

**Pieces of a puzzle: Linking government performance,
citizen satisfaction, and trust**

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INTRODUCTION

An important question in the study of local government performance concerns how citizens respond to good or bad government performance, particularly with respect to their satisfaction judgments and, in turn, trust of government. At first glance, this may seem to be a simple question. Citizens are satisfied, we might assume, when government performs well, and are dissatisfied when government performs poorly. But from an empirical research perspective, the question of how citizens respond to government performance is more complicated than this assumption of a simple correspondence. To begin with, government performance, particularly the actual outcomes or accomplishments of government efforts, are often not well measured or not measured at all. In addition, even when good outcome measures are available, citizens often respond based on their perceptions of performance, which may or may not correlate with outcome measures collected by public administrators. Furthermore, little is known about the processes citizens use to combine their various performance perceptions into an overall satisfaction judgment or sense of trust, as well as other behavioral consequences of inherent interest (such as complaining or leaving a jurisdiction).

In this paper, I outline a conceptual framework for investigating the relationships between government performance, citizen satisfaction, and trust. My motivation for doing so stems from a desire to piece together the results of a number of separate but related studies my colleagues and I have completed in this area over the past five years using citizen survey data from both New York City and the nation (USA). I also seek to identify other, related research and to suggest promising areas for future investigation of the question of how citizens respond to good or bad government performance.

It can be argued that a better understanding of the links between government performance, citizen satisfaction, and trust can contribute a great deal to the field of public administration and public management. From a utilitarian perspective, the maximization of satisfaction, or utility, can be seen as an ethical imperative for the organization of society and, thus, the aims and operations of government (Goodin, 1995). The contemporary focus on customer service and managing for results, often defined in terms of citizen satisfaction, are established strategies of the New Public Management and Reinventing Government (Kettl, 2000; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). And the gradual yet sustained decline in trust of government over the past few decades raises concerns – not only about public sector performance – but about

citizens' changing relationships with and views of government (Yang & Holzer, 2006). For all these reasons it becomes imperative to understand better, and with empirical evidence, the pieces of this puzzle – the links between government performance, citizen satisfaction, and trust.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework of the major relationships involved in addressing the question of how citizens respond to the performance of government. It should be pointed out that this framework is a meta-analytic one, in the sense that it describes a set of general relationships, or links, that my colleagues and I, as well as various other researchers in the field, have begun to investigate through more specific, in-depth empirical studies. This section briefly describes the framework; later sections will illuminate the links in the framework, and the empirical research issues and evidence, in more detail.

The first link in the framework refers to the fact that public managers employ various strategies to influence objective outcomes (the A-B link), although these outcomes are not entirely under their control (exogenous influences, such as the economy and social trends, also play a role). In the next link, citizens then experience or perceive these outcomes (the B-C link), but these perceptions may or may not correspond closely to objectively measured performance for various reasons to be discussed shortly. Performance perceptions then get combined into a summative satisfaction judgment (the C-D link), a process that I will argue involves weighting individual perceptions with various government services and comparing performance perceptions with prior expectations. And finally, overall satisfaction with government contributes to trust and influences related behaviors, such as exiting, complaining, and neglect (the D-E link). Although the framework presented in Figure 1 emphasizes a causal direction flowing from left to right, the dotted lines indicate relationships that upon investigation could well turn out to involve reverse causality. More will be said about this in later sections. Performance perceptions, satisfaction, and trust may be driven by *exogenous influences* as well, such as the personal background characteristics, social context, the media, and political ideology.

The next sections of this paper discuss each of these links in the framework in more detail. Selected research findings from the work my colleagues and I have done on New York City and the nation (USA), as well as the findings of researchers studying other localities, are

presented that shed light on the nature of the relationship as well as suggest topics of future research.

A→B: Managerial Strategy and Objective Outcomes

As mentioned, the framework in Figure 1 begins by asserting a link between managerial strategy and the objective outcomes or accomplishments of government. This link represents the traditional concern of public sector performance measurement – managing for results (Hatry 1999). Police departments engage in strategies to reduce crime. Sanitation departments strive to clean streets and to collect garbage in a timely manner. The parks department tends to the parks, playgrounds, and gardens of the city. Of course, public managers cannot entirely direct or control these outcomes. Crime may surge, or recede, for reasons (such as fluctuations in the economy or a change in the supply of street drugs crossing the border) that lie beyond the immediate control of the police department. These are the *exogenous influences* on objective performance shown in Figure 1. Thus, the link between managerial strategy and objective outcomes remains far from perfect or deterministic. Although a good deal of public administration research over the years has focused on the use and effectiveness of various managerial strategies for improving government performance (see for example Kettl, Fanaras, Lieb, & Michaels 2006), my concern in this paper is not with these strategies as such but rather with the question of how citizens respond to the results.

Importantly, the outcomes of government may be imperfectly measured – or not measured at all – so that public managers have little indication of whether or not they are achieving their purposes. Indeed, the push for more and better outcome measurement reflects this desire to avoid ‘flying blind’ and, again, manage for results (Poister, 2003). Indeed, research suggests that many public managers still base strategy on only limited outcome measures (Julnes & Holzer 2001). Moreover, the limited availability of outcome measures has important implications for research on how citizens respond to good or bad government performance. If performance measures are unavailable, it becomes impossible to examine the influence of government performance on citizen satisfaction and trust of government. The data is simply not on hand to answer the question.

Even when performance measures are available, they often focus on *outputs* rather than true *outcomes* that matter to citizens (Hatry 1999). Thus, more effort needs to be devoted to

developing performance measures that capture outcomes of most interest to citizens, such as the work of Barbara Cohen and colleagues at the Fund for the City of New York's Center on Municipal Government Performance (Cohen 2005). And research on citizens' responses to government performance should focus on areas of government performance for which good, citizen-driven measures exist. Otherwise, research on citizen responses to government performance will simply end up demonstrating the obvious: that citizens' judgments about government performance correlate poorly with outcome measures they care little about.

B→C: Objective Outcomes and Perceived Outcomes

The outcomes or accomplishments of government, no matter how imperfectly under the control of public managers, then get experienced or perceived by citizens. This link between *objective* and *subjective* measures of government performance has received a fair amount of attention in the public administration literature, in part because of interest in and use of citizen surveys by local governments to measure performance (Holzer & Yang, 2004; Miller & Miller-Kobayashi, 2000). Early advocates of citizen surveys tended to portray the ratings of service quality as unproblematic, provided questions in a citizen survey are worded clearly and fairly (Webb & Hatry, 1973). But in an influential article by Stipak (1979), serious doubts began to be raised about the potential of citizen surveys to serve as a true gauge of government performance. Subsequent articles by Brown and Coulter (1983) and more recently Kelly and Swindell (2002; see also Swindell and Kelly, 2000) cast further doubt on the ability of citizen surveys to capture objectively measured government performance in the areas of policing, road conditions, and parks. It may even be said that a prevailing view among public administration scholars and practitioners has emerged in which citizen perceptions of government performance have come to be seen as generally inaccurate and untrustworthy, although perhaps of interest in their own right for public relations purposes (Stipak 1980).

However, recent studies demonstrate that citizens can form accurate perceptions of the quality of at least some local government services. In a *Public Administration Review* article, Licari, McLean, and Rice (2005) found that citizens' ratings of street maintenance and park conditions in 99 small towns in Iowa (USA) correlated closely (.49 and .34, respectively) with trained, nonresident observers' ratings of these same services. And in a recent APPAM conference paper, my colleagues and I (Van Ryzin, Immerwahr, & Altman 2005) report an even

stronger correlation between citizens' ratings of street cleanliness in 59 districts of New York City and the city government's well-established street cleanliness scorecard. **Figure 2** shows this correlation ($r = .73$) for New York City in 2001. It should be noted many performance measurement experts point to New York City's street cleanliness scorecard as a model of true outcome measurement (Hatry 1999). These two recent empirical studies suggest that citizens can indeed judge the quality of city services in a way that corresponds quite closely with objective outcome measures, and thus that citizens can accurately assess the performance of at least some government services.

As the conceptual framework in Figure 1 suggests, exogenous influences may well help determine subjective performance measures, including such influences as demographic factors, the media, and general attitudes toward government. In a study that looked at the race gap in satisfaction with city services, my colleagues and I discovered significant differences by race-ethnicity in a range of city services, even after controlling for neighborhood-specific effects (Van Ryzin, Muzzio, & Immerwahr 2004). However, much of the race gap disappeared when we included trust and expectations of government as control variables. This suggests that race per se may not be the key factor but rather general attitudes toward government that are correlated with race. One noteworthy exception was in the area of policing where the race gap persisted even after controlling for socioeconomic status, neighborhood, and general trust. Notice that this analysis assumed general trust of government was an ingrained outlook developed in individuals or groups based on past or even historical experience, culture, and ideology rather than a reflection of current satisfaction with government performance. This possible reverse causality, indicated by the dotted lines in Figure 1, is plausible as well as consistent with our empirical findings.

In sum, I would argue that more needs to be understood about which objectively measured outcomes matter to citizens, and which do not, particularly in areas like policing that seem to suggest a poor correspondence between government performance measures and citizen perceptions. Perhaps arrest rates, clearance rates, or even crime rates matter less to citizens than other measures of the safety and security of their neighborhoods, such as loitering, graffiti, and other common indicators of disorder. And there is also the important issue of policy-community relations to consider. These are empirical questions that can be answered by research. Moreover, such an understanding might well suggest some key outcome measures to include

beyond those traditionally tracked by local government. In addition, more must be known about those areas of government performance for which citizens can, indeed, make accurate assessments. The recent empirical evidence regarding street cleanliness, street maintenance, and park conditions would seem to suggest that citizen perceptions can be quite valid when the service is clearly visible and frequently experienced. Citizen assessments of such services as policing, fire protection, and even public education (especially for those without children in the schools) may be inherently more difficult to judge objectively and thus more susceptible to influences such as culture, historical reputation, and the media. Again, these are questions that additional empirical research can help answer.

C→D: Perceived Outcomes and Satisfaction

Walter Lippmann (1922) long ago recognized that it was not “the world outside” but “the pictures in our heads” that determine citizens’ responses to government and public affairs. He wrote that, in responding to public affairs, “what each man does is based not on direct and certain knowledge, put on pictures made by himself or given to him” (p. 16). Lippmann’s concern was with public opinion about the events of World War I, yet the essential problem he posed can be applied to national and local government affairs as well. Most people do not directly experience crime rates or high school dropout rates, yet we form perceptions of how well the police and public schools are doing their job. While some of these perceptions may relate only vaguely to the actual efforts and accomplishments of government, in other service areas that are more directly experienced by citizens, as we have seen, these performance perceptions may indeed be quite accurate. Either way, it is the *perception* of government performance that constitutes the basis for the formation of overall satisfaction judgments and related behavioral responses by citizens (such as complaining or leaving).

Thus, the question becomes: How do citizens combine their various perceptions of government performance, however objectively valid, into an overall satisfaction judgment? One possible answer to this question can be found in the *expectancy-disconfirmation model*, a model developed from years of research in the field of consumer behavior (Oliver 1997). The expectancy-disconfirmation model suggests that citizens form their overall satisfaction judgments by comparing their perceptions of performance to their prior expectations. To the extent perceived performance meets or exceeds expectations, citizens are satisfied; and to the

extent perceived performance falls short of their expectations, citizens grow dissatisfied. Two previous studies by the author, one using citizen survey data from New York City (Van Ryzin 2004a) and the other using data from an online survey of a national panel of people from across the USA (Van Ryzin 2006), provide empirical support for the expectancy-disconfirmation model of the formation of overall citizen satisfaction with local government services. **Figure 3** shows the model and the empirical estimates for the New York City case (Van Ryzin, 2005).

In the model estimated in Figure 3, disconfirmation is a subtractive measure of the difference between prior expectations and the perceived overall quality of local government services. Performance is a composite (latent) variable measured by a set of specific perceived service quality ratings, including policing, schools, public transit, parks, street cleanliness, road conditions, etc. Performance has a positive direct effect on overall satisfaction, but performance also has a substantial indirect effect on satisfaction through disconfirmation. In other words, citizens form their satisfaction judgments not only in direct response to their perception of performance but also through comparison of these performance perceptions to their prior expectations. The expectations variable in this study was retrospectively ascertained, which is a limitation of cross-sectional survey research. But much the same pattern of coefficients was obtained in a replication study using a much different sample and survey methodology (Van Ryzin 2006). Still, it would be useful to conduct some experimental research to test the model, for example by experimentally manipulating citizen expectations and government performance (through simulation) and then observing the overall satisfaction response.

The key insight from the expectancy-disconfirmation model is that citizens may form their overall satisfaction judgments in a way that both reflects their performance perceptions and their prior expectations. It therefore calls attention to the origins of and influences on expectations, for example citizens' past performance experiences, the media, or even the efforts of public managers to set public expectations through various public relations efforts.

D→E: Satisfaction, Trust, and EVLN

Overall citizen satisfaction may well be seen as an outcome of intrinsic interest in its own right, a utilitarian value and ultimate aim of government (Goodin, 1995). Still, we would like to know that what we measure as overall citizen satisfaction indeed captures this utilitarian aim.

Moreover, from a public administration or governing perspective, we might wish to consider the

instrumental value of citizen satisfaction – how it helps us accomplish our professional and institutional objectives. Finally, there is also the political question of what actions citizens take, both individually and collectively, when dissatisfied with local government performance. For these reasons, the last step in the model suggests a link between overall citizen satisfaction and trust of government as well as other behavioral consequences, such as complaining or leaving a jurisdiction. These key behavioral consequences of dissatisfaction were put forth by Lyons, Lowery, and DeHoog (1992) in what they term the EVLN model: *exit* (leaving a jurisdiction), *voice* (complaining), *loyalty* (trust), and *neglect* (apathy or alienation). Their theoretical work, supported by substantial empirical evidence on citizen satisfaction in Lexington and Louisville (USA), suggest that these behaviors constitute the major forms of citizen response to satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, with local government performance.

The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) model provides another, related specification of the link between local government performance, citizen satisfaction, and the behavioral consequences of trust and exit. Originally developed to explain the behavior of business consumers (Fornell et al, 1996), the ACSI model has been applied and tested in the context of local government services by my colleagues and I, again using survey data on New York City residents (Van Ryzin et al, 2004). The antecedents of satisfaction include performance perceptions and expectations, as previously discussed in the context of the expectancy-disconfirmation model. But the ACSI model explicitly views satisfaction as instrumental to obtaining other outcomes, such as increasing customer retentions or reducing customer complaints (in a business context). The Van Ryzin et al (2004) study, following the work of Lyons et al (1992), used trust of government (loyalty) and intentions to move out the jurisdiction (exit) as the end outcomes of interest. As **Figure 4** shows, the outcome of overall citizen satisfaction is positively related to trust of government (TRUST) and negatively related to behavioral intentions to move out of the jurisdiction (MOVEOUT).

Additional evidence for the behavioral consequences of overall citizen satisfaction comes from an online study of mine (Van Ryzin 2004) that examined the predictive validity of a three-item index of citizen satisfaction composed of overall satisfaction, comparison with expectations, and comparison with an ideal level of performance of local government services. This prospective study showed that baseline citizen satisfaction in a national panel of US adults was related to various behaviors and attitude changes 120 days later. Citizen satisfaction was

negatively correlated with later steps taken toward moving ($r = -.17$), such as looking for a job or a place to live in another locality, and positively correlated with both change in trust of local officials ($r = .15$) and change in confidence in local officials ($r = .22$). Although modest, these correlations do provide some evidence that overall citizen satisfaction can indeed predict future behaviors and attitudes of interest, such as staying in a jurisdiction or trusting local government.

CONCLUSIONS

In order to manage and to govern effectively, it is important to avoid operating under the simplistic assumption that citizens respond directly to the outcomes of government, as gauged by traditional performance measures, in an uncomplicated manner. As I have argued, traditional performance measures do not necessarily capture the dimensions or features of service quality that matter most to citizens. More effort must be made in the field, therefore, to develop truly citizen-driven performance measures that both help public managers manage and that help truly satisfy the needs of the people they serve. Furthermore, citizens clearly perceive some outcomes in ways that may be selective or influenced by exogenous variables, such as demographic differences or general attitudes toward government. These exogenous influences need to be better understood. Still, for government services that are directly experienced and frequently encountered, research suggests that citizen perceptions are often more accurate than previously assumed. More needs to be known about which services citizens perceive accurately and which services seem most susceptible to exogenous influences. The overall satisfaction judgments citizens make about government, in turn, depend on their performance perceptions – not necessarily on the objective measures of achievement printed in government scorecards and reports. Thus, more needs to be understood about the processes citizens use to combine their performance perceptions into overall satisfaction judgments. The expectancy-disconfirmation model provides one possible explanation of this process, but the model requires far more empirical validation and testing. Finally, there is some evidence that citizens' overall satisfaction with government predicts important behavioral responses, such as trusting government or leaving a jurisdiction. Here too more research is needed. Still, it is important to keep in mind that overall citizen satisfaction deserves to be viewed as an outcome of interest in its own right, not just a means to obtaining political or institutional objectives.

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Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Government performance, citizen satisfaction, and trust

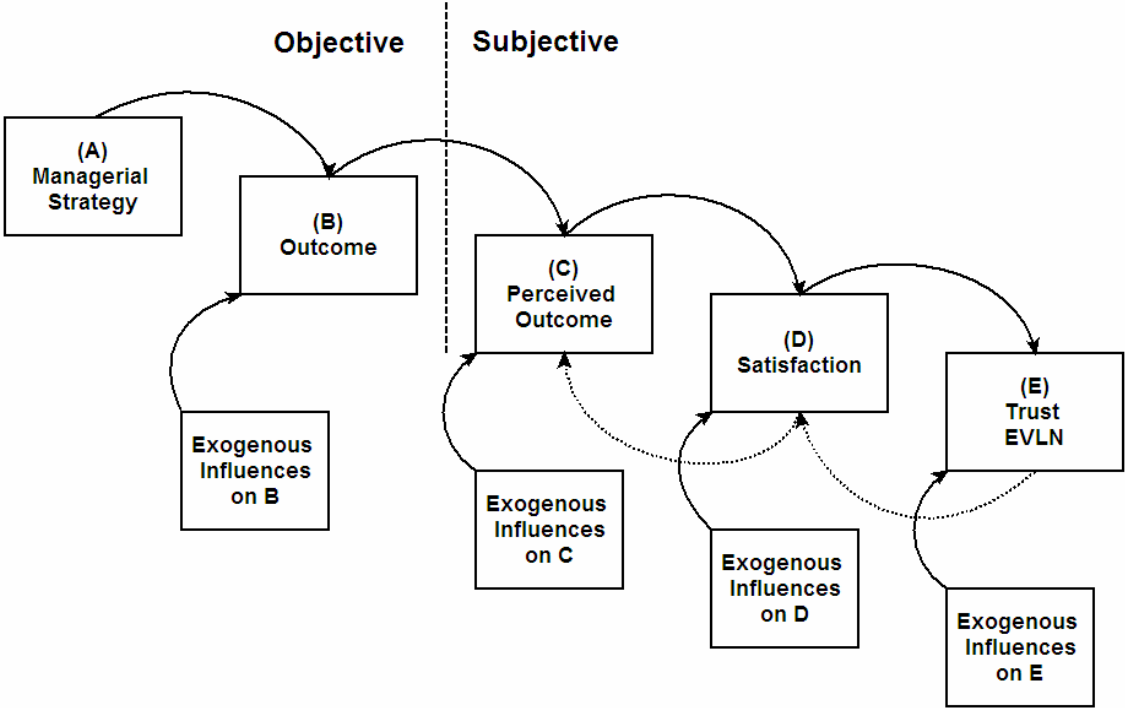
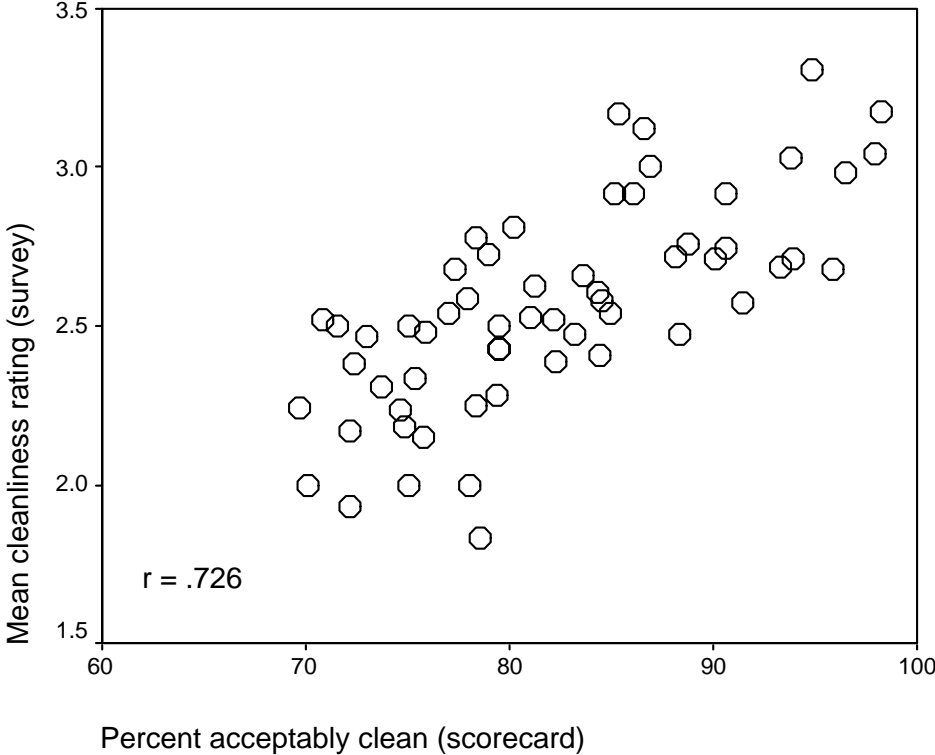
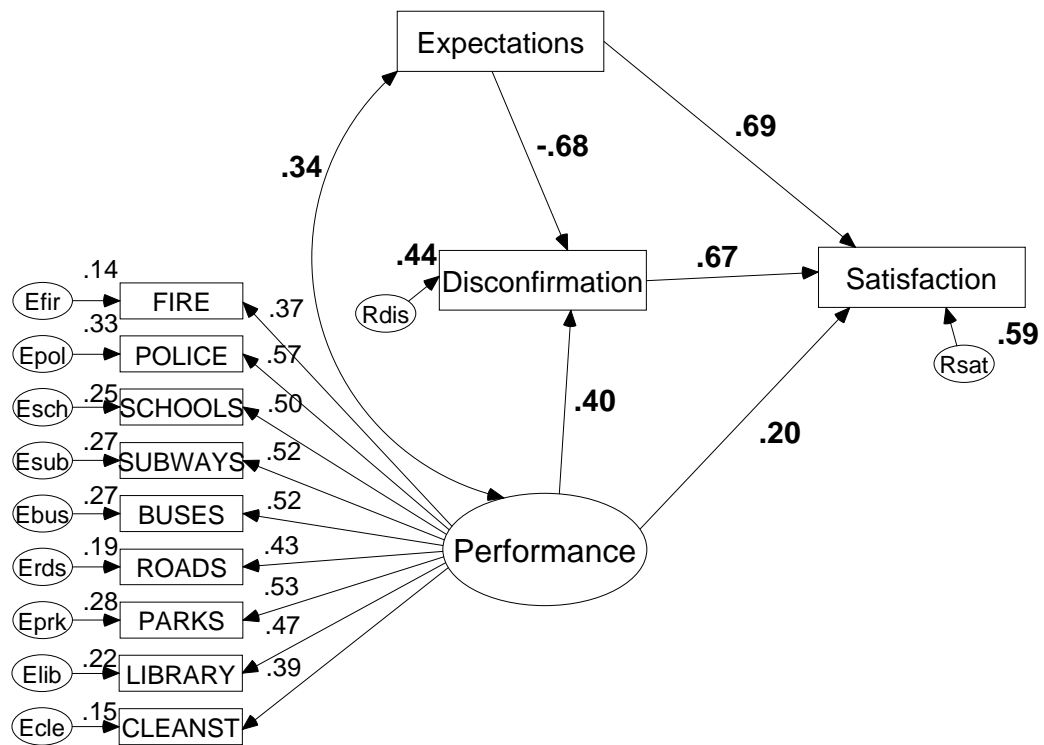


Figure 2. Correlation between objective (scorecard) and subjective (survey) measures of street cleanliness for New York City neighborhoods



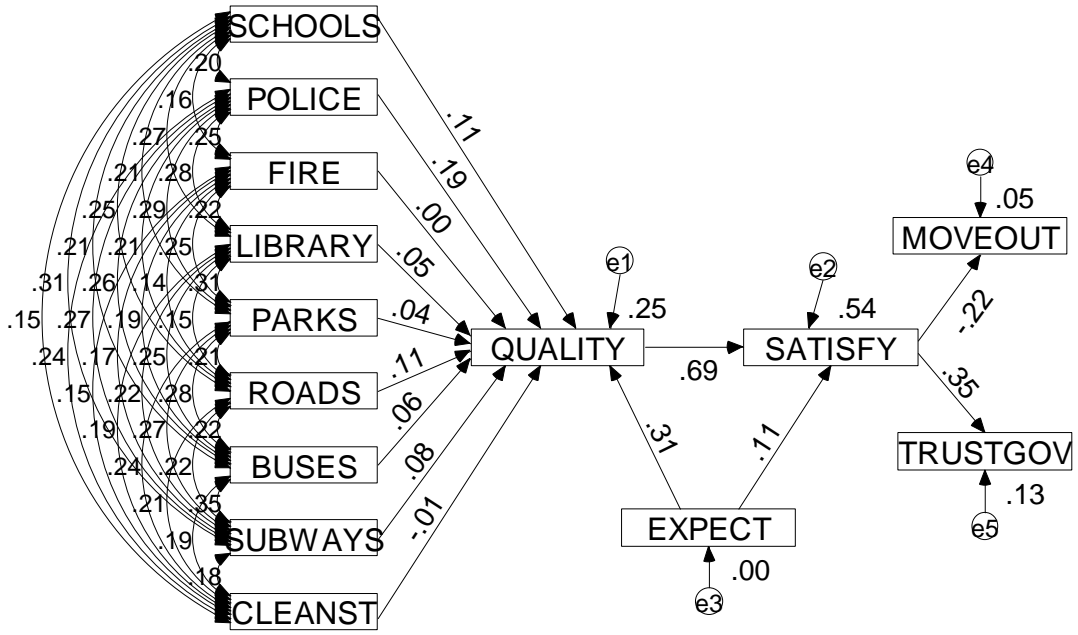
Source: Van Ryzin & Immerwahr (2005)

Figure 3. The expectancy-disconfirmation model of the formation of overall citizen satisfaction judgments (standardized estimates, 2001 New York City citizen survey data)



Source: Van Ryzin (2005)

Figure 4. The American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) model of drivers and consequences (standardized estimates, 2001 New York City citizen survey data)



Source: Van Ryzin, Muzzio, Immerwahr, Gulick & Martinez (2004).