

## **Assignment #1**

### **On Methods: Challenges in Constructing Heuristic Models**

The theme traversing all these readings points to the difficulty of drawing generalized conclusions from unique situations. In reading these articles, I found myself repeatedly asking the same question: How does one extract lessons from context-specific cases? As many of the readings make clear, generalization can lead to misunderstandings, and not all pathways to generalization are equal. Tandler (1998) advocates for considering a project's wider institutional and temporal context, Roe (1991) warns against simplified narratives, March (1981) adds complexity to the rational model of decision-making, and nearly all the readings challenge some conventional model by delving into details and suggesting a more nuanced approach (e.g. Goldsmith, Kelman, Fox). The articles focus in on the specifics of each case, then step back and offer conclusions, which cannot be translated to another case without again focusing closely on specifics. I found this constant zooming in and out somewhat dizzying, and it is easy to get lost in the details. The complex contexts and dynamics of each case mean that any attempt at learning requires some degree of generalization. How does one find generally applicable commonalities while avoiding oversimplified storylines?

Taken together, these readings suggest to me that we should draw lessons not by simplifying whole situations or summarizing broad sequences of events. Instead, lessons should come from identifying common patterns in the details. In a view consistent with complexity theory, this approach isolates subsets of forces and actors, draws lessons from observations of relationships between them, and advocates caution in placing these lessons back in the larger

context. Instead of a general grand narrative, I imagine a collection of distinct plot elements, each describing a discrete context and dynamic. It is up to the researcher to assemble these fragments to produce a coherent representation of the given situation.

### **Models vs. Blueprints**

Decision-makers commonly confuse these bits of wisdom with whole models or even instructions, as Roe (1991) makes clear in his critique of development narratives. I liked that it exposed common mistakes in development policy; however, I expected Roe to explicitly draw attention to the distinction between a narrative and a 'blueprint.' In my interpretation, a narrative is basically a heuristic model. It is a way of understanding and communicating what typically happens. Like a model, it helps one understand how things work, to understand the forces and structure behind phenomena. In contrast, a blueprint is instructions for what to do. (And both of these differ from a normative model.) Roe implicitly suggests that decision-makers often mistake heuristic models for policy blueprints. Although to me this seems an obvious pitfall, Roe's article reminds me that in practice it is more difficult to see these distinctions.

### **Who is Constructing the Model?**

In later articles, Roe focuses attention on the dilemma of those constructing narratives, a seemingly central problem in development work. In reading Roe (1991), I appreciated his qualified acceptance of narratives. Curious to learn more about how we might 'make the most' of them, I read his second article (Roe 1995). However, this brought no clarity, as here Roe seems to contradict his earlier argument. In the later article he condemns 'crisis narratives' as

attempts by outside elites to wrest away control of local resources: “the more crisis narratives are generated by an expert elite, the more the elite appears to have established a claim...” (He also fails to distinguish between crisis narrative and more general development narrative.) The problem is that these narratives are not policy-relevant, he says. But in my view, policy-relevant narratives can still be co-opting. Roe proposes counternarrative as an alternative strategy. But how does a counternarrative, even if more valid and policy-relevant, avoid the problem of co-optation? Indeed, if it is relevant for policy, isn't it more problematic? In other words, if the narrative facilitates policies that affect control of resources, isn't co-optation more likely? Roe implies that narratives which evolve from local people's views and local conditions are preferable (and I agree), but that doesn't avoid or solve the fundamental problem as long as expert elites control the story. In addition, Roe (1995) suggests that another alternative is the “denarrative,” or insistence that there is “no story until the facts are in.” This seems sensible, but it contradicts his earlier support for the usefulness of narratives. In all, the Roe readings left me with many more questions than answers—a sign of a good article, perhaps.

The concept of development narrative did help me frame other cases in the readings. Most immediately, it helped me see Goldsmith's (1999) challenge of conventional thinking as an attempt to dismantle the dominant narrative. Goldsmith's central argument seems very simple—he claims that it is not the size of Africa's bureaucracies that are a problem, but their poor record of service. This makes so much sense, I have to wonder how the conventional view—that African governments perform badly because they are too big—ever took hold. Was it because the Western development experts who constructed the narrative held an ideological view

favoring neoliberal economic interests? Perhaps, but in taking that view I might be guilty of applying another oversimplified narrative.

### **Top-down vs. Bottom-up: A False Dichotomy**

Planners—myself included—often talk about action as either top-down or bottom-up, and we usually favor the latter. So I was intrigued when Fox (1992) challenged this view and exposed it as a false dichotomy. Fox claims the Mexican food assistance program was initially a top-down decision, but subsequently became a grassroots movement that could then put pressure on others in the federal government. The story includes elements of both “activating the discontented” and “change feeding on itself,” elements Kelman (2005) identifies in support of his argument that change is possible through pathways that lie hidden within organizations. While this dual direction forces could be seen as a ‘sandwich,’ I prefer the imagery of a spiral or loop, which is more consistent with the concept of dynamic self-reinforcing loops.

Whether sandwich or spiral, I liked that Fox and Kelman view top-down vs. bottom-up as more dialectic than dichotomy. I’ve always agreed with the conventional thinking that considers bottom-up approaches more legitimate and somehow more ‘authentic’ than top-down decisions. At the same time, I recognized that this preference for grassroots discounts the value and agency of government authorities. The idea that change should not, or cannot, be top-down portrays a depressingly cynical view of government. I appreciated that these articles resolved that conflict not only by recognizing top leadership and local citizens as important initiators of change, but also by highlighting the interdependencies between them.

## **Organizational Redundancy**

Among the many lessons that reminded me of past experiences, I found that the idea of organizational ‘takeover’ described by Tandler (1993) challenged my former thinking. The article shows how successful agencies often “took over” tasks from existing organizations. I recognized this phenomenon from my work with the Manchester PDC, when we took on responsibilities that were officially assigned to an existing organization but were being performed poorly. At the time, I thought this redundancy was absurd and wasteful; I thought the tasks should be officially assigned to us. However, Tandler’s article presented a compelling argument in favor of bureaucratic redundancy by showing how redundancy with the prospect of ‘takeover’ creates beneficial competition between organizations, leading to better performance. From an objective point of view, I have to agree. Going further, I have to ask whether the concept of organizational competition supports the view that government organizations should be modeled more after private businesses—an issue which I found lying just beneath many of the readings.

## **Exploration vs. Exploitation**

I found the analysis of exploration and exploitation in March (1991) useful in that it shed light on the dynamics of innovation of which I had previously been aware, but had not understood in such clear terms. In particular, I found it valuable in identifying differences between the private and public sector. March explains that internal dynamics tend to favor exploitation over exploration, to the detriment of organizational learning. Reading this, I considered how private businesses face external pressures of competition that provide incentives

for exploration; public agencies, in contrast, rarely confront these pressures. Could this also be an argument in favor of private-sector-style management in government?

### **Behavior of Individuals**

Many of the readings attempted to draw lessons from seemingly unique situations by viewing individuals within organizations as rational actors. First of all, I was glad to be reminded that organizations are really collections of individuals—an obvious fact, yet one people tend to forget. In particular, I found the attempts to distinguish between individual idiosyncrasies and systematic behavior helpful, especially Wilson's (1989) discussion of the relative effect of external factors, past experience, personal disposition and beliefs on behavior. I had not previously thought of these influences in such clear terms.

I found the articles which address individuals' motivations particularly engaging and relevant (Wilson 1989, Lipsky 1980, Justice 1986, Scully and Segal 2002). From where do members of organizations derive their motivation? The readings identify a number of possible sources: the promise of upward mobility, the prospect of securing political power, obligations to conform to professional norms (Wilson 1989), desire for secure status within the community (Justice 1986), for example. Lipsky (1980) finds that street-level bureaucrats suffer from tension between their own motivation, organizational norms, public accountability, and client needs. After reading Lipsky, I found the articles by Tandler (1994) and Justice (1986) interesting, not just in their recognition that motivation and accountability can—and often should—derive from the community, but because this finding was supposedly counterintuitive. That public servants should work in the interest of the people they serve is so basic and intuitive, it is perplexing that

instances of it are so rare! These articles were instructive in suggesting that resolving the tension between organizational structure and reward structure offers a pathway to better performance.

I found it helpful to locate the issues of motivation and community in the larger context of societal change. Supposedly the transition to modern society involves the formalization and institutionalization of formerly close-knit social bonds. Trust, accountability and recognition of status that were once embedded within local relationships in a way consistent with community interests become, in the modern workplace, separated out and replaced with formal, more anonymous relationships. It is not surprising that increasing complexity of organizations often creates a disconnect between personal motivation, organizational structure, and the wider public interest. I would expect this disconnect to be especially jarring in communities that exist somewhere between the traditional and modern but are governed by 'modern' administration, as in the case of rural Northeast Brazil (Tendler 1994).

In similar contexts where traditional society still retains a strong hold, I imagine that successful programs would work with traditional community structure, rather than try to impose an artificial structure. This was the case with peons in Nepal (Justice 1986) and the health workers in Brazil (Tendler 1994). Reading these articles, I thought of how the Peace Corps employs a similar strategy, stressing integration into the community above all else. Peace Corps volunteers spend two years in the same community, plus a three-month training period in which they live with a host family. Living in a small community often very isolated from formal support networks, volunteers are almost completely dependent on the goodwill of their neighbors. The desire for acceptance, trust, and appreciation from the community thus motivates good service, and the Peace Corps' official policy reflects this. New volunteers are told, "Don't

do any work in the first six months. All you should do is talk to people and get to know them.” It’s true that some volunteers fail to integrate into their community, and the Peace Corps certainly has other bureaucratic problems, but successful volunteers are generally able to resolve the tension between reward structure and organizational norms.

### **On Rationality**

March (1981) and March (1994), along with several other articles, led me to consider the topic of rationality in a general sense. On one hand, I found the framework of limited rationality presented by March difficult to contest; indeed, he suggests it is popular precisely because everyone can find something they like about it. On the other hand, I had to question how much this new framework really departs from a rational framework. The limited rationality approach attempts to ‘correct’ the conventional rational model of decision-making by modifying certain assumptions. However, each of these modifications—such as the addition of concepts like satisficing and search—describes locally rational behavior. March’s approach recognizes that decisions often appear irrational at the system level, but at the individual level actors behave rationally. The ‘limitation’ arises because the number of modifications needed to reflect reality is essentially infinite, suggesting that a cohesive model is not possible for most situations, as it would be extremely complex. Taking this view, I imagine a collection of infinitely many rational processes, rather than limitations to rationality. Might “infinite rationality” be a better term than “limited rationality?”

More generally, the March readings helped me understand the seemingly ambivalent position toward rationality that permeates much of planning theory. These articles claim to



challenge the rational model of decision-making, but they do not question rationality itself. They cannot question rationality, because our epistemological framework does not allow it.

Constrained by this framework and limited by our modes of communication, the best they can do is break apart the rational model, replacing it with a collection of explanations, each of which is fundamentally driven by rational behavior.

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