

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY OF BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE CURRENT STATE

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Abstract: *The article deals with the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of best practice research (BPR). First, the basic components of BPR are formulated and analyzed. Then two different approaches to BPR are reviewed and their pros and cons discussed. Then the general problems of BPR are considered along with the possible ways of getting over them. The article shows that currently there is nothing like a “best practice of best practice research” and argues that much has to be done in the development of BPR theory and methodology. It concludes with several recommendations for improvement (mixed research design, clear definition of purpose, focus upon mechanisms etc.)*

Keywords: *best practice research, good practice, smart practice, mechanism, public policy*

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INTRODUCTION

One of the ways of improving public organizations is to identify, communicate and facilitate the transfer of practices that seem to work successfully somewhere else¹. This increasingly popular approach is called “best practice research” (hereinafter referred to as “BPR”²) and is based on the idea that instead of formulating an abstract ideal state we want to reach, we should develop what has been or is being implemented and is proven to work somewhere else. According to this approach, one should, above all, study carefully and disseminate “what works” instead of formulating hitherto unimplemented objectives and ways of attaining them. According to Overman and Boyd (1994, 69), the primary goal of BPR is “the selective observation of a set of exemplars across different contexts in order to derive more generalizable principles and theories of management”.

BPR was originally conceived in the domain of management and began to penetrate various domains of public policy in the early 1990s. For example, the ERIC database, as the largest resource in the field of education, has more than 4000 entries with the keywords “best practice”. Therefore, it is desirable to ask where BPR comes from and what its possibilities and limitations are. Despite the undeniable benefit of some existing pieces of best practice “research”, both academics and practitioners are often at odds with the methodological and theoretical foundations of BPR. In particular, instances of “good practice” tend to be selected without any underlying theoretical framework. Literature on BPR is confusing, terminologically incoherent, fragmented and in many ways inconsistent. There is no consensus on what BPR actually is and how it should be properly conducted. Many papers and “research” reports with BPR in their name are, in fact, nothing but mere descriptions of practices that seem, in one way or another (and often not quite clearly), useful and beneficial. Moreover, such exemplars tend to be selected randomly, subjectively and without any justification. This does not necessarily mean that such approaches are not useful or helpful, but one can hardly refer to them as “research”.

In response to such “bad practice of good practice”, scholarly literature (especially in the fields of management and policy analysis) has gradually formulated approaches that attempt to better define the theoretical, epistemological

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2 In this article, I use the acronym BPR (best practice research) to refer to “best”, “good” and so-called “smart” practice research.

and methodological foundations of BPR, and formulate more rigorous, systematic and transparent methods. Of course, such approaches do not only try to make BPR more “scientific” but also to make it more practicable and useful. In other words, they want the results of BPR (the selection and analysis of exemplars of good practice) to be truly inspiring for others.

In line with the argument just made, this paper has the following objectives: (1) to describe and explain the basic principles of two contemporary systematic approaches to BPR, (2) to compare both approaches and describe their possibilities and limitations, and (3) to propose possible improvements for BPR theory, methodology and practice. As mentioned above, BPR is a highly inconsistent field, and therefore I will also attempt to clarify the terminology and cover the main elements of BPR as such. More specifically, I will seek answers to the following questions: (1) what main approaches to the formulation of systematic foundations of BPR can be identified in scholarly literature?, (2) what are the differences between those approaches?, (3) what are their respective strengths and weaknesses, and (4) what kind of recommendations for improving BPR can be derived from them?

I will proceed in this paper as follows. First, I will clarify basic terms related to BPR. Then I will describe the basic elements every piece of BPR consists of. In the following section, I will critically analyze two different methodological approaches to BPR and discuss their respective advantages and disadvantages. Finally, I will discuss some general problems of BPR and the possibilities of overcoming them. The paper is designed as a theoretical-methodological one. Due to space limitations, I will omit detailed analysis of the ways the approaches outlined have been applied in practice (in specific case studies). Nevertheless, I will attempt to demonstrate theoretical arguments on specific examples, wherever possible.

TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS

Several interrelated terms are used in the literature to refer to BPR. They include, above all, the terms “best practice”, “good practice” and “smart practices”. Those terms are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes refer to different things. The matters are even more complicated by the fact that various disciplines apply the terms differently or in different contexts. For example, the goal of identifying good practice in private sector management is in many ways contrasting to the same goal in the public sector. There is no consensus on what “best practice” or “good practice” is, or how “good practice” research should be conducted (Myers, Smith, and Martin 2004, 4). Many authors also

avoid any definitions. Table 1 reveals that definitions of the above terms overlap in some aspects and differ in others. Nevertheless, common features can be identified.

Table 1 Different definitions of BPR

Definition	Source
In a general sense, the term best practice refers to the most efficient way of doing something. The fastest method that uses the least resources (including labor and parts) to create the highest quality output is the “best practice.” Almost every thinkable industry has adopted best practices in some aspect of its processes, but those that have made use of it successfully and publicly have typically done so in the fields of technology development, quality control, project management, teaching (on the college and secondary circuits), manufacturing, health-care, and sales.	“Best Practices.” Encyclopedia of Management (2009)
The term “best practice” implies that it is best when compared to any alternative course of action and that it is a practice designed to achieve some deliberative end.	Bretschneider et al. (2005, 309)
The phrase “best practices” or, in the singular, “best practice” is business jargon arising from the management tool known as “benchmarking.” The assumption underlying this term is that production and management processes are uniform enough so that a “best practice” can be identified and then adopted more or less “as is” by another entity.	“Best Practices.” Encyclopedia of Small Business. 3 rd ed. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale, 2007. 90–92. Gale Virtual Reference Library
The most precise definition of BPR is the selective observation of a set of exemplars across different contexts in order to derive more generalizable principles and theories.	Overman and Boyd (1994, 69)

Authors more or less agree that BPR, as a way of thinking, is oriented on constant learning, feedback and reflection of what works and why, or even what does not work (Stenström and Laine 2006). The definition of good practices emphasizes function and orientation on process, transformation and innovation (Tuominen, Koskinen-Ollonqvist, and Rouvinen-Wilenius 2004, 7, 27). However, there are important contrasts between BPR definitions. Tuominen et al. (2004, cited in Stenström and Laine 2006, 12–13) have designed the following classification of “good practice” definitions:

1. Definitions emphasising functionality:
 - Good practices can be anything which works fully or partly; they can be useful sets of functions which generate learning.

- Good practices have worked well elsewhere; they have been proven to be good and they have led to good results.
 - Good practices are outcomes which can be transferred elsewhere as functional sets.
2. Definitions emphasising processes:
- Good practices stand for advantageous methods which help to achieve the objectives defined for an activity, open up avenues of action, and make a company more profitable.
 - Good practices include the same elements as benchmarking even if the associated data collection procedures are more research-based.
3. Definitions emphasising innovativeness and transformability:
- Good practices are innovative. They create opportunities to introduce new procedures and approaches.
 - Good practices are associated with successful projects.
 - Good practice can be turned into new practices. Good practice includes elements needed in problem-solving, in which case it can be transformed to suit different situations.

Thus, one can approach the study of “good practice” from different angles. According to type 1, namely function-oriented definitions, exemplars of “good practice” can be seen in any set or “database” or good ideas, irrespective of the ways they were put together³. This concept is perhaps the most widespread in practice. Type 2 definitions, which emphasize the uniqueness of the process, primarily seek to identify the best or optimal process for attaining the highest profit (in the case of businesses). Finally, type 3 definitions are oriented on the implementation and realization of practices. Instead of looking for the best exemplar per se, they accentuate the identification of such practices that can lead to desirable innovations and changes in other places⁴. As I emphasized above, I am going to discuss those approaches that see BPR as a more-or-less systematic research process with its theoretical and methodological foundations. Such approaches are mostly related to type 2 and type 3 definitions. Nevertheless, I must first clarify the basic components of BPR and the links between them.

3 One must raise the objection that to refer to the process of creating such a database as “research” or to refer to the exemplars as “best practices” is problematic, given the random selection of exemplars and the theoretical vagueness of the process. It would perhaps be more appropriate to use the term “good practice”, as many authors do. Such authors are aware of the fact that unsystematic selection of exemplars of practice prevents us from demonstrating that they are truly *the best*.

4 Here, innovativeness is meant as the application of practices in a *new* site and a new context, not the creation of a generally unique practice.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF BPR

The primary goal of BPR is to improve the working of a social institution, typically a business or a non-profit organization, by adopting certain principles of the working of another institution that appears more successful. With some degree of simplification, one can say that any BPR study consists of two basic elements that are sometimes referred to as target site and source site. **Target sites** are institutions whose working is to be improved, while **source sites** are institutions providing inspiration for such internal change.

BPR consists of several steps. First, one analyzes the target site, i.e. the institution whose working one wants to improve. One must find out in what aspects the institution falls behind others, where its problems lie and what it needs to improve. This cannot be done without a clear definition of the goals the institution aims to attain. This is especially important for non-profit and public institutions with their various missions and purposes of activity⁵. In the field of tertiary education, such goals are related to the mission and vision a university (or a part thereof) defines for itself. Therefore, this step aims at defining what a given institution wants to attain and why the attainment of such defined goals is not completely successful. The basic questions we ask are, “what is going wrong?” and “why?”.

In further steps of the BPR process, we attempt to answer the question “how?”. Thus, we look for such exemplars of working practices that appear superior, compared to those in the target site. The key is to find an exemplar which is worth of following and appears as the best. Such an exemplar is referred to as “best practice” or “smart practice” (see below). However, “best practice” identification is not sufficient in itself. In order to utilize the given practice in the target site, we need to know *why* it works. This step is sometimes referred to as **explanation**. It aims at understanding what role the given practice plays in source site’s superior results. Finally, in the fourth step, we convert experience from the exemplar to the target site. This step is sometimes referred to as **extrapolation**.

Literature provides a great diversity of BPR methodologies which accentuate different phases of the above-outlined general process. Here, at least two basic types of BPR can be distinguished (Myers, Smith, and Martin 2004, 10–11): (1) quantitative microeconomic BPR and (2) case study-based qualitative BPR. In the following, I will briefly analyze both approaches using examples from their most important proponents. I will begin with the first type.

5 The main purpose of private businesses is, of course, to generate profit. This makes basic comparison between businesses much easier. Nevertheless, even private firms can have diverse specific goals.

“BEST PRACTICE” METHODOLOGY ACCORDING TO BRETSCHEIDER ET AL.

The frequently cited paper by Bretschneider et al. (2005) wanted to formulate a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for identifying a truly “best practice” and critically evaluate different techniques that are available for such identification. According to Bretschneider et al., the term “best practice” implies a way of action that appears better than any alternative ways of action and, at the same time, attains a defined goal. Their theoretical analysis led them to the conclusion that there are two necessary and sufficient conditions for identifying a best practice: (1) completeness of cases included in comparison and (2) comparability of those cases.

The condition of completeness states that in order to truly identify a “best practice”, we must include *all* comparable examples from a given area; a sample survey (however representative) will not suffice. In the case of a sample survey (as the basis of statistical inferences about the population as a whole), a *better* case may exist outside the sample and the term “best practice” is misleading. For example, if we want to identify the “best practice” in foreign language instruction at Czech universities, we must include *all* universities teaching foreign languages in the Czech Republic (not only randomly selected universities). Bretschneider et al. acknowledge the fact that the condition of completeness tends to be very difficult or even impossible to fulfil in practice. As a result, researchers tend to narrow the set of cases for comparison geographically or temporally in order to survey the complete population (for example, the population of schools can be narrowed to one region and a time frame of one year). However, if we compare *all* schools in one region (e.g., Central Bohemia), then an exemplar of “best practice” for that region can be identified (provided other methodological conditions are fulfilled, see below), described and analyzed. However, given the narrow focus of the exercise, we may not be able to fully extrapolate the knowledge derived from the exemplar to other regions.

The condition of comparability states that examples in a given set are comparable in terms of actions (practices), outcomes and the contexts they exist in. Even this criterion may be problematic. For example, when we try to identify a best practice in the involvement of social partners in the work of a university, are we supposed to include in one set both public and private universities and all their programs, or are the functions of those types of universities so different that we had better look for exemplars of best practice within the individual *types* of universities or within the individual programs? Which cases should we consider similar enough to be included in one set, and which ones should we not? Based on what criteria can we make sure that the set is complete?

According to Bretschneider et al., an underlying theory is necessary. They believe that **production theory** in economics is the most useful for this purpose. This theory is applied for relating outcomes (outputs) with the number of inputs and combinations thereof that were necessary to attain a given production. According to the authors, the advantage of production models lies in their acknowledging the existence of a formally discoverable relationship between inputs and outputs, which enables us to identify *one* best exemplar in which the best possible process transforms inputs into outputs. The authors then go on to comment on the pros and cons of several statistical procedures for rigorous identification of the best case⁶.

However, what exactly does “the best” mean? Based on what criterion can we tell that it is precisely school x where foreign language instruction is the best? “The best” can really mean a lot of things, e.g. students’ ability to speak a foreign language irrespectively of what they could in the beginning; students’ ability to speak a foreign language considering what they could in the beginning; and so on. To illustrate the concept of Bretschneider and colleagues using this example, we would in any case have to clearly define both inputs (e.g., students’ input language skills or motivations for language study) and outputs (e.g., ability to carry a conversation or to comprehend a scholarly text) in order to identify a best practice. However, the definition of what counts as inputs and outputs is highly subjective as well, and in practice, it tends to be determined by what we are and what we are not able to measure⁷.

The apparent ambition of Bretschneider et al. was to offer an alternative to the widespread method of identifying “best practice” in public administration by establishing a group of experts to assess the set of proposals received and select the example they find best. The authors do not think such an approach qualifies as rigorous research. They believe a relationship between action and its output must be identified as well. In other words, one must formulate a **causal theory** with emphasis on identifying such causes of the given phenomenon that can be controlled for in a way. The authors believe that statistical techniques can help us identify such complex relationships and simultaneously better ensure the comparability of cases. For example, when we want to identify the best case of collaboration between schools and social partners, many factors are apparently present: size of school, employment in the region etc. Such different statistical parameters can be controlled for statistically in order to ensure some level of comparability.

6 They consist of statistical techniques for identifying and working with extreme units in a set.

7 This is closely related to the so-called school added value: many issues have been raised with this approach (e.g., Amrein-Beardsley 2008).

“SMART PRACTICE” METHODOLOGY ACCORDING TO E. BARDACH

E. Bardach (1994, 1998, 2000, 2004) approached BPR from a different angle. According to Bardach, the term “best practice” is misleading because we are rarely certain that we have really identified the best exemplar of all options which might solve the problem we are facing or the goal we are trying to fulfil (Bardach 2000, 71). Such extensive research that would really take all options into consideration is practically never possible. What we get out of such research is at best “good practice”. But even this term is, according to Bardach, rather inappropriate. What is and what is not “good practice” also depends on the context: “good practice” in one setting may not be “good practice” in another setting. Therefore, Bardach finds the term “**smart practice**” to be the most appropriate.

The term “smart practice” suggests, in Bardach’s view, the existence of a smart or interesting idea in a given practice, one that deserves attention. It is precisely this “smartness” that the researcher should look for, study, verbalize and evaluate for applicability in the context of the target site. One of the characteristics of “smart practice” is “getting something for nothing”. In contrast to the popular belief that “there’s no such thing as a free lunch”, Bardach wants to demonstrate the existence of such practices that cost nothing or relatively little and are highly beneficial nonetheless. For example, the alphabetic ordering of information or the lining up of waiting persons are cost-free operations that can make life significantly easier and more efficient. Another example mentioned by Bardach is “the invisible hand of the market” which creates social values automatically, without additional direct cost. Still another example of “smart practices” with almost zero cost might be the establishment, interlinking and utilization of diverse social networks by means of new communication technologies. Their administration is almost cost-free, while their positive effects may be high. In the academia, such practices typically take the form of interactive alumni portals that can be utilized by universities for obtaining attractive internship opportunities for students.

Bardach acknowledges the limited array of such opportunities, but emphasizes their existence. He also acknowledges the fact that it requires some additional work to utilize such latent opportunities. In this respect, he uses the terms “to take advantage” and “to exploit” a latent opportunity. Nevertheless, what exactly is a “smart practice”? Bardach does not propose any precise definition or detailed set of instructions for formulating “smart practices”. He simply considers a “smart practice” to be anything that “aims to exploit, or take advantage of, some latent opportunity for creating value on the cheap” (Bardach 2000, 77). Such “anything” has both “essential” and “support-

ive” aspects. Essential are such aspects that causally produce valued effects of a given practice. They represent the defining “idea” of a “smart practice” without which there would never be any positive effect. In contrast, supportive are such aspects that increase the effectiveness or ensure the sustainability of a given practice but do not guarantee the valued effects on their own (for example, supervision or staff training for the given practice).

The uneasy task of revealing aspects in the core of a given smart practice, ones that really produce the desired effects, represents the key element of “smart practice” analysis. What is and what is not a central aspect is related to the *theory* our thinking is built on. However, there is a multitude of theoretical perspectives and people’s receptions of them. While Bardach does not mention this explicitly at any point, one can derive from his text that the purpose of “smart practice” analysis is in fact to understand and describe *why* it works and to formulate it in the form of a theory.

Bardach, as well as many other social scientists, has a problem with identifying a *causal* theory behind a given “smart practice”. Causality implies that some phenomena are causes and others are effects. But in a complex social world, social phenomena are often intertwined, and one cannot tell which one precedes the other. Instead of causality, Bardach’s later works use the term **mechanism**, referring to the works of Elster (1998) and Hedstrom and Swedberg (1998). According to Bardach, a mechanism is an explanation of a phenomenon at the medium level of abstraction. It is less abstract than general “laws” but more abstract than mere descriptions. Examples of mechanisms include the market processes through which the price equilibrium is achieved.

In order to describe “smart practices”, Bardach also uses the metaphor of “reservoir”, i.e. a kind of energy or potentiality in the social reality that can be tapped. Reservoirs are mostly free, provided by the nature. All we need to do is learn how to use them. Similarly to the energy hidden in the molecules of hydrocarbons, energy is hidden in “social nature”. Bardach gives the example of the human ability to learn more effectively when the organism is adequately aroused. Another example is the ability and inclination of students to learn from one another (under favourable conditions). A mechanism is a way of tapping and exploiting such a “reservoir”. In other words, one needs to create such an interface and to set such conditions that can exploit energy from the reservoir⁸. For example, since people work and learn better under some pressure (the often untapped “reservoir”), we should set such conditions that would exert adequate pressure (time pressure, high expectations by teachers and other students).

8 However, Bardach’s orientation is by no means philosophical. Quite the contrary, his orientation is a fully practical one.

Thus, while a mechanism is the principal element of every “smart practice” (and it is what we need to reveal and subsequently implement in the target site), it is always surrounded by an institutional, political, economic and inter-personal context that must be taken into consideration when “smart practice” is transferred from the source site to the target site. Here we arrive at an important term Bardach (and many followers) use, namely **extrapolation**. Bardach understands it as the transfer of experience from one site (institution, region, organization) to another. This is not extrapolation in the classic meaning of the term⁹ or replication of an organization’s practice in another organization. Instead, one should speak of creative and flexible application in the target site of a carefully examined mechanism discovered in the source site. From this perspective, extrapolation is the process of learning from mediated experience and creating practices that conform to new circumstances (Ongaro 2009, 2).

According to Bardach, “smart practice” should be characterized generally and flexibly, rather than prescriptively or with too much detail. The goal is to characterize the basic general aspects and links between them, rather than to provide a detailed description of aspects that are specific and merely supportive. Those implementing the smart practice exemplar in the target site should be free to adapt it to the new circumstances which may differ significantly. It is also important not to understand implementation as adoption or even enforcement of foreign practices. Bardach acknowledges that it may be difficult to characterize some “smart practices” because they can be highly complex and multidimensional. Therefore, they cannot be reviewed in a few sentences or paragraphs. Instead, they consist of a set of diverse general ideas that are not ordered hierarchically.

COMPARING THE TWO BPR METHODOLOGIES

In Table 2, I attempt to describe both basic approaches to BPR. Differences between them begin in their very orientations. While Bretschneider et al. aim at rigorous selection of exemplars, Bardach’s primary aim is to find a practice that fits the target site. While Bretschneider et al.’s methodology is based on statistical data analysis, Bardach takes a mostly qualitative approach, in fact a form of case study. Bretschneider et al.’s approach is based on production theory, while Bardach assumes the existence of mechanisms that must be revealed.

⁹ Normally, extrapolation is understood as “a procedure in time series analysis which estimates the continuation of a series of numeric values beyond the time frame in which they were observed” (Rehák 1996: 301).

Table 2 Comparison of BPR methodologies

Typical name of methodology	Key emphasis	Methodology	Theory	Key authors
Best practice	Exemplar identification	Mostly quantitative	Production function	Bretschneider et al. (2005)
“Good practice” (“smart practice”)	Extrapolation (target site)	Mostly qualitative	Mechanism	Bardach (1994, 2000)

Source: Author

Both approaches have their limitations. Bretschneider et al.’s approach appears fit for phenomena that are relatively trivial and, more specifically, ongoing processes with easily quantifiable inputs, processes and outputs (e.g., issuing documents). In such cases, one can indeed assume that the units under comparison (and processes within them) are comparable. Then, to identify the best exemplar may be useful in terms of finding the organization with the most effective combination of inputs and the best design of internal processes. However, such processes are not assumed to be fundamentally different, and it is absolutely out of question that each organization might attain the outputs by completely different procedures (mechanisms). Thus, the main advantages of Bretschneider et al.’s approach lie in its rigor and replicability.

Nevertheless, Bretschneider et al.’s approach also has its principal limitations. First, Bretschneider et al. are oriented on identifying an *exemplar* (for instance, a university) which has (or is assumed to have) the best practice, rather than on the ways of “extracting” the practice from the present exemplar and applying it in different contexts. Another limitation of Bretschneider et al.’s approach lies in its very theoretical assumption, the production function (comparison between inputs and outputs). According to Ongaro (2009), there are many exemplars where output cannot be assessed in units of production (e.g., strategic management of a public institution). In other words, we often want to assess the ways institutions achieve certain *qualitative* parameters which cannot be quantified easily. The third limitation lies in the fact that even where quantitative comparison is possible, all units cannot usually be included in the set for comparison.

Bardach’s approach is advantageous in its focus on qualitative aspects and extrapolation. But it also has its limitations. First, it does not tell us where and how to look for and select exemplars of “smart practice”. Given the relatively difficult preparation of a case study, it is very important for the researcher not to waste time and energy trying to reveal “smart practice” mechanisms where

they do not exist. A possible response to this objection is that one might start with a comprehensive *quantitative* survey to be able to at least guess where exemplars of “smart practice” *might* exist¹⁰. Another issue of Bardach’s approach lies in the exact way of conducting “smart practice” analysis in order to make it useful for the target site. In response to this issue, several protocols have been proposed, with Ongaro’s (2009) protocol as perhaps the most elaborated one.

Finally, I must note that many differences between both approaches under comparison are rooted in underlying general social science methodology. Here I primarily mean the classic discussion of differences between the qualitative and quantitative approaches (e.g., Leedy and Ormrod 2005) and different research strategies such as deduction, induction, abduction and retroduction (Blaikie 2007). Apparently, while Bretschneider et al. were mostly inspired by the positivist and quantitative traditions, Bardach’s approach was in many aspects inspired by retroduction which is related to transcendental or scientific realism as formulated by Bhaskar and Harré. Retroduction, just like deduction, starts by observing some regularity, but does not go on to formulate testable hypotheses. Instead, it proceeds by “establishing the existence of the hypothesized structure or mechanism that is responsible for producing an observed regularity” (Blaikie 2000, 180). Then, it uses observation or experiment to find out if the formulated mechanism really exists. The retroductive approach understands the discovery of mechanisms behind observed phenomena to be the primary scientific task. Thus, retroduction is based on “the logic of discovery”, on creative imagination.

CRITIQUES AND LIMITATIONS OF BPR

In order to formulate proposals for improving BPR, it is necessary to reflect its possibilities and limitations critically. However, instead of analysing various approaches to BPR (like those mentioned above), literature tends to analyse BPR as a whole. In general, BPR tends to be criticized more often than defended. Therefore, at this point, I will attempt to classify and review those critiques and formulate additional points of criticism. As the above review of two different approaches to BPR reveals, BPR is far from being a uniform stream, which means that critiques addressed to BPR tend to refer to one of the individual approaches or another. Thus, my review of critiques should distinguish whether they refer to BPR as a whole, or just a single approach to it.

10 I must note here that mixed social research which combines quantitative and qualitative methods usually follows the opposite sequence – qualitative research precedes quantitative one.

BPR has been criticized for many reasons. They can be divided into scientific (methodological) and practical reasons (Overman and Boyd 1994). I will begin with critiques that questioned BPR’s scientific rigor. First, some authors have pointed to the **lack of theory** behind the approach and the implicit assumption of “let’s just copy what someone else did and see what happens” (Myers et al. 2004, 6). According to this critique, BPR lacks theoretical foundations and pays little attention to discovering the reasons why a given practice works. This critique tends to be valid for quantitative econometric methods, but less so for Bardach’s approach which attempts to deal with this critique by applying the term “mechanism”.

Another important line of criticism claims that BPR violates all types of threats to internal validity as formulated by Shadish, Cook, and Campbell (2001)¹¹. In other words, critics claim that BPR methodology does not guarantee what we know about the given case is really true. Overman and Boyd (1994, 79) consider maturation, theory testing and selection bias as particularly frequent violations of internal validity. For example, by selecting a case as an exemplar of “good practice” and studying it, the researcher becomes a factor and begins to affect the case. As a result, the practices and results observed may really become extraordinary due to more efforts at the target site, rather than due to any especially well-working mechanism.

The third highly relevant critique of BPR decries its **low level of external validity**¹². As a rule, BPR is conducted in order to improve practice at another site. Therefore, it is very important to be able to generalize “best” practice first. The ability to extrapolate practices to a different site tends to be very problematic because the fact that a practice works “that well” is determined by the context in which it is implemented. One can assume that many “smart practices” were not implemented in target sites simply because the given contexts prevented them from working successfully, and not because they were understood or implemented improperly¹³.

11 Internal validity “concerns the question whether or not the measurements used in a given research are properly, i.e. correctly, operationalized in view of the theoretical concept as intended” (Pennings, Keman, and Kleinnijenhuis 2006, 6).

12 External validity “presupposes that the concepts used in a given piece of research, and the related outcomes, apply not only to the cases under review but to all similar cases that satisfy the conditions set out in the research question and related research design” (Pennings, Keman, and Kleinnijenhuis 2006, 7) In other words, “it is the extent to which we can generalize the conclusions of our observation” (Nekola, Veselý, and Ochrana 2007, 154).

13 In this respect, I will mention, for instance, the importance of a high level of “social capital”, and in particular, generalized trust, for many measures implemented in public policy. Many examples of “good practice” are based on mutual trust and cooperation, factors which cannot be easily adopted or built on purpose.

According to the fourth line of critique, BPR is **insufficiently critical and rigorous** (Overman and Boyd 1994, 80). BPR usually focuses on retrospective and cross-sectional description of successful exemplars only. It tends to pay little attention to verifying the evidence obtained and discovering alternative explanations of a given practice.

Finally, the fifth point of methodological critique considers BPR a kind of hybrid between the scientific and practical approaches because it **is not based on a uniform paradigm**, whether positivist or interpretative. As a result, BPR does not apply any generally accepted set of rules, e.g. in respect of sampling or proof¹⁴. According to Overman and Boyd (1994, 79), there is a strong tendency to consider BPR as a form of case study¹⁵. This research design helps us to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the case at hand in its natural environment and to better understand underlying relations which would be obscured by other research strategies (Nekola, Veselý, and Ochrana 2007). It also produces evidence for falsifying existing theories or building new ones. However, according to Overman and Boyd (1994, 79), BPR does not lead to any of this due to its much more superficial orientation. Yet again, such a generalized claim against BPR is not justified because, as we have seen, there are approaches which explicitly build on a research design other than case study.

As Myers et al. (2004, 9) argue, BPR's existence cannot be justified by methodological purity, but rather by the benefits it brings to politicians and other stakeholders. However, it has been criticized for some practical reasons as well, some of which are related to the above-mentioned methodological issues. The first line of practical critique claims that BPR **does not make sufficient use of accumulated experience** (Overman and Boyd 1994, 76). It tends to focus on short-term time horizons and ignore the more long-term consequences of practices at hand. However, long-term effects may often be substantially different from those in the short term. This is related to the fact that "best" practices tend to be adopted without being time-proven.

According to another important line of practical critique, **best practices have little or no transferability**. As Overman and Boyd (1994, 78) argue, there is no proof that best practices can be transferred from one context

14 However, the above analysis of two approaches demonstrates that this critique is not justified; there are approaches which define their methodological assumptions clearly (e.g., in respect of sampling). According to Bretschneider et al., BPR cannot be based on a sample survey and instead has to analyze all units in a given population.

15 Case study is a form of research design (other forms include experimental research design, cross-sectional research design or longitudinal research design). See Nekola, Veselý, and Ochrana (2007) for more details.

to another. This may be related, among other things, to the fact that in order to be successful at the target site, a given practice must be *desired* by target site implementers. However, institutions often tend to pretend innovativeness (to avoid being perceived as "backwards") without any internal motivation for real change. Of course, this completely paralyzes the application of any new practices (not only the "best" ones). It is difficult to prove or disprove that this critique is justified. Analyses tend to conclude by *proposing* exemplars of "good practice" without evaluating their implementation and effects in target sites. This may appear as a substantial weakness of BPR.

Other types of limitations of BPR can be identified, too. For example, Richard Rose demonstrated that we should not limit analysis to "best" or "good" practices because learning by negative example can be highly beneficial as well (2005, 39). Rose also pointed to the fact that the particular success of an exemplar (of a country, in Rose's case) may be caused by entirely different factors. For instance, good population health is not "only" determined by the organization of the health care system but also by people's lifestyles. This finding can be extended to organizations and institutions. An even more important argument against studying "best solutions" only lies in the fact that a "best solution" may not always be the most appropriate, especially when a country or organization is "falling behind"; instead of what is best on some kind of ladder, such underdeveloped institutions may better benefit from things that are more adequate to their current level of development. All this speaks for the first type of BPR definition ("anything that works") because a rigorous scientific approach may not always be necessary, and "the best" is not always the solution.

To the above literature review of critiques, I would like to add some more general arguments and issues related to BPR that I have, curiously, not identified in the literature. First, "good practice" exemplars often do not solve things systemically. They represent an incremental and conservative way of policy making. They are useful wherever systemic and complex solutions are impossible (for example, politically unfeasible). However, problems sometimes need to be addressed in a very complex way. Exemplars of good practice are always good within a given system. But what if the entire system at hand is designed suboptimally or in conflict with the principle of social justice?

Second, "good practice" exemplars are often highly specific. Sometimes it is very difficult to formulate the "mechanism" it relies on. In order to understand how it works, we also need to know the "conditions" under which it can work. Therefore, the analysis of such a case is difficult to both conduct and communicate. The analyst obtains a good deal of "tacit knowledge" which is difficult to relay and transfer.

Finally, the third issue is a practical and ethical one. Exemplars of “good practice” have their value and they increase an organization’s competitiveness. When they really work, they help us do things better and more effectively, increasing our profits. This places the “researcher” in a competitive environment. As a rule, when the best exemplar is too specific, it is publicly accessible (those implementing it do not need to worry about losing their competitive advantage) but at the same time, it is difficult to generalize and apply at another site. Instead, an innovative approach that can be used by others represents a competitive advantage no one is interested in revealing to others. This argument of competitiveness is perhaps less valid for public organizations. Even public organizations (like schools or hospitals), however, are increasingly forced to compete for clients and resources, and are not necessarily willing to share their good practices.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO BPR’S LIMITATIONS AND INSPIRATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

Many of the above critical comments have been raised twenty or more years ago. In spite of them, the popularity of BPR does not seem to have declined – quite the opposite. This is, above all, because of BPR’s unique ability to connect the worlds of research and practice. But it is also caused by diminishing relevance of some of the above comments over time. Some BPR-related issues are difficult to overcome (e.g., how to sample the entire population) and all we can do is to reflect them critically and work with them. It is not and cannot be the goal of this article to propose a methodology for conducting “good practice” research. Nevertheless, I will attempt to formulate some more general recommendations that arise from my literature review as well as from my and other people’s experience.

First, it seems clear that in order to at least partially eliminate the above disadvantages, we must choose a form of mixed research design, i.e. one that combines quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative approach appears necessary for the identification of cases *where* “good practices” *might* exist. And the qualitative research design appears as the only choice for more in-depth analysis of selected exemplars. Second, in order to increase transferability, we should clearly define the purpose, i.e. what is to be achieved. This prevents us from identifying exemplars of “good practice” *per se*, and makes our research effort more purposeful. Whether practices are “good” should only be assessed in view of the target site. Third, it is important to avoid mere description of successful cases. “Good practice” exemplars should help us un-

cover underlying mechanisms and thus formulate a theory of why they work¹⁶. Fourth, since the ways practices work do not only depend on the mechanism but also on the context in which an institution exists, we should thoroughly describe the context in which “good practices” emerge. We should do this at least because the information we have about the context helps us verify to what extent the mechanism might work independently. Fifth, research should not be limited to positive examples, and we should also analyze “unsuccessful” cases where the implementation of a policy or program failed, in order to think about why that happened. Finally, sixth, “good practice” research should not end by publicizing what appears as good, or by implementing such exemplars in the target site. If we want to know whether an exemplar of “good practice” really is “good practice”, we must evaluate the effects of its implementation elsewhere. In this respect, BPR has to do with the theory and practice of evaluation; but unfortunately, to date, it has been completely disconnected from it.

To the best of my knowledge, existing attempts to identify exemplars of “good practice” in order to improve public policy in the CEE countries have mostly been descriptive in nature. Authors tend to devote most of their energy to describing the details of practices they deem somehow better than other practices, without thinking about the reasons why they are better and how they might be helpful to others. The above analysis demonstrates that this approach is not very beneficial because the contexts may be completely different and change over time. Therefore, I believe that useful BPR cannot be done descriptively, mechanically and formally. Instead, it must be connected with more in-depth thinking about processes and mechanisms. The results of this thinking should be formulated in the form of a model or theory, however simple, in order to not only describe but also explain the practice at hand.

Like all other domains of research, “best practice” research has its limitations. One should not overestimate its possibilities and see it as a panacea for public policy. However, BPR may be very useful when conducted systematically and with critical reflection of its weaknesses. Nevertheless, both researchers and practitioners are still learning to reflect and respond to all those limitations. The point when we will have a generally shared “best practice of best practice research” is still many miles ahead.

16 Here I should mention Kurt Lewin’s (1951, 169) frequently-cited statement that “nothing is as practical as a good theory”.

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