

A protocol for the extrapolation of ‘Best’ Practices: How to draw lessons from one experience to improve public management in another situation

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ABSTRACT

This article pursues the goal of proposing a protocol for the extrapolation of ‘best’ practices from one situation to another situation. It owes much to the approach of the ‘smart practices analysis’ originally proposed by Bardach (1994 and 1998), which is here revisited and integrated; elements for refining the protocol of organizational analysis for the extrapolation of practices from instrumental case studies are also proposed and complementarities with recent developments of the research on ‘best practices’ in public management highlighted.

KEY WORDS

Best practices, smart practices, extrapolation of practices, applicability of practices outside the context where they originated, change processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Starting from a ‘practice that works’ (useful to solve a problem), how to employ it in another situation? It is this question that is addressed in the paper. What will be proposed here is a simple, but not naïve, ‘reverse engineering protocol’.

Useless to say, major methodological and epistemological caveats apply when dealing with the issue of ‘best practices and their transferability’, when attempts are made to provide indications about how to transfer a practice from one situation to another one (situation is here conceived in a very general way as a set of circumstances – in practical terms it may mean an organization, and transfer refer to the action of employing practices that originated in one public sector organization into another public sector organization). It is for this reason that in this paper a discussion of the state of the art of the ‘best’ practices research agenda in public management is conducted – and notably the ‘smart practices approach’ originally proposed by Bardach (1994 and 1998) is revisited.

The work is structured as follows. In the next section, the approach of the smart practices analysis is presented and discussed in the light of recent developments in literature. In the subsequent section, the protocol for the extrapolation of practices is presented and commented, also by making reference to a specific example of implementing a process of devolution in an unfavourable context. Some

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broader implications for advancing the policy and research agenda on the issue of the extrapolation of practices are discussed in the final section.

Readers interested in the academic/scientific debate on ‘best’ or ‘smart’ practices, and the methodological and epistemological issues involved in the extrapolation problem, may enjoy the reading of paragraph 2. Readers whose core interest is the application of the extrapolation protocol may go directly to paragraph 3.

2. THE EXTRAPOLATION PROBLEM AND ‘SMART PRACTICES ANALYSIS’

A review of the literature on best practices

A recently revived debate on the ‘best practices research’ (Bardach, 2004 and Barzelay, 2007) has raised the issue of whether current research conventions in public management are effective as regards the identification and supple elaboration of ‘best’ practices to be used for addressing key problems in the management of public sector organizations, i.e. whether analysts in public management can properly address the problem of improving the performance of public sector organizations in one situation (target site) by employing experience acquired elsewhere (source site). Learning from second-hand experience (the extrapolation problem) is more complex than ascertaining whether a given practice is effective in the source site (the evaluation problem); extrapolation is the process of learning from vicarious experience and designing practices fitting the (new and diverse) circumstances to which the practices are to be applied.

Researching ‘best’ practices seems to involve at least two crucial problems: the identification of cases that contain a best practice; and the extrapolation of the practice, i.e. the way by which experience acquired elsewhere can be employed in the target site.

A major contribution to addressing the first problem is proposed by Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele and Wu (2005). The Authors define the two joint necessary and sufficient conditions for finding a ‘best’ practice (or better: for finding a case that contains a best practice to be extrapolated): the completeness of cases considered; and the comparability of cases. The subsequent step consists in the elaboration of a general framework for selecting the proper technical option available to researchers for estimating relationships of inputs (resources) to outputs that focus on extreme behaviours in order to find the best performing case (i.e.: for finding the unit where the transformation of inputs into outputs – the production function – is performed at the best level).

There are, in our view, two main limitations in the contribution of Bretschneider and Colleagues. First, it focuses on the issue of the identification of the case(s) that contains a best practice, not on how to ‘extract’ the practice and make it fit the diverse circumstances to which it is to be applied. There are a number of issues making the extrapolation process problematic. It is the consideration

about how the ‘smart practices analysis’ deals with these issues - outlined below - that make, in our view, such approach be worth exploring.

The second main limitation is implicit in the core assumption underlying the general framework proposed: the theory of production drawn from economics – which leads the Authors to recognize that ‘a ‘best practice’ is essentially about comparing how these units transform inputs (resources) into output(s)’ (Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele and Wu, 2005, p313). While undoubtedly a general category of situations to which best practices research in the public sector is applied is, in a broad sense, service delivery (as is the example of performances of elementary schools, referred to in the article of Bretschneider, Marc-Aurele and Wu), there are other categories of situations, like the management of complex change processes, where performance cannot generally be expressed in the terms of a production function². As an example, it may be considered the formulation of strategic visioning in the US Air Force accounted by Michael Barzelay and Colin Campbell (2003), in which the performance of the process was

[e]xpanding the horizons for strategic planning to encompass visioning, and to do it in such ways to, first, enable the US Air Force to focus on issues other than the development of technical system – [issues] like human knowledge and skills, managerial systems, and norms and values – and, second, to question issues previously regarded as settled matters concerning whether the core technological capability should continue to be the application of military force by land-based fixed wing aircraft flown by Air Force pilots (Barzelay and Campbell, 2003, pp2-3).

From this definition, it follows that the ‘performance’ of such process of strategic visioning cannot be expressed in the terms of a production function.

The case of the US Air Force, for which it is *stricto sensu* difficult to find directly comparable cases (the second condition in Bretschneider et al., 2005, for the identification of best cases), leads us to another consideration: how to employ a case for generating useful knowledge (as is done, in our view, in the account by Barzelay and Campbell), even if it is not possible to demonstrate that the case under investigation is the best case, since surveying the overall population is simply not possible³, or since significant constraints to conducting systematic research through comparison are present⁴. These constraints make it sensible, in our view, to proceed in the search for practices also with single case study research designs.

A single case study may provide material enough for extrapolating practices about complex change processes, provided that the causal reconstruction of the events of the experience under

² If we take for example the four categories of excellence identified by the 2009 edition of the European Public Sector Award (EPSA), only one of them refers directly (also) to the productivity of public sector organizations and programmes.

³ As is the case of the air force, where access to all the military services throughout the world may be simply impossible.

investigation is carried out, based on theoretical sources, like social mechanisms. Social mechanisms can be defined as systematic sets of statements that provide a plausible account of how two entities are linked to one another by moving beyond simple covariation and investigating the causal texture of social phenomena⁵ (Elster, 1989; Hedstrom and Swedberg 1998, p7; and Stinchcombe, 1991). Social processes are regular sequences – concatenations - of such mechanisms (McAdam et al., 2001, p24). What we argue is that also specimens of smart practices derived from single case study research designs, provided a theory-driven and processual analysis of the causal texture of the dynamics of change is developed in the case study, may be valuable for practitioners: the account of the causal texture of the experience and how the practice intervenes on the system may be sufficient source of ideas for practitioners to solve the design problem they face. The case investigated is here interpreted as a design exemplar (Barzelay, 2007), that is, a concrete solution to a design problem that is somewhat similar to the one that actors aim to solve. Under extrapolation-based design, actors would narrow down the design problem they face to devising contrivances fitting their specific circumstances that would activate a causal process like the one evident in the functioning of the design exemplar, in order to produce similar effects. This article focuses on this aspect, i.e. how to extract practices from a single case, thus making the case utilizable as a design exemplar. The extrapolation of practices from a single case may well be enough for practitioners – indeed, a number of contributions to the research on practices in public management (like Bardach, 1998; Barzelay and Campbell, 2003; Barzelay and Thompson, 2003) focus exclusively on the extrapolation phase.

In this respect, a few words should be said about the problem of the division of the intellectual labour between researchers and practitioners, concerning especially the phase of designing practices to be applied by practitioners in the target site. Designing practices apt to solving extant problems is the daily concern of practitioners. Although also direct learning (i.e. based on lived experiences) is a

⁴ Constraints may be related to practical difficulties in surveying a ‘wide’ number of cases scattered throughout the world and/or back in the time, related to the accessibility to the site (Glesne, 1999), or to the availability of resources for collecting and analyzing a vast amount of data.

⁵ More in detail, social mechanisms can be defined (Hedstrom and Swedberg 1998) as unobserved analytical constructs that provide hypothetical links between observable events: ‘Assume that we have observed a systematic relationship between two entities, say I and O. In order to explain the relationship between them we search for a mechanism, M, which is such that on the occurrence of the cause or input, I, it generated the effect or outcome, O. The search for mechanisms means that we are not satisfied with merely establishing systematic covariation between variables or events; a satisfactory explanation requires that we are also able to specify the social ‘cogs and wheels’ (Elster 1993, 3) that have brought the relationship into existence ... a mechanism can be seen as a systematic set of statements that provide a plausible account of how I and O are linked to one another’ (Hedstrom and Swedberg 1998, 7d). In a similar way, and explicitly citing Hedstrom and Swedberg, McAdam et al. (2001) define social mechanisms as ‘delimited sorts of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations’. Social processes (McAdam et al. 2001, 24) are regular sequences of social mechanisms that produce similar (generally more complex and contingent) transformations of those elements. Concatenation of mechanisms is central in understanding change processes since ‘[M]echanisms seldom operate on their own. They typically concatenate with other mechanisms into broader social processes’ (Gambetta 1998, 105), and ‘[E]xplanations of most concrete social events or states require resort to several elementary mechanisms; one is not enough. Sometimes, these mechanisms counteract one another, and sometimes they work together’ (Hedstrom and Swedberg 1998, 21).

powerful source for designing solutions to problems, the width of direct experience is inescapably narrow (March, Sproull and Tamuz, 1991). Practitioners must thus rely on vicarious learning, i.e. on the works of researchers producing accounts of ‘significant’ (in terms of performance effects) experiences. Such accounts might also extend to encompass the designing of practices drawing on extrapolation-oriented research that can subsequently be tailored by practitioners to their specific circumstances, through a process of ingenious adaptation, by carrying out the detailed design of contrivances apt to generating advantageous patterns of action and solving the problem at hand.

By way of wrapping things up on these points, what we argue is that the ‘identification procedures’ (surveying the relevant population for identifying the cases containing best practices) and the ‘extrapolation procedures’ (how to extract the practice and apply to analogous problem situation) are to be intended as complementary and both should be executed. Were there constraints to conducting the entire process (identification plus extrapolation), which seems to be quite often the case in practice, it seems sensible to consider the relative importance of the two types of procedures above, which is determined by the type of problems addressed: while in ‘static’ cases (the paradigmatic category being the delivery of an iterative public service under relatively structured conditions, e.g.: the issuing of registry office certificates to citizens, or the cleaning of roads, etc.) what matters most is surveying a ‘wide’ population for identifying ‘best’ production functions (once identified the best case, extrapolation might then be relatively straightforward), in complex change processes what matters is extracting theory-based knowledge about how to achieve change from the cases ‘available’.

We can now turn to the extrapolation problem – which is the core issue discussed by this article. As a preliminary step, we will consider the criticisms addressed to current research conventions concerning the way extrapolation is conducted, and how the smart practices approach may represent an (at least tentative) answer.

A severe criticism has been addressed to a strand of literature that had emerged from US public policy schools in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s and included, *inter alia*, Behn’s *Leadership counts* (1991) and Barzelay’s *Breaking through bureaucracy* (1992), and has been classified by one of its main critics, Lynn (1996, p140), as ‘best practice research’ tradition. The criticism is basically concerned with the lack of theorized knowledge found in this strand of scholarship, which undermines the way the extrapolation process is conducted.

In proposing the ‘smart practices’ approach, Bardach (1998) makes his own criticisms to these approaches to extrapolation-oriented research. Bardach’s first criticism shares with Lynn’s a common concern about the fact that best practice research proceeds without sufficient methodological rigour (Bardach, 1994, p260, referring also to the work of Overman and Boyd, 1994). A second criticism is about the method employed by best practice research approaches for the identification of ‘solutions’ to problems. A flaw lies in the way the question is posed: ‘What works? [...] the rhetoric standard solution-seeking question is not well posed; it seeks too big an answer at once [...] it would be better to

decompose it into two questions, one nested into the other' (Bardach, 1994, p263). The point is that, in the research for practices 'that work', a first step lies in the understanding of how the system operates at all. In this way, an insight can be gained about the sources of high performance as well as about the modes of failure, such sources being interpreted as opportunities: only once features of the opportunities of which the practice tries to make advantage have been analyzed, the second question: 'how can we make the system work better' can be fruitfully addressed.

The 'smart-practices' approach

In this approach, a practice can be conceived as a means to exploit opportunities, a method of interacting with a situation that is intended to produce results. In order to better figure the way the smart practices research operates, an analogy can be drawn with the process of reverse engineering that (Bardach, 1998, 41):

[I]n its simplest form finds an amazing gizmo, takes it apart, and tries to figure out the clever trick that makes it work so well. [...] It may be noted that such a process, far from being simple and immediate, can involve a complex process of theoretical reasoning. Furthermore, the analogy must not be "stretched" too far: differently from the ordinary work of engineers, smart practice analysis lack the capacity to thoroughly break down and reconstitute the gizmo, [...] or does it have access to the body of scientific and technical knowledge that permits engineers to arrive at a realistic understanding. Furthermore [...] for an engineer to generalize beyond the specimen at hand is often straightforward.

The smart practices analysis provides a powerful approach for addressing the previously outlined criticism concerning the lack of systematic employment of theory: it does so by employing a reverse engineering 'protocol' of analysis. A reverse engineering process is at the same time capable of making an intense use of theorized knowledge and of being very selective in it. This is possible since its starting point is the break down of the 'practice that works' in the source site: it is the analysis of the practice that 'leads' to the employment of the proper body of theorized knowledge. Such approach may also address the criticism about the method employed for the identification of solutions to problems. As noted above, the smart practices approach is construed and operationalized in order to systematically relate the (candidate smart) practice to the nature of the opportunities it seeks to exploit. Grounded on the analysis of the different ways in which a practice interacts with a situation and can produce differentiated results (success as well as failures), categories of contingent solutions can be identified. The problem is how to conduct the analysis on the source site in such ways that the practice may be extrapolated and thus made applicable in a range of potential target sites. The analysis carried out by Bardach – whilst in our view thorough in outlining the substantive elements required for a research agenda on practices – seems to be shorter in proposing a protocol of analysis for conducting the extrapolation process.

A development of the smart practices approach in this direction is proposed by Barzelay (2007, see also Barzelay and Campbell, 2003) by addressing the topic of how to conduct extrapolation-oriented case research. An operationalization for conducting smart practices analysis on change processes is elaborated by identifying for each activity the related process design features and process context factors, and analyzing the respective relations (that is, the way process context factors affect the functioning of process design features). Process context factors – a category encompassing durable situational factors within the undertaking under investigation, apart from the process design features themselves, and contextual factors situated outside the undertaking – provide the opportunities of which process design features take advantage. The analysis of the process context factors allows the identification of the ‘domain of applicability’ of the practices: smart practices are generalizable (in the sense that they apply beyond the specific case from which they are extracted to a wide range of situations), but at the same time they work under specified conditions, which we call *context factors of the change process* (process context factors) - and enables the development of research on *categories* of smart practices.

A question concerns how context factors are identified and qualified (i.e. in which way they affect the functioning of the practice). The direct answer is that it is the theory-based knowledge of how the system (on which the practice intervenes) works that guides the identification of context factors. The social science-based foundation of the causal understanding of how the exemplar functions (addressing the question: ‘how the system works’), combined with the methodological innovation of distinguishing design features from context factors in addressing the question ‘how the practice intervenes on the system’, guides the identification and qualification of the smart practices in the proposed ‘reverse engineering protocol of analysis’. These previous methodological contributions (Bardach, 1994 and 1998, Barzelay and Campbell, 2003) are taken up in the present work which aims at outlining a protocol of analysis about how to conduct the extrapolation process on the basis of extrapolation-oriented case analysis (the protocol for conducting the smart practices analysis is illustrated in the next section and schematized in Table 1, which makes reference to an exemplar case, and illustrates a concrete application of the protocol by extrapolating practices for the management of devolution processes from an already known case analysis of the dynamics of organizational change in a process of devolution – reported in Ongaro, 2006, on whose analysis we rely for addressing the question ‘how the system works’). Thus, what this work does is to elaborate an extrapolation protocol, applicable for the extrapolation of practices, that in our view represents a refinement of Bardach’s (1998) and Barzelay’s (2003) proposed protocols (as well as indirectly a way to operationalize some of the proposals of Lynn, 1995).

3. THE EXTRAPOLATION PROTOCOL

In this section it is proposed the extrapolation protocol. It is articulated into five steps, which may be summarized as follows:

1. Identify the function to be performed: what is the function that the practice has made it possible to achieve
 - example: mobilize constituencies for supporting change
2. Define what *exactly* the practice is about
 - example: Setting to work *loci* for empowering communication channels between public sector organizations and stakeholders
3. Describe the practice, by answering the following two questions:
 - 1. How does the system operate?
 - 2. How does the practice try to take advantage of the way the system operate (design and innovation dynamics)?
4. Identify *all* the effects of the practice
 - 1. *Main* effects of the practice (Results)
 - 2. *Variations* of the practice (what accounts for unusually satisfactory performances, what accounts for possible breakdowns?)
 - 3. Possible *side* effects
5. Define the key ‘process context factors’: under what conditions the practice works
 - The causal mechanisms that have made it possible for the practice to work in that specific context must be identified so that the practice may be geared to the recipient context (in fact, ‘universal’ practices, independent of technical, political, and environmental context are very rare; moreover, very likely they have already been detected and they are already employed)

As an illustrative example, the extrapolation of practices from a case of actual implementation of a devolution process that occurred notwithstanding an unfavourable context is presented; the case (devolution in the sector of agriculture in the Italian region of Lombardy over the period 1998-2002) is discussed on the basis of the findings reported in Ongaro (2006).

The first step concerns the identification of the functions to be performed in order for the change process to take place. Functions are here defined as sub-processes of the overall change process that need to be performed if the overall change process is to be implemented (see also Barzelay and Campbell, 2003, chap. 5). In the specific case used as exemplar, but in many respects in a quite general and conventional way, the functions leading to such changes can be characterized as in Figure 1.

In the case of devolution⁶, complex change processes unfolding over a long a period of time require momentum of the devolution process to be gained (function F1) and sustained (F2). Having social groups that could potentially resist change to instead commit to the progress of the devolution process (or at least do not hinder) affects the overall advancement of the process. Attribution of opportunity and attribution of threat by the different social groups and the ways in which attribution of opportunity may be exploited and attribution of threat be counteracted by properly employed practices is crucial to understand the practice that made performing such functions possible. The idea of the centrality of the mechanism of attribution of opportunity/threat in explaining social change and, broadly, momentum (or absence of momentum) of the change process has been drawn mainly from McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001, pp16-18 and pp315-317 in particular). Sustaining momentum over a long period of time also requires keeping the cohesion within the top management in the organization leading the devolution process (F2). Performing the new programmatic activities requires the reallocation of personnel and the adaptation of structure and routines in the public sector organizations that have changed their programmatic tasks (F3). Finally, once the new situation has been achieved, the new organizational configuration has to be consolidated (institutionalized, F4).

Here we schematize change according to the very conventional model of a change process as a three-phase process: the unfreezing of a previously stable situation (F1), change (trajectory from the initial to the end 'state' – F2 and F3) and then consolidation ('freezing') of the new achieved configuration (F4). This conventional model applies only in the case of the so-called 'episodic change', that is, change occurring when organizations are moving away from a given equilibrium situation (Weick and Quinn, 1999). This form of change is labelled episodic because it tends to occur in distinct periods during which shifts are precipitated by events, internal or external, that sometimes may be labelled as characterising a 'crisis' situation. It is however a very important category of change processes.

Figure 1 about here

⁶ Functions may obviously differ, at least in part, according to the specific features of the devolution policy package: differences may arise from the content of programmatic activities devolved, whether decision powers (the authority of enacting laws or issuing regulations) or service delivery tasks, or both (service delivery being in general more labour intensive, hence requiring massive personnel reallocation, than the decentralization of decision powers): differences are determined also by the way the implementation process is designed in the reform package itself. However, the scheme seems to be general enough to encompass a broad range of variations in the devolution policy package, and identifies key functions of the implementation of a devolution exercise, as well as to be useful as a source of inspiration for designing schemes of the functions involved in a change process which is episodic in nature (in the sense above specified).

The Lombardy case provides evidence of a number of distinct social groups affected by devolution⁷. For at least three groups, the costs for them determined by devolution exceeded the envisaged benefits (for reasons that are widely discussed in Ongaro, 2006): tenured officials in the staff of local governments, managers at the regional level in associations of agricultural businesses, and the personnel to be reallocated. All these three categories could provide sources of resistance to change, but this did not occur. Why? The reason is that the practices employed counteracted these sources of resistance – whilst at the same time other practices prompted the backing by those other categories of actors that were instead potentially discontent with the current state of affairs and envisaged benefits in the new situation (‘triggering the discontents’ as Kelman, 2005, put it).

For example, for tenured officials in local authorities devolution represented mainly a transfer under their responsibility of ‘boring’ routine tasks, that also conveyed a high degree of administrative risk embodied in their execution; and the massive reallocation of personnel from the region represented for them a concrete menace of being superseded by transferred regional staff, who had been promoted to a higher assignment-level as an incentive to transfer, and should therefore be assigned correspondingly higher-level duties under the labour regulation in force in the Italian public sector. A calculation of costs and risks by tenured officials already in the payroll of local governments would be likely to lead them to resisting the reform, hence – given the importance of the staff already in local authorities for the integration of the personnel reallocated from the region – to lead the overall devolution process to a halt. The point is that in the devolution of labour-intensive tasks, as was the case in Lombardy, succeeding in the organizational integration of the staff reallocated to the recipient level of government is crucial; the bulk of conducting the adaptation process is on tenured officials in the local governments: it is for this reason that having them to side with the devolution process, and supporting them in defining the proper organizational solutions for the integration of personnel, is central for carrying out the devolution process. But the design of the devolution program provided public managers engaged in implementing devolution with some formal instruments: for example, the devolution law prescribed the establishment of the inter-institutional table as a venue for elected and tenured officials from regional and local governments to meet. It has been the adoption of smart practices, however, *like the utilization of the inter-institutional table as a mobilizing structure*, that has allowed the performance of the above identified functions⁸. In this respect, the inter-institutional table for agriculture, that worked through systematic meetings held on a regular basis and interconnected with formal deliberative moments within individual organizations, performed also another function beyond its institutional one: it acted as an important *mobilizing structure*, a social

⁷ in the remainder of this section we make systematic reference to the findings of the case analysis reported in Ongaro 2006: what the present work does is utilizing those findings for extrapolating practices and constructing them in terms of their design features and context factors – Table 1.

⁸ To stick to the example, as we shall see, the utilization of the inter-institutional table as a mobilizing structure that allowed the performance of Function 1.1, namely engaging governments recipients of devolution for creating momentum of the change process.

space put at the service of interpretations of situations and objectives (McAdam et al., 2001, p102), interpretations that made the new situation be interpreted by tenured officials in local authorities more as an opportunity than as a threat. This process seems to identify a practice, labelled Practice 1 (table 1), that performs the function of creating momentum by counteracting the mechanism of attribution of threat to the new situation by the tenured officials in the level of government recipient of the devolution of tasks. The inter-institutional table, established formally for interconnecting deliberative moments of the regional and local governments in a context of labour division between the two levels (regulatory powers being exercised by the region, service delivery by the local authorities), exploited the opportunity provided by this design of inter-institutional labour division *by performing also a mobilizing function central to the progression of change.*

The example⁹ serves the purpose of illustrating the second step in the protocol: define what exactly the practice is about. In the case, the practice is about ‘setting to work *loci* for empowering communication channels between public sector organizations and stakeholders’: this is the ‘essence’ of the practice, whilst the other aspects associated to this table, its formal competences assigned by the law, etc., are *not* the core of the practice.

In turn, the description of the practice - third step - is based on answering two interconnected questions: 1. how does the system operate? and 2. How does the practice try to take advantage of the way the system operate? In fact, as we have seen in the example above, it is first necessary to have an understanding of how the system works; in the case in point, that devolution is not a ‘neutral’ process, but it is a process that objectively affects a number of categories of actors, and for certain of them in such terms that costs by far exceed benefits, which may trigger a mechanism of attribution of threat associated to the new situation by such categories (which behave as rational actors), hence lead to resistance which may be impossible to overcome if the actors are empowered with enough means to stop the process. Only once it is understood that this is the way the system operates in devolution dynamics, the question about how the practice works can more properly be addressed in the terms of ‘how the practice tries to take advantage of the way the system operates’ (in order to counteract some effects and determines others). In the case, by appropriating a mobilizing structure to make the change be interpreted as an opportunity and not as a threat, as well as by facilitating the development of inter-organizational teams and other structures and routines for inter-organizational co-ordination of transactions.

Moreover, and this leads us to step 4, it is not only the main effect(s) of the practice that must be identified, but also side effects. Thus for example the exclusion of some categories of actors from the tables may lead these categories to even amplify their attribution of threat to the new situation, hence further increase their likely resistance to the change process. Moreover, variations of the practice may be influential too, and lead to unusually satisfactory performances as well as breakdowns.

Last, but definitely not least, practices are assumed to work under specific conditions – only very seldom practices may be considered as operating ‘free of context’, and such practices are very likely to have already been discovered and applied. The fifth step in the protocol is therefore the definition of the process context factors under which the practice works. This is a crucial component of the transferability of the practice: practices work only in ‘similar’ conditions; or, to put it in another way, practices have to be adapted, and combined in different ways, to fit partly different context factors (i.e.: to produce similar effects as they did in the original case), and in the absence of ‘(functionally) similar’ context factors, practices are very likely not to work, or to produce unintended consequences.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 summarizes the protocol of extrapolation, and, by illustrating the set of practices extrapolated from the Lombardy experience, it also provides an example¹⁰. To sum up, the logic structure of the proposed protocol of analysis for the extrapolation of practices is as follows. First (column 1), each practice must be related to the function it performs. In general, the practice employs one or more social mechanisms in order to counteract other social mechanisms that would ‘naturally’ inhibit or sap the unfolding of the devolution process. The latter is referred to as ‘the problem addressed’.

The content of the practice must then be described (column 2). The way the practice works has to be described by addressing the two distinct though interrelated questions of, first, how the system operates, and, second, how the practice tries to take advantage of the way the system operates (how it exploits opportunities lying in the system) (column 3). Theory-based understanding of how the system works is the basis for characterizing the practice and the way it works.

Effect or ‘result’ of the practice is the way the outcome of running the practice allows performing the function. The sensitivity of the effects of the practice to possible variations in running it must be described (point 2 in column 4). In particular, the questions about what accounts for unusually satisfactory performance or, at the opposite, what accounts for possible breakdown determined by the practice must be examined. Finally, and complementarily, possible side effects of running the practice, an aspect too seldom cared about in management literature, have to be investigated (point 3 in column 4).

⁹ All the other practices employed will not be described in detail in the text for reasons of brevity, but they are reported in Table 1.

¹⁰ It should also be added that F4 was performed mainly by managing some symbols and the use of authoritative means; i.e., it was achieved without resorting to any especially significant practice, like those described below with regard to the other functions, but simply by effective communication in formal and informal occasions that the ‘new’ state of affairs had been achieved, and sometimes giving public evidence to events, like the first payments done by the newly established regional funding body, ‘tiny indicators that people elaborate into full-blown stories’ (Weick, 2001), symbolizing the new ways in which things were being run.

Context factors of the change process ('Process context factors') are considered in column 5. They provide the opportunity the practice may exploit and determine the 'domain of applicability' of the. It is the careful consideration of these 'operating conditions' of the practice that allows avoiding unwarranted generalizations. The identification of context factors, though mainly a craftsman work that cannot be done according to pre-codified, automatic procedures, is guided by the theorized knowledge acquired about the way the system works, produced by the (extrapolation-oriented) case analysis based on the two questions in column 3. In this respect, to distinguish the two questions (Bardach, 1994) about 1. how the system works, and 2. how the practice intervenes on the system for exploiting opportunities for improving performance (in a broad sense), is central for identification and qualification of the context factors.

4. DISCUSSION

As considered at the end of the previous section, the domain of applicability of the practices (i.e.: the conditions under which the practice has the potential of producing the range of identified effects) is defined by the context factors associated to each practice (see Column 5, table 1). Thus, smart practices are an attempt at providing generalizable knowledge extracted from the case investigated, but a kind of knowledge for which the domain of applicability has to be specified, by the identification and qualification of the context factors. It is of course necessary that context factors do not define conditions 'too specific', but general enough for the practice to be of practical relevance for a wide range of practitioners. What this article does for contributing to a research agenda on categories of smart practices is proposing a protocol of organizational analysis for the extrapolation of practices (schematized in table 1 and commented above) that in our view represents a refinement of Bardach's and Barzelay's proposed protocols (Bardach, 1998; Barzelay and Campbell, 2003; Barzelay and Thompson, 2003

The joint efforts of: 1. institutions engaged in organizing major exercises for the identification of best practices, 2. researchers engaged in a research program on different categories of smart practices, and 3. practitioners willing to provide full accessibility to their experience (including the least attractive 'side' aspects of their experience) and to critically re-examine them together with researchers might provide a major contribution to the generation of a range of exemplars - a sort of 'menu of practices' - from which practitioners can draw lessons for elaborating contrivances for application to their extant problem.

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Figure 1: Case example: functions in implementing an intervention of devolution (on the basis of the analysis reported in Ongaro, 2006)

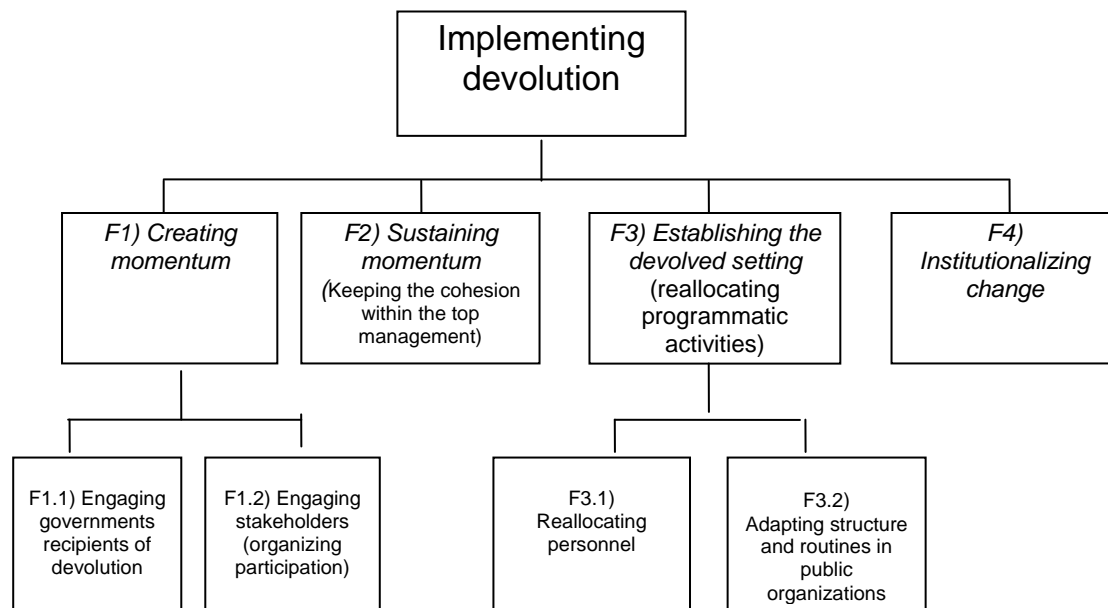


Table 1: case example: practices extrapolated from the Lombardy experience of decentralization (on the basis of the analysis in Ongaro, 2006)

(1) Function (in brackets the problem addressed by the practice)	(2) Practice	(3) Description	(4) Effects	(5) Key Process Context Factors
F1-1 (‘Attribution of threat’ by civil servants in the recipients authorities concerning the new responsibility and risks)	P1] Setting to work <i>loci</i> for empowering communication channels and joint decision-making among public sector organizations (in the Lombardy case, the inter-institutional table of agriculture)	<p>1.The system Attribution of threat or opportunity to the new situation. The replace of intra-organizational, hierarchy-based mechanisms of governing the transactions with inter-organizational settings and network-based transactions mechanisms.</p> <p>2.How the practice takes advantage of the way the system operates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By appropriating a mobilizing structure to make the change be interpreted as an opportunity and not as a threat - By facilitating the development of inter-organizational teams and other structures and routines for inter-organizational co-ordination of transactions 	<p>1.Main effects Momentum of the devolution process is initiated (and sustained). Network-based mechanisms of governing the transactions are set to work.</p> <p>2. Variations of the practice Training programs attended jointly by personnel of the different levels of government and other procedures may further facilitate the development of the implementation network.</p> <p>3. Possible side effects Exclusion of some actors may amplify attribution of threat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nature of the division of labour across levels of government and asymmetry in powers and expertise (facilitating the appropriation of mobilizing structures by the upper level of government) - Collaborative dynamics of the political system, especially regarding the relations between upper (devolving) and lower (recipient) levels of government.
F1-2 (Attribution of threat by relevant constituencies to the new situation)	P2] Setting to work <i>loci</i> for empowering communication channels between public sector organizations and stakeholders (in the case, the ‘agricultural table’) and incentives for prompting stakeholders to back the devolution intervention (in the case, the Centers for Agricultural Assistance that were contracted out important public administrative tasks)	<p>1.The system The reshaping of electoral and non-electoral constituencies determined by the reallocation of decision powers and administrative tasks implied by devolution affects attribution of opportunity and threat by relevant stakeholders</p> <p>2.How the practice takes advantage of the way the system operates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By making the change be interpreted as an opportunity - By linking stakeholders’ (in the case, farmers’) representatives agenda to the devolution agenda performed by the regional government (brokerage mechanism) 	<p>1.Main effects Momentum of the devolution process is initiated (and sustained) by enhancing stakeholders’ consensus towards devolution.</p> <p>2. Variations of the practice Linking the decentralization agenda with other cross-sectoral, highly political <i>loci</i> for communication and joint decision-making may strengthen the effects (in the Lombardy case, the ‘pact for the development table’ for consulting stakeholders in all the main economic fields).</p> <p>3. Possible side effects Exclusion of some actors may amplify attribution of threat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nature of the relations between the government and the stakeholders in the policy sector - Features of stakeholders’ internal organization
F2 (in complex change)	P3] Interconnecting the individual interventions required for implementing	1.The system Complex processes tend to split into a variety of distinct, though interdependent, adaptation efforts (‘projects’).	1.Main effects The variety of adaptation efforts are recognized and strongly interconnected, thus sustaining	- Stability and continuity of the governing coalition

<p>processes, some interventions tend to lose the recognition by key actors of their significance for the progression of the devolution agenda</p>	<p>devolution by having top managers to take part to all or most of the projects teams</p>	<p>Actor certification / de-certification of the devolution interventions affects key actors' commitment.</p> <p>2.How the practice takes advantage of the way the system operates By having the key actors to take part to all or most of the working groups, validation is maintained over time and interdependencies in the change process are governed</p>	<p>momentum and increasing co-ordination</p> <p>3.Possible side effects Exclusion of some actors may amplify attribution of threat</p>	<p>- Nature of the interdependencies of the different adaptation efforts</p>
<p>F3-1 (Problem: being reallocated is a net loss for personnel)</p>	<p>P4] Combination of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - inducing a belief of inevitability by properly manipulating the organizational design - careful selection of personnel - monetary incentives 	<p>1.The system The move to another level of government affects the social as well as the material labor contract between the organization and its labor force: as a result, an unbalance between contribution and reward in the staff to be transferred is produced. Threshold-based behaviors about whether to accept or resist transfer may be operating</p> <p>2.How the practice takes advantage of the way the system operates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By explicitly reducing the unbalance by providing a compensation - By constraining available decisional alternatives though the formation of a belief of inevitability - By triggering rational imitation (specifically threshold based behavior) at the individual level 	<p>1. Main effects Attenuation of resistance to transfer by the personnel.</p> <p>2. Variations of the practice The block transfer of personnel may either reinforce the process of hamper it. The gradual transfer of personnel over the time period of devolution may facilitate the activation of persistent patron-client networks, in turn leading to some of the personnel avoiding transfer</p> <p>3. Possible side effects Attribution of threat connected with the perception of being superseded on the side of staff already in the payroll of the lower level of government</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Social status' and labor contract of personnel at different levels of government (a country-specific factor) - Organizational culture and preferences structure of personnel
<p>F3.2 (The new institutional division of labor may enhance room for opportunistic behaviors. Adaptation of structure and routines to the new tasks performed is required)</p>	<p>P5] Developing a 'professional bureaucracy' organizational model for the public sector entity that devolves tasks, and establishing specialized bodies</p> <p>Setting to work routines for processing information on performances and tasks execution in the other entities of the policy subsystem (in the case, the new inter-organizational computerized information system)</p>	<p>1.The system New tasks are to be executed at the different levels of government, hence different organizational configurations are required. Fragmentation of tasks increases the scope for opportunistic behaviors.</p> <p>2.How the practice takes advantage of the way the system operates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - By providing top executives with the organizational instruments for keeping the grasp over the overall policy process - By empowering middle management and staff by enriching their job - By sharing information and thus reducing the scope for opportunistic behaviors 	<p>1. Main effects Enabling the regional government to focus on its new core activities and keeping the grasp over the entire agriculture policy formulation and delivery process</p> <p>Improving working relationships between levels of government; providing 'platforms' for improving service delivery</p> <p>3. Side effects Integrated information system: risks of breakdowns when the hierarchical logic overextends and/or when information is used only according to a 'negotiation' logic.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contents of the reform policy package (what is re-allocated) - Collaborative dynamics of the political system, especially regarding the relations between upper (devolving) and lower (recipient) levels of government - Division of labor across levels of government; nature of interdependencies among the tasks

