

Reconceptualizing “Best Practices” in Public Sector

Authors : Eftychia Kessopoulou, Styliani Xanthopoulou, Ypatia Theodorakioglou, George Tsiotras, Katerina Gotzamani

Abstract : Public sector managers frequently herald that implementing best practices as a set of standards, may lead to superior organizational performance. However, recent research questions the objectification of best practices, highlighting: a) the inability of public sector organizations to develop innovative administrative practices, as well as b) the adoption of stereotypical renowned practices inculcated in the public sector by international governance bodies. The process through which organizations construe what a best practice is, still remains a black box that is yet to be investigated, given the trend of continuous changes in public sector performance, as well as the burgeoning interest of sharing popular administrative practices put forward by international bodies. This study aims to describe and understand how organizational best practices are constructed by public sector performance management teams, like benchmarkers, during the benchmarking-mediated performance improvement process and what mechanisms enable this construction. A critical realist action research methodology is employed, starting from a description of various approaches on best practice nature when a benchmarking-mediated performance improvement initiative, such as the Common Assessment Framework, is applied. Firstly, we observed the benchmarker’s management process of best practices in a public organization, so as to map their theories-in-use. As a second step we contextualized best administrative practices by reflecting the different perspectives emerged from the previous stage on the design and implementation of an interview protocol. We used this protocol to conduct 30 semi-structured interviews with “best practice” process owners, in order to examine their experiences and performance needs. Previous research on best practices has shown that needs and intentions of benchmarkers cannot be detached from the causal mechanisms of the various contexts in which they work. Such causal mechanisms can be found in: a) process owner capabilities, b) the structural context of the organization, and c) state regulations. Therefore, we developed an interview protocol theoretically informed in the first part to spot causal mechanisms suggested by previous research studies and supplemented it with questions regarding the provision of best practice support from the government. Findings of this work include: a) a causal account of the nature of best administrative practices in the Greek public sector that shed light on explaining their management, b) a description of the various contexts affecting best practice conceptualization, and c) a description of how their interplay changed the organization’s best practice management.

Keywords : benchmarking, action research, critical realism, best practices, public sector

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