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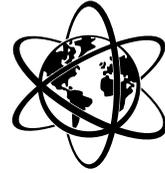**Email Alerts:** http://ras.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

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Mapping the terrain of public service quality improvement: twenty-five years of trends and practices in the United States

Marc Holzer, Etienne Charbonneau and Younhee Kim

Abstract
The quality movement in the United States has been characterized as an impetus for organizational effectiveness and responsiveness since the late 1970s. 'Quality' can be a subjective term as each organization has its own definition and boundaries. Three emphases are evident in the field of quality improvement: quality circles, total quality management, and citizen satisfaction. Practices of quality improvement in the public sector have been driven by demands from citizens for more effective services, outcomes that require the implementation of suitable quality models and standards.

Points for practitioners
This article presents major intellectual trends in the practice of service quality improvement. Practitioners will be able to comprehend the most fundamental concepts of 'what is public service quality improvement'. Practitioners will also obtain useful insights into defining quality criteria and assessing organizational improvement models based on substantive principles of quality management for promoting organizational effectiveness and responsiveness.

Keywords: citizen satisfaction, performance management, quality awards, quality circles, quality improvement, TQM

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Introduction

Driven by citizen concerns for improved government performance since the 1970s, public organizations have increasingly turned their attention to producing better services. A fundamental ongoing task of contemporary public administration reform is, then, to improve the quality and performance of public services. In the United States, the conceptual construction of quality assurance is modeled on organizational effectiveness efforts that emerged in the private sector from the late 1950s. Since the 1970s, the term 'effectiveness' has been redefined more narrowly as the concept of 'quality' (Boyne, 2003). There is not a standard definition of the term, as it ranges over 'quality control', 'quality increases', 'quality assurance', 'quality of life', and even 'quality of working life'. While quality of life, for example, is measured in terms of economic and social conditions, quality of working life is gauged by job satisfaction, lifecycle planning, and the absence or presence of alienation (US Civil Service Commission, 1978). Parallel to quality initiatives in government, public organizations have, since the late 1970s, taken renewed notice of the benefits of quality management for cultivating a quality improvement culture.

The emphasis on total quality in the United States emerged as a direct response to the quality revolution in Japan, focusing on improving an entire organization's processes via total quality management (TQM). By the end of the 1990s, however, TQM had faded from view in the US, although it was still a dominant concept in Europe (American Society for Quality, 2007). In the early 1990s, the Federal National Performance Review initiative and the call for 'Reinventing Government' pushed government to become both more efficient and more attentive to new approaches to organizational change and improvement. As in the private sector, quality improvement in government requires more than just increased efficiency. It is now viewed by public sector practitioners and academics as an effective vehicle for achieving public organizations' goals that citizens have been promised and that they expect to be fulfilled to their satisfaction.

This article discusses major research trends on public service quality improvement classified into three areas: quality circles, total quality management, and citizen satisfaction. Within this conceptual foundation, we address popular practices of public service quality improvement. The final section sheds light on an ongoing concern for citizen satisfaction as a central concept of quality improvement.

Three conceptual pillars in the quality improvement trend

'Service quality is one of those slippery concepts in public administration. Attempts to define and measure it to everyone's complete satisfaction are analogous to the challenge of herding cats' (Folz, 2004: 213). This might be why, in a 1999 survey, Streib and Poister (1999: 113) observed that more than two-thirds of the surveyed 1218 senior officials from municipal jurisdictions in the United States had trouble measuring quality at least some of the time. As an example, one of the most straightforward and important public services, the provision of tap water,[1] illustrates the complexity of discerning quality. If we think about quality of tap water, we first think of its color, the absence of foul smell and taste. At least in the Western hemisphere, we take for

granted that it will not poison us with arsenic, lead, DDT, PCBs, *E. coli*, etc. Perhaps this is where quality lies: in what we take for granted. Moreover, the quality of tap water is inseparable from the quantity of the supply and the efficacy of the treatment process. Tap water quality, not unlike other public services, is a constant compromise between quality and quantity: it would be easy for a municipality to offer a greater supply of water of lower quality for a better price (Beecher and Shanaghan, 1999: 30).

Folz and Lyons (1986: 23) argue that 'the concept of service quality is related to the effectiveness concept, but refers specifically to service level, timeliness, convenience, accuracy, and responsiveness'. This recalls problems underscored by Waldo (2006 [1948]: 201–4) when trying to define 'efficiency': normative values are intertwined and make little sense when defined on their own. The same way efficiency is used to mean at least as effective using fewer resources, or of equal or better quality with no more than the current amount of resources, quality improvements are better understood when referenced to gains in equity, effectiveness or efficiency.

Quality circles

The idea inherent in quality circles was to increase an organization's productivity, as well as the quality of its products, through direct employee participation (Blair et al., 1982; Roll and Roll, 1983; Steel et al., 1985; Kersell, 1988). It initially developed from experiments in Japanese private sector firms. Many definitions were provided for quality circles in the public sector. A typical definition of a quality circle is a:

> … small group of people who do similar or connected work and who meet regularly (usually an hour a week) to identify, analyze, and solve work-process problems. Typically, quality circles are 6 to 12 employees led by their first-line supervisor and assisted by a trained facilitator. (Denhardt et al., 1987: 304)

The consultation and problem-solving process is bottom-up. All the participants in the process, circle members, supervisors and the meeting facilitator, have previously been trained in the ethos of quality circles and how to conduct problem-solving discussions. Recommendations are carried up the hierarchical chain, from which corrective actions should then be implemented in a top-down manner (or may simply be implemented by work groups at lower levels). Innovations for increased quality of operations typically come from line employees, not from the 'new, the very great, and the extraordinary burdens and duties' of managers (Taylor, 1912).

What happened with quality circles? Why did this practice fade from North American public agencies? Like many new management methods, quality circles had been 'hyped' and 'sold' to agencies before being implemented. Expectations were high, but implementation was laborious and results were mixed. As Steel et al. (1985: 116) observed in quality circles in US hospitals: 'The most enthusiastic employees (with the highest expectations) probably became actively involved as participants in the program. When the intervention failed to deliver (either because it lacked the capacity to do so or because it was badly managed), high hopes were dashed, a reaction set in, and attitudes declined.' In a changing workplace, it was at times difficult to attribute results to a particular technique. Support and funding eroded: quality circles were dissolved (Steel et al., 1985: 117).

The quality circle is not, of course, the first technique that was oversold. The main

assumption of quality circles is that the solution for quality improvement lies within the organization: if only different elements of the organization were listened to or could easily exchange information, then the quality of the services would improve. This idea became increasingly difficult to sell to stakeholders outside government (especially private sector interest groups and employers' associations, but also elected officials) to the extent that government was typically depicted by its critics as being inefficient, ineffective and overly bureaucratic. The mantra was that public servants should look to their counterparts in the private sector for guidance on how to improve quality rather than seeking insights from their daily experiences in government.

Issues of quality, of course, remained. At the beginning of the 1990s, scholars started documenting what public agencies were accomplishing with this new technique, often imported from the private sector as Total Quality Management.

TQM

Total Quality Management (TQM) was increasingly evident in academic journals soon after the wave of quality circles had crested. In North America, the bulk of the TQM literature was written in the 1990s. However, some scholarly articles in third world settings are still being published (Withanachchi et al., 2007). Much like quality circles, TQM was first introduced by private sector entities to improve quality (Dean and Helms, 1996). TQM as a 'simple but revolutionary way of performing work' (Cohen and Eimicke, 1994: 450) refers to:

> *Total* means applying to every aspect of work, from identifying customer needs to aggressively evaluating whether the customer is satisfied. *Quality* means meeting and exceeding customer expectations. *Management* means developing and maintaining the organizational capacity to constantly improve quality. (Cohen and Eimicke, 1994: 450)

Concretely, this translates into basic elements pertinent to public servants' day to day work (Cohen and Brand, 1993). First, public sector employees must check that the supplies used in the agency's daily operations are adequate. Second, employees must constantly analyze how they carry out tasks to try to improve processes and reduce variations. Dean and Helms (1996) would add quality leadership to the list, that agencies must be led by informed, sophisticated leaders who are responsive to inputs from the workforce. For their part, the Canada School of Public Service suggests the necessity for a 'strategic quality plan' (CSPS, 2007) as a fourth element of TQM. Cohen and Eimicke (1994: 451) also specify that, with TQM, departments must be able to tap their workers' expertise on how to ameliorate operations. Just as important, employees must be attentive to customers' (or citizens') needs and expectations as to how they perceive quality. In a sense, then, TQM is a derivative of quality circles, with an added focus on customers'/citizens' needs.

In the public sector, the core meaning of TQM, as first coined by the US Naval Air Systems Command, is to achieve long-term success through customer satisfaction. Core parts of TQM's management orientation are to create constancy of purpose for improving products and services; improve constantly and for ever every process for planning, production and service; institute a vigorous program of education and self-improvement for everyone; eliminate numerical quotas for the workforce and

numerical goals for management; and put everybody in the organization to work accomplishing the transformation (American Society for Quality, 2007).

As academics lost interest in the TQM movement in the second half of the 1990s, there was a parallel decrease in the capacity for quality management in public agencies. For instance, when surveying a wide sample of 1211 US cities with a population over 25,000, Berman and West (1995: 223) found that 'the lack of funding for training is a significant negative force affecting TQM commitment. Comments by survey respondents reinforce the point that training often is cut in the presence of budget shortfalls.' At the time of their study, those authors noted that cities that had only recently introduced TQM had higher commitment and impact scores (Berman and West, 1995: 223). Many cities that had implemented TQM early on seemed to be losing interest, and therefore capacity.

It followed that scholars could not and did not write about TQM once it was not widely being practiced by agencies. In retrospect, as an experiment TQM in the public sector had many virtues regarding quality improvement, not the least of which was to reinforce the importance of customer satisfaction. TQM balanced multiple considerations of quality by all stakeholders, whereas quality circles concentrated their efforts on internal management only. But the adaptation from the private sector to the public sector was uncertain. The targeted customer base of private companies was typically self-selected and more homogeneous than the all-encompassing public of public agencies.

The next trend in academic writings on quality improvement in North America concentrated on citizen satisfaction, relegating internal processes of quality improvement to the background. Input and output were now 'out', and outcomes were 'in'. That renewed attention to users' perspectives continued in the citizen satisfaction thread found in the literature.

Citizen satisfaction

Using citizen satisfaction as a proxy for quality answers the problem of 'Quality improvement for whom?' It is generally agreed that among all the stakeholders of quality in public goods and services, citizens are the ones that matter most. Citizens are the end users of public goods and services, and their evaluations of quality are indicative of outcomes. Citizen satisfaction as quality is an idea imported from program evaluation (Hatry et al., 1973: 102).

Even though citizen satisfaction research was present before quality circles and TQM, it had become less and less visible by the time quality circles came into play. An early article by Ostrom (1976) compared citizen perception to empirical observation by trained observers. The results were 'given that citizens seem to be fairly accurate in their perception of specific and clear-cut attributes of road condition and street lighting, one can have somewhat more confidence that citizens will be fairly accurate in their perception of specific attributes of other services' (Ostrom, 1976: 55–6). But that proposition lost momentum as such research was not generally replicated (Pachon and Lovrich, 1977: 42; Shin, 1977: 216; Poister and McDavid, 1978; Stipak, 1979; Brown and Coulter, 1983: 54; Parks, 1984: 125; Tan and Murrell, 1984: 37, 48). Only after TQM publications largely ceased did citizen satisfaction return in force, and it is now the mainstream of the quality and quality improvement literature.

Relying on citizen satisfaction data to determine improvement of quality in public services makes sense. A public organization finds ways to ameliorate the quality of service: delivery is now faster, call-back time from managers is shorter, access is now easier through a one-stop portal, etc. If the improvement is important to citizens, they will notice and as a result will be more satisfied with the service. This will likely reflect well on the agency as a whole. Increases in citizen satisfaction might even go so far as to bolster citizens' trust in government as a whole.[2] This is an attractive path. Improvement of services is measurable if the agency has good data. If it does not, researchers can still proceed. Outcomes trump inputs and outputs. All that the researchers have to do is to administer convenient citizen surveys and measure this new bottom line of public administration: citizen satisfaction. It is an adaptation of the TQM model, free of its input and output quality improvement components. In reality, however, to the best of our knowledge, only three articles[3] out of some 67 follow the storyline above. In fact, the performance–satisfaction relationship is a complex construction. According to Van Ryzin, 'While performance as measured by ratings of specific services also matters as a determinant of citizen satisfaction, it appears that performance effects alone do not adequately capture the basis upon which citizens form their satisfaction judgments with respect to urban services' (Van Ryzin, 2004: 443).

If improvements in quality are not the only factors that influence citizen satisfaction, what does? Many characteristics that are distinct from actual public service performance do impact levels of citizen satisfaction. For instance, a recent user of a service, either public or private, tends to inflate the score that is attributed to that service (Poister and Henry, 1994: 158), particularly for emergency medical services and parks (Kelly and Swindell, 2002: 101).

There are exceptions to that recent user characteristic, particularly in policing (Cheurprakobkit, 2000: 331; Kelly and Swindell, 2002: 101), if one is the object of the service, such as the recipient of a summons. The user's perception (rather than the official measure) of how long it took to receive a state agency's verdict about their disputes with utility companies, and whether the case was decided in their favor, has great influence on citizens' satisfaction (Shingler et al., 2008: 105). The fact of being coerced into using a service rather than choosing it also influences citizen satisfaction (Brown, 2007: 561). This might be why customer satisfaction is a better proxy for private sector quality, and citizen satisfaction is a better proxy for public sector quality. Having to pay little or no fees for services tends to increase citizen satisfaction (Callahan and Gilbert, 2005: 66). Having to bear a higher tax burden has a detrimental effect on citizen satisfaction of police and fire services (Kelly, 2003: 861). Living in a wealthy town tends to make citizens more satisfied with streets and parks than neutral trained observers (Licari et al., 2005: 365). Living in a municipality organized as a council-manager or mayor-council structure tends to boost citizen evaluation of municipal services (Wood and Fan, 2008: 420). The belief that the service is better in one's neighborhood, rather than in surrounding ones, makes a citizen more satisfied with municipal police services (Brown and Coulter, 1983: 54).

The size of a municipality also has an influence on citizen satisfaction; even controlling for crime indicators, citizens are more satisfied with their police forces in smaller municipalities than in larger ones (Pachon and Lovrich, 1977: 42). Race plays a role in

citizen satisfaction when neighborhood, socioeconomic status and trust in government are controlled, especially in the case of police, fire protection, and parks (Van Ryzin et al., 2004a: 625). It is worth noting than this racial bias varies on what is being evaluated: it does not seem to influence satisfaction with neighborhoods (Chapman and Lombard, 2006: 788). Critical events, like school shootings, also impact citizen evaluation of the academic quality of schools (Pride, 2002: 175–6).

Two other reasons are methodological. Citizen satisfaction in some important services that deal with problems of crime, poverty, air pollution and traffic flow, drives satisfaction with other services deemed minor (Miller and Miller, 1991: 512). Finally, variations in citizen satisfaction might simply come from the type (Wood and Fan, 2008: 420) or the order of questions in citizen surveys (Benton and Daly, 1993).

Some scholars defend citizen satisfaction surveys. Even though he recognizes shortcomings, Percy states that citizen surveys are an important tool of governmental accountability (Percy, 1986: 81). And 'overall citizen satisfaction deserves to be viewed as an outcome of interest in its own right, not just a means to realizing political or institutional ends' (Van Ryzin, 2007: 533).

Recently, different methods have been used to probe the satisfaction–performance link, with varying success. Methods involving factors of *trust* (Bouckaert and Van de Walle, 2003; Yang and Holzer, 2006), *bottom-up spillover effect* (Sirgy et al., 2000), *expectation–perception gap* (Parasuraman et al., 1985; Van Ryzin et al., 2004b; Roch and Poister, 2006), *disconfirmation of expectation* (Oliver, 1980; Eng and Niininen, 2005), *importance–performance analysis* (Van Ryzin and Immerwahr, 2004, 2007) and *user disgruntlement* (Stradling et al., 2007) have been used to understand citizen satisfaction.

Citizen satisfaction as a measure of quality will continue to be a valuable tool, not only as perhaps the best overall indication of performance, but as the most salient — a particularly appealing measure for policy-level managers, elected officials, the media and citizen groups.

Practices of quality improvement: dimensions and awards models

The current practices of public service quality improvement in the United States are connected with developing quality management systems and procedures, setting criteria and standards, measuring performance, evaluating quality improvement efforts, sustaining continuous quality improvement, and improving citizen satisfaction. Based on the practice of quality improvement, applicable techniques and models have been introduced for advancing effective public service delivery and the enhancement of internal capacities through adoption of dimensions of quality. These quality dimensions not only focus on financial aspects, but also connect key assumptions of quality improvement and operating performance. In the public sector, quality dimensions are intended to 'put a higher emphasis on the people dimension' (Eskildsen et al., 2004: 50).

Quality awards models incorporating critical dimensions of quality and techniques offer valuable lessons to those who are looking to promote institutional effectiveness, develop excellent standards, and focus customer satisfaction on delivering the most effective means of quality improvement by diagnosing the implementation of

quality efforts. Quality techniques are widely used for advancing knowledge and insights in the field of quality management. With the intention of achieving sustained quality improvement, informative approaches have been developed, such as the ISO 9000 series, Six Sigma, the Balanced Scorecard, benchmarking, and LEAN. In terms of technical aspects of quality assessment and performance measurement, these quality tools are broadly exercised for aligning quality improvement goals in the public sector.

Quality dimensions

Organizational success on quality improvement practices requires a strong connection between managerial dimensions and a results-based approach. In general, quality management is identified with seven categories: top-level management, strategic management, customer and market focused management, information management, human resource management, process management, and results-based management. Successful and sustainable quality management should be incorporated through satisfying key aspects of quality improvement. The holistic process of quality management should be conducted in a systematic feedback loop because quality dimensions are mutually influenced by each other in terms of achieving expected results.

Effective *top-level management* is the most important driving force for continuous and long-term quality improvement (Flynn and Saladin, 2001; Meyer and Collier, 2001). Upper-level management should be responsible for delineating the organizational mission and values; setting directions; and identifying expectations for achieving organizational quality improvement goals. Leadership performance should be evaluated by 'peer reviews, and formal or informal workforce and other stakeholder feedback' (NIST, 2008b: 8).

Strategic management focuses on developing strategic objectives and action plans for achieving projected results by clarifying an organization's goals and missions, managing the necessary operational procedures, and promoting innovation and excellence in services and processes. The key to improving quality is to set up the best strategies reflecting constant adjustment to environmental changes. The balanced scorecard as a tool of measurement-based strategic management offers substantial focus, motivation and accountability in government (Kaplan and Norton, 1998), focusing on customer-defined quality service, financial accountability, internal work process efficiencies, and learning and growth of employees. Thus, the balanced scorecard is at its core an amalgam of the models of TQM and citizen satisfaction presented previously. Many public organizations across different levels of government have successfully implemented the scorecard approach, linking tangible strategies with performance measurement (Holmes et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2004; Kaplan and Norton, 1998, 2001; Syfert et al., 1998).

Customer- and market-focused management concerns satisfaction of customers and markets by implementing customer requirements and standards. Levels of citizen satisfaction and quality standards are broadly used for auditing quality management systems. The ISO 9000 series is a device for establishing an effective quality system and for improving an organization's performance, focusing on customer satisfaction. Features of services under ISO 9000 standards include 'its usability, availability, safety,

maintainability, reliability, punctuality and costs' (United Nations, 2001: 13). The public sector utilizes the ISO 9000 certification for controlling the process of quality systems, from identifying goals and expectations to reviewing improvements based on ISO 9000 standards.

Information management attempts to optimize highly qualified data — accurate and operationalized — through a standardized evaluation process. One of the important aspects of information management is controlling unexpected fluctuation by providing consistent performance. The process of quality improvement is intended to eliminate variation using mathematical certainty, which is commonly placed into six standard deviations such as Six Sigma. The Six Sigma technique is a data-driven approach for improving customer satisfaction by identifying critical-to-quality requirements (Green, 2006) and bottom-line results by reducing defects in work processes. The key steps of Six Sigma are defining problems, measuring performance, analyzing work processes, improving quality and controlling work processes. Six Sigma principles help improve the productivity and quality of service provision in terms of data-driven results in the public sector (Bigio et al., 2004; Furterer and Elshennawy, 2005).

Human resource management emphasizes developing the workforce's capacity and aligning work with organizational values and objectives for high performance. That is, high-quality work and service depends on managing human capital, and the workforce must understand the range and causes of variation in quality, and be committed to a deep knowledge of quality improvement in order to improve performance. Effective human resource management needs to apply diversified practices because facilitating workforce development requires multidimensional strategies. A team approach to supervision, for example, can help guarantee the quality of individual performance and positive work results in the public sector.

Process management ensures work process requirements systematically to 'deliver customer value and achieve organizational success and sustainability' (NIST, 2008b: 21). This approach involves continual efforts to design the effective flow of work systems for embedding sustainable improvement. In this context, the LEAN technique is a process-based perspective that helps to eliminate, organize, and simplify wasteful processes by identifying a range of wasteful areas (Levinson and Rerick, 2002), and can be used to resolve many inefficient work processes such as time in queue. LEAN is suited to public organizations with high volume and routine tasks (e.g. payroll, purchasing process, and emergency services) that need standardization and integration of work process flows.

Quality improvement awards models

Public service quality award programs are used for assessing and recognizing an organization's capacity for innovation and improvement. The criteria required by awards typically focus on leadership, processes, human resource development, strategic planning, customer focus, and results. Quality awards criteria in the public sector address core values of citizen-driven quality and continuous improvement of organizational effectiveness and capabilities. Questions continue about whether recognition for meeting high standards, as defined by awards criteria, can actually improve organizational performance (Wilford, 2007). The widespread use of quality improvement approaches, however, is promoted by quality awards practices as they

disseminate best practice exemplars (Bowman, 1998). Award models not only generate many measures with which to monitor internal processes (Kaplan and Norton, 2001), but also transform organizational culture both internally and externally in the pursuit of tangible performance improvement.

Responding to the rapid expansion of interest in quality improvement in the US public sector, more public awards and recognition programs are being developed to promote practices of quality improvement. For example, three awards for federal agencies were crafted since 1988 and over 40 states had initiated quality award programs by 1995, following the creation of the Malcolm Baldrige Award in 1987 (Reiman, 1993). Internationally, approximately 25 quality award programs have been established since 1991, and many have extended their award process to public organizations, such as the European Quality Award launched by the European Foundation. The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award has become America's highest honor for performance excellence at both federal and state levels because it applies rigorous evaluation standards. The award offers an opportunity to share significant implications and lessons from best practices. Between 1998 and 2008, the total number of Baldrige Award applications was 1308, and 76 organizations have been recognized. Its quality criteria for the purposes of evaluation are heavily used across government agencies as well as throughout the world.

The Baldrige criteria have become an essential factor for improving performance and evaluating service quality, focusing on three aspects: developing value to customers; resulting in marketplace success; and improving the organization's effectiveness and capacities (NIST, 2008a). The criteria address directions for organizational self-improvement and confidence. Each criterion is intertwined with others in the performance 'fabric', and relationships among the categories are driven by leadership toward results. The Baldrige health care criteria for a performance excellence framework (NIST, 2008a), for example, explain the process of measurement and quality management using recursive or feedback loops to organizational success. More effective leadership within a relationship circle directly and indirectly leads to better performance results (e.g., Meyer and Collier, 2001; Flynn and Saladin, 2001; Lee et al., 2003).

Perhaps the most valuable function of the Baldrige Award framework is as a prototype for self-assessment and continuous quality improvement. The US quality movement has become identified with the Baldrige Award as a process that provides insights into effective quality performance. For the most part, the seven Baldrige criteria provide a measurable set of quality achievements via cause–effect relationships, and the Baldrige criteria are considered as a robust model that connects organizational performance with quality assessment processes in the US. The impact of Baldrige has 'reshaped managers' thinking behavior' and influenced most public and private organizations (Garvin, 1991: 80).

The President's Quality Award program, with criteria similar to the Baldrige Award, is oriented to recognizing high-performing federal organizations; to promoting sharing of best management techniques, strategies, and performance practices; to providing assessment models; and to providing a systematic approach for managing change (Mehta, 2000). At the state level, the US Senate Productivity and Quality Award program was established in 1982 to cultivate continuous performance improvement for

contributing to national competitiveness based on knowledge sharing, feedback and evaluation, and recognition. The Award for Virginia, the oldest and the most widely developed award program, is grounded in practical values, such as focusing on results and creating value, organizational and personal learning, visionary leadership, and customer-driven excellence (US Senate Productivity and Quality Award for Virginia, 2007).

Awards fulfill an inspirational function in the public sector by underlining the importance of quality. Because public organizations do not have clear measures of profit and loss, awarding prizes and celebrating high-quality government services serve to identify best practice organizations and, hopefully, foster emulation.

Conclusion

Overall, then, public sector practices in the context of quality programs and techniques have highlighted citizen-centered commitments and continuous performance improvement for organizational effectiveness and responsiveness. The trend toward quality improvement is not a new managerial paradigm shift. Since the 1970s, identifying 'best or effective' practices in the public sector has been under the quality management umbrella. Dimensions and measures of quality improvement are not only constructed in terms of technical aspects of an organization's work, but also contingent meanings in a variety of situations. Practically, public sector quality improvement efforts have been moving toward citizen-focused and value-laden service improvement.

The citizen satisfaction trend in academic research on quality still maintains momentum. We do not expect it to decline in the foreseeable future. We dare make that prediction, knowing of the inherent risks, in light of three elements. First, when research on quality and quality improvement revisited the idea that citizen satisfaction is the key concept to understand in terms of quality, it moved very close to what has been done on performance and performance measurement. Cross-pollination between citizen satisfaction and the performance measurement academic literature has already been evident. In fact, citizen satisfaction is now widely used as a prime performance measure of quality. Performance measurement is a vivid research vector, with many conferences, journal articles and even journals totally dedicated to the topic.[4] With a renewed commitment to quality and quality improvement, we think that both performance measurement and quality have been revitalized. Academic research on quality using citizen satisfaction has spread in directions other than just performance measurement.

Second, by seeking explanations from variations in citizen satisfaction, genuine differences in the delivery of governmental services have been identified. However, the subsequent improvement of services in previously underserved areas has not always translated into increased satisfaction with citizens. As Swindell and Kelly (2005: 720) conclude, 'variation in service quality raises some concerns about urban distributional equity and resurrects the discussion of the role of public servants in the proper delivery of urban services'. We see upcoming social equity research in public administration reconnecting with what has (Haar and Fessler, 1986: 14) and will be observed as 'objective' or perceived differences in the quality of governmental services. This will

have profound implications for policies. Here is an example of the limits of relying on citizen satisfaction as a key performance indicator for police services:

> … if community differences in perceptions of police stem from real differences in what the police do, then the police can engage in training or other community programs to enhance their image and strengthen their community relations. If the attitudinal differences stem from inherent community characteristics, then there may be an upper limit to the ability of the police to strengthen their relations with citizens. (Crank and Giacomazzi, 2007: 112)

Third, as the quality literature using citizen satisfaction has evidenced, many variables influence citizen assessments of quality improvements. This raises an important issue about quality. As we mentioned earlier, quality does not exist independently from effectiveness, efficiency and social equity. Also, just like effectiveness and efficiency, quality is better understood and assessed in reference to a baseline. Internal base-lines are limited, as they do not reveal how much quality improvement is possible at a given budget level or with current technologies (Meszaros and Owen, 1997: 22; McAdams and O'Neil, 2002: 454; Raaum, 2007; Triantafillou, 2007: 839).

Quality improvement will be particularly difficult in an American context, more so at the municipal level. Making comparisons between levels of quality services implies that municipalities would have to collect information about what they are doing in a standardized way.[5] Even when associations such as the International City Management Association have proposed non-binding indicators, the simple mention of that possibility raised a firestorm of objections from municipal and county American managers. Even when systematically collected local government data exist in a North American context, as in the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec, it is arduous for academics (let alone the public) to access them. The case of the provincial government of Nova Scotia (Canada) provides a notable exception of easily accessible, municipal, non-aggregated comparison data in North America. For academics interested in comparing quality of services, official data are still likely to come from Denmark, Norway, Britain, Wales, Scotland and New South Wales (Australia).

This North American 'feudal' mentality is more difficult to understand, especially given citizens' demand for transparency (Piotrowski and Van Ryzin, 2007). The American enthusiasm for citizen-driven performance measurement (Ho and Coates, 2004; Holzer and Yang, 2004) might in part be explained by the desire of public managers to avoid comparisons. Tying quality at the micro level with citizen-driven performance measurement might help address the discrepancy between what managers see as 'objective' quality improvements of services, and what citizens perceive as such.

Notes

1 For a summary of quality considerations of tap water, we suggest Charbonneau (2006: 32–5).
2 For the best conceptual models on the link between public agency performance and citizen trust, see Van de Walle and Bouckaert (2003).
3 The three articles are Ostrom (1976), Agus et al. (2007), and Van Ryzin et al. (2008). It is worth noting that the second article, finding a link between performance and citizen satisfaction, achieved a 95 percent survey response rate in Malaysia.
4 This includes but is not limited to *Benchmarking*, *Ecological Indicators*, the *International*

Journal of Productivity and Performance Management, the *International Journal of Public Sector Performance Management*, the *Journal of Productivity Analysis*, *Public Performance and Management Review* and *Social Indicator Research*.

5   We mean here that the information is standardized, not the operations or service delivery.

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