used in the French public sector).

### 2.2. Measures

Perceptions of NPM-related changes were assessed using the scale developed by Abord de Chatillon & Desmarais (2012). This instrument consisted of three dimensions: (1) an emphasis on costs (2 items; e.g., “The resources available to carry out my work were increasingly limited”), (2) increased accountability (2 items; e.g., “I was required to provide increasingly precise and frequent accounts of my activities”), and (3) consideration of stakeholders (2 items; e.g., “We worked on a daily basis with an ever-growing number of interlocutors”). Emotional exhaustion was measured using five items from the *Maslach Burnout Inventory–General Survey* (Maslach et al., 1997; e.g., “I felt emotionally drained after a day of work”). Finally, intention to leave the organization was measured using an adaptation of the item employed by Lafrenière-Carrier et al. (2018) (i.e., “I intended to leave my organization as soon as possible”). All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (totally disagree) to 7 (totally agree).

### 2.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was administered online in a self-completed format over a period of approximately two months in early 2024. Several organizations across the three branches of the civil service were contacted and invited to distribute the questionnaire to their employees. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would remain anonymous.

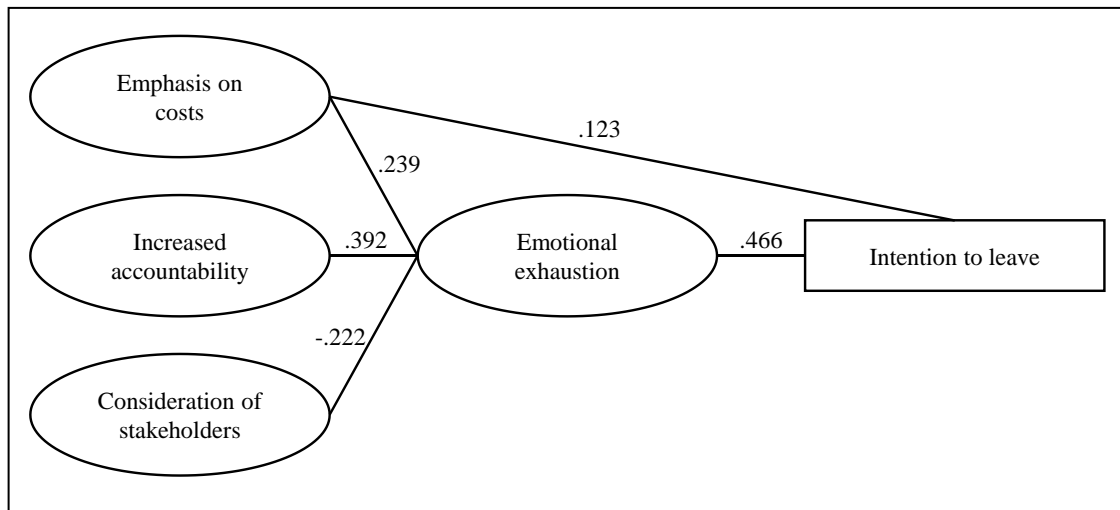
## 3. Analysis and results

For this study, we used Mplus 8.10 (Muthén & Muthén, 2023) with the robust maximum likelihood estimator. We first tested a measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) that included the multi-item constructs (i.e., perceptions of NPM-related changes and emotional exhaustion) as well as the observed score of intention to leave the organization, which was allowed to correlate with the factors

representing perceptions of NPM-related changes and emotional exhaustion. This measurement model was then converted into a predictive structural equation model (SEM) in which the first-order factors of perceptions of NPM-related changes were specified as antecedents, emotional exhaustion as a mediator, and intention to leave as the outcome. Direct and indirect effects (i.e., through emotional exhaustion) of perceptions of an emphasis on costs, increased accountability, and consideration of stakeholders on intention to leave were tested using bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals with 10,000 bootstrap samples (CI; Cheung & Lau, 2008).

Model fit indices for both the CFA ( $SB\chi^2(49) = 492.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CFI = .93$ ,  $TLI = .91$ ,  $RMSEA = .07$ ,  $SRMR = .044$ ) and the SEM ( $SB\chi^2(45) = 556.09$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CFI = .94$ ,  $TLI = .91$ ,  $RMSEA = .078$ ,  $SRMR = .038$ ) indicated acceptable fit. The resulting model is presented in Figure 1. The analyses showed that perceptions of an emphasis on costs and increased accountability directly and positively predicted emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = .239$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\beta = .392$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively). In contrast, perceptions of consideration of stakeholders significantly and negatively predicted emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = -.222$ ,  $p = .007$ ). Moreover, perception of an emphasis on costs directly, significantly, and positively predicted intention to leave ( $\beta = .123$ ,  $p = .014$ ), whereas the effect was not significant for increased accountability and consideration of stakeholders ( $\beta = .021$ ,  $p = .791$ ;  $\beta = -.129$ ,  $p = .065$ ). Finally, the indirect effects of perceptions of NPM-related changes on intention to leave through emotional exhaustion were significant for emphasis on costs ( $\beta = .111$ , 95% CI [.057, .168]), increased accountability ( $\beta = .183$ , 95% CI [.104, .279]), and consideration of stakeholders ( $\beta = -.104$ , 95% CI [-.186, -.035]).

Figure 1. Significant standardized mediation paths from NPM-related changes perceptions to turnover intentions through emotional exhaustion.



#### 4. Discussion, limitations and future research directions

The objective of this study was to examine the extent to which perceptions of NPM-related changes influence turnover intentions among French civil servants and to assess whether emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between these perceptions and intentions to leave the organization. The results of the structural equation modeling highlighted the central role of emotional exhaustion in this process. Specifically, perceptions of an emphasis on costs and increased accountability positively predicted emotional exhaustion, which in turn was associated with higher turnover intentions. Interestingly, perceptions of consideration of stakeholders negatively predicted emotional exhaustion, suggesting that not all dimensions of NPM reforms are uniformly detrimental to employee well-being. This finding implies that certain reform practices, when perceived as supportive or inclusive, may act as resources that buffer against stress and mitigate the risk of burnout. These findings can be interpreted through the lens of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2007) which offers a pertinent framework by positing that high job demands (e.g., increased accountability, focus on cost efficiency) may deplete personal resources, leading to strain and burnout, whereas job resources (e.g., social interactions, stakeholder consideration, autonomy) can mitigate these effects.

While these results provide important insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study employed a cross-sectional design, which limits causal inference and precludes examination of temporal trajectories. As the organizational reform process remains ongoing, future research could employ longitudinal designs to assess how employees perceive and respond to forthcoming changes over the long term, and to examine the evolving relationships among reform perceptions, emotional exhaustion, and turnover intentions over time. Second, the mediation model tested was relatively simple. Future research could explore sequential mediation, building on the work of Abord de Chatillon & Desmarais (2012), who directly accounted for perceived constraints and proposed that higher perceptions of NPM-related changes are first associated with increased perceived job demands, which in turn contribute to burnout. Third, turnover intentions were operationalized as a single construct, without distinguishing between different forms of withdrawal, such as remaining in the same organization, moving to another public organization, retiring, or leaving the public sector entirely (Jeon & Robertson, 2013). Making such distinctions would refine our understanding of the drivers of retention and attrition within the civil service in the context of ongoing public-sector reforms. Another avenue for further investigation concerns the operationalization of NPM perceptions. In this study, we focused on three dimensions (*i.e.*, emphasis on costs, increased accountability, consideration of stakeholders) based on Abord de Chatillon & Desmarais' (2012) framework. However, other principles of NPM highlighted in the literature (Bezes & Musselin, 2015), such as performance culture or the separation of strategic and operational functions, may also influence employee NPM-related changes perceptions. Expanding the model to include these dimensions could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how complex managerial reforms are experienced by civil servants.

In conclusion, this study underscores the psychological mechanisms linking NPM-related changes perceptions to turnover intentions in the French civil service, identifies emotional exhaustion as a key mediator, and highlights the importance of considering both the detrimental and protective aspects of NPM-inspired changes.

## References

- Abord de Chatillon, E., & Desmarais, C. (2012). Le Nouveau Management Public est-il pathogène ? *Management international*, 16(3), 10-24. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1011413ar>
- Arens, A. K., & Morin, A. J. S. (2016). Relations between teachers' emotional exhaustion and students' educational outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 108(6), 800-813. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000105>
- Bae, S.-H. (2022). Noneconomic and economic impacts of nurse turnover in hospitals: A systematic review. *International Nursing Review*, 69(3), 392-404. <https://doi.org/10.1111/inr.12769>
- Bakker, A. B., Hakanen, J. J., Demerouti, E., & Xanthopoulou, D. (2007). Job resources boost work engagement, particularly when job demands are high. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(2), 274-284. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.99.2.274>
- Bezes, P. (2012). État, experts et savoirs néo-managériaux: Les producteurs et diffuseurs du New Public Management en France depuis les années 1970. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 193(3), 16-37. <https://doi.org/10.3917/arss.193.0016>
- Bezes, P., & Musselin, C. (2015). *Le New Public Management* (p. 128). Presses de Sciences Po. <https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01520666>
- Cheung, G. W., & Lau, R. S. (2008). Testing Mediation and Suppression Effects of Latent Variables: Bootstrapping With Structural Equation Models. *Organizational Research Methods*, 11(2), 296-325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428107300343>
- Christensen, T., & Fan, Y. (2018). Post-New Public Management: A new administrative paradigm for China? *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 84(2), 389-404. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852316633513>
- Diefenbach, T. (2009). New Public Management in Public Sector Organizations: The Dark Sides of Managerialistic 'Enlightenment.' *Public Administration*, 87(4), 892-909. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2009.01766.x>
- Ducharme, L. J., Knudsen, H. K., & Roman, P. M. (2007). Emotional Exhaustion and Turnover Intention in Human Service Occupations: The Protective Role of Coworker Support. *Sociological Spectrum*, 28(1), 81-104. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732170701675268>
- Dussuet, A., Nirello, L., & Puissant, E. (2017). De la restriction des budgets des politiques sociales à la dégradation des conditions de travail dans le secteur médico-social. *La Revue de l'Ires*, 9192(1), 185-211. <https://doi.org/10.3917/rqli.091.0185>

- Emery, Y., & Martin, N. (2008). Quelle identité d'agent public aujourd'hui? *Revue française d'administration publique*, 127(3), 559-578.
- Guenoun, M., & Matyjasik, N. (2019). La fin de l'histoire du NMP? In N. Matyjasik & M. Guenoun (Eds.), *En finir avec le New Public Management* (pp. 1-28). Institut de la gestion publique et du développement économique.
- Heavey, A. L., Holwerda, J. A., & Hausknecht, J. P. (2013). Causes and consequences of collective turnover: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 98(3), 412-453. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032380>
- Jeon, S. H., & Robertson, P. J. (2013). Should I Stay or Should I Go: The Impact of Public Duty Motivation on Turnover Intentions. *Korean Journal of Policy Studies*, 28(2), 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.52372/kjps28201>
- Kim, J. (2015). What Increases Public Employees' Turnover Intention? *Public Personnel Management*, 44(4), 496-519. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091026015604447>
- Kirkpatrick, I., Ackroyd, S., & Walker, R. (2005). *The New Managerialism and Public Service Professions: Change in Health, Social Services and Housing*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230503595>
- Klenk, T., & Reiter, R. (2019). Post-New Public Management: Reform ideas and their application in the field of social services. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 85(1), 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.3917/risa.851.0005>
- Lafrenière-Carrier, B., Lauzier, M., & Yelle, M. (2018). Mesurer l'intention de rester ou l'intention de quitter... telle est la question! *Humain et Organisation*, 4(1), 26-36. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095897ar>
- Lee, K.-J., & Youm, J. (2024). Effect of Citizen Incivility on Self-Sacrifice of Public Service Motivation and Turnover Intention of Street-Level Bureaucrats: Mediating Effect of Emotional Exhaustion. *Public Performance & Management Review*, 47(6), 1376-1398. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15309576.2024.2390621>
- Maslach, C., Jackson, S. E., & Leiter, M. P. (1997). Maslach Burnout Inventory: Third edition. In *Evaluating stress: A book of resources* (pp. 191-218). Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Mouele, D. G. B. (2023). *Essai d'analyse sur l'évolution de la fonction publique au regard des contraintes budgétaires et financières: Étude comparative entre la France et le Gabon* [Doctoral dissertation, Université de Perpignan]. <https://theses.hal.science/tel-04193659>
- Muthén, L. K., & Muthén, B. O. (2023). *Mplus user's guide* (Muthén&Muthén).
- Prouet, E., Barasz, J., & Faure, A. (2024). *Travailler dans la fonction publique: Le défi de l'attractivité*. France Stratégie. <https://www.strategie.gouv.fr/publications/travailler-fonction-publique-defi-de-l-attractivite>
- Reiter, R., & Klenk, T. (2019). The manifold meanings of 'post-New Public Management' – a systematic literature review. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 85(1), 11-27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020852318759736>
- Rivière, A., Commeiras, N., & Loubès, A. (2019). Nouveau Management Public, tensions de rôle et stress professionnel chez les cadres de santé. *Revue de gestion des ressources humaines*, 112(2), 3-20. <https://doi.org/10.3917/grhu.112.0003>
- Rossano, M. (2018). *La santé au travail dans les fonctions publiques territoriale et hospitalière: Une approche par les ressources* [Doctoral dissertation, Université Grenoble Alpes]. <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-02049049>