

# **L I S Research in the US and Canada: Are the Differences Cultural or Methodological?**

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**Abstract:** This paper pertains to an aspect of L I S research which is seldom addressed in the literature - that of replication. The first phase of *The Canadian Public Library Effectiveness Study* replicated the Preference component of Van House and Childers' study entitled *The Public Library Effectiveness Study*. The purpose of the paper is twofold. First, it examines closely one of the explanations advanced by Van House and Childers regarding the "surprising similarity" they found among the seven constituent groups they studied. Second, the paper briefly explore another potential explanation. If methodology does not explain the differences found among the seven Canadian constituent groups, could the theoretical perspective be disregarded when culture constitutes another potential explanation?

"Organizations in the public sector are in danger. Public libraries are in danger.

The dangers are many, and they threaten every public organization with the possibility of reduced usership, reduced funding, and reduced political and social support. The story of the assorted dangers has been told often. Their impact has been felt by every organization, from sanitation departments to arts leagues to... libraries.

The dangers we speak of are largely external. The environment that sustains the public library organization – and every other public organization – is the same environment that threatens it. Yet the threats themselves, the dangers to organizational existence, imply what a public organization – a library – might do to maintain its health in that nurturing yet perilous environment." (Childers and Van House, 1993, p. 1)

In 1993, Van House and Childers published *The Public Library Effectiveness Study - The Complete Report*. In the Spring of 1993, this researcher was awarded a grant from SSHRC to conduct a research also related to the public library effectiveness construct. Two of the research objectives were: 1) to validate a multiple constituencies model for the study of public library organizational effectiveness, and 2) to build upon previous research both in the area of public library effectiveness and the organizational structures of public libraries.

This paper pertains to an aspect of L I S research which is seldom addressed in the literature - that of replication.

In order to build upon previous research and to validate a multiple constituencies model for the study of public library organizational effectiveness, the research replicated to a great extent Van House and Childers' approach. Based on similar theoretical perspectives, that is the Open Systems, and the Multiple Constituencies models, the variable "public library effectiveness" was operationally defined in terms of Van House and Childers' indicators. Their data gathering instrument, a questionnaire, was used to gather data from the same seven constituency groups, that is, City Councillors, Community Leaders, Friends of the library, Librarians, Library Managers, Public Library Board members, and Users. (Van House and Childers, 1993)

While organizational effectiveness has been scrutinized extensively, of the four general approaches to defining organizational effectiveness identified in the literature, two, the Open Systems model and the Multiple Constituencies approach, provided the basis for this research.

The Open Systems model emphasizes the interdependence of the organization with its environment. In his introduction to a chapter dealing with "Boundary setting and boundary spanning", Richard W. Scott points out that: "The central insight emerging from the open systems model is that all organizations are incomplete: all depend on exchanges with other systems. All are open to environmental influences as a condition of their survival." (Scott, 1987, p. 170). This interdependence of the organization with its environment, particularly defined in terms of the need to acquire resources controlled by external groups is the dominant theme of Pfeffer and Salancik's resource dependence approach. For them the understanding of organizations must necessarily take into account contextual variables. "... organizational survival and success are not always achieved by making internal adjustments. Dealing with and managing the environment is just as important a component of organizational effectiveness." (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978, p.4)

Second, the Multiple Constituency approach emphasizes the value-based nature of the organizational effectiveness construct. As Au points out: "..., as more and more scholars have come to realize, the concept of effectiveness is inherently subjective and is based on personal views as well as preferences of individuals (Cameron & Whetten, 1983b; Campbell, 1977; Hall, 1991)." (Au, 1996). While several variants of the model exist, Anne S. Tsui points out that: "... the central tenet across all the variants is that an organization is effective to the extent it satisfies the interests of one or more constituencies associated with the organization." (Tsui, 1990, p. 458) This implies that an organization is not able to satisfy multiple constituencies simultaneously, each constituency having its own preferences, interests, values for defining the organization's effectiveness.

Based upon this theoretical perspective, Childers and Van House hypothesized that: "... there would be a significant relationship between the rating of indicators and the constituent type of the respondent." (Childers and Van House, 1989, pp.284-85). However,

one of their major conclusions is that:

“The seven constituent groups display surprising similarity in their preferred ways of viewing the public library, as seen in their preferences for indicators .... The similarity supports the idea that the public library enjoys a uniform image in the American culture. However, the similarity seems counter-intuitive to the extent that one would expect social roles to affect the way groups perceive social institutions. Additional study of the constituent groups and their perceptions of the public library is needed.” (Childers and Van House, 1989, p. 291)

According to Childers and Van House several explanations can be advanced as to why differences across constituents groups were not evident in the data. The first one, as stated above, pertains to a shared view of the public library among the constituent groups. The second explanation addresses the sensitivity of the data gathering instrument which may not allow to discern differences across constituent groups. However, their third explanation which refers to the fact that their: “... method of sampling - essentially, selection by the library directors - may have biased the sample towards similarity of perception.” (1989, p. 291) is the one explanation which this paper addresses.

In the present study, differences between the seven constituent groups were found leading to the question: Are the differences cultural or methodological? In order to determine if methodological differences possibly influenced the findings, a close examination of the two methodologies is required.

While *The Complete Report* presents the methodology followed in great details, a shorter version is found in “Dimensions of Public Library Effectiveness” published in *Library and Information Science Research*. While lengthy, the following quote summarizes accurately the essence of Childers and Van House methodology.

“A random sample of libraries, proportional to their actual numbers in the size and region categories, was drawn from the *American Library Directory* (Bowker, 1986). The libraries were stratified into six size-groups by population served. Libraries serving populations smaller than 25,000 were eliminated, since they have, on average, fewer than two librarians each. Libraries were also stratified by region of the country, in order to assure geographic coverage.....

During the initial interviews, the researchers were convinced that it would be difficult to secure the cooperation of the external constituents, especially the Local Officials, through a mailed questionnaire. Lacking the resources to interview a national sample, it was decided to enlist the help of library directors. The directors of the libraries were contacted and asked to identify people in each constituent group. They were further asked to sample their users as they visited the library and secure completed questionnaires from them. Questionnaires were subsequently sent to all those named, including the library directors. Directors were used to deliver the questionnaire to the

Local Officials and Community Leaders, as well as Users. The total number of persons receiving questionnaires was 2689, which reflects generous over sampling in anticipation of nonresponse. The number of useable responses was 2418, for a 89.8% return rate. The returns represent the size and region strata in appropriate proportions.

The method of securing the sample is very likely to have resulted in a sample with positive bias toward the library and possibly bias toward viewing the library in ways similar to the library director. The sample and subsamples cannot be treated as random. Strickly speaking, one cannot generalize from this study to the population of constituents of public libraries. However, the large numbers and proportional distribution of the sample increase the likelihood that the study represents the range, if not the proportions, of perceptions.” (Childers and Van House, 1989, pp. 281-82)

In the Canadian study, the first step consisted in identifying, across the country, the cities with a population of 25,000 or more. According to the 1991 Census Data, 146 Canadian cities met the criteria. The minimum of 25,000 was established to keep as close as possible to the Van House and Childers’ study. In the upper limit, only Montreal and the former City of Toronto (before 1998) were excluded given the much larger size of their populations. Furthermore, of the 144 remaining cities, 42 were excluded given that they are located in the province of Quebec and as stated below, for this first phase of the study, these cities do not meet the criteria of having their public libraries administered by a library board. However, it should be pointed out that the study of the cities located in Quebec constitutes the second phase of this research.

The other criteria for the inclusion of a city was, for one, that the city had a public library. But more important, for this first phase of the study, was the requirements that a) the library be administered by a board of trustees, and b) that the library had a formally organized Friends of the Library group. After contacting the provincial public library services as well as the library association in each province, it became clear that each library would have to be contacted individually. The problem was with the Friends of the library group for which no complete listing could be found. Ultimately, in only 4 provinces could libraries be found meeting all of the above criteria and only in Ontario could the public libraries be selected randomly. In all, 17 cities participated in the study: 4 in British Columbia, 4 in Alberta, 2 in Saskatchewan, and 7 in Ontario.

For each library the next step consisted in contacting first, the library administration, second, the library board, and third, the city council, soliciting their agreement to participate to the study. Once these agreements were secured, in an attempt to minimize bias, in each city, the following sampling procedure was followed:

Group 1 (City Councillors) - The mayor and all city councillors. The size of this group varied from 7 to 19 members.

Group 2 (Community Leaders) - In each city, 5 community leaders. Serious attempts

were made to keep this group as similar as possible. The pattern was: the Chair or President of the Chamber of Commerce or the Board of Trade, the Chair or President of the city Arts Council or equivalent, the Chair or President of the Rotary or Kiwanis or Lions Club, and the CEO of the city Literacy Group, and CEO of the YMCA-YWCA. In two cities a request was received and a 6<sup>th</sup> member was added to the group.

Group 3 (Friends of the library) - In each library, 10 Friends. This group comprised the Executives of the Friends group plus names of Friends suggested by the library to make up 10 members for that group. In one case a request was granted to add an 11<sup>th</sup> member to the group, and in another case the library provided only 8 names of Friends.

Group 4 (Librarians) - This group comprised up to 10 librarians not in management position. If there were more than 10 librarians, 10 were randomly selected by the researcher from the complete list submitted by the library. In one case there were 11 librarians in total. It was decided to include them all.

Group 5 (Library Managers) - The same procedure as for the librarians was followed, that is up to 10 library managers. If there were more than 10 library managers, 10 were randomly selected by the researcher from the complete list submitted by the library.

Group 6 (Library Board) - All the library board members, with the exception of the library director (included in the Library Managers group), and city councillors (included in the City Councillors group). This group varied from 6 to 12 members.

Group 7 (Users) - 10 library users randomly selected by the researcher. In each library the group comprised 5 women and 5 men contacted in person during the visit to the library.

From previous projects (Mittermeyer, 1989, 1994), this researcher was fully aware of the intricacies of working with city council members. Also, community leaders may not always have the public library at the top of their agenda. Thus, in this study, the 17 cities were visited and before the visit, appointments were made with the public library director, the mayor, and each of the community leaders. During the visit, the researcher was introduced to most of the library personnel, occasionally to some board members and friends, as well as some city councillors while visiting city hall. Also, as previously mentioned, the researcher distributed herself the questionnaires to the users present in the library at the time of the visit.

Each questionnaire package was individually addressed (except for the users group) and comprised a letter explaining the nature and purpose of the study, the questionnaire, a self-addressed stamped envelop and a self-addressed stamped postcard to be mailed separately to insure anonymity and for follow-up purposes. Each questionnaire was identified

only in terms of the city and the group the participant belong to. The postcard had the name and address of the participant since it was to be mailed separately. During the distribution to the users, they provided their names and addresses and were reminded to fill the back of the postcard with the same information.

In all 942 questionnaires were distributed during the visit to 17 cities in Ontario, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia. The number of useable questionnaires received was 752, for a response rate of 79.8%. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the response rate for both, the Canadian and the American studies.

**Table 1 - Distribution of Response Rates**

Groups	Questionnaire returned - Canada	Questionnaire returned - US	Response Rate	
			Canada	US
Councillors	101	387	58.3%	80.9%
Leaders	78	389	89.6%	82.9%
Friends	131	273	77.5%	88.9%
Librarians	93	304	95.8%	95.6%
Managers	93	293	91.1%	95.4%
Board members	114	260	79.1%	84.5%
Users	142	512	83.5%	100%*
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>752</b>	<b>2,418</b>	<b>79.8%</b>	<b>89.8%</b>

\* Some directors returned more user responses than requested. (Childers and Van House, 1993, p. 23.

As pertaining to the Canadian study, these response rates reflect quite closely what was expected. The over 90% response rate of "Librarians" and "Managers" is impressive. The two groups with whom the researcher met individually, the "Community Leaders" and the "Users", both groups have a response rate of over 80%. The two other groups with whom the researcher met briefly with a few representatives and for whom the questionnaire package was distributed through the library internal mail system, that is, the "Friends" and the "Board" members, both have a response rate in the 70% range.

Regarding City Councillors, although in each city but one, the researcher met with the mayor or a city councillor, two incidents may contribute to explain the low response rate. The first incident happened when one city was visited one week before a municipal election. When the coming of this election was mentioned to the researcher, it was considered too late to cancel the visit. Too much preparation work had been done already.

The “Councillors” response rate for that city is 28.5%. To some extent, the second incident allowed for the testing of the methodological approach being used. When the researcher was informed that City Council would not consider the request to participate in the study given that it is a policy of this city not to forward to City Council such request, the temptation was great to cancel that visit in order to affect as least as possible the response rate. However, it was decided to pursue in order to verify if such approach would influence the response rate. The “Councillors” response rate for that city is 9%.

During the visit, the questionnaire packages were left with an administrative secretary for internal distribution. Three weeks after the visit the researcher wrote to each councillor a personal letter, informing them of the low response rate and inviting them to share with her the reasons why they did not participate. Surprisingly about 50% of them took the time to send an email to apologize and explain. The bottom line is that it had nothing to do with the research or the questionnaire. Aside from being out of the country or being sick, most had far too much to do.

Regarding Childers and Van House returned rate, they provide the following explanations:

“The principal investigators conclude that the extraordinary rate of return was due to a number of factors:

- Library directors were contacted by telephone by the principal investigators.
- Respondents were selected by library directors, with the possibility that mostly cooperative respondents were selected.
- Many of the respondents were contacted - often personally - by the library directors.
- The topic of effectiveness seems to be salient to the public library community.
- The initial introductory letter (sent to the directors) was strong and positive.
- All letters and envelopes appeared individually produced.
- The principal investigators’ names are known to many librarian respondents.
- Librarians are prone to cooperate with surveys.
- The study was supported by a federal agency, the Department of Education.

Finally, some people may have responded because of the offer of a copy of the survey results and participation in a raffle for current best-sellers for their libraries.

The strongest argument for seeking a selected sample through the directors was expediency: There seemed no more practical way to achieve a national sample within the study resources. There are other arguments as well. First, those people selected by the directors, to the extent that they might be advocates for or users of the public library, might be expected to respond with more care or to have given more thought to the essence of a

public library than people selected at random. The thrust of this research was to explore the criteria that mark a library's effectiveness, and that may be done best by tapping the views of those most likely to have given thought to the subject." (Van House and Childers, 1993, pp. 23-24)

Following the above statement, two questions come to mind. First: "Have the participants to the Canadian study been selected at random?" Second: "Could the point be made that, although the participants have not been selected by the directors, given their constituency link with the library, it is expected that they have responded with care?"

To the first question the answer is yes, to the extent that as soon as a library met the criteria of being administered by a library board and having a Friends of the library group, and as soon as the library administration, the library board, and city council agreed to participate, that city became part of the study and for each group the potential participants were solicited based only on the fact that they were members of that group. However, it should be pointed out that only in Ontario were the libraries, themselves, selected randomly.

To the second question the answer is also yes, to the extent that during the data gathering phase of this study, the researcher had the opportunity to discuss with representatives of each group, in each of the 17 cities visited, and while each potential participant demonstrated a genuine interest in the subject of the study, it soon became apparent that these diverse representatives had their own "preferences, interests, and values for defining the organization's (the public library) effectiveness."

The remaining question pertains to the cultural interpretation of the differences between constituent groups found in the Canadian study. Assuming that all the groups have answered the *Public Library Effectiveness* questionnaire with care and that their answers constitute an accurate rating of the level of importance they attribute to each of the 62 indicators presented to them, could the differences in the findings be attributed to cultural factors characterizing the Canadian public library scene? In other words, based on Childers and Van House's interpretation, could these differences mean that the public library does not enjoy a uniform image in the Canadian culture? While this question is certainly worth asking, any attempt at answering it should consider the possibility that the public library also enjoy a uniform image in the Canadian culture but, given that the *Public Library Effectiveness* questionnaire was designed "to explore the criteria that mark a library's effectiveness", this instrument does not allow for the measurement of the public library cultural image.

Finally, and not to be neglected, could it be that the differences found in the Canadian study between the seven constituent groups represent, in fact, an actual difference in the perceptions, values, and interests of these groups in defining the effectiveness of the public library? Thus, to answer one of Childers and Van House's concerns, could it be that the *Public Library Effectiveness* instrument is sensitive enough and allows to discern differences across constituent groups?



To illustrate this point, and in conclusion, here are the results of the ranking of two indicators selected among the many available. Following Van House and Childers analysis, the importance attributed to the indicators on a Likert scale from one to five, by each group, was ranked in decreasing order by mean scores. Then, the ranking of each group was divided into sextiles. The selected indicators are “Cooperation with other libraries” and “Variety of types of library users”, and the question was: “In evaluating a public library’s effectiveness, how important would it be for you to know each of the following about the library?” In terms of importance attributed to “Cooperation with other libraries”, the results are:

- The **Users** group ranked this indicator in the 2<sup>nd</sup> sextile.
- The **Leaders** and the **Friends** groups ranked it in the 3<sup>rd</sup> sextile.
- The **Councillors** group ranked it in the 4<sup>th</sup> sextile.
- The **Board** group ranked it in the 5<sup>th</sup> sextile
- The **Librarians** and the **Managers** groups ranked it in the 6<sup>th</sup> sextile.

On the other hand, the results pertaining to the importance attributed to “Variety of types of library users” are as follows:

- The **Librarians** group ranked this indicator in the 2<sup>nd</sup> sextile.
- The **Board** group ranked it in the 3<sup>rd</sup> sextile.
- The **Managers** group ranked it in the 4<sup>th</sup> sextile.
- The **Councillors**, **Leaders**, and **Friends** group ranked it in the 5<sup>th</sup> sextile.
- The **Users** group ranked it in the 6<sup>th</sup> sextile.

While the length limitation of this paper does not allow for detailed interpretations nor for more examples of differences between constituent groups, it should be pointed out that the “Users” ranking of the “Cooperation with other libraries” indicator in the second sextile comes as no surprise. As well, the ranking of this group of the “Variety of types of library users” indicator in the sixth sextile is understandable. A result which is most interesting however is the ranking of the “Cooperation with other libraries” indicator, in the 6<sup>th</sup> sextile, by both the “Librarians” and the “Managers” groups.

In the background of this study lies the idea that if only we had a better understanding of what really count for each of the public library constituent groups, we could gear-up our efforts at prioritizing and fulfilling these expectations, thus turning dangers or threats into opportunities and successes. The results of this study, although briefly presented in this paper, allow us to refine such understanding. This researcher would like to take this opportunity to thank Professors Nancy A. Van House and Thomas A. Childers for the opportunity to build upon their research and the possibility to use the *Public Library Effectiveness* data gathering instrument.

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