

The Translation of Best Practices in Italy

Pedro Monteiro

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Supervisors: Davide Nicolini - Warwick Business School

Andrea Lippi – University of Florence (Università di Firenze)

Abstract

The study aims to understand the long-term success of a best practice approach in the Italian administration. Based on a previous work, it re-examine a population of projects in order to understand the reasons and forces that have sustained the popularity of the model through time. By focusing in-depth on the local appropriations of the best practice idea and the forces at work in this context, the research maps its local translations and reconstructions. It then shows how actors have tailored the idea according to their own interests, supporting its spread. This means that although the concept has brought changes, these were not 'wholesale' and must be understood according to the local situation and the actors involved in the process. Bearing that in mind, the study concludes that the notion of best practice has been mainly used for legitimacy and as to a tool for transparency and to influence policy-making.

Introduction

The present research builds on a previous one realized in 2004 by the two supervisors on the adoption of a best practice approach in the Italian public sector (Formez, 2005). In line with the reform waves of the New Public Management (Hood, 1991), the public administration in Italy has introduced from the private field a range of managerial methods and discourses (Gherardi and Jacobsson, 2000). 'Best practice' is one of these imported notions that were/are expected to transform the *modus operandi* of the public services (Brunsson and Sahlin-Anderson, 2000) helping it to become more efficient, economic and so on (Brunetta, 2009).

Originally, the concept of best practice refers to those cases in which outstanding results are achieved. These are usually identified through a process of benchmarking, comparing a given organization with the leaders of a sector, or by adopting (quality) standards more or less structured (Codling, 1995; Zairi, 1998). In theory, they offer the possibility of discovering and adopting 'the best way' to do things (Stapenhurst, 2009)

However, it is a commonplace in organizational studies the fact that changes are usually followed by de-coupling processes: actors adopt ideas only on the surface, but their actual performances remain the same (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Tilcsik, 2010). Besides, studies on the circulation of ideas

anchored in the translation paradigm (Sahlin-Anderson and Engwall, 2002; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005) have showed that they are usually not only decoupled, but also re-created, acquiring different formats. In some (extreme) cases, concepts named in the same way have even triggered different practices and vice-versa (Erlingsdottir and Lindberg, 2005).

This means that the effects of the spread of management notions in the public sector cannot be presupposed according to their original aspects. As a matter of fact, the original research in 2004 demonstrated that the adoption of the best practice approach by a variety of actors did not (necessarily) reflect a managerial framework. Only the minority of projects, for instance, adopted a benchmarking strategy or any other form of structured comparison. Actually, most actors justified the effort to collect and/or showcase these (best) practices as a way to promote the spread of good ideas.

The present study hence builds on these considerations to investigate the reasons for the success of this best practice approach. If these projects did not (necessarily) contribute to the advancement of a managerial logic, for what have they been used and what explains their continuity? And in the cases it was unsuccessful, is it a result of their lack of commitment to the original best practice approach? What are the forces that have sustained this idea and for what purposes? This implies that before exploring the fate of the initiatives, it is important to understand what they really represent and how they have been shaped, so that they satisfied the interests of the actors involved in their unfolding.

Methodology

In order to understand the success factors of the best practice approach, the study made use of the theoretical framework known as the sociology of translation (Lippi, 2000; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Nicolini, 2010). Unlike traditional perspectives that study the travel of ideas as a diffusion process occurring in a social void by a transparent and necessary order, the translation literature affirms that an idea cannot travel unmodified by inertia and free of politics. When an actor adopts it, s/he also translates it according to his/her own purposes. What appears to be the extensive presence of the 'same' entity spreading in an S-curve is only fruit of methodologies that focus on the results, not the processes through which they circulate (Nicolini, 2010). When studied proximally (Cooper and Law, 2005) through qualitative in-depth methods, it becomes possible to uncover what are the different local (re)interpretations of a concept – in this case, the best practice approach – and to map the arrangement of forces leading to its development.

At first (February 2011), the researcher surveyed via telephone the projects previously studied in 2004 to establish their current status. Among these, approximately 1/3 was still active. However, it was not possible to visualize the reasons for their success or insuccess at that point, due to the lack of data about the different ways the category of best practice had evolved and the different motivations and interests associated to it.

A qualitative case study was hence the most advisable strategy in order to analyze the underlying key social processes in the context (Bryman,

2004). The cases were purposefully selected to create a contrast study (one represented an initiative that had flourished and another one that ceased to exist) enabling a comparative investigation.

Funded by the IATL, the researcher travelled to Italy (from the 31st of May to the 14th June) to realize a series of semi-structured interviews *in situ* to privileged informants and to collect documents referent to each project, in order to reconstitute the story of their development. Once the interviews were transcribed, the data was analyzed (on July and August) through a thematic analysis in line with the relevant literature (Bryman, 2004). The researcher then used the insights generated to cast light on the other cases and the general process, unpacking what the notion of best practice has brought in this context and addressing to what interests it is connected.

Results

The main points identified by the research demonstrate that the best practices approach was deployed by the different actors mainly as a route to obtain legitimacy. Depending on their status (e.g., regional or central administration) and the themes of the projects (e.g., gender policies, environmental sustainability, administrative innovations), they had different incentives to adopt the concept. Often, it constituted a label (Sahlin-Anderson and Engwall, 2002b) to re-brand their activities in a 'modern' (Røvik, 2002) and 'fashionable' (Czarniawska, 2005) manner that reflected the expectations of the reforms.

Moreover, the study showed that the notion is related not only to the 'managerialization' of the Italian public sector but also has become a trend through the years in the public field as a whole. Informants reported that the European Union, for instance, usually expects receivers of grants to signalize the 'best practices' (here seen as 'positive initiatives') that the funding was invested in. Therefore, the concept has increasingly become an obligatory step for those interested in establishing associations beyond national borders. This means that those who had aimed for an international reach, either for financial reasons or to exercise pressure in European policies in a given area, usually sustain(ed) the importance of the approach.

Similar to what has been pointed out in the first research, the adoption of this notion/label did not prescribe any particular method. Despite that, two formats emerged as the most common ones, related in one case to the creation of archives and on the other to the organization of sharing opportunities, loosely mirroring the scheme of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In the database configuration, the most popular, the organizations collect and store best practices, making them available on online portals or other media such as CDs or publications. This enables the organizations to showcase practices exemplary of the topics and models they support. For instance, those involved in environmental activities used it to bring to the fore these issues to the population and the government. This strategy was particularly relevant when the organizations needed to call attention for some questions relatively ignored in a given moment. Therefore, depending on the change of perception during these years in some specific themes (e.g.,

environmental sustainability which is now perceived as a relevant issue), the actors decided to invest (or not) in other areas, abandoning (or not) the collection of best practices.

In addition, the archives, especially when inserted among larger projects, were used not only to convince other (suspicious) subjects of the relevance of certain topics but also the 'affordability' of certain policies. This was often the case of projects related to gender issues, which historically are overlooked by the Italian government. By showcasing what has been done, the database was used then to both persuade others about the importance of the topics related to it and to demonstrate examples of how much 'doable' certain policies were (Fujimura, 1988).

The problem with databases, however, is that they require continuous updates and inescapable costs. When some funds decreased, some of these projects reached an end. On the other hand, those who have adopted a less structured approach avoided these costs. Indeed, it is telling that those who focused on creating opportunities for the sharing of best practices had a stronger continuity. The trade-off, though, was that they did not benefit from creating quasi 'tangible' devices (i.e., databases) that could be manipulated for different purposes.

Conclusion and outcome

The gist of the study is that the best practice idea was successful because it was translated by different actors for their (local) interests. This means that the reason for its spread was in the hands of the adopters who by 'betraying' it, sustained its circulation (Nicolini, 2010).

But even though the best practice approach did not cause a direct shift towards a managerial logic, it still brought considerable changes. As the findings demonstrate, such management practice has become a new instrument for organizing and accomplishing certain results in the public services. Besides, it has sustained different strategies of how administrations make sense of their activities.

In the particular cases analysed, they brought a new form of auditing (sponsored also by the European Union) as part of what has been called an audit culture (Strathern, 2000). This evidences an interesting point: best practices might not have delivered the expected focus on performance; nevertheless, they concurred to sow new forms of transparency (Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008), a value also akin to the reform canon. Furthermore, the research suggests that the collection of best practices also represents a political tool to propose agendas in the policy-making process. As a result, the best practice approach appears associated with the development of a model of governance as it gives the public administration instruments to accounts for itself and to make others accountable (Djelic and Sahlin-Anderson, 2006b) and establishes a format of 'soft regulation' similar to the creation of systems of name and shame and peer pressure (Mörth, 2006).

The research has showed that the study of ideas, especially those embedded with certain political projects, cannot prescind from a zoom in what happens after it is implemented. By paying attention to the processes and interests involved in its adoption and development, it becomes possible to

understand how it is re-constructed and the new (political) meanings it assumes. This implies that the translation model adopted appear as highly suitable to better understand the encounter of the public and private realms. It is able to conceptualize non-linear processes – given that these changes are seldom ‘wholesale’ – recognizing the hybridization (Djelic and Sahlin-Anderson, 2006a) of these practices and with a major sensitivity to their ‘glocal’ dimension.

Next Steps

The researcher and the supervisors will meet in the beginning of October in Italy in order to discuss the next steps of the project. The aim now is to write a scholar article to share with the scientific community the results of the study. In addition, the researcher also expects to present the work in a seminar in the next year.

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