

**Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript**

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

**Persistent WRAP URL:**

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/116205>

**How to cite:**

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information. If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

**Copyright and reuse:**

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: [wrap@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:wrap@warwick.ac.uk).

# SYSTEMATIC HETEROGENEITY IN THE ADAPTATION PROCESS OF MANAGEMENT INNOVATIONS

INSIGHTS FROM THE ITALIAN PUBLIC  
SECTOR<sup>1</sup>

*Davide Nicolini, Andrea Lippi and Pedro Monteiro*

**Abstract:** In this chapter, we investigate how the best practices approach ‘diffused’ in the Italian public sector. We show that despite the lack of a clear original model or a strong brokering agency — and the considerable changes this management innovation went through in its arrival in Italy — the result was not complete idiosyncrasy. Rather, clear adaptation patterns and systematic heterogeneity emerged. We argue that the bottom-up emergence of such patterns can be explained by paying attention to the very nature of the public sector field. We use these findings to develop a framework that accounts for the convergence/divergence of adaptation patterns in the ‘diffusion’ of management innovations based on power relations between innovation brokers and adopters.

---

<sup>1</sup> To appear as: Nicolini, D., Lippi, A. Monteiro, P. (2019). Systematic heterogeneity in the adaptation process of management innovations. Insights from the Italian public sector. In T. Reay, T. Zilber, A. Langley and H. Tsoukas (eds.) *Institutions and organizations: a process view*. Oxford: University Press [In press].

**Key Words:** diffusion; translation; management innovations; management practices; benchmarking; best practices; power; public sector.

## *1 Introduction*

In recent years, a growing number of scholars have embraced the notion that variation is intrinsic to the process of diffusion of administrative and managerial practices (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010; Ansari, Reinecke and Spaan, 2014). This understanding emerged from the convergence of three research programs: the work by Scandinavian institutionalism on the travel of ideas and the translation of innovation (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Frenkel, 2005; Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005; Morris and Lancaster, 2005; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008); scholarship on the glocalization of organizational forms and practices (Saka, 2004; Frenkel, 2005; Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Drori, Hollerer and Walgenbach, 2014); and studies of the adaptation of innovations during their diffusion (Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010; Saka, 2004; Frenkel, 2005; Djelic and Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Drori, Hollerer and Walgenbach, 2014). Authors from all these research programs problematize the previously accepted assumption that innovations spread like ink in water (Rogers, 1995). Instead, they submit that adopters modify management innovations according to their contexts and in light of their interests (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005). Thus, the very idea of diffusion has now been expanded to include adaptation as a constitutive element (Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010). We signal this shift in theoretical sensitivity by using the term ‘diffusion’ in inverted commas throughout the chapter (employed in the sense of “diffusion cum adaptation”). Similarly, we use adaptation as a general

reference to the changes management innovations go through in their 'diffusion' — a process labelled in the literature in various ways, such as variation, translation, editing and glocalization (Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008; Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013).

Early studies on this topic conducted by exponents of the Scandinavian neo-institutionalism school remained close to the idea that 'diffusion', adaptation and translation should be studied processually one case at a time utilizing proximal and longitudinal methods of inquiry (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005). This was particularly because this work focused on variation to problematize the then prevailing view that management ideas and practices remained constant when they 'diffuse'. More recently, however, scholars have started to explore the existence of patterns and mechanisms in adaptation. The attention has been focused especially on two aspects: the underlying causes of adaptation processes (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Campbell, 2004; Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008; Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013); and the relationship between the spread of innovations in a field and adaptation dynamics at the organizational level (Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010; Fiss, Kennedy, and Davis, 2012; Compagni, Mele and Ravasi, 2015). While the former has attracted significant attention, the latter remains still largely unexplored and authors have called for more attention to the link between organizational and inter-organizational levels in the study of management innovations (Volberda, Van Den Bosch and Mihalache, 2014).

In this chapter, we respond to this call by investigating the process through which the best practice approach (henceforth 'BP' — plural or singular as the context admits) made inroads into the Italian

public sector. Through a combination of survey and case studies, we trace how an idea that originated in the private context has been reinterpreted and practiced in the Italian public sector, exploring its adaptation among a population of 65 early-adopting best practice projects. Our case is particularly illuminating because its conditions are different from those explored in previous research. Existing studies in fact often tend to focus on cases when (1) the management innovation has clearly identifiable sources; and (2) it is backed by a brokering agency with established authority vis-à-vis adopters (Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010; Fiss, Kennedy, and Davis, 2012; Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013; Ansari, Reinecke and Spaan, 2014; Compagni, Mele and Ravasi, 2015). For example, Ansari, Reinecke and Spann (2014) investigate the diffusion of a very specialized management practice across sites of a multinational company guided by clear ‘owners’. Conversely, in this chapter we explore an adaptation processes in the absence of a univocal source or powerful brokering agents.

We find that in Italy the ‘diffusion’ of BP happened in a bottom-up manner and that its early-adopters drew on a variety of sources and models (this is quite different from the ‘diffusion’ of BP in other European countries around the same time, see Bowerman et al., 2002; Ball et al., 2002). Of interest here, and the focus of this chapter, is the fact that such an idiosyncratic process did not produce pure heterogeneity but a systemic one. More specifically, there were clear patterns in the adaptation of the management innovation. We argue that these patterns — and the lack of tensions, resistance or concerns with fidelity among users of different versions — can be accounted for in terms of the power relations in the public sector field (an aspect

that is rarely thematized in the existing literature on management innovations). To that end, we employ insights from institutional theory to show how the social position of the adopting organizations and the overall structure of the field shaped the process of 'diffusion' of the management innovation (Lockett, Currie, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2014; Battilana, 2011).

## *2 Theorizing the process of 'diffusion' of management innovations*

### *2.1 From diffusion to 'diffusion cum adaptation'*

For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, social sciences scholars and policy-makers endorsed the view that new practices and ideas diffuse within a population or field through communication-based processes of contagion (Rogers, 1995; Strang and Soule, 1998; Van de Ven and Hargrave, 2004). The implicit principle was that 'information' is transmitted unchanged and its success depends on the nature of the sender, the object diffused, and the fit with the receivers. Adopters are often depicted as passive and easily influenced; the focus is on responsive adaptive behavior; and the driving force behind the diffusion of innovations is assumed to be either the acquisition of a competitive advantage or normative compliance (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Johnson and Hagström, 2005).

This under-socialized view of the circulation and take-up of innovations was problematized in the 1990s by a number of studies, which shed light on the active

role of adopters in the diffusion process (Scott, 2008; Strang and Meyer, 1993; Strang, 2010). These studies suggest that the idea of mechanical imitation underlying much of the previous work on diffusion is inadequate. Innovative practices are necessarily reinterpreted in the light of the prevailing interests and system of relevance of the adopting organization as “a self-consciously interpretive process underlies most adoption” (Strang and Soule, 1998: 276). Because of this inevitable process of interpretation, transfer necessarily implies modification and the output of an organizational transfer process may be significantly different from the input (Strang and Kim, 2004).

These critiques led to the development of the so-called translation model of innovation circulation (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005; Johnson and Hagström, 2005; Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008; Pipan and Czarniawska, 2010). This strongly processual approach makes two main assumptions. First, the movement in space and time of any new idea is in the hands of those involved at each step. Each of these actors shape the innovation to their own ends, thus sustaining its further travel. They may “accept it, modify it, deflect it, betray it, add to it, appropriate it, or let it drop” (Latour, 1987: 267). Instead of a process of transmission, we thus have a process of continuous and contingent transformation, reshaping and local adaptation (Latour, 1987; Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Strang and Kim, 2004). This process has been described by various authors as ‘contextualization’ (Latour, 2005), ‘hybridization’ (Djelic, 1998), ‘editing’ (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996), ‘bricolage’ (Campbell, 2004) and ‘ideational adaptation’ (Frenkel, 2005). Second, there are always

several possible competing interpretations of any idea, each serving a particular set of interests. Hence, the 'diffusion' process should always be regarded as a political project that takes place within specific power dynamics (Johnson and Hagström, 2005; Nicolini, 2010).

Most of the early studies from a translation perspective were conducted by scholars from the Scandinavian Institutionalism school who used in-depth single longitudinal studies in order to highlight how actors reshape practices during adoption (see Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008, p. 222 and Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010, p. 71 for a discussion). Attention to patterns was limited to the study of regularities in the different processes of adaptation at the organizational level (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996; Campbell, 2004; Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005; Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008; Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013). To be clear, the emergence of adaptation patterns was not ignored but simply remained unexplored: although occasional mention is made of the institutional and organizational dynamics shaping the adaptation of organizational practices, the contingent conditions of how much variation unfolds during 'diffusion' (and whether adaptation patterns emerge) remained largely unexplored.

## *2.2 The 'diffusion' of management innovations*

Things changed with the increasing acceptance of the idea that innovations change as they 'diffuse'<sup>2</sup> in

---

<sup>2</sup> Somewhat confusingly, some of these scholars continued to use the term 'diffusion' to refer to the process, although the meaning of the term had greatly changed. In order to signal

mainstream management studies (Strang, 2010; Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010). Attention turned to the relationship between the processes of inter-organizational ‘diffusion’ and intra-organizational adaptation. Ansari and his co-authors, for example, put forward a theoretical framework for analyzing how practices vary as they diffuse in a field and are implemented within organizations. The framework is based on the assumption that adaptation will depend on the technical, cultural and political fit between the diffusing practice and the adopting organization. Different forms of dynamic fit will trigger different take-up, especially in terms of fidelity and extensiveness — i.e., similarity with the original prototype and dosage of the implementation throughout the organization (Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010, p.71 and 72). The framework has been used subsequently to explore variation in ‘diffusion’ of management innovations in a number of empirical studies.

For example, Fiss, Kennedy and Davis (2011) studied the spread of the controversial practice of offering ‘golden parachute’ contracts to executives in firms exposed to a takeover. They find that population-level factors (e.g., information availability and contestation) as well as organization-level ones (e.g., stakeholder and takeover exposure), affect both the extensiveness of adoption and similarity of the model that circulates. In short, because of the contested nature of the practice, adopters stuck to the same model that they could justify in terms of ‘peer pressure’. Ansari, Reinecke and Spaan (2014) examined how organizations anticipate and purposefully influence

---

such change, in this text we use the term ‘diffusion’ in inverted commas.

adaptation. They found that a multinational corporation uses specific strategies to manage the tension between standardization and variation in management practices as they diffuse across the corporation. Scarbrough, Robertson and Swan (2015) investigated the 'diffusion' of resource planning. They found the initial development of the innovation was strongly driven by the vested interests of the professional groups that gathered around it. They attended to the effort of reframing and supporting the innovation in tandem with organization-level actors who enacted and continually adapted it. As the innovation gained momentum, it was objectified in software, thus reducing its flexibility. In the end, this process gave rise to technology market mechanisms that then drove the innovation's spread, supplanting the role the professional association played in this respect.

While these studies shed light on the relationship between an organizational level process and field level dynamics, they all operate within a fairly restricted set of assumptions. First, most of these and other studies assume the existence of an original source guarded by specific brokering agents promoting the diffusion process (Canato, Ravasi and Philips, 2013; Ansari et al, 2010, Ansari, Reinecke and Spaan, 2014). As a matter of fact, only if we assume a well-defined and recognizable 'original' with associated 'brokers' can we discuss issues of fidelity and extensiveness of adoption as do, for example, Ansari et al., (2010) or the ways managers consciously 'prepare' an innovation, such as quality management, for its variation (cf. Ansari, Reinecke and Spaan, 2014).

Second, and strictly related to the above, many of these studies pay little attention to power dynamics and usually assume the authority of the originating source and/or brokers vis-à-vis adopters. This idea is common

both to traditional diffusion studies which traditionally privilege a focus on role models and trendsetters (Rogers, 2005) and studies of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). These perspectives assume that imbalance is due to positional authority, resource dependency, cognitive legitimacy (as in the case when the innovation has been subject to theorization. See Strang and Meyer, 1993) or combination of all three. Cases when such imbalance does not apply are rarely contemplated. This goes against one of the basic assumptions explored by the translation school introduced above: all 'diffusion' is fuelled by the interests of adopters. Accordingly, it represents a political project that takes place within specific power dynamics that exist in many formations. These interests and power dynamics, as suggested by institutional theory, are in turn shaped by the social position of actors within a field. Failing to pay attention to the configuration of a field in which organizations are embedded and the power dynamics within it may therefore hamper our understanding of how and why adaptation in 'diffusion' happens in the first place.

### *3 Research Setting and Methodology*

To investigate the relationship between field level 'diffusion' of management practices and organizational level adaptation, we focused on the adoption of the BP approach in the Italian public sector. In the next three sections, we explain the rationale of the study, the choice of the Italian case and our methodology.

### *3.1 Best Practice: a management practice in motion*

The notion of 'best practice' has an uncertain origin traditionally attributed to the Scientific Management movement. Yet, it became a buzzword only in the 1980s when firms started to investigate and compare levels of performance (Davies and Kochlar, 2002). The expectation being that once 'best practices' of superior organizations had been identified, these would be adopted leading thus to improved performance (Spendolini, 1992). Three characteristics are typical of how BP are used in the private sector (Bowerman, Francis, Ball and Fry, 2002):

- Best practices are identified through highly codified, systematic assessments.
- Conducting benchmarking is part of a step-wise search for improvement.
- Participation is voluntary and confidential (data is kept within firm boundaries).

In the early 1990s, the BP approach spilled into the public sector mainly thanks to its association with the NPM movement. NPM and post-NPM reforms strongly advocated a shift from policy-making to management skills (Christensen and Laegreid, 2011). This went hand-in-hand with identification and comparison of quantitative results and the establishment of league tables and minimum performance thresholds. Thus, collecting, comparing and showcasing best practices became a key governance strategy to promote efficiency and value-for-money (Bowerman et al., 2002; Ball, Broadbent, Moore, 2002; Papaioannou, Rush and Bessant, 2006). The European Union (EU) was a

particularly enthusiastic adopter and promoter of BP due to its political positioning at the time. Indeed, analysts commented that starting from the 1990s "...in the EU, benchmarking, it seems, is everywhere" (Arrowsmith, Sisson and Marginson, 2004, p.311).

At the time of our research, BP was therefore a practice in motion, which made it a fitting object for our inquiry into the 'diffusion' of management practices.

### *3.2 Research Setting: Why Italy?*

The Italian public sector has a number of particularities that traditionally differentiate it from other European countries (Capano, 2003). More specifically, two of its characteristics make it particularly suitable for our study: the segmented and decentralized nature of the Italian public sector; and the lack of traditional central agencies supporting the uptake of new practices in public sector organizations.

#### *3.2.1 The segmented and decentralized nature of the Italian public sector*

The Italian public sector includes central organizations such as governmental bodies, national institutes, and ministries; and peripheral ones such as quasi-autonomous non-governmental organizations (QUANGOs), municipalities, charities, foundations, and associations). These central and peripheral organizations co-exist in a loosely-coupled relationship that is resultant from two historical processes. The gradual transformation of the unitary nature of the State, and the enlargement of the public sector through the involvement of quangos and private bodies (Capano,

2003). First, in recent years, the Italian State has gradually moved towards a 'quasi-federalist' model (Lippi, 2011) through decentralization and the devolution of power to its Regions. This resulted in a strong segmented field and a redundant (and often ambiguous) multi-level system of governance in which central and local agencies deal with the same issues.

Secondly, the Italian public sector is characterized by a large number of arms-length bodies and semi-governmental agencies (QUANGOs). While some of these were established as a form of patronage by ruling politicians, they became of key importance in the late 1990s when the New Public Management (NPM) reforms promoted delegation and outsourcing of power to private organizations (NGOs, associations, foundations). Segmentation and delegation were accelerated by the State's crisis of legitimacy following the scandals and financial crises of the 1990s and the increasing pressure of separatist movements (i.e., Northern League Party). By the end of the 1990s the Italian Public Sector was characterized by a sharp distinction between 'traditional and insiders' central bodies and 'emergent and outsiders' peripheral organizations (Capano and Giuliani 2001).

The former controlled the definition of specific policies and the distribution of resources while the latter were left in charge of piloting new ideas and fuelling change.

### *3.2.2 The lack of strong brokering agencies for innovation in Italy's public sector*

The particular way in which innovations spread in Italy's public sector is well-illustrated in the process

though which New Public Management was introduced in the country. Italy did not experience a single brokering agency supporting the uptake of NPM; unlike, for example, Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian countries where NPM ideas were introduced through mandatory policy initiatives issued by central government — often under a regime of central controls and inspections (Ongaro, 2006; Mele and Ongaro, 2014; Kuhlmann and Wollmann, 2014). In contrast, in Italy reforms were introduced in a piecemeal fashion through redundant legislation and spontaneous initiatives (Cepiku and Meneguzzo, 2011; Ongaro, 2006). The absence of a single brokering agency left ample scope for local adaptation. Local authorities, foundations, associations and other national agencies ended up implementing NPM tools autonomously or only partially coordinated by central governing bodies (ministries).

In summary, the nature of the Italy's public sector makes it particularly suitable for studying the 'diffusion' of management innovations in the absence of a strong model and powerful central brokering agency thus complementing the extant literature. In addition, given the existence of well-identifiable and varied positions within the public field, this setting is also ideal to map out the influence of distinct social positions and power relations in the adaptation process and the possible emergence of patterns.

### *3.3 Data collection*

The data for this chapter stem from a large study carried out in two phases between 2005 and 2011. The first phase comprised: (1) a review of Italy's public sector literature and an exploratory round of interviews; (2) a survey; (3) four in-depth case studies. The second

phase included (4) a review of all the cases contacted in 2005. The data set is summarized in Table 1.

	<b>Exploratory interviews 2005</b>	<b>Survey 2005</b>	<b>Case studies 2005</b>	<b>Survey 2011</b>
<b>Aim for data</b>	Explore the Italian context and construct sample	Examine the main characteristics of adopters	Understand adaptation patterns in detail	Investigate longitudinal development of initiatives
<b>Data collection method</b>	Semi structured interviews	25 items e-mail/postal survey	In-depth case studies (12-18 Interviews)	Phone interviews
<b>Sampling method</b>	Expert consultation	Snowballing	Theoretical	Respondents of 2011 survey
<b>Usable sample</b>	N=20 (officials in central and local government, academics, and consult.)	N=65 (out of 71 contacted)	N=4	N= 49 (out of 65 contacted)

(1) We carried out an in-depth review of the literature on change and improvement in the Italian public sector and interviewed a number of expert informants including officials in central and local government, academics, and consultants (N=20). The questions were on the adoption of the best practice approach, their origins, diffusion and the critical issues that emerged. We also elicited a list of existing best practice initiatives. This initial sample was subsequently expanded through a web search and, most importantly, 'chain referral' or 'snowball sampling' (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981; Faugier and Sargeant, 1997). The

sampling (which yielded a list of 71 projects) stopped when different informants started to repeatedly mention the same projects.

(2) On the basis of the results from the interviews, we designed and piloted a postal survey. The survey was mailed or e-mailed to individual contacts in all the projects identified. The 25-item questionnaire investigated the duration, aim, and rationale of the projects. It gathered information on the ways in which BPs were identified and 'captured', who decided when a BP should be considered as such, and on what basis. It also investigated how the BPs were stored and disseminated, whether there was any follow-up and what effects ensued from their implementation. The authors contacted about half of the potential respondents by phone or e-mail to explain the purpose of the research and to encourage them to complete the survey. Sixty-five usable questionnaires were returned and constitute the basis of our analysis.

(3) After the survey, we conducted four case studies to raise understanding of specific issues. The case studies were selected on the basis of theoretical considerations to include two organizations for each main adaptation pattern identified. We chose projects that had been running for at least three years, as we wanted the case studies to capture some of the experience of and evolution in using the management innovation. Each case study involved between 12 and 18 on-site face-to-face and telephone semi-structured interviews. We also gathered a large amount of documentary materials, from project briefs to websites and, of course, best practice reports.

(4) In 2011, we returned to the field guided by the results of the first round of analysis. We aimed to contact all the original 2005 participants, from both the

exploratory interviews and survey. Of the 65 original participants, 49 were available for interview in the 2011 phase. Others were no longer involved in the project or the project was no longer running. In each case we collected basic narrative information on what had happened since 2005. Interviews were conducted mostly by phone and lasted between fifteen and forty-five minutes.

### *3.4 Data analysis*

The data from the 2005 exploratory survey were analyzed using a combination of descriptive statistics, statistical analysis and qualitative content analysis. We first tabulated all the responses and ran some basic descriptive statistics to get a general picture of the phenomenon using histograms and frequency distributions. We analyzed both types of initiatives and their distribution over time. We then cross-tabulated the results and studied the relationship between responses. The only significant relationship that emerged ( $p < .01$ ) was between the position of the organizations studied (central versus peripheral organizations) and the type of initiative these organizations had implemented.

In parallel with the statistical analysis of the survey, we also conducted a content analysis of the case studies. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analyzed jointly by two of the authors using a thematic analysis approach (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The two types of data were used in combination during three joint analysis meetings when we worked together to analyze and interpret the data. During the analysis, a consistent pattern emerged across quantitative and qualitative data, which suggested that our cases could be classified into two

distinct adaptation ideal types. We were first alerted about this by reading the comments of at least two informants, one from a local administration and one from a non-governmental association. In the interview transcripts, they described their projects as “networking” initiatives aimed at building a space for interactions and exchanges. They also explicitly tried to differentiate what they were doing from the central government, which was accused of wasting time and money and of building what was somewhat derogatorily called “best practice museums.” Given that the distinction had already been identified in the literature (Hansen, Nohria, and Tierney, 1999), we returned to our data and progressively refined the two ideal types by combining questions from the questionnaires and categories stemming from the content analysis.

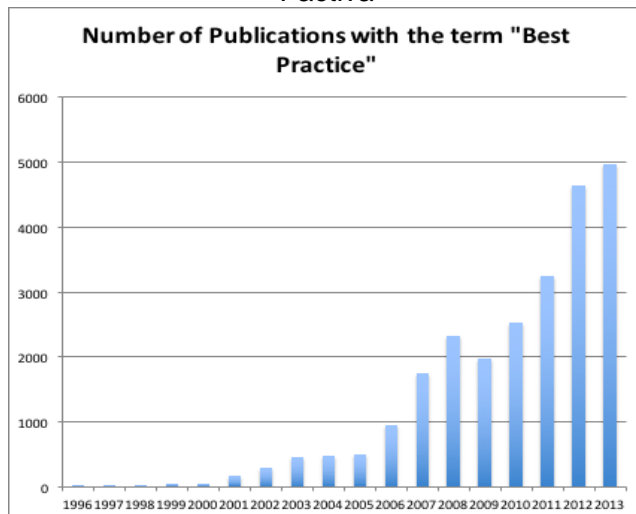
Using these criteria, we re-coded all the cases; a minority of disputed cases (<10%) were consensually allocated after discussion. During this phase, evidence from the survey was triangulated with the results from the interviews, our in-depth case studies and the analysis of documents and web sites. This enabled us to allocate cases on the basis of what the project did rather than what respondents said it did, thus minimizing the potential legitimating bias in the survey. This revealed the importance of the power relationships between central and peripheral agencies. Once again, we returned to our data and moving back and forth between data and interpretation we generated the framework discussed in the final part of the chapter.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Best Practice: The Travel to Italy

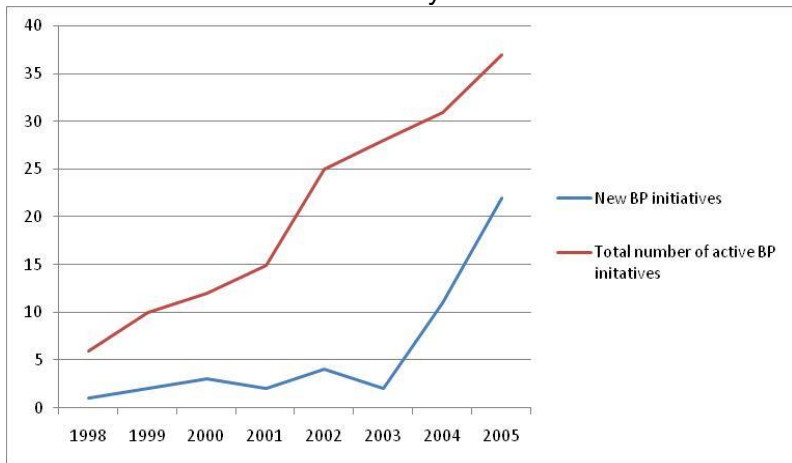
After spilling from the private to the public sector by the mid-1990s best practices had become an integral part of policy at the European Union (Dorsch, and Yasin, 1998; Arrowsmith, Sisson and Marginson, 2004). BP were also widely used in EU countries such as the UK (Bowerman *et al.*, 2002; Ball *et al.*, 2002) and Sweden (Kuhlmann and Jaekel, 2013). By contrast, in Italy the wave of interest was just starting to emerge and a steady rise is observable only from the very early 2000s onwards making this country a late adopter of BP (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** Number of entries for term 'Best Practice' in Factiva



However, the later take-up of the idea did not mean it was any less popular. As summarized in Figure 2, BP initiatives quickly became popular with the diffusion of the best practice approach following the well-known “S-curve” pattern (Rogers, 1995).

**Figure 2.** Number of BP projects in Italy according to our survey



#### *4.1.1 BP in Italy: an unsystematic arrival from many sources*

While BP became popular, there was no overarching plan, vision or specific legislation promoting it (Ongaro, 2006). The central government launched a variety of best practice projects to support the spread of the approach. However, this did not add up to any formal top-down program and the central government

limited itself to providing general calls for action, thus leaving substantial autonomy for organizations at all levels and making its adoption voluntary. Without a policy or legislation to define uses and scope, organizations experimented with the management innovation throughout the country, which took root in a bottom-up, unsystematic fashion.

The lack of clear top down program was accompanied by the reliance on a multiplicity of 'sources' in the identification and implementation of this management idea. In our survey, respondents pointed to several different models and 31% of respondents openly admitted that they operated in an "intuitive approach taking only general inspiration from existing codified benchmarking methods" (survey). Table 2 presents the long list of different models mentioned by respondents which suggests that the idea of BP was actively constructed (or reconstructed) in each location building on a variety of sources. The variety is so extreme that it is reasonable to ask whether this was really a process of adaptation and editing rather than a process of radical reinvention through patchwork and bricolage. In the next section, we provide a brief glimpse on the variety of ways in which BP was adapted in the Italian context.

**Table 2.** Sources of the BP approach used by adopters

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– European Foundation for Quality Management Excellence Model</li> <li>– Models issued by transnational standardization agencies, e. g. EUREPGAP certification scheme</li> <li>– ISO model</li> <li>– Example of use of BP in other European public sectors collected through visits and documents</li> <li>– Industry practitioners (e.g., from FIAT)</li> <li>– International agencies (e.g., OSHA)</li> <li>– Benchmarking consultants from industry</li> <li>– EU calls for funds</li> <li>– Academic literature on benchmarking in industry</li> <li>– EU Cross national projects (e.g., Helios)</li> <li>– Benchmarking in industry manuals and how to do books</li> <li>– EU project evaluation criteria</li> </ul> |
|---|

#### *4.1.2 BP in Italy: from 'best' to 'good' practices*

The vast majority of BP projects in our sample used some loose form of informal benchmarking, whereas performance benchmarking, which is the most common approach in the private sector and in other EU countries (Van Dooren et al., 2015), was carried out only rarely. Informal benchmarking refers to the comparison work process with that of the best competitor based on qualitative and, in our case, anecdotal evidence. In the case of performance benchmarking, the process is conducted in a structured and rigorous manner using specific standardized metrics (Spendolini, 1992). In fact, fewer than one in five projects used quantitative data and systematic methods to determine what counted as a best practice. This minority (four cases in all) were projects that used standardized, non-financial metrics such as the European Foundation for Quality Management Business Excellence Model or the Vision Framework. Overall, the selection was often made in what looked like a methodologically crude manner: almost 45% of the projects relied for the most part on self-nomination, while another 16% identified BPs through personal and professional contacts and ties.

While hard data were seldom used to identify BPs, most projects singled them out by using explicit ex-ante evaluation criteria. Yet, here as well, the methodological frameworks were set up in an ad hoc fashion, often without referring to common standards. On this note, it is significant to observe that the very way the BP notion was linguistically translated in Italian follows this fading attention to systematic assessments. In most cases, adopters used the term 'good praxes' (*buone prassi*), underplaying the explicit reference to rankings and

assessments in the original expression – i.e., ‘best’ practices.

In light of this view of BP, most projects aimed at identifying and highlighting notable examples. This was pursued through intensive use of ceremonial advertisement, usually referred to as ‘dissemination activities.’ Only a few projects did not wind up with a major workshop, congress or event. Specifically, in 30% of projects surveyed, this promotional activity was associated with an award or formal celebratory recognition. These were mostly prizes of a symbolic nature and only in a minority of instances did small sums of money change hands (Monteiro and Nicolini, 2015). The practice of awarding prizes was evenly distributed among all organizations and was used slightly more by central agencies. While most prizes followed a traditional contest format, about one in four was of a threshold nature.

#### *4.2 Adaptation Patterns: Inventories and Networking Spaces*

Given the lack of a central agency promoting or brokering the innovation and the distinctive bottom-up way of adopting the BP without clear sources, one might have expected multiple unrelated adaptations of the BP approach. Yet our findings revealed this was not the case. In fact, rather than complete heterogeneity, we found that the outcomes of the ‘diffusion’ had produced a field characterized by systematic heterogeneity. There was a certain method in the apparent Italian madness, as according to our analysis, the BP approach was mostly used by public sector organizations in projects

according to two ideal types: inventories and networking spaces.

*Inventories* are those projects that aim to build large (often very large) BP databases. These were usually set up by large, central government agencies, which carried out 'surveys of best practices' in their own jurisdictions (e.g., the Ministry of Labor created a database of best practices in employment, training, work welfare and entrepreneurship). Inventories counted for about 60% of our total sample and about two thirds of all initiatives promoted by central government agencies fell within this category (65% of our sample). The overt goal of inventories was to create a reservoir of excellence cases to be imitated. This meant that 'transferability' was usually an important criterion: the expectation was to identify and archive cases that could be easily reproduced in multiple contexts. An instance of this first ideal type is provided in Box 1.

### Box 1. Example of BP Inventory

#### **LearningGov**

In 1998 a large, Rome-based government agency for the promotion of professional education and employment launched a major initiative to develop and disseminate best practices emerging from previous EC-funded projects. The aim was to identify and formalize procedures raising standards in the areas covered by the agency (such as vocational training, distance learning, access to employment, and equal opportunities).

The BP were identified by members of the organization among EC-funded initiatives in the four previous years. The evaluation criteria were set by the agency and included: (1) projects' ability to identify and address issues in a given field; (2) the breadth of the projects' scope; (3) their innovativeness and transferability; (4) the existence of a clear project strategy; (5) the overall quality of the results.

Projects were investigated using a structured questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The results were summarized in short standardized reports illustrating the origin and development of the initiative, its main results, and why the project constituted 'good practice'. The reports, about three pages long, were collected in several volumes published internally (and therefore not available to the general public). The exercise and its results were

*Networking spaces* (or 'market place' as one of our informants called them) were projects in which BP exchanges were based on personal encounters between members of organizations belonging to the same field of interest and hence subject to the same challenges, pressures, and constraints. According to our informants, this common condition constituted an intrinsic drive to 'steal useful ideas from one another' – a phenomenon that is well known and discussed in depth in the so-

called 'community of practice' literature (Wenger, 1998). As a local administration manager put it:

We come to these BP meetings to see what's on offer, what other people are doing, how much it would cost us to do the same thing...it's mostly 'give and take'... it's like a marketplace...we talk, we try to understand, and if there is something we like, we take it home. (Local Administration Manager).

In the networking pattern, most of the promoters' efforts went into the establishment and facilitation of exchange processes. The idea of the marketplace suggests that BP can be traded in an open forum where people pool their experience. As another informant put it, the goal in networking spaces is, "setting up an exchange space and ensuring that there is enough stuff on offer." Although catalogues of best practices also existed in these initiatives, these were less structured and not conceived as an aim in themselves.

In summary, when BP approaches were translated in terms of networking spaces, the emphasis was less on identifying the extent to which best practices are transferable via specific evaluation criteria and more on creating opportunities for dialogue between practitioners and managing a network of relationships to sustain the exchange of excellence cases. Box 2 provides an example of an instance of this second ideal type.

## **Box 2. Example of BP Networking Space**

### **SchoolNet**

SchoolNet is a private foundation that since 1999 confers a prestigious national award for the most innovative teaching and management practices in primary and secondary schools. The prize money supports future innovative projects rather than past achievements. Winners are invited to the award ceremony and given high media visibility. Unlike the case of other prizes, however, this is only the beginning. SchoolNet in fact considers the award as a “mean to an end rather than an end in itself”. Winners become members of growing network that SchoolNet manages and actively facilitates. This takes the form of one-to-one visits, peer assist and networking events. SchoolNet describes itself as the provider and facilitator of networking opportunities in support of mutual learning. Interestingly enough the database with the description of the BPs of winners was discontinued after three years as it did not provide value for money and was not aligned with the mission of the organization that aims to promote and sustain innovation.

A summary of the attributes of the two models of adaptation is provided in Table 3. Table 4 reports the distribution of models around cases. Table 4 suggests that some amount of variation did exist within the two groups and that the situation in the field was not totally black and white. This is something to be expected given that our categories identify adaptation ideal types (see Gerhardt, 1994 for a discussion). For example, many of the agencies that translated the idea of BP in terms of networking spaces also established a database of sort

(so that these organizations had both inventories and a networking spaces).

However, other aspects of our research support the validity of the distinction. Most significantly, the practitioners were fully aware of the differences between the two models and the need for their organizations to embrace one rather than the other. For example, one of our informants contrasted 'markets squares' (our networking spaces) with what she called a '*practico-teca*'. This was a made-up and derogatory term that combined the Italian words for "practice" and for library (*biblio-teca*). The term was used to convey the idea that for this informant inventories were perceived as unhelpful. In her words:

The effort to map the world on a 1:1 scale is worthless from the perspective of those who have to take action... modelled practices are of little use...if they're too long I don't have time to read them...if they're too short they are worthless...to understand what people do, you need to talk to them (Charity Manager).

During our follow-up study, we noted that many organizations later abandoned the inventory approach as in the case of SchoolNet in Box 2. Indeed, in 2011 we found that none of the networking initiatives still actively operated a BP database. This change and the presence of hybrids as noted before thus underscores that adaptation is a process which unfolds in time –while we were only able to take a static snapshot of it.

**Table 3.** Characteristics of Adaptation Patterns

	<b>Inventory</b>	<b>Networking Space</b>
<b>Main User</b>	Central organizations	Peripheral organizations
<b>Basis for Selection of BP</b>	Presumed evidence of excellence	Relevance and capacity to trigger dialogue between practitioners
<b>Overall Aim</b>	To establish ideal models to inspire imitation	To sustain innovation by revealing what is going on within a network
<b>Typical Way to Make BP Available</b>	Database in official web site or printed publication	Community of practice

**Table 4.** Distribution of Adaptation Patterns across Cases

	<b>Inventory</b>	<b>Networking Space</b>
<b>Central Organizations</b>	20	7
<b>Peripheral Organizations</b>	18	20

### *4.3 Adaptation Process and Positions in the Public Sector Field*

To gain some further insights into the emergence of the pattern in adaptation, we zoom in briefly on two cases: EduGov and EcoCounty. These organizations occupy different positions in Italian public sector field (EduGov is a central agency while EcoCounty is a peripheral administration) and adapted best practice benchmarking in opposite ways.

#### *4.3.1 Adaptation processes in the center*

EduGov is a large government agency for the promotion of education with headquarters in Florence and regional offices across the country. Founded in the 1920s as a national archive and museum of education, it is financed by (and operates under the control of) the Ministry of Education. In 1995, in the middle of a major revision (and elimination) of existing historical QUANGOs, EduGov was tasked with managing the register of all educational projects funded by the European Union. As a national agency, EduGov was only officially expected to collect information about administrative details and store project documents. Yet, managers at EduGov soon grasped the opportunity to expand this archival work beyond auditing purposes. Rather than merely acting as an administrative archive, they sought to establish themselves as a documentation center recording the innovative efforts of the Italian education system. The word “and the dissemination of best practices” was added to their mission “EduGov

aims to provide ... information on educational resources, projects and technologies in order to facilitate educational innovation and the dissemination of best practices” (from EduGov documents, emphasis added). In short, in order to increase its legitimacy and ensure its long-term survival, the agency sought to position itself as the main center for the promotion of excellence in the Italian school system.

The creation of the best practice inventory coincided with the introduction of a number of laws that gave Italian schools the power to partially modify the national curriculum at the local level. The Ministry of Education was looking for a central repository where all innovative ideas developed locally could be made widely available and disseminated. As one of the informants at EduGov explained, they were interested in combining their traditional bureaucratic style of central control through ministerial decrees and memorandums with a form of “co-ordination based on participation and emulation between schools.” The ‘best practice’ approach was then an occasion to develop this monitoring work. EduGov set up an inventory with exemplary cases developed by schools across the country. Schools sent forms featuring both standardized data and discursive information on their ‘best practices’ to local partners who employed an established set of criteria to sift through the applications. Selected best practices were then divided between excellent and outstanding and an award was presented to the latter. In the mid-2000s the database contained over 3000 records (2984 marked as excellent and 382 outstanding) and in 2009 there were 944 outstanding projects. By creating a panoramic view of innovations promoted by others, EduGov helped the Ministry to provide a model of what a devolved school system may look like in

practice and made itself indispensable in the process. At the time of writing this chapter, the agency is very active.

#### *4.4 Adaptation processes the periphery*

The attempt by EduGov to create a large, comprehensive inventory of best practices aimed at documenting and influencing the pedagogical orientation of Italian schools can be contrasted with the case of EcoCounty. EcoCounty is a provincial (county) administration in northern Italy and one of the first in the country to develop a specific plan pursuing Agenda 21 objectives (an international action plan for sustainable development created in 1992). The province drew up a local program to put its general principles into effect through specific events under the aegis of an 'Agenda 21 Forum' with the participation of diverse stakeholders. Until 2001, these forums were conducted in a traditional conference format. In early 2002 the local administrators decided to use a participative mode in order to capitalize on local achievements and give them wide visibility. Together with a small consulting firm specialized in participatory policy-making, the province started to gather best practices. However, the way they went about it was very different from EduGov. Rather than collecting forms with the main goal of creating a database, the consultants carried out a number of outreach interviews through snowball sampling based on suggestions from province workers and contacts from previous events. In their words: "[we were] seeking people who had stories to tell ... for example, a councilor who promotes recycling, whether if it fails or succeeds, has a lot to tell" (Consultant for EcoCounty). Identifying best practices was a way to survey existent projects and enable people to meet and learn from one another.

People were asked not only what they did, but also their interests and availability to engage in future projects. In the words of one original promoter:

“The important thing is that they represent good examples to trigger a virtuous cycle... we wanted people to say ‘if they have done it, we can do it too!’ But also ‘I do not like how they did it: we’ll do it in a different way’”  
(Member of EcoCounty team)

This suggests that the aim was not to collect and store information but to forge partnerships and build a network of actors willing to promote initiatives on such themes as recycling or renewable sources. The results of the collection of best practices were summarized in a number of “What we did in practice” reports which were then used by the provincial administration to draw up its strategic plan and to establish its funding priorities. These priorities also became the topics of a number of best practice groups which met regularly for two years, discussed examples arising from both local and distant experiences, and exchanged materials and tools (from accounting templates to contracts). The meetings were held as away-days and special attention was paid to providing spaces where informal contacts and one-to-one conversations could take place.

#### *4.4.1 Two coexisting processes of adaptation*

Interestingly enough, our study did not reveal any form of attrition, conflict or competition among these models of using BP. In fact, we found that organizations that used one model often also took part in initiatives promoted by agencies that had interpreted BP in a radically different way. For example, the organizer of

one of the networking spaces we studied candidly told us that he checked inventories: “to understand the direction of the national policy, which topics are foregrounded and what sort of things they want us to focus on”. Interviewees seem to accept that a division of labor existed between the two alternative models of using BPs. This contrasts for example with the competition between large inventory initiatives: we found several central agencies collecting best practices on the same topic often under a regime of ‘dynamic tension’. For example, when in 2005 the Ministry of Welfare announced the establishment of a ‘comprehensive’ inventory of best practice, we heard promoters and managers of existing inventories complaining about wasteful redundancy and arguing for the superiority of their inventories both in terms of coverage and methodology used.

## *5 Discussion*

We claim that our findings on the emergent adaptation patterns underpinning the ‘diffusion’ of BP in the Italian public sector advance organizational scholarship in three ways. First, we qualify the increasingly popular idea that management innovations need to be made to fit to the new contexts and organizational conditions in order to be adopted (Ansari, Reinecke and Spaan, 2014; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996, Frenkel, 2005; Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013). Second, we claim that interests and interpretations stemming from the configuration of fields and the position of adopting organizations in them go far to explain the uptake of innovations and the related re-configurations they go through (Boxenbaum, 2006; Zilber, 2006).

Finally, we suggest that the bottom-up convergence towards certain adaptation patterns we observed in our case is a particular case of a more general 'diffusion' process (Mazza, Sahlin-Anderson and Pedersen, 2005; Lippi, 2000; Fiss, Kenendy and Davis, 2012). We therefore put forward a framework to explain the convergence or divergence of adaptation patterns in the diffusion of management innovations based on power relations between innovation brokers and adopters.

### *5.1 Qualifying adaptation: When and How does it Happen?*

A significant body of scholarship proposes that novel ideas undergo significant variation as they cross national, industry and organizational borders. Our case study helps to qualify this increasingly accepted idea by drawing attention to the boundary conditions within which the process unfolds. We argue that most case studies of 'contextualization work' (Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013), 'fitting' (Ansari et al., 2010), 'theorization' (Strang and Meyer, 1993) and 'framing' (Morris and Lancaster, 2005; Boxenbaum, 2006) build on a hidden assumption that is rarely expressed. They have assumed a management innovation that has a high degree of objectification, in a context with a clearly identifiable source, and one where active brokers promote the innovation (Saka, 2004; Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005; Boxenbaum, 2006; Ansari Reinecke and Spaan, 2015). These conditions make innovations less interpretively flexible which in turn generates the need for the adaptation efforts listed above. However, this condition was notably absent in our case. The BP approach was almost never objectified or carried by

artifacts; original models were notably absent; ideas on how BPs could be used were plural and they were derived from a variety of models; and no visible sources of authority were governing the process.

Therefore, questions of fidelity (Ansari et al., 2010) never arose as the issue would be “Fidelity to what?” This is not only a matter of semantics. The nature of what is being adapted or made to fit affects the work associated with the process (Spicer and Parkman, 2008; Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013). It is one thing to implement something rather freely according to one’s local interpretation of a popular idea circulating via fragmentary hints, tips and exemplars; it is quite another to adapt or tweak or edit something that has a recognizable form and is backed by some existing source of authority. The two imply and require different levels of empowerment, different types of work, and may potentially trigger different dynamics (e.g., control and resistance).

Innovations that have been successfully packaged into a “closed box” (Latour, 2005) can hardly be taken apart at will and re-used freely. Specific agents exist that ensure that this does not apply, such as the case of accreditation agencies for management tools (see e.g., Scarbrough, Robertson and Swan, 2005). A very different situation applies when no closed box exists, so to speak. This explains why in our case adopters could claim to use a highly particular modification of the BP approach (e.g., without benchmarking or similar forms of systematic assessment) and still call it ‘best practice’ without triggering disputes.

In summary, our case suggests that different modes of adaptation (or contextualization, or fitting, or framing) apply depending on some of the existing boundary conditions. More specifically, our study

suggests that issues of fidelity discussed in the literature apply especially when a (management) innovation is highly objectified (as in the case of resource planning discussed by Scarbrough, Robertson and Swan, 2015) and/or supported by an institutionalized normative apparatus (see e.g., the example of safety procedures in Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000). Other mechanisms and dynamics are likely to operate when such conditions do not apply. What such dynamics may look like will become clearer once we examine in the next sections why in spite of the lack of a strong translating agency in the Italian case we ended up with a clear pattern at field level.

## *5.2 Adaptation Patterns and Field Configurations*

Although the uptake of BPs in Italy was linked to a number of loosely-linked sources, we did not end up with a totally idiosyncratic landscape. On the contrary, the management innovation was modified in comparable ways according to organizational and institutional conditions. This can hardly be explained on the basis of external social forces such as general belief systems or the work of (institutional) entrepreneurs (Miller and Garnsey, 2000; Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005; Lounsbury, 2007; Delmestri, 2009). All adopters belonged to the public sector and as such they utilized the same general outlook and value system. At the same time, no obvious institutional entrepreneur existed – indeed, as we explain above, the field was characterized by a multitude of intermediaries and sources. Therefore, our conclusion is that the resulting

allomorphic<sup>3</sup> configuration of the field can only be understood by taking into account specific situational circumstances. In this, we agree with Saka (2004) when she suggests that “not only broader institutional belief systems or logics, but also the interpretative schemes and interaction patterns of actors shape practices.”

We argue in particular that the emergence of such distinct adaptation patterns of the best practice approach can be explained in terms of the combination of two features of the Italian Public sector: the urgent need for legitimization and the very structure of the field dividing organizations between center and periphery. The two operated in tandem and neither can explain our findings on its own. The constant need for legitimization is common to all organizations (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and especially public ones. While it is particularly acute in disaffected democracies such as Italy’s (and many other countries) where citizens harbor a deep mistrust of politicians and public institutions (Torcal and Montero, 2006), no organization in the public sector can do without it. As for the division between center and periphery, of itself this distinction is not sufficient to explain such a strong polarization in the adaptation pattern. For example, work by Compagni, Mele and Ravasi (2015) conducted in the healthcare system in

---

3 Allomorphy captures the idea that systematic diversification processes lurk beneath the surface appearance of generalized take-up (Lippi, 2000). According to the Collins Dictionary, ‘allomorph’ in linguistics indicates “any of the phonological representations of a single morpheme. For example, the final (s) and (z) sounds of *bets* and *beds* are allomorphs of the English noun-plural morpheme”. In chemistry, allomorph designates “any of two or more different crystalline forms of a chemical compound, such as a mineral”.

Italy shows that while central and peripheral actors in a field tend to cognitively frame innovations differently (e.g., threat versus opportunity), this does not automatically translate into different patterns of adaptation. In their case, the position in the field affected mostly the timing of adoption but did not shape adaptation (and indeed in their case strong isomorphism tendencies were present). It is only when positioning and legitimacy needs are considered together that the systematic heterogeneity emerging from our data can be understood.

Consider, by way of example, the case of organizations such as EduGov and similar central governmental agencies. For this type of organizations, collecting and archiving knowledge constitutes an effective way to gain legitimacy and justify their existence in the eyes of the Italian public, the elected government, and even the EU. To be noticed by these stakeholders, projects ought to be as large and as visible as possible – often with hundreds of best practices cases archived. The efficacy of such archives is only marginally relevant, for the aim is to justify the use of resources (many EU funding initiatives include the request to create a BP database listing cases of excellence among those funded). Critical to our discussion is that peripheral organizations were pursuing the same aim – legitimization. However, the outcomes were dramatically different. At the local level, BP projects were quickly perceived as a way to provide legitimacy by helping peripheral actors to gain recognition as valid autonomous and accredited decision-making hubs (against the center). This is why part of local governments and associations used the same initiative as the center (inventories of best practices) in striving to establish their autonomy from the

latter. In so doing, they symbolically and practically stated that what counts as 'good' (or 'bad') in areas such as sustainability, education or modernization of the public administration can also be decided at the local level.

As laws giving more autonomy to local organizations were passed (see above), peripheral organizations started to use the BP approach to independently promote specific agendas at the local level through networking spaces. The expectation being that once officials have the chance to directly learn about 'experiences elsewhere', they can use it in a rhetorical way to trigger action in their own constituency, nurturing a grassroots movement. In short, since organizations in central and peripheral positions anticipated similar benefits they used similar adaptation patterns (Boxenbaum, 2006; Zilber, 2006). Their purposes were "neither arbitrary nor dependent on the subjects' idiosyncrasies" and tended to be general in the sense that individuals placed in the same positions would tend towards similar choices (Brym and Hamlin, 2009, p. 90).

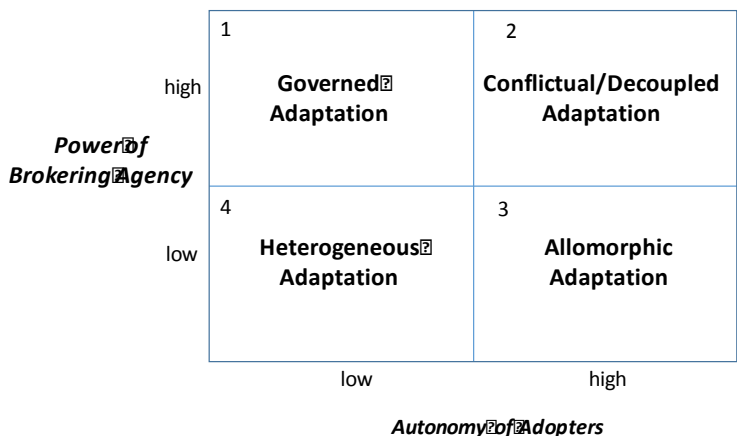
### *5.3 Towards a Framework of Adaptation Dynamics*

One of the most surprising results of our study is that we did not observe any notable tension or conflict in the emergence of the adaptation patterns previously described. The relative lack of conflict is surprising insofar as the control over standardization and variation of innovations is inherently an arena of and for power struggles (Nicolini, 2010). What counts as an appropriate variation of an idea can in fact have material

consequences, which at times lead to tensions. Indeed, the literature has documented many cases of forceful top-down impositions of a particular way of interpreting an innovation (Bruland, 1995). This includes research on the use of the BP approach in more centralizing nations such as in Germany and the UK (Bowerman et al., 2002; Greiling, 2005). For example, Ansari Reinecke and Spaan (2015) show that managers usually try to control which elements of a practice are allowed to vary and how. Studies also document struggles over how much autonomy exists in the adaptation of practices across organizations and open conflict regarding which version of the innovation should be adopted (e.g., Meyer and Höllerer, 2010). The literature is full of cases in which conflict results in cosmetic adoption (Erlingsdóttir and Lindberg, 2005) or decoupling between acceptance and implementation (Gondo and Amis, 2013). Interestingly enough, many of these studies were conducted within multinationals where the headquarters usually have significant control over the process (Ferner et al., 2004) or in countries with a strong central government (Erlingsdóttir and Lindberg, 2005 studied reforms in Sweden). As we discussed above, the conditions underpinning these cases were different from those we encountered in Italy where there was no evidence of a central authoritative brokering agency and the diffusion proceeded in a bottom-up fashion (rather than top down).

In this final section, we use the distinctiveness of our case vis-à-vis previous studies to construct a framework that accounts for different outcomes of the adaptation process depending on the balance between the power of the brokering agency and the autonomy of adopters. The framework is summarized in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** A Model of Adaptation Dynamics



Quadrant 1 captures the scenario explored by scholars who studied the relationship between organizational level adaptation and field level spread of management practices (Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010; Dokko and Gaba, 2012; Canato, Ravasi and Philips, 2013; Ansari, Reinecke and Spaan, 2015). It also applies to a broader literature that examines consistency and variability in spread of HRM practices within organizations, especially multinational companies (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004, Nishii and Wright, 2008). This represents the traditional situation in which the brokering agency enjoys significant power so that prospective adopters have relatively few degrees of freedom. Examples of this quadrant include other cases in which the ‘diffusion’ process is led by actors with a high position in an organizational structure (see, e.g., the case of coerced implementation of Six Sigma in GE by Canato, Ravasi and Phillips, 2013), or orchestrated by a

body with established formal power in a field such as a professional body, or an evaluation agency (see, e.g., the role of professional associations in Scarbrough, Robertson and Swan, 2015). In short, in this scenario the convergence towards a clear pattern depends on the top-down work of brokering agents that carefully support the diffusing innovation, often carefully managing its contextualization.

Quadrant 3 captures the situation described in our case in which there is no clear brokering agency (or one with little power in terms of governance of the field) and adopters enjoy high autonomy. In this case, we expect adaptation patterns to emerge in a bottom-up fashion with some level of mutual mimesis and acceptance among adopters. Tensions and conflict are rare because there is an understanding that different organizations carrying out different types of activities have different ongoing concerns.

Quadrants 2 and 4 refer to cases where the power balance is more uncertain and a plurality of adaptations unfold. Quadrant 2 captures the familiar case of divergence when the 'diffusion' of innovations is associated with a plurality of competing 'versions'. Several examples of this situation have been captured in previous studies (Meyer and Höllerer, 2010; Scarbrough, Robertson and Swan, 2015) which usually indicate two typical behaviors among adopters: resistance and decoupling. As an example of the former, a study of the arrival of the contentious practice of shareholder value in Austria studied by Meyer and Höllerer (2010) triggered a number of disputing interpretations from groups with distinct interests without the emergence of a clear (winning) pattern. As for the latter, it is well-documented how organizations may adopt an innovation symbolically without implementing it

substantively through the process of decoupling (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008; Haack and Schoeneborn, 2015).

Finally, Quadrant 4 corresponds to cases where both the brokering agents and expected adopters have low power and autonomy. In these cases, we would also expect little convergence and a patchy take-up (McCabe, 2011; Morris, 2005; van Veen, Bezemer and Karsten, 2011). This is the situation that mostly resembles one of cacophony or pure heterogeneity in the field and is best exemplified by studies of management ideas with low popularity. These usually do not have clear proponents and their take-up is usually fueled by the interest of adopters, who double as promoters (van Veen, Bezemer and Karsten, 2011). Yet, their lack of independence and relevance in the field makes them unable to sustain the visibility of any particular adaptation pattern. For example, in a study of how management ideas from a US management guru arrived in a fragmented way in the UK banking sector, McCabe (2011) shows how employees themselves modified the idea to a point where it bore almost no resemblance to the original. However, these employees lacked the necessary power and 'capital' to promote their local interpretation across organizations.

Although we have discussed how exemplary empirical studies fit into the four quadrants, their position should not be considered mutually exclusive and permanent. Rather, we expect to find a mix of adaptation dynamics in any situation. In addition, because power is dynamic in nature and so is the nature of management innovations, cases might move from one quadrant to another should conditions change. Hence, if or when power conditions in the field are altered, adaptation processes may change accordingly.

This may happen in the case of different innovations within the same context or in the case of the same innovation over time. A typical example would be a change in the nature of the brokering agency (a less centralizing government, or a new CEO with a strong centralist view). In this hypothetical situation, bottom-up convergence could be quickly undermined through the introduction of new stringent standards resulting in the break of a truce among models leaving adopters in a state of dispute (a process that could be represented as a move from Quadrant 3 Quadrant 2).

## *6 Conclusions*

In this chapter, we set out to study the relationship between organizational level processes of adaptation and field level processes of ‘diffusion’ of a management innovation in the absence of strong sources and without a powerful brokering agency. We found that the best practice approach assumed a strong local flavor as it gravitated around one-off selections of best practices in an unstructured manner with a focus on showcasing and sharing. The presence of such a strong re-creation drive did not result in a totally idiosyncratic landscape but rather in systematic heterogeneity across organizations that we explained in terms of comparable interests stemming from similar positions in the public sector field.

The chapter makes three main contributions. First, we expand and refine the idea that innovations need to be ‘made to fit’ to new contexts by pointing out that this applies mostly in the presence of clearly identifiable sources and well-packaged management innovations. We suggest that the process and dynamics are likely to be different in the presence of different conditions. In so

doing, the chapter responds to the call for more fine-grained analysis of how practices vary as they spread (Fiss, Kennedy, and Davis, 2012). It also demonstrates the benefits of conducting studies in non-traditional contexts where some of the taken-for-granted conditions (e.g., the presence of a strong corporate actor) do not apply.

Second, the chapter highlights the value of situational interests and interpretations in explaining the uptake of innovations and resulting field configurations. In particular, we show how specific adaptation patterns emerge in relation to the positions and interests of adopters in the field. Although previous literature has discussed variation dynamics, the focus was mainly on degrees of variation in relation to environmental/organizational conditions (Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010; Fiss, Kennedy and Davis, 2012; Ansari, Reinecke and Spaan, 2014). Our study advances the debate by showing the mechanisms through which management innovations vary as they diffuse, and adaptation patterns may emerge.

Third, we develop a framework that accounts for different outcomes of the adaptation process depending on the balance between the power of brokering agency and autonomy of adopters in a field. The framework enriches and expands existing theory and sheds further light on the relationships between inter-organizational mechanisms of diffusion and intra-organizational implementation and adaptation (Ansari, Fiss and Zajac, 2010, p.68). In addition, we offer empirical evidence that interests and relationships among adopters have as much theoretical purchase as accounts based on the fit between the innovation and adopters (cf. Ansari et al., 2010). While the general organizational and management literature on innovations and knowledge

often mentions the importance of power dynamics, the study of how this applies in the case of the 'diffusion' of management innovations is still under-explored (Peeters, Massini and Lewin, 2014). In so doing, we recover a central insight of the translation perspective on how adaptation is underpinned by the interests of adopters.

Our study opens interesting directions for future research. First, the multi-method approach paves the way for further studies that bridge the organizational and the field level. As we suggest above, new phenomena and unexpected insights may stem from addressing such issues in fields and national contexts that are different from those traditionally considered in the management literature. In particular, this may lead to interesting questions such as: Are the mechanisms suggested here generalizable? Do other conditions apply in different organizational fields? What happens in different national contexts? Second, our model is admittedly speculative and further research will be necessary to refine it and test its validity. Finally, further interesting insights can be derived if one also considers the temporal dimension of the phenomena and more research will be needed to understand how different fields moved between quadrants. By their nature, most studies in the translation and glocalization traditions (reviewed in the first part of this chapter) focus on the here and now or confine themselves to reporting events over relatively short periods. Longitudinal research could reveal how and whether patterns persist through time and whether allomorphism (systematic heterogeneity) is a lasting state or simply a transitional one towards isomorphism.

## 7 References

- Ansari, S., Fiss, P., and Zajac, E. (2010). Made to fit: How practices vary as they diffuse. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(1): 67-92.
- Ansari, S., Reinecke, J., and Spaan, A. (2014). How are practices made to vary? Managing practice adaptation in a multinational corporation. *Organization Studies*, 35 (9), 1313–1341.
- Arrowsmith, J., Sisson, K., and Marginson, P. (2004). What can 'benchmarking' offer the open method of co-ordination? *Journal of European Public Policy*, 11(2): 311-328.
- Ball, A., Broadbent, J., and Moore, C. (2002). Local Government: Best Value and the Control of Local Government: Challenges and Contradictions. *Public money and Management*, 22(2): 9-16.
- Battilana, J. (2011). "The Enabling Role of Social Position in Diverging from the Institutional Status Quo: Evidence from the UK National Health Service." *Organization Science*, 22: 817–834.
- Biernacki, P., and Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological methods and research*, 10(2): 141-163.
- Bowen, D. E., and Ostroff, C. (2004). Understanding HRM–firm performance linkages: The role of the "strength" of the HRM system. *Academy of Management Review*, 29(2), 203-221.
- Bowerman, M., Francis, G., Ball, A., and Fry, J. (2002). The evolution of benchmarking in UK local authorities. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, 9(5): 429-449.
- Boxenbaum, E. (2006). Lost in Translation: The Making of Danish Diversity Management. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(7): 939-948.
- Boxenbaum, E., and Battilana, J. (2005). Importation as innovation: Transposing managerial practices across fields. *Strategic organization*, 3(4): 355-383
- Boxenbaum, E., and Jonsson, S. (2008). Isomorphism, diffusion and decoupling. *The Sage handbook of organizational institutionalism*, 78-98.

- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2): 77-101.
- Bruland, K. (1995). Patterns of resistance to new technologies in Scandinavia: an historical perspective". In Bauer, M. (Ed.), *Resistance to New Technology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brym, R., and Hamlin, C. (2009). Suicide bombers: Beyond cultural dopes and rational fools. *Raymond Boudon: A life in sociology*, 2, 83-96.
- Campbell, J. (2004). *Institutional change and globalization*: Princeton University Press.
- Capano, G. (2003). Administrative traditions and policy change: when policy paradigms matter. The case of Italian administrative reform during the 1990s. *Public administration*, 81(4), 781-801.
- Capano, G.; Giuliani, M. (2001) Governing Without Surviving? An Italian Paradox: Law-Making in Italy, 1987-2001. *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 7 (4), pp. 17–36
- Cepiku, D., and Meneguzzo, M. (2011). Public administration reform in Italy: a shopping-basket approach to the new public management or the new Weberianism? *International Journal of Public Administration*, 34(1-2), 19-25.
- Christensen, T., and Lægreid, P. (2011). *The Ashgate research companion to new public management*: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.
- Compagni, A., Mele, V., and Ravasi, D. (2015). How Early Implementations Influence Later Adoptions of Innovation: Social Positioning and Skill Reproduction in the Diffusion of Robotic Surgery. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58(1), 242-278.
- Czarniawska, B., and Joerges, B. (1996). The travel of ideas. In B. Czarniawska, and G. Sevón (Eds.), *Translating organizational change*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

- Czarniawska, B., and Sevón, G. (2005). *Global ideas: how ideas, objects and practices travel in a global economy*. Malmo, Sweden: Liber and Copenhagen Business School Press
- Davies, A., and Kochhar, A. (2002). Manufacturing best practice and performance studies: a critique. *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*, 22(3): 289-305.
- Delmestri, G. (2009). Institutional streams, logics, and fields. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, 27, 115-144.
- DiMaggio, P., and Powell, W. (1991). *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Djelic, M.-L. (2001). *Exporting the American model: The postwar transformation of European business*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Djelic, M.-L., and Sahlin-Andersson, K. (2006). *Transnational governance: Institutional dynamics of regulation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dokko, G. and V. Gaba (2012) "Venturing into new territory: Career experiences of corporate venture capital managers and practice variation." *Academy of Management Journal* 55(3): 563-583.
- Dorsch, J. J., and Yasin, M. M. (1998). A framework for benchmarking in the public sector: literature review and directions for future research. *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 11(2/3), 91-115
- Drori, G. S., Höllerer, M. A., and Walgenbach, P. (2014). Unpacking the glocalization of organization: from term, to theory, to analysis. *European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology*, 1(1), 85-99.
- Erlingsdóttir, G., and Lindberg, K. (2005). Isomorphism, Isopraxism and Isonymism-Complementary or Competing Processes? In B. Czarniawska-Joerges, and G. Sevón (Eds.), *Global ideas: how ideas, objects and practices travel in a global economy*. Copenhagen: Liber and Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Faugier, J., and Sargeant, M. (1997). Sampling hard to reach populations. *Journal of advanced nursing*, 26(4): 790-797.
- Ferner, A., Almond, Ph., Clark, I., Colling, T., Edwards, T., Holden, L. and Muller-Camen, M. (2004). The dynamics of central control and subsidiary autonomy in the management of human

- resources: Case study evidence from US MNCs in the UK. *Organisation Studies*, 25(3): 363-391.
- Fiss, P., Kennedy, M., and Davis, G. (2012). How golden parachutes unfolded: Diffusion and variation of a controversial practice. *Organization Science*, 23(4), 1077-1099.
- Frenkel, M. (2005). The politics of translation: How state-level political relations affect the cross-national travel of management ideas. *Organization*, 12(2): 275-301.
- Gerhardt, U. (1994). The use of Weberian ideal-type methodology in qualitative data interpretation: An outline for ideal-type analysis. *Bulletin de méthodologie sociologique*, 45(1), 74-126.
- Gherardi, S., and Nicolini, D. (2000). To transfer is to transform: The circulation of safety knowledge. *Organization*, 7(2), 329-348.
- Gond, J.-P., and Boxenbaum, E. (2013). The glocalization of responsible investment: Contextualization work in France and Quebec. *Journal of business ethics*, 115(4), 707-721.
- Gondo, M., and Amis, J. (2013). Variations in practice adoption: The roles of conscious reflection and discourse. *Academy of Management Review*, 38, 229-247.
- Greiling, D. (2005). Performance measurement in the public sector: The German experience. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 54(7): 551-567.
- Haack, P., and Schoeneborn, D. (2015). Is decoupling becoming decoupled from institutional theory? A commentary on Wijen. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(2), 307-310.
- Halligan, J., Bouckaert, G., and Van Dooren, W. (2010). *Performance management in the public sector*. London: Routledge.
- Hansen, M. T., Nohria, N., and Tierney, T. (1999). What's your strategy for managing knowledge? *The Knowledge Management Yearbook 2000-2001*.
- Johnson, B., and Hagström, B. (2005). The translation perspective as an alternative to the policy diffusion paradigm: The case of the Swedish methadone maintenance treatment. *Journal of Social Policy*, 34(3): 365-388.

- Kuhlmann, S., and Jäkel, T. (2013). Competing, collaborating or controlling? Comparing benchmarking in European local government. *Public Money and Management*, 33(4): 269-276.
- Kuhlmann, S., and Wollmann, H. (2014). *Introduction to Comparative Public Administration: Administrative Systems and Reforms in Europe*. London: Palgrave.
- Latour, B. (1987). *Science in action: How to follow scientists and engineers through society*: Harvard university press.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the social-an introduction to actor-network-theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lippi, A. (2000). One theory, many practices. Institutional allomorphism in the managerialist reorganization of Italian local governments. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 16(4): 455-477.
- Lippi, A. (2011). Evaluating the 'Quasi Federalist' Programme of Decentralisation in Italy since the 1990s: A Side-effect Approach. *Local Government Studies*, 37(5), p.495-516
- Lounsbury, M. (2008). Institutional rationality and practice variation: New directions in the institutional analysis of practice. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 33(4): 349-361.
- Lockett, A., G. Currie, R. Finn, G. Martin, and J. Waring (2014). "The Influence of Social Position on Sensemaking about Organizational Change." *Academy of Management Journal*, 57: 1102–1129.
- Mazza, C., Sahlin-Andersson, K., and Pedersen, J. S. (2005). European constructions of an American model developments of four MBA programmes. *Management Learning*, 36(4), 471-491.
- McCabe, D. (2011). Opening Pandora's box: The unintended consequences of Stephen Covey's effectiveness movement. *Management Learning*, 42(2), 183-197.
- Mele, V. and Ongaro, E. (2014). Public Sector Reform in a Context of Political Instability: Italy 1992–2007. *International Public Management Journal*, 17 (1), pp.111-142.
- Meyer, J., and Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American journal of sociology*: 340-363.
- Meyer, R. E., and Höllerer, M. A. (2010). Meaning structures in a contested issue field: A topographic map of shareholder value

- in Austria. *Academy of Management Journal*, 53(6), 1241-1262.
- Miller, D., and Garnsey, E. (2000). Entrepreneurs and technology diffusion: How diffusion research can benefit from a greater understanding of entrepreneurship. *Technology in Society*, 22(4), 445-465.
- Monteiro, P., and D. Nicolini (2015). "Recovering Materiality in Institutional Work: Prizes as an Assemblage of Human and Material Entities." *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 24: 61–81.
- Morris, T., and Lancaster, Z. (2006). Translating management ideas. *Organization Studies*, 27(2): 207-233.
- Nicolini, D. (2010). Medical innovation as a process of translation: a case from the field of telemedicine. *British Journal of Management*, 21(4): 1011-1026.
- Nishii, L. and Wright, P. (2008). Variability within organizations: implications for strategic human resource management. In D.B. Smith (ed.), *The People Make the Place: Dynamic Linkages Between Individuals and Organizations*, New York: Taylor and Francis Group.
- Ongaro, E. (2006). The dynamics of devolution processes in legalistic countries: organizational change in the Italian public sector. *Public administration*, 84(3), 737-770.
- Papaioannou, T., Rush, H., and Bessant, J. (2006). Benchmarking as a policy-making tool: from the private to the public sector. *Science and Public Policy*, 33(2): 91-102.
- Perkmann, M., and Spicer, A. (2008). How are management fashions institutionalized? The role of institutional work. *Human Relations*, 61(6), 811-844.
- Pipan, T., and Czarniawska, B. (2010). How to construct an actor-network: Management accounting from idea to practice. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 21(3), 243-251.
- Powell, W., and DiMaggio, P. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2): 147-160.
- Rogers, E. (1983). *Diffusion of innovations* (3 ed.). New York: Free Press.

- Sahlin, K., and Wedlin, L. (2008). Circulating ideas: Imitation, translation and editing. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, K. Sahlin, and R. Suddaby (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*: 218-242. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Sahlin-Andersson, K. (1996). Imitating by editing success. The construction of organizational fields and identities. In B. Czarniawska, and G. Sevón (Eds.), *Translating organizational change* Vol. 56. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Saka, A. (2004). The cross-national diffusion of work systems: Translation of Japanese operations in the UK. *Organization Studies*, 25(2), 209-228.
- Scarbrough, H., Robertson, M., and Swan, J. (2005). Professional media and management fashion: The case of knowledge management. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 21(2), 197-208.
- Scarbrough, H., Robertson, M., and Swan, J. (2015). Diffusion in the face of failure: the evolution of a management innovation. *British Journal of Management*.
- Scott, W. R. (2008). *Institutions and Organizations* (Second ed.) London: Sage.
- Spendolini, M. (1992). *The benchmarking book*. New York, NY: Amacom
- Strang, D. (2010). *Learning by Example: Imitation and Innovation at a Global Bank*. Princeton University Press.
- Strang, D., and Kim, Y. (2005). The diffusion and domestication of managerial innovations: The spread of scientific management, quality circles, and TQM between the US and Japan. In S. Ackroyd, P. Thompson, P. Tolbert, and R. Batt (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Work and Organization*: 177-199.
- Strang, D., and Meyer, J. (1993). Institutional conditions for diffusion. *Theory and society*, 22(4): 487-511.
- Strang, D., and Soule, S. (1998). Diffusion in organizations and social movements: From hybrid corn to poison pills. *Annual Review of Sociology*: 265-290.
- Torcal, M., and Montero, J. R. (2006). *Political disaffection in contemporary democracies: Social capital, institutions and politics*. London: Routledge.
- Van Dooren, W., Bouckaert, G., & Halligan, J. (2015). *Performance management in the public sector*. London: Routledge.

- Van de Ven, A., and Hargrave, T.(2004). *Social, technical, and institutional change*: Oxford: University Press.
- van Veen, K., Bezemer, J., and Karsten, L. (2011). Diffusion, translation and the neglected role of managers in the fashion setting process: The case of MANS. *Management Learning*, 42(2), 149-164.
- Volberda, H., Van Den Bosch, F., Mihalache, O. (2014). Advancing Management Innovation: Synthesizing Processes, Levels of Analysis, and Change Agents. *Organization Studies*, 35: 1245-1264.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice : learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zilber, T. (2006). The work of the symbolic in institutional processes: Translations of rational myths in Israeli hi-tech. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49: 279–301.