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Political Self-Efficacy Tested

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A subset of citizens in a democratic system directly test their political self-efficacy by petitioning government for assistance of one kind or another. Drawing on survey data gathered in India in 1967, this investigation focuses on the consequences of success or failure for perceived self-efficacy and for perceived government responsiveness. The analysis demonstrates that (1) successful petitioners come to enjoy a somewhat enhanced sense of self-efficacy but do not view government as particularly responsive, (2) unsuccessful petitioners do not see themselves as inefficacious but—possibly instead—do see government responsiveness in distinctly negative terms, and, (3) the kind of evidence that can help sustain a positive sense of self-efficacy will not suffice to undergird a belief in system responsiveness.

Interest in the connection between perceived self-efficacy and behavior has produced a large and varied empirical research literature. Until recently, however, it was a literature of bits and pieces (no surprise, given the different research methods and disciplinary interests of its contributors), lacking a general theory to integrate the disparate research strands and give broader meaning to their findings. This void has been addressed by Albert Bandura (1977, 1982), who has organized a great deal of evidence from both laboratory and field studies (including a substantial amount emerging from his own research program), within a powerful theory of human coping behavior that places self-efficacy at its core. The essence of the theory is this: self-referent thought in general and self-efficacy judgements in particular mediate the relationship between knowledge and action, affecting both motivation and behavior. Within any particular domain of activity, feelings of self-efficacy strongly influence all coping efforts as well as diverse other phenomena, including physiological stress reactions, thought patterns, and emotional responses. People who perceive themselves to be efficacious resolutely confront environmental demands, whether emanating from private worlds or public. In so doing, they allocate attention and effort with relative efficiency, and they are not easily discouraged by obstacles.

Perceived self-efficacy, the theory continues, is a product of social learning. Four sources of information are important to this process: one's own performance attainments, vicarious experience of others' performances, verbal persuasion, and one's own physiological states. The first is the most influential of the four, but those that "operate through nonperformance modes are of particular interest because they provide no behavioral information for judging changes in one's self-efficacy. Persons have to infer their capabilities from vicarious and symbolic sources of efficacy information" (Bandura 1982, 128).

Finally, making an obvious but impor-
tant point, Bandura writes that even where motivation can be assumed, perceived self-efficacy does not by itself determine whether coping behavior will be undertaken. Also crucial are judgements of the relevant environment. For example, one may believe oneself to be personally effective but feel that the environment inhibits or blocks the possibilities for successful action. With respect to either a prospective effort or a past performance, success or failure can be seen as dependent upon some combination of self-efficacy and environmental circumstance. And, of course, very often it can only be a matter of assumption as to what contribution is made by each part of that combination to an outcome (further discussion of this internal-external distinction can be found in Gurin and Brim 1984).

Self-Efficacy in Political Life

Self-efficacy in political life has been the subject of field study for more than 30 years. Interest in this psychological disposition was inspired by the belief that it is a fundamental influence on both political participation and system support in a democracy. In the initial investigations, the concept was elaborated with differing emphases—"the sense of political efficacy" for Campbell and his colleagues (Campbell et al. 1960; Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954); "political self-confidence" for Janowitiz and Marvick (1956); and "subjective political competence" for Almond and Verba (1963)—which led to considerable, and in some respects unfortunate, variation at the operational level. However, in the ensuing years, the Campbell conceptualization has come to be generally accepted in political science. Political self-efficacy, according to that formulation, is "the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process... the feeling that political and social change is possible, and that the individual citizen can play a part in bringing about this change" (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954, 187).

For the first two decades of research, the standard operationalization of political self-efficacy involved the following four survey items (statements with which respondents would either agree or disagree): (1) "People like me don't have any say about what the government does," (2) "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on," (3) "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think," and (4) "Voting is the only way people like me can have any say about how the government runs things." However, in 1969, Mokken published analyses showing that item four did not scale with the others; efficacious respondents could disagree, arguing that voting was not the only way they could be effective, but at the same time inefficacious respondents could also disagree, arguing that not even by voting could they be effective.

Further evidence of need for modification in the standard operationalization came from papers by Hensler (1971), Converse (1972), and Balch (1974). These investigators demonstrated empirically what scholars had previously only argued (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963; Easton 1965; Gamson 1968; Lane 1959), namely that the measure of political efficacy commingled two separate dimensions, one focused on personal efficacy and the other focused on the responsiveness of government. This distinction matches Bandura's separation of perceived self-efficacy from perceived environmental circumstance. However, in the political science literature of that day, the latter dimension was too often muddied by conceptualizations emphasizing evaluation rather than perception. Thus, for example, Easton (1965) spoke of "support," Lane (1962) of "alienation," and Gamson (1968) of "trust."
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It is true that perception of government responsiveness will often predict evaluation, perhaps especially in democratic systems, but nonetheless the two must be kept conceptually distinct (and, as will be seen below, viewing an environment as unresponsive does not, in Bandura’s theory, necessarily lead to a sense of grievance). More recent work has done that (Abramson and Aldrich 1982; Finkel 1985; Pollock 1983). The terms internal efficacy and external efficacy have been embraced, presumably borrowed from Rotter’s (1966) work on generalized expectancies for control. However, the latter term seems to me an unfortunate choice. Rotter wrote of the perception of external control—that is, control by outside forces or persons—over one’s own reinforcements. External control has clear meaning, but external efficacy does not. Not even by connotation does the latter term connect to environmental circumstance, which is what is truly in point. Hence, I see Bandura’s emphasis as much to be preferred.

It might be noted, too, that internal efficacy is different from internal control. The latter is a generalized expectancy, but for political scientists the former is a focused perception. Even in a particular domain, Bandura points out, the two may be uncorrelated. For example, one may believe that control over an event is in one’s own hands, yet perceived self-efficacy can be low if one sees in oneself a lack of crucial skills.

The separation of judgments of political self-efficacy from those of political environment is important to the understanding of each part of this interacting combination. The two, in Bandura’s theory, have quite different behavioral and emotional implications. When positive judgments of self are joined to positive judgments of the environment the result (motivation assumed) is “assured, opportune action,” but when they are joined to negative judgments of the environment, the result is protest or milieu change, possibly accompanied by a sense of grievance. And when negative judgments of self are joined to positive judgments of the environment the result is self-devaluation and despondency, but when they are joined to negative judgments of the environment the result is simple apathy. That these distinctions can have important macroscopic implications is seen in the Abramson and Aldrich (1982) research tying the decline in U.S. electoral participation to a declining sense of government responsiveness—and, though they make little of it, a stable sense of political self-efficacy (for other systemic implications, see Gurin et al. 1969).

Extending Bandura’s argument, one would expect that judgments of political self-efficacy and those of political environment would also have quite different resiliences. Positive political efficacy must often be psychologically joined to a more generalized sense of personal significance, a belief that one counts in this world (see Campbell 1962; Douvan and Walker 1956). Intuitively, one would expect such a sentiment to be both valued and defended by its holder, in which case, the evidence accepted by that holder as fully confirming could be of a weaker character—vicarious experience or verbal persuasion, in Bandura’s terms, rather than actual performance attainments. And if an individual psychologically defends a sense of self-efficacy, that defense could be much strengthened by the fact that any performance failures (which, as noted, are often of ambiguous cause) may be blamed on environmental circumstance. Thus, in this theoretical view, belief in political self-efficacy probably would be more readily acquired and surely would be more actively defended than would any comparable belief about the political environment. In fact, the latter belief may in many instances be in service to the former.

The pertinent evidence on these points
is varied. Almond and Verba (1963) report that when a national sample of U.S. adults was asked if there was anything they, as individuals, could do about a national regulation that they disliked, 75% said that there was. Yet only 18% stated that they had ever undertaken such action. This ratio, about 4:1, is exceeded by the ratios for West Germany (5:1), Great Britain (7:1), Italy (9:1), and Mexico (12:1). It would seem that such statements of personal effectiveness must be grounded primarily in feelings of self-efficacy, but, in the absence of measurement, one cannot determine precisely what part is that and what part is perception of the political environment. It is clear, however, that whatever the compound, it is much less the result of performance attainments than it is of lessons learned in other ways.

Political socialization—in stable systems, normally a blend of verbal persuasion and vicarious experience—surely is important here. Easton and Dennis (1967) show in a sample of U.S. elementary school students that, by the eighth grade, more than 50% claim that their families have some influence in the political process. Jennings and Niemi (1974) show that among U.S. high school students, more attributed political influence to their parents than the parents did to themselves. Moreover, these students were more likely to claim understanding of politics than were their parents. The data indicate that perception of political self-efficacy is very high at the time of entry into the electorate, obviously not the result of performance attainments. But again one would wish for better measurement.

Good evidence supports the view that, once acquired, the sense of political self-efficacy and the sense of the political environment do have different resiliences. Gurin and Brim (1984), in the course of a general review of the personal efficacy literature, present several short time series of mean scores for the U.S. population showing substantially less variance for the measures of self-efficacy and greater variance for the measures of government responsiveness. And they give four-year panel test-retest correlations (i.e., stability coefficients) that in raw form run about .5 for the personal items but only about .2 for the environmental items. Based upon this and other evidence, they conclude that self-efficacy judgments are relatively impervious to events, an outcome they explain in functional terms. Psychological needs for control, for self-respect, and for consistency are posited, forces that on balance act to conserve the sense of self-efficacy, whether it be high or low. Disrupting this stability requires events that are psychologically "compelling"—that is, attention-getting and, in their implications for self-efficacy, incontrovertible.

Epistemological problems of functional theory aside, the Gurin-Brim argument leaves many questions unanswered. For example, can one know in advance what events will be psychologically compelling, and for whom? They apparently believe such events to be rare and idiosyncratic: "The paradox is that... events which make people look at themselves and deal with the self-implications of the experience are by definition too rare to alter a whole population's judgments of themselves as competent" (pp. 324-35). Thus, one should not expect to see any appreciable movement up or down in collective self-efficacy judgments, except perhaps over the very long run.

A second question has to do with the apparent belief that self-efficacy is conserved by psychological needs having equal force for individuals with either positive or negative self-feelings. This seems odd. It must mean that the need for consistency dominates the need for control. Might not an event that implied greater control be for that very reason compelling for those with negative feel-
ings? And might not an event with the same force, were it to imply less control, be shrugged off by those with positive feelings? It seems reasonable to assume that the definition of a compelling event depends in significant part on the efficacy feelings of the beholder.

Gurin and Brim see perceptions of the system responsiveness as normally free from conserving forces—hence much affected by events—because of the absence of self-involvement. Change reflects a realistic appraisal of actual happenings. However, here too, a question of asymmetry arises. Katz et al. (1975) have asked what happens to the sense of government responsiveness after a direct test of one's political efficacy. In data from a nationwide survey study, they identified those who had in one way or another sought help from government. It turns out that those who had good experiences rated public bureaucracy no better than did those who had no contact whatsoever. However, those who had bad experiences rated the bureaucracy substantially below the average for the uninvolved. In other words, successful encounters with government do not seem to improve its standing, but unsuccessful encounters diminish it. Not given in the study, unfortunately, are any data on self-efficacy. It is clear that the asymmetry in these results does not easily lend itself to the belief that realistic appraisals are involved. More plausible is the view that even with judgments of the responsiveness of the environment, self-perceptions are intertwined in complex ways. Of course, that is only to restate Bandura's argument.

The present study brings new evidence to bear on the questions raised above. Using carefully tested measures of political self-efficacy and of government responsiveness, the research examines the consequences of successful and unsuccessful approaches to government officials in search of personal assistance. The results support the conclusion that performance attainments do have asymmetric effects both on perceptions of self-efficacy and on perceptions of environmental circumstance.

**Methods and Data**

The data for this study come from a national sample survey of Indian male citizens, completed just after the 1967 national election. The particulars of sampling, questionnaire construction, field work, and data evaluation can be found in Eldersveld and Ahmed 1978.

The four standard political efficacy items were included in the questionnaire, accompanied in the same battery by three other agree-disagree measures. Sixty-five respondents who answered don't know to six or all seven of these items were dropped from the analysis. Another 577 respondents (29%) agreed with all seven. Tests with other agree-disagree items scattered through the questionnaire suggested that perhaps 120 of them were being acquiescent during the interview, with little or no attention to the specific content of each item offered in an agree-disagree format. However, since it seems that acquiescent respondents would not be among those with strong self-efficacy feelings, none of these respondents was ultimately deleted from the pool. Moreover, intercorrelations of the four items, with such cases removed, were only slightly smaller than when they were included.

Also in the questionnaire were two items that called for direct evaluation of government responses to personal needs. Both because these two items were located elsewhere in the questionnaire and because of their wording, no self-efficacy implications were likely to have been raised in the mind of the respondent. The first asked whether or not he was satisfied with the job being done by local-level officials, and the second asked the same with respect to higher-level officials.
Analysis of self-efficacy measures went through several steps. First, the four standard items were intercorrelated, revealing that items one ("can't have any say") and two ("can't understand") were the most closely related, with item three ("officials don't care") next and item four ("voting is the only way") the weakest of the lot. This ordering was the same whether the correlations were rank-order or product-moment.

Second, through the use of a variant of cluster analysis, "candidate" items—which now included, in addition to the four standard efficacy measures, the two items dealing with evaluation of government response and several other attitude variables—were tested against 50 demographic and attitude criterion variables to determine the extent to which the candidate items patterned together in their relationships with the criteria. Specifically, this involved (1) correlating each candidate variable with the full set of criterion variables, (2) entering these correlations into the clustering routine as the raw data for each candidate variable, (3) computing (and printing) the correlations of each candidate item's set of correlations with the counterpart set for every other candidate item—that is, distances between patterns were computed, and (4) combining the two items with the closest patterns by averaging, after which steps three and four were repeated again and again until all candidate variables were included in the final cluster. Obviously, it is the early clusters that are most useful here.

Put simply, this clustering approach (essentially that of Tryon; see Tryon and Bailey 1970) goes beyond the candidate items' relationships with one another and tests the extent to which their impacts on a variety of external variables are the same. The resultant findings were, first, that items one ("don't have any say") and two ("can't understand") patterned together very closely and, most remarka-
Table 1. Perceived Self-Efficacy and Government Responsiveness by Status of Petition to Government

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions</th>
<th>Petition to Government was</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Successful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government responsiveness</td>
<td>.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of cases</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are mean scores on variables standardized for the entire sample. * marks each entry that is significantly different \( (p < .01) \) from its Not Offered counterpart.

finds in items one, two, and four the self-referent measure and in item three and two others (the same two “outside” variables as used by Gurin and Brim) the responsiveness measure. Craig and Maggiotto (1982) bring item one back to the responsiveness measure, as did Balch (1974). McPherson, Welch, and Clark (1977) dispute that assignment. Finally, perhaps needless to say, many different statistical techniques are used by these investigators in establishing their final measures.

Three things seem clear. The first is that continued inclusion of item four in either measure is not useful. Mokken (1969) demonstrates this in Dutch and U.S. data. Hensler (1971) and McPherson, Welch, and Clark (1977) demonstrate it in U.S. data. Now it can be seen in Indian data as well. The second is that additional standard items tapping each of the two perceptions—namely, of self and system—are sorely needed. And finally, because very different statistical approaches are likely to yield different multiple-item measures and, because of that, different and confusing estimates of relationships, exact comparison of findings from the efficacy literature (and perhaps from any political-attitude literature) are probably futile, without generally accepted procedures for scale construction.

A final point: in what follows, reference is made to a measure of political awareness. This measure was constructed exactly as were the two discussed above. Included are items dealing with political information and awareness of election events.

**Analysis and Findings**

Asked if they had ever gone to an official in the government for help, those who said they had—and thus had put themselves in a position actually to test their perceptions of political self-efficacy—toted 20% of the 1,805 cases in the analysis. They differ from the rest in their political awareness and education, both of which are significantly \( (p < .05) \), though not greatly, higher than average. This subset splits almost evenly into successful and unsuccessful groups, the two populations of interest. With respect to political awareness and education, the successful and the unsuccessful do not significantly differ from one another (the latter are a bit higher in awareness and a bit lower in education). However, with respect to judgments of self-efficacy and environmental circumstance, the differences are plain and can be seen in Table 1.

The successful petitioners typically show a sense of self-efficacy that is well above the norm for those making no such contact \( (p < .01) \) but a perception of governmental responsiveness that is only slightly and insignificantly above the
Table 2. Perceived Self-Efficacy and Government Responsiveness for Successful and Unsuccessful Petitioners (Controlled for Education, Economic Circumstance, and Political Awareness)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions</th>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Unsuccessful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>.13 (.01)</td>
<td>-.07 (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government responsiveness</td>
<td>.09 (.21)</td>
<td>-.31 (.01)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. Following each entry, the associated significance figure is given in parentheses.

Success is associated with very slight inclination to raise one's evaluation of government performance, a result matching that of Katz et al. (1975). However, that same success apparently enhances feelings of self-efficacy, an outcome in keeping with Bandura's evidence on the power of performance attainments.

Findings for the unsuccessful group are the reverse. On average, their efficacy level is indistinguishable from the non-contacters' norm, but their view of government responsiveness is very dramatically more negative ($p < .01$). In other words, self-efficacy suffers not at all, but the view of the government suffers a great deal (note, by the way, that beliefs about self-efficacy and about government responsiveness are here uncorrelated with partisan attachments).

These results do not change appreciably when success and failure are brought (as dummy variables) into a simple linear-regression equation in which education, objective economic circumstance, and political awareness are used to predict perception of self-efficacy on the one hand and of government responsiveness on the other. The unstandardized regression coefficients for the two measures of interest are given in Table 2. These coefficients, directly comparable to the simple means in Table 1, give essentially the same picture. Success significantly enhances the sense of self-efficacy but not the view of government. Failure changes self-efficacy very little but changes perception of government responsiveness dramatically.

Still another way to assess the effects of success or failure here is through consideration of a very simple social-learning model. In this model, education is taken as a predictor—and, in substantive terms, a producer—both of judgments of self-efficacy and judgments of government responsiveness. In other words, education is here taken to be a principal channel for political socialization, a view that has been argued with respect to Western democracies but has even greater persuasiveness in a context where mass-media penetration is quite limited, as in the present case.

No socioeconomic variable has been more closely tied to political self-efficacy than has education (see Almond and Verba 1963; Campbell et al. 1960; Inkeles and Smith 1974). And none has nearly as strong an effect on self-efficacy in these Indian data. However, it is obvious that this variable indexes much more than education per se. For example, here it is correlated with wealth at .46, with caste at .34, and with father's education at .45—results that underscore its pronounced status coloration. Nonetheless, the education variable, with all its complexities, still stands as a reasonable proxy for the social-learning processes here of interest, namely verbal persuasion and vicarious experience of others' per-
formance attainments. These processes drive what might be called normal political socialization, certainly with respect to political self-efficacy but probably with respect to many other political judgments as well.

The findings can be easily stated. First, the effect of education on self-efficacy for each of the three groups—that is, the non-contacters, the unsuccessful, and the successful—is close to invariant (the correlations, in order, being .31, .30, and .35). In spite of a direct test of political self-efficacy, this result suggests, the influence of social learning is only very slightly modified. Especially interesting here are the unsuccessful petitioners, seemingly as ready to be influenced by verbal persuasion and vicarious experience—that is, by socialization—as they would be had they never experienced failure in their contacts with government. The failure appears to have been dismissed as a comment on self, a result that again underscores the stamina of perceived self-efficacy.

On the other hand, the relationship of education with perception of government responsiveness is for any of the three groups quite trivial (the correlations being .05, .03, and .09, with the latter two not even approaching statistical significance). Socialization here matters very little. A government's good standing is not to be established so easily. Moreover, as shown earlier, even a successful encounter with government will not yield a great deal of credit. Once again, the possibility that perception of environment is in service to perception of self is suggested.

Discussion

The evidence presented here supports four interrelated propositions: (1) that perceptions of political self-efficacy and perceptions of government responsiveness are arrived at differently, though not entirely separately; (2) that these judgments respond asymmetrically to events; (3) that a positive sense of self-efficacy is served by successful outcomes much more readily than is a positive sense of government responsiveness, and (4) that positive self-efficacy can be much more easily taught and maintained—in the sense that weaker evidence will suffice—than can positive perceptions of government responsiveness.

This evidence is striking not because it alone is conclusive but because it fits so well with other kinds of evidence on self-efficacy in several domains (see Bandura 1982, 1977; and Gurin and Brim 1984). Obviously, in the absence of such a fit, this cross-sectional survey study—like all such studies, lacking a really strong foundation for causal inference—would be of less import.

There is one recent study whose results may be read as at variance with proposition four above. Finkel (1985), using U.S. panel-study data, presents findings which suggest that acts of electoral participation have a small but significant influence on "external efficacy" and have no such influence on internal efficacy. Thus, it might seem that perception of government responsiveness is more easily influenced than perception of self-efficacy, at least by electoral participation. This research is carefully done but, regrettably, because of very different operationalization of the key concepts, lacks an exact (and perhaps even an approximate) basis for comparisons. The responsiveness measure is derived from items that include as key references Congress, elections, and parties. This puts a rather different spin on the measure, especially in the context of an election campaign, from that derived from references to "government officials." Less important, the self-efficacy measure in this U.S. study includes the item about voting being the only way to have a say in government. These problems serve as another reminder of the cumulativeness sacrificed in any
Consideration of the broader political implications of these findings brings us back to Bandura’s theory, specifically to his findings on the interactive effects of self-efficacy and environment perceptions on motivation, emotions, and behavior. Recall that, in the absence of positive self-efficacy, individuals are found not to undertake action, whatever their views on the environment. Instead, they are apathetic (if they see a negative environment) or despondent (if they see a positive environment). In political life, then, one can conclude that both eventualities would mean the absence of participation (assuming voluntary participation rather than compulsory). Motivation to pursue self-interest in political or governmental arenas may not be wholly absent for such individuals, but it cannot produce action, conventional or otherwise. Although I can recall no example of the despondency case from the literature, the apathy case seems to me nicely represented by Banfield’s (1958) citizens of Montegrano.

When feelings of efficacy and perceptions of environmental circumstance are both positive, action in response to suitable motivation is assured. In politics, if the relevant environmental actor is government, this combination of positive perceptions can be expected to induce broad participation in conventional political life (assuming, as before, personal motivation). And it probably would mean at least passive, and quite possibly active, support for the political system. Such sentiments and involvements have long been regarded as hallmarks of the good democratic citizen.

The last combination, positive self-efficacy with a negative perception of environmental circumstance, is seen to produce a sense of grievance, a “social activism,” and protest actions against an unresponsive or negatively biased environment. For political life, again assuming the relevant environment is the political system, the implications would seem clear. One would not expect this to be a recipe for quiescent politics. However, the fact that in the U.S. this combination apparently is becoming more common with no observed consequence except declining voter turnout raises questions about this interpretation. It is possible that the answer lies in another consequence that Bandura sees as possible in this situation. “Should change be difficult to achieve,” he writes, “given suitable alternatives people will desert environments that are unresponsive to their efforts and pursue their activities elsewhere” (1982, 141). No doubt such desertion is more likely to be psychological than physical. Thus, in the U.S. case, one might find that the decline in turnout represents such a psychological withdrawal from political life. Finally, it should also be noted that the grievance and protest that Bandura’s theory predicts do appear in some careful studies of smaller scope (most notably, Gurin et al., 1969).

There are normative, as well as empirical, grounds for seeing perceptions of system responsiveness as important to the functioning of a democratic system. The surprising finding of the present research is that in contrast with a resilient sense of political self-efficacy, this crucial belief in system responsiveness seems quite fragile. Even when the system is in fact responsive, a benefitted citizen’s inclination is self-congratulatory, crediting personal efficacy for favorable outcomes and discounting system performance. And if the system does fail to respond to the citizen’s needs, its standing in his or her eyes falls substantially, perhaps so that a sense of self can remain intact. Realism about the capacities of both self and system is much to be desired. The obvious question is how such realism can be cultivated.
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Note

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References


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