



## Comment on Performance

Brian Stipak

*Public Administration Review*, Vol. 44, No. 6. (Nov. - Dec., 1984), pp. 551-552.

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*Public Administration Review* is currently published by American Society for Public Administration.

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# Communications

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## Necessary Essay

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To the Editor:

I found Roger R. Parks' essay on Linking Objective and Subjective Measures of Performance, to be a most necessary one. Mr. Parks addresses an issue that has plagued law enforcement public relations programs for years. I am referring to the dichotomy that exists between the perspectives of law enforcement vs. the public, as to the role and function of the police in the community. Whereas the police officer views him or herself as an enforcer of the law, the public traditionally views the police as societies' servants. Community dwellers seldom concern themselves with statistics; rather, they seem to possess a tendency to regard the police with disdain should a responding officer fail to remain courteous, helpful, and responsive to citizens' needs and problems.

The argument presented paves the way towards a greater understanding of the dichotomy that exists between objective and subjective indicators in regards to police service effectiveness.

J. Gregory Jarrett

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## Comment on Performance

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To the Editor:

Roger Parks' article, "Linking Objective and Subjective Measures of Performance" (*PAR*, March/April 1984), investigates how objective characteristics of governmental services affect citizens' subjective evaluations of those services. Parks claims to demonstrate a much stronger linkage than earlier research by Philip Coulter and myself. Although I feel the Parks' article is in many ways an excellent article, I want to warn *PAR* readers against too quickly accepting its conclusions.

The Parks' article reports research on citizens' evaluations of the speed of police response time in their neighborhoods. This is a very specific subjective measure of a specific objective performance characteristic. Research has shown that specific measures have greater reliability, and probably greater validity, than more general measures, and for that reason I have recommended their use over more general evaluations. The very specific subjective measure Parks analyzes is the type of subjective measure most likely to show clear linkages to objective performance. Unfortunately, because administrators typically use more general subjective measures, such as citizens' satisfaction with a governmental service, the findings of the Parks'

research have limited relevance for the use of subjective performance measures.

Another reason for caution in drawing conclusions from the Parks' article concerns the research methodology. The article claims to develop and test "an alternative specification of the possible linkages of objective and subjective indicators." It does not, in fact, *develop and test*, but rather merely *develops and estimates* an alternative specification. The difference involves a crucial distinction between elaborating a theoretical position versus presenting evidence for that position. Figures 1 and 2 in the article represent Parks' prior theory of how the variables are related. The numbers in the path diagram (Figure 2) do not test the theory, but rather are estimates obtained after accepting the theory *a priori*. These estimates are meaningless if the diagram is meaningless.

What, then, is the theory embodied in these diagrams? These diagrams embody a theory of economic rationality that presumes individuals' attitudes result from rational calculations based on relevant perceptions and experience. This perspective stems naturally from the ongoing Indiana University Workshop research, in which Parks is a key participant, on the political economy of urban services. This perspective contrasts greatly with more psychological perspectives, as well as with findings from research on public opinion and on subjective social indicators. Unfortunately, the carefully logical, deductive perspective of political economy that accounts for the Workshop's excellent work on city services may impede attempts of those readers at understanding subjective survey measures.

To illustrate alternative theoretical perspectives, take Figure 2 in the Parks' article. Figure 2 shows reported response time (MINUTES) as having a direct effect on reported satisfaction (NEGEXP). Thus, citizens' satisfaction is considered a result of rational assessments of police actions, including response time. A contrasting perspective might reverse the causal arrow and show that reported satisfaction affects reported response time. This formulation would fit a psychological model that views specific information elicited from citizens about an encounter as affected by the citizens' overall feelings about that encounter. Citizens who feel dissatisfied about a police encounter might therefore report longer response times *because of their general dissatisfaction*. Thus, Figure 2 represents only one specific theoretical perspective.

Any doubts about this theoretical perspective invalidate not only the reported path coefficients, but also the estimated total effects. By positing numerous intervening variables between objective and subjective performance measures we might compute large estimated total effects for the objective measures, but whether

those estimates are spurious or reasonable depends on the correctness of the presumed causal structure. Simply going through a path analysis exercise that yields large estimated total effects—and note that the Parks' article shows rather modest total effects—may reveal more about the theoretical perspective of the researchers than about the true underlying effects.

I feel this is true for the Parks' article. As already discussed, the article assumes a response model based on economic rationality, rather than alternative psychological response models I and others have discussed elsewhere. Moreover, the variables hypothesized to have a direct impact on citizens' evaluations of neighborhood response time (Figure 1) are all variables based on citizen survey information. For example, the variable showing the strongest direct effect and total effect, the variable labelled "Response Time in Recent Experience" in Figure 1 and "MINUTES" in Figure 2, is based on citizens' answers to the survey. The variable showing the second strongest direct effect is reported satisfaction with a recent police encounter. Viewed from the article's highly rational perspective this all makes sense. But alternatively, what if answers to these different survey questions result largely from citizens' general attitudes toward police? What if answers to specific questions about a police encounter reflect primarily general feelings about that encounter? In that case, it would hardly be surprising that those variables were interrelated, and that using them as intervening variables would create inflated "total effects."

Rather than showing strikingly new results, the Parks' article basically fits earlier research, including my own, showing that citizens' evaluations of governmental services have weak relationships with objective performance measures commonly used by administrators. This does not invalidate their importance and use, but it certainly complicates their interpretation.

Brian Stipak  
*Portland State University*

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### No Apologies

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To the Editor:

In his comment on my recent article, Brian Stipak questions my use of a model based in "economic rationality." My own view is that it is preferable to model human behavior as if people responded rationally to stimuli they perceive, rather than to postulate unknowable psychological constructs. With reference to my article, I argued that public service delivery agencies take actions which produce phenomena that are, in turn, perceived by citizens. Citizens then form their evaluations of the phenomena they perceive, and can report their evaluations to interviewers in a survey context. I find this a reasonable line of argumentation, one that most of us, upon introspection, would agree is the way we react to the world. I make no apologies for adopting it.

Stipak is correct when he makes the distinction between developing and testing and developing and estimating. I regret my usage of the word "testing." Path analytic techniques cannot provide a test of a model such as the one I developed, though they can assess whether a set of data are consistent with the model as specified a priori. It is this consistency which I demonstrated in the article.

Stipak claims that citizens' evaluation of the speed of police response is too specific a measure to have relevance for administrators. Given the emphasis placed by police administrators on responding rapidly to citizens' service requests, I find this claim spurious. Further, this specific evaluation measure correlates quite highly with citizens' overall evaluations of the police services they receive (a Pearson  $r$  of 0.78 in the data set I employed). Thus, the results with respect to this evaluation might be generalized to reflect on the validity of "general subjective measures."

Finally, I suppose one person's relatively strong relationships are another's weak relationships. To provide some comparison between my own findings and those reported earlier in Stipak's 1979 *PAR* article, I offer the following. Stipak reported that an increase of 5 sworn officers per 10,000 population would increase evaluations by .075 standard deviations. My own data (using the same type of partial analysis as that of Stipak) estimate an increase of .040 standard deviations, a weak result similar to Stipak's. But, an increase of 10 percent in the assignment of sworn officers to patrol is estimated by my results to increase response speed evaluations by .90 standard deviations. This is not an insignificant or weak relationship. It serves to highlight one of the messages of my article—how resources are used is much more important than how many resources are available. Unfortunately, Stipak did not include such usage measures in his 1979 article and, so, may have missed this important linkage.

I appreciate the opportunity to clarify these few points regarding my own and Stipak's analyses and look forward to a continuation of our dialogue in forthcoming issues of the *Review*.

Roger Parks  
*Indiana University*

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### Understanding Research

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To the Editor:

In my academic experience, those who demand "research standards" often indicate that they do not understand research. This is the case with the Howard McCurdy/Robert Cleary piece ("Why Can't We Resolve the Research Issue in Public Administration?" Jan/Feb 1984). Perhaps asked to create a problem that NASPAA can solve, the authors combine careless reasoning, academic snobbishness and, above all, their own unacceptable research methods, to fashion recommendations that could lock the field into a straight-jacket and perhaps land NASPAA in court.