



Interpretation and Translation in Policy Implementation

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Abstract

Interpretation has long been recognized as an important aspect of implementation. Yet, interpretation remain understudied and undertheorized in the implementation literature. In this paper, I argue that implementation will always involve several processes of interpretation, as the abstract model or intention that constitutes a public service intervention is recreated as concrete actions in specific locations. Drawing on recent developments in implementation and organization theory, I theorize these processes as translation and suggest that socially skilled actors act as translators by interpreting public service interventions in ways that foster collective action. To do so successfully, they must exercise four distinct translation skills: knowledge, creativity, patience and strength. I further argue that processes of translation unfold along three dimensions in the implementation system—within the hierarchy (vertical), across fields (horizontal) and over time (longitudinal). To illustrate this argument, I present a multi-sited case study of the implementation and translation of evidence-based practice in Danish child protective services as it has unfolded over two decades. By calling attention to the crucial role of interpretation on all levels of the implementation system and theorizing this as translation, the paper contributes to our understanding of implementation as a complex social process, which is both highly context-specific and at the same time characterized by generalizable patterns of action. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Implementation, ambiguity, interpretation, translation, socially skilled actors

1. Introduction

Since before the 1970s, policy implementation has been recognized as a central issue in public administration research and practice. Implementation studies is now a flourishing field, stretching over three generations (Saetren 2014). During these years, scholars have highlighted the complexity of joint action and the role of veto points (Pressman and Wildavsky 1973), debated the relative strengths and weaknesses of top-down and bottom-up approaches (Elmore 1979; Hjern and Hull 1982; Matland 1995) and sought to bring these perspectives together in integrated implementation frameworks (Winter 2012b). The purpose that unites these efforts is to increase our understanding of not only what happens when public policy ‘meets the street’ (Zacka 2017), but also how it happens, and why.

Throughout these decades of scholarship, interpretation has been recognized as an important aspect of the implementation process, particularly in relation to ambiguity. Goal ambiguity has been brought forward as a key explanatory factor in regards to implementation problems, because ambiguous policy goals will be interpreted differently by different actors—e.g. stakeholders, local political leaders, managers and street-level bureaucrats—often in ways that promotes their own interest (Baier, March, and Saetren 1986; Lipsky 1980; Matland 1995; May and Winter 2009; Winter 2012a). Most scholars also recognize that implementation unfolds in a complex social system. Recently, Moulton and Sandfort have argued that implementation can be fruitfully understood as a complex social process which unfolds within and across a number of Strategic Action Fields, which together constitute the implementation system that forms around a public service intervention (Moulton and Sandfort 2016; J. Sandfort and Moulton 2014). In this framework, socially skilled actors use their agency to drive stability or change by leveraging latent sources of authority and legitimacy. Here, interpretation of goals and framing of action are also seen as key mechanisms. Yet, despite this widespread acknowledgement of interpretation as a key aspect of implementation, interpretation remains undertheorized in the implementation literature.

In this paper, I offer a theoretical discussion of the role of interpretation and present an illustrative case study to show *how* this matters for implementation. I draw on Moulton and Sandfort’s implementation systems perspective and their concept of socially skilled actors as interpreters of public service interventions and combine this with the concept of translation skills developed by Røvik (2007, 2016). I hereby follow a longstanding tradition in implementation research of letting advances in organization studies inform theoretical development in the field (Winter 2012a). Based on a discussion of these two theoretical perspectives, I conceptualize interpretation as translation and suggest that this is an inherent and inevitable aspect of implementation, which unfolds along three dimensions: within the hierarchy (vertical), between fields (horizontal) and over time (longitudinal). I further argue that socially skilled actors

essentially act as translators of policy and that this requires a specific skillset, equivalent to Røvik's notion of translator virtues. Following this theoretical argument, I present a multi-sited case study of ongoing efforts to implement evidence-based programs in Danish child protective services, to illustrate the analytical potential. I end the paper with a discussion of the implications for research and practice.

2. Ambiguity and interpretation in implementation

As already noted, interpretation has long been recognized by implementation scholars as an important factor in the implementation process, primarily in relation to ambiguity (Baier, March, and Saetren 1986; Matland 1995; Winter 2012a). Baier, March and Saetren argue that ambiguity is an inherent trait of policy making, in which 'difficult issues are often "settled" by leaving them unresolved or specifying them in a form requiring subsequent interpretation.' (Baier, March, and Saetren 1986, 206). They continue: 'Policy ambiguity allows different groups and individuals to support the same policy for different reasons and with different expectations, including different expectations about administrative consequences of the policy. Thus, official policy is likely to be vague, contradictory or adopted without generally shared expectations about its meaning or implementation.' (ibid).

The consequences of this are particularly pertinent when we turn our attention to the frontline workers, whose actions constitute the output against which we often evaluate implementation failure or success (Meyers and Lehmann Nielsen 2012; Winter 2012a). The flourishing literature on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980) contains countless examples of how frontline workers must reconcile vague, ambiguous and/or contradictory policy goals with citizen-clients' service demands and limited resources (Brodin 2011; Gassner and Gofen 2018; Hupe and Hill 2007; J. R. Sandfort 2000; Tummers et al. 2015; Tummers and Bekkers 2014). While this literature is often focused on frontline workers' uses of discretion when dealing with individual cases, it also highlights the importance of interpretation when it comes to implementation of new policies and programs at the frontline.

For example, studies have shown that frontline workers do not necessarily see themselves as implementers of policy, but as citizen-agents who 'play the rules' rather than follow them (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2009). Their behavior is influenced by their individual policy predispositions and perceptions of policy goals (May and Winter 2009) and attitudes towards the target group (Baviskar and Winter 2017). Others have demonstrated that policies and programs which are perceived as conflicting with frontline workers' shared knowledge, collective beliefs or professional norms are likely to leave them feeling alienated and

decrease the chances of successful implementation (J. R. Sandfort 2000; Tummers, Bekkers, and Steijn 2009).

In this context, the prevalence of ambiguity means that the ‘multiple principal problem’ generally faced by frontline workers (Winter 2012, 233) may also become a ‘multiple interpretations problem’, as implementation actors on different levels interpret and frame new policies and programs. As noted by Baier, Saetren and March, both national and local agencies may ‘interpret policy directives in ways that transform their prior desires into the wishes of policy makers’ (Baier, March, and Saetren 1986, 201), but they may also just try to make sense of what these policy directives entail in terms of concrete action. Local service managers must necessarily engage in interpretation as they navigate between policy goals and the local organizational context—potentially dividing their allegiance between the national and local political leadership, the frontline workers with whom they may or may not share their professional background and norms, and the citizen-clients which they aim to serve (Evans 2016; Winter 2012a). However, scholars generally agree that, while local political leadership and managerial action may play a role, socialization and professional norms are the more influential forms of control (Brehm and Gates 1997; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2009; Riccucci 2005). What matters most is likely the interpretations that develop among peers.

While the connection between ambiguity and interpretation is evident, I argue that interpretation is in fact a necessary and inevitable aspect of the implementation process even when policies are clear and widely supported. If we look to the dictionary, the verb ‘to interpret’ can be defined as follows: 1) to explain or tell the meaning of (present in understandable terms), 2) to conceive in the light of individual belief, judgment, or circumstance (construe), 3) to represent by means of art (bring to realization by performance or direction), and 4) to act as an interpreter between speakers of different languages.¹ With these definitions in mind, it does not appear far-fetched to say that any policy or program is inherently subject to interpretation by implementation actors on all bureaucratic levels, simply because it will always involve the process of recreating an abstract idea or model as concrete actions in a particular context. To do this, implementation actors need to answer the question: What does this mean for us in our particular context?

3. An implementation systems perspective

It follows from the brief discussion above, that if we want to understand the role of interpretation, we must pay attention to the entire implementation system and the interdependency between different fields of

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/interpreting>

action. To highlight this, I draw on Moulton and Sandfort's Strategic Action Field Framework (Moulton and Sandfort 2016; J. Sandfort and Moulton 2014). The framework is essentially rooted in structuration theory (Giddens 1984), meaning that social structures and human agency are seen as mutually enabling and constraining. Implementation actors work within bounded social settings, conceptualized as Strategic Action Fields, which are both vertically nested and hierarchically connected (Moulton and Sandfort 2016, 9). Strategic Action Fields are mid-level social orders, which revolve around shared understandings about purposes, relationships and rules, and constitute venues for collective action. In relation to policy implementation, Moulton and Sandfort differentiate between the policy field, the organization and the frontline. Together, these fields create a multi-level implementation system around a public service intervention. While there are ties and resource dependencies between them, different fields comprise different actors, resources and roles as well as different sources of authority and legitimacy; the most important are political authority, economic authority, professional norms and shared beliefs and values.

Notably, these sources of authority and legitimacy are not objectively present but mobilized through the agency of socially skilled actors. Social skill is defined as 'the ability [of an actor] to induce cooperation by appealing to and helping to create shared meanings and collective identities' (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012, 46, quoted in Moulton and Sandfort 2016, 3). Importantly, implementation actors are seen as having significant degrees of discretion and autonomy, but the extent to which they are aware of and utilize this autonomy to react to conflicting demands and diverging opinions differs. At the same time, humans are seen as searching for social connection and meaning, meaning that their identities and interests are constructed and shaped in relation to others (Moulton and Sandfort 2016, 3). Hence, socially skilled actors play a crucial role on all levels of the implementation system, as they employ their skills to 'interpret and adjust a public service intervention in ways that build common understanding and reconcile competing sources of authority to enable collective action.' (Moulton and Sandfort 2016, 2). In other words, they seek to influence and mobilize others by 'offering their interpretation of events, frame action options, and set an action agenda by engaging others and appealing to their interests' (Moulton and Sandfort 2016, 13) with the purpose of driving stability or change. Interpretation is a key mechanism in these efforts.

4. Translation theory

To gain a deeper understanding of this mechanism and its implications for implementation, I find it helpful to consider the concept of translation as it has developed in organization studies. Translation theory is an example of a potentially rich source of theoretical development that has not yet been leveraged fully in

regard to policy implementation. Latour (1986) proposes that the concept of translation is a preferable alternative to the concepts of 'diffusion' and 'implementation' which convey a mechanistic process and, according to Latour, imply a disregard for the crucial role of actors and agency in building support for a claim or idea. In Latour's version, translation involves offering new interpretations to create alignment of actors' interests and goals: 'Translating interests means at once offering new interpretations of these interests and channeling people in different directions' (Latour 1986, 117).

The work of Latour and Callon (1984) has served as an important inspiration for the development of so-called Scandinavian Institutionalism, where translation has become a key concept for scholars studying the spread, uptake and institutionalization of organizational ideas in both private and public organizational contexts (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; Røvik 2007; Sahlin and Wedlin 2008; Waeraas and Nielsen 2016; Waldorff 2013). This literature focuses on organizational ideas or 'model practices' which have been shown—or are at least believed—to improve organizational performance; examples include LEAN and Total Quality Management. In a public sector context, examples include evidence-based programs as well as more abstract ideas or principles; e.g. various forms of evaluation or accreditation or broader reform programs such as New Public Management (Sahlin and Wedlin 2008). Here, I view these organizational ideas as equivalent to what Moulton and Sandfort refer to as public service interventions around which an implementation system forms, as they are 'introduced through formal public policy or through the programmatic initiatives of entities such as evaluation firms, nonprofit organizations, local governments, or private funders' (Moulton and Sandfort 2016, 2).

The unifying assumption underpinning various versions of translation theory is that an idea or practice will always be transformed as it moves through time and space and is picked up and passed on (or ignored, distorted or brought to a halt) by different actors along the way. Drawing on the definition of interpretation presented above, I argue that this process of translation essentially involves interpreting a symbolic object (i.e. a policy, principle or program) that originated in one context in order to recreate it in a different context. In this process, abstract and generalizable concepts or principles are translated into concrete actions in specific locations by specific actors and under the influence of specific contextual factors, as people ask: what does this mean for us in this particular location, time and situation?

My understanding of translation in what follows draws on the work of Røvik (2007, 2016). Røvik draws on the Scandinavian Institutional approach but represents an attempt to move beyond this literature's preference for in-depth and primarily descriptive case studies, which generally underscore the highly contextualized and unique character of translation processes. Instead, Røvik positions himself as a 'pragmatic institutionalist' and seeks to identify patterns in relation to translation in order to build an

instrumental and, indeed, normative theory of translation. Røvik's position is thus in alignment with Moulton and Sandfort's argument that, while implementation always unfolds in unique circumstances, it is also a generalizable social process, and there may be more or less fruitful ways to deal with it in practice.

5. Socially skilled actors as translators

Røvik (2007) draws on literary translation studies and uses the translation of a text from one language to another as a metaphor for the process of translating an abstract idea or 'model practice' into concrete actions in a specific context. When translating a text, Røvik argues, the translator must have a deep familiarity with both the original and the 'receiving' language, including both its social, political and cultural history and its everyday use in a variety of contexts. Only such deep knowledge will allow the translator to choose a fitting translation, which conveys the meaning of the original text. If the contexts are very different, the translator faces a dilemma, which is debated intensely in the field of literary translation studies. The question is which translation is more appropriate: One that remains loyal to the original context but risks alienating readers in the receiving context who may not fully understand idioms or notice the hidden symbolism or culturally specific references? Or is the better translation one that replaces foreign idioms and cultural, historic and political references with more familiar ones, so that a more literal translation is discarded in favor of conveying the meaning in the context of the receiving language?

Røvik's core argument is that the process of translation, including the dilemma outlined above, is a useful metaphor for the implementation of organizational ideas. Translation is essentially an act of interpretation and sensemaking; this is also the case for implementation. Even in situations where organizational ideas—or, in our case, the public service intervention and associated goals—are relatively clear and uncontested, abstract goals and generalized intentions must be translated into concrete actions in specific (social, organizational, professional, institutional) contexts.

Røvik further argues that the nature of the idea influences the mode of translation. Specifically, he calls attention to the level of complexity, subtlety and (in cases where the idea is a representation of an actual practice that originated elsewhere) its entwinement with the original context. If the idea, or public service intervention, is relatively simple, explicit and easily generalized across contexts, translation is likely to take the form of reproduction. However, if the idea or interventions is relatively complex, difficult to explicate and deeply intertwined with specific local contexts, translation is more likely to take the form of adaptation or radical transformation. Røvik refers to this as the mode of translation. Importantly, these different modes of translation are not good or bad per se, as they can potentially all lead to desirable outcomes or

turn out to be dysfunctional. Setting aside the quality of the idea as such (i.e. the validity of its underpinning theory of change), Røvik argues that the quality of the translation and the resulting output—e.g. organizational performance or frontline behavior—and outcomes—e.g. desired change for the target group—depends to a large extent on the skills of key actors who act as translator(s).

Competent translators are characterized by four essential skills, which are crucial to achieving successful translation processes. Note that ‘successful’ here means that the idea or public service intervention is recreated in a way that fosters desirable and sustainable practice change, i.e. it is neither decoupled nor outright rejected, nor does it change practice in undesirable ways. This of course invites the question of what constitutes ‘desirable’ practice change and from whose perspective—and, in relation to this, which degree of adaptation or transformation is acceptable? I will return to this issue in the discussion section. At this point, it is worth noting that Røvik’s understanding of ‘successful translations’ allows room for interpretation and adaptation at the local level. In other words, it recognizes the autonomy and discretion of implementation actors. As such, his position is in line with Sandfort and Moulton (2014) and recent developments in evaluation theory (Patton 2017) but in contrast to the strong focus on ‘fidelity’ in implementation science (Fixsen et al. 2005; Nilsen et al. 2013). The four essential skills exercised by successful translators are knowledge, courage and creativity, patience, and strength.

First, **knowledge** is needed in the form of in-depth knowledge about the intervention and the implementation context. Knowledge about the intervention includes a deep understanding of its core content and principles as well as inbuilt conflicts, compromises and ambiguities. Knowledge about the implementation context includes in-depth knowledge of actors and social structures— institutionalized norms, rules, regulations and routines—in relevant fields in the implementation system. Because a field is never a blank slate, it also involves knowledge of the local history, including cognitive and emotional residue from previous successes and failures, as well as knowledge of competing ideas and interventions. This is important, because such residue or competing projects can both support or hinder the translation process at hand. This knowledge is fundamental for the translator’s ability to leverage latent sources of authority and legitimacy in the field, for example by appealing to professional norms or shared values and beliefs. It also allows the translator to interpret the language spoken by actors, including the use of abstract concepts and metaphors as ways of making sense of the world, and to act as boundary spanner by comparing and shifting between languages and thereby translate meaning between fields.

Second, translators must exercise courage and **creativity** to be able to verbalize and explicate the tacit forms of knowledge outlined above, and to invent new concepts, metaphors and images. These may build on but also challenge how actors in the field see themselves and how they are seen by others. Third, they

must possess **patience**. As many implementation scholars have noted, practice change takes time. While there is a strong tendency to look for results after just a few years (and come out disappointed), the literature suggests that the development from discursive acts to actual practice change may take as long as a decade or two (Winter 2012a). This makes patience another crucial virtue for translators. Fourth, the translator must possess **strength**. As noted by Moulton and Sandfort, there are different sources of authority and legitimacy in any field. A skilled translator knows how to leverage these in a way that allows him or her to handle diverging interests, conflict and power plays, and to take this into account when offering interpretations and framing actions to build collective understandings within and across fields.

Conceptualizing interpretation as processes of translation allows us to acknowledge ambiguity and interpretation as inherent aspects of implementation. Rather than framing local adaptations as problematic ‘distortions’ of policy goals or interventions, translation describes the necessary and inevitable adaptation of abstract practices, principles or reform elements and generalized intentions to specific organizational contexts and concrete actions. Focusing on Røvik’s four translator skills allows us to study in more detail how this mechanism works and brings us closer to an understanding of the agency exercised by socially skilled actors. Table 1 presents an overview of the four skill.

Table 1. Translator skills

Skill	Manifestation
Knowledge	Knowledge about the intervention: content and principles, conflicts and compromises. Knowledge about the implementation context: institutionalized norms, rules, regulations, routines, local history, cognitive and emotional residue, competing projects
Creativity	Ability to verbalize tacit knowledge, utilize knowledge to invent concepts, metaphors and images that challenge how actors see themselves and are seen by others.
Patience	Willingness to engage in long-term change process.
Strength	Ability to identify diverging interests, potential conflict and power plays and to deal with these by leveraging appropriate sources of authority.

6. A three-dimensional perspective on translation

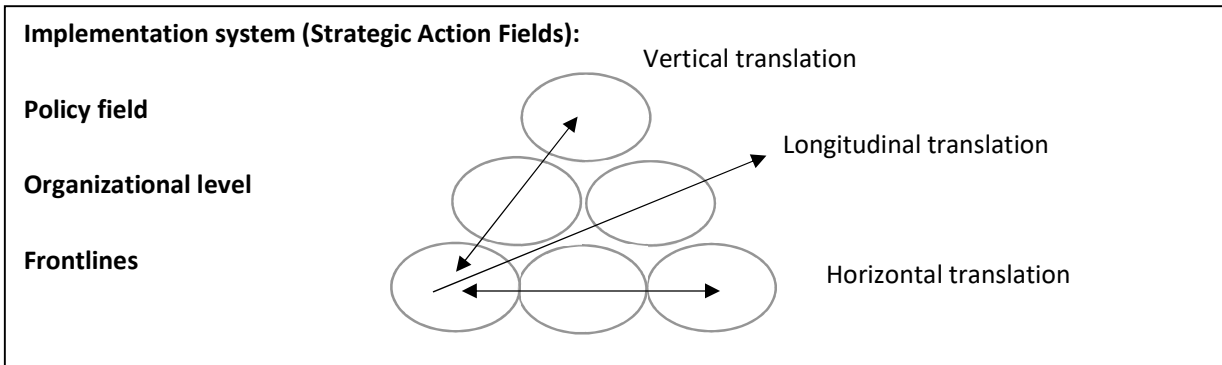
Combining Røvik’s theory with Moulton and Sandfort’s framework increases the usefulness of translation theory with regard to the implementation of public service interventions (Moulton and Sandfort 2016, 6). Moulton and Sandfort’s framework calls attention to the broader implementation system and the nested

character of the Strategic Action Fields that compose it. This allows us to see that there may be several translators and hence multiple translations at work, as socially skilled actors operate within and across different fields and may leverage a variety of sources of authority and legitimacy.

Further, because fields are nested vertically and connected horizontally, translation processes are shaped by contextual factors and social dynamics within each field, but activities in one field may also be enabled and constrained through its ties to other fields. In other words, translation must be considered along both vertical and horizontal dimensions. Finally, translation is an ongoing process, as actors continue to engage in interpretation and sensemaking throughout the implementation process which, as noted above, may stretch over decades. Actors’ understanding of policy content and goals is not static but likely to change over time, as a result of experience, learning and/or changing circumstances.

Translation processes thus unfold within the hierarchical structure (vertical dimension), between fields (horizontal dimension) and over time (longitudinal dimension). This three-dimensional perspective on translation is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. A three-dimensional perspective on translation



7. Case study: Translating evidence-based practice in Danish child protection services

Below, I present a multi-sited case study, which traces efforts to implement of evidence-based practice in Danish child protective services from the late 1990s until today. The purpose is to unfold and illustrate the usefulness of the theoretical argument and develop an empirical basis for discussing its implications. I begin by introducing the research setting, design, methods and data before presenting the main findings.

Research setting, methods and data. Denmark is a small country with a population of approx. 5.8 million people and is generally considered an efficient and highly decentralized welfare state. Social Policy is decided by the Danish Parliament. The National Board of Social Services (NBSS), an agency under the Ministry of Social Affairs, is responsible for policy implementation and knowledge dissemination. Other key players in the policy field include the Ministry of Finance, the National Audit Office, the National Appeals Board, Local Governments Denmark (KL), university colleges, professional associations, and the Danish National Centre for Social Research (SFI), which provides research-based knowledge for the development of social policy.² Private consultancies, foundations, NGOs, the media and the public also play an active role.

At the organizational level, the 98 municipalities are responsible for the delivery of public services, including social services and child protection. The municipalities are governed by city councils and enjoy a high degree of autonomy regarding the organization and standard of services. At the frontline, local child protective agencies investigate cases of possible child abuse and neglect and instigate relevant and proportionate interventions if necessary, ranging from preventive measures to out-of-home placement with or without consent. Frontline workers are mostly professionally trained social workers or pedagogues; some are psychologists. Caseworkers process cases, while external providers deliver interventions.

The case study presented here is based on an interpretive research design (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) and includes data from the policy field as well as three agencies in two municipalities. Crocusville Municipality is located in the capital region and has a population of approx. 600,000 inhabitants. Heatherhill Municipality is located in Western Denmark and has a population of approx. 87,000 inhabitants. Both municipalities are considered frontrunners in the field with regard to professional development in general. They were purposefully sampled and expected to be particularly rich in experiences relevant to our research interest: The apparent and puzzling ambiguity of implementation outputs in relation to evidence-based practice (Flyvbjerg 2006, 2011; Haverland and Yanow 2012).

Data comprises field notes from approx. 150 hours of observation in the three agencies and a total of 39 interviews carried out over a period of 14 months (2015-2016). Twenty-nine were semi-structured interviews with local organizational actors (frontline professionals, managers on various levels and political representatives). Ten were loosely structured interviews with policy actors in the field. I also collected national and local policy documents, consultancy reports, articles and artefacts such as checklists. The study was also informed by passive participant observation of seven practitioner conferences over a period

² SFI was merged with another research institution in 2017. This study was carried out before the merger, and so I refer to SFI in the following even though this organization no longer exists.

of 10 years (2006-2015), which aided the construction of a timeline and were used to prompt the memory of policy actors during interviews. Interview data was analyzed using NVIVO and combined with analytical and theoretical memos based on field notes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). I used a combination of open and closed coding, focusing on participants' accounts of national and local developments and (changing) interpretations of policy goals and means associated with evidence-based practice.³

Evidence-based policy and practice. The so-called 'Evidence Movement' describes efforts to develop and promote procedures for accumulating and disseminating research evidence focused on 'what works' with the purpose of improving public policy and service delivery. This is to be achieved by increasing the use of research evidence in decision-making and through the implementation of evidence-based programs and guidelines. The notion of 'evidence' generally underpinning these efforts is based on a positivist methodological hierarchy which places systematic reviews and randomized controlled trials at the top and qualitative studies at the bottom alongside e.g. 'expert opinions' (Boaz et al. 2019; Davies, Nutley, and Smith 2000; Hansen and Rieper 2009).

In the academic community, the evidence agenda has been accompanied by a growing interest in research on using evidence (Nutley, Walter, and Davies 2007) and the development of a new field, implementation science, which originated in health care but has since expanded its focus (Fixsen et al. 2005; Nilsen et al. 2013). The push for evidence-based policy and practice has also been questioned and criticized by scholars in the field of medicine where it originated (Greenhalgh, Howick, and Maskrey 2014) and in other fields to which it has expanded, including social work (Bergmark, Bergmark, and Lundstrom 2012; Webb 2001) and education (Biesta 2010; Schwandt 2005). Critics question its positivist methodology and narrow focus on 'what works' as well as the feasibility of the ideal and its implications for professional autonomy, given the practical realities of policymaking and service delivery. Notwithstanding this criticism, the idea has gained considerable traction and can be characterized as a 'master idea': a narrative strong enough to drive reform across national and organizational contexts in diverse policy fields (Røvik and Pettersen 2014).

Vertical translation. The idea of evidence-based policy and practice was introduced as a policy idea in Denmark in the late 1990s (Hansen and Rieper 2010). Efforts to accumulate and disseminate the 'current best evidence' in the social policy field in Denmark were institutionalized with the establishment of the Nordic Campbell Center in Copenhagen in 2002; a regional representation of the international Campbell Collaboration modelled after the Cochrane Collaboration in the field of medicine. The definition of evidence-based practice promoted by the Nordic Campbell Center was a translation of the original

³ See Møller (2018) and Møller (2019) for detailed information and analyses using different theoretical frameworks.

definition of Evidence-Based Medicine as ‘the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients.’ (Sackett et al. 1996, 71). However, in the Danish translation, the latter part was changed to ‘... decisions about other people’s well-being’. This slight rhetorical change broadened the scope from ‘patients’ to ‘people’ and from ‘care’ to ‘well-being’. More importantly, by leaving out the word ‘individual’, it shifted the focus from frontline professionals as the primary decision-makers and effectively obscured which decisions were addressed by this ideal, including by whom and at which hierarchical level the decisions in question were to be made.

Consequently, while the original definition indicates a bottom-up perspective aiming to promote frontline professionals’ use of research evidence in decision-making, the translation of evidence-based practice in the Danish policy field enabled a different interpretation of the evidence agenda as a top-down reform program aimed at promoting the implementation standardized evidence-based programs (see also Johansson, Denvall, and Vedung 2015). Due to the decentralized services and high degree of municipal autonomy, the evidence agenda took the form of a ‘meta-policy’ aimed at building normative pressure in the field and offering support to those municipalities who decided to embrace it. This broad policy agenda was pursued by the Nordic Campbell Center and the NBSS in the following decade, most clearly reflected in the NBSS’ *Evidence Policy* published in 2012 and in the *Methods Dissemination Program* from 2013, which aimed to support the implementation of evidence-based programs—primarily developed and tested in the US—in the Danish municipal child protective services.

Notably, the vertical translation process was not unidirectional: Even before the NBSS became engaged in promoting and disseminating evidence-based programs, Heatherhill Municipality along with a few others had already begun to implement standardized programs. They quickly came to serve as an inspiration and over the years formed a strong alliance with the NBSS. The Agency Director from Heatherhill Municipality became a well-known advocate for the evidence-based programs in the policy field and Heatherhill Municipality was brought forward as an exemplar at conferences and on the NBSS website. Over the following decades, the municipality maintained its position as a frontrunner, constantly searching for and adopting new evidence-based programs and tools, and urging the NBSS to support implementation and dissemination in the field.

The Agency Director and other staff members in Heatherhill Municipality played essential roles as translators between both the policy field and the organizational level, and the local political leadership and the frontline. They used their knowledge of the political arena to develop business cases explaining how investing in evidence-based programs would cut expenses in the long run. This was also an act of courage and creativity, as business cases had never been used before in regards to social policy. They also used

other creative measures to build collective understandings: Through field trips, invited speakers, metaphors and mottos, local politicians came to see the value of investing in evidence-based programs and frontline workers came to appreciate cost-effectiveness as a relevant factor in their decision-making. They also exercised both patience and strength: On the one hand, the agency director and staff members realized that this was a long-term investment, as the envisioned culture change would take years to accomplish. On the other hand, local actors describe these early years as tough, characterized not only by enthusiasm but also by conflict and confrontation with professionals. Many decided to leave the organization, and were encouraged to do so, if they were not on board with the new agenda.

In the policy field, the evidence-based programs were also a subject of great controversy. Representatives from the social work community, including professional associations, educational institutions, researchers and NGOs, were highly critical of the evidence agenda for many of the same reasons highlighted in the scholarly literature (cf. above). They found the reductionist methodology problematic and argued that the evidence-based programs were a poor fit with Danish pedagogical traditions and served to undermine professional autonomy and discretion. Reflective of these debates, frontline professionals often referred to the standardized programs as 'dog training programs'. Notably, those advocating in favor of evidence-based programs often had a background in economics. They had considerable knowledge of research methodologies and public spending, but little knowledge of social work research and practice. In other words, there appeared to be a lack of actors in the policy field with the necessary skills to translate the evidence agenda into something that made sense to social work scholars and professionals. These controversies meant that many municipalities remained reluctant to invest in the expensive programs.

In Crocusville Municipality, the programs were only implemented almost a decade later on the request of the local political leadership. Here, implementation of the programs followed a four-year long implementation of a so-called solution-focused approach rooted in constructionist and systemic thinking. The project manager who had been in charge of implementing the former program also became responsible for implementing the evidence-based programs and hence became a key translator. As a trained psychologist, the project manager possessed the knowledge to realize the methodological paradox of combining methods rooted in constructionist and positivist methodologies. This paradox was eventually resolved by subsuming the evidence-based programs under the constructionist framework. Consequently, frontline workers were encouraged to use constructionist methods when working with the evidence-based programs: experimentation and flexibility was valued over fidelity to aid professionals' sensemaking and ensure the legitimacy of the programs.

Again, both knowledge, creativity and strength were important factors in the translation process. The demand that frontline professionals participated in training and certification was underpinned by political as well as economic authority. At the same time, the project manager developed a metaphor to assist sensemaking among professionals: The solution-focused approach they had just spent years learning would still constitute the landscape in which they were to operate. Only now, the evidence-based programs would provide them with a detailed road map. A service manager provides a similar sentiment in describing the solution-focused approach as the trunk of a tree, which forms the core principle of service delivery in the municipality. The evidence-based programs form one among several branches.

Horizontal translation. When Crocusville Municipality decided to implement evidence-based programs, it was under the influence of the growing normative pressure in the field. Due to its size, the political and administrative leadership generally consider it part of the municipality's responsibility to contribute to the development of the field on a national level, but also place great value on local innovation. While Heatherhill and other entrepreneurial municipalities in Western Denmark had embraced the evidence agenda with full support from the NBSS, the child protective agency in Crocusville had focused on its own development program. When the political leadership requested the agency to 'get with the programs', so to speak, professional development consultants looked to Heatherhill and found them to be far ahead. They decided to implement two of the three programs that had been adopted by Heatherhill.⁴ The third program was considered too expensive and had also been subject to a public scholarly debate in which its effectiveness in the Danish welfare state context had been questioned. Hence, Crocusville professionals searched for and found an alternative program⁵ for the same target group. This alternative program was eventually included in the NBSS' portfolio of supported programs—a fact that local actors state with pride.

As Heatherhill Municipality continued to develop their services over the years, the evidence-based programs were incorporated into a more encompassing development program, which also focused on improving the quality of casework. In this process, Heatherhill incorporated tools and methods from the constructionist approach previously implemented in Crocusville⁶ and engaged in a mutual exchange of knowledge and experience. Over the years, a large number of municipalities arranged study trips to Heatherhill to learn about their experiences and approach. Actors from Heatherhill explain how these knowledge sharing activities supported the local implementation process because it forced frontline

⁴ Parent Management Training–Oregon (PMTO) and The Incredible Years (TIY), but not Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST).

⁵ Functional Family Therapy (FFT).

⁶ Signs of Safety (SOS) and Safety Planning as an alternative to out-of-home placement.

professionals to explicate what they were doing and why. Their efforts to present their activities in a way that made sense to outsiders also assisted their own sensemaking.

These are examples horizontal translation where implementation decisions and actions are not merely occasioned within the hierarchy but also via horizontal relations between organizational actors who are able to translate meaning between fields. The nature and prevalence of horizontal translation appears to depend to some extent on existing ties between the organizational actors and/or opportunities for them to engage with each other, for example via practitioner conferences or similar events. In this case, local actors mentioned that there were plenty of opportunities for higher-level managers and staff members to engage in knowledge exchange with their peers in other municipalities, but only few opportunities for service managers and frontline professionals to do the same. Cultivating professional networks and ties at various organizational levels below top management is likely to support horizontal translation, perhaps to a larger degree than ties among top-level managers. It is also likely that translators must leverage different sources of authority to create collective understandings among top-level managers versus staff members and frontline professionals. Whereas political and economic authority is likely to affect the former, the latter may be moved more effectively by appealing to professional norms and shared knowledge and beliefs.

Longitudinal translation. Actors in Heatherhill Municipality today emphasize the need to experiment and combine elements of evidence-based programs and work with module-based approaches to ensure tailor-made interventions, as the standardized programs do not work for everyone. Actors in Crocusville Municipality view the evidence-based programs as an integrated part of services and a positive element in their work; they share elements that are perceived as useful, but also emphasize that no programs are better than others *per se*; it all depends on the relationship with the citizen-client. At the same time, agency directors and service managers in both municipalities note an overflow of practices and expectations to professional practice in general. This includes an increased interest in articulating the reasoning behind one's practice, documenting and measuring outcomes of interventions (whether or not they follow a standardized program), an increased appreciation of the need for cost-effective interventions, and an increased interest in how research evidence can inform practice. Hence, while translations of the evidence agenda have resulted in different emphases and trajectories of development, the evidence-based programs eventually appear to have changed professional practices locally in highly similar ways.

Both municipalities eventually launched new ambitious development programs. These were rooted in bottom-up innovation, prototyping and design thinking, as opposed to large-scale implementation of 'pre-packaged' programs. Some view this as a break with the evidence agenda, and is presented as such by Crocusville actors—one of whom explain that the evidence agenda is a fading trend—the new programs

incorporate all of the principles outlined above. When presenting the programs to frontline professionals, staff members and service managers used their skills as translators by paying attention to significant cognitive and emotional residue from 'reform exhaustion' as well as potential conflicts among different professional groups who may feel overlooked or disadvantaged by the new initiatives. The new development programs are presented as 'knowledge-based' rather than evidence-based, signaling a broader orientation towards diverse sources of knowledge. This conveys continuation of the normative ideal embedded in the evidence agenda—that research evidence is a crucial source of knowledge for professional practice—but also acknowledges the longstanding criticism that the agenda was too narrowly focused on one specific form of evidence and entailed a problematic disregard for other forms of knowledge equally important for practice development.

This development is also visible in the policy field, where a rhetorical shift has taken place since 2015. The NBSS, SFI - The Danish National Centre for Social Science Research and Local Governments Denmark have all abandoned the term 'evidence-based practice' in favor of 'knowledge-based practice', and evidence-based programs in favor of 'empirically documented methods', on websites, in publications and conference programs. The NBSS' more recent policy initiatives are less focused on the implementation of standardized programs and tools and more oriented towards documenting extant practices and support structured innovation to create 'practice-based evidence' from the bottom-up. Together with initiatives that support 'data-driven decision-making', these initiatives are still part of a broader agenda with the overarching goal of developing a stronger evidence base and fostering an orientation towards new sources of knowledge in the field. As such, they represent a continuation of the evidence agenda, but a different interpretation of the goal, which calls for different means.

According to key actors in the policy field, this change is the result of a learning process brought about by the surprisingly enduring resistance towards the first translation of the evidence agenda in the social work community. They explain how they have come to realize that implementing evidence-based programs imported from the US was in many ways problematic, and that this approach came with great costs. Most importantly in terms of alienating professionals, but also in terms of neglecting target groups that fell outside the scope of the programs and the problems associated with transferring practices across national, cultural and pedagogical contexts as diverse as Denmark and the US. Critics brought up these issues from the beginning, but they carry greater weight when resulting from experience rather than abstract claims.

The development towards a new interpretation of the evidence agenda demonstrates the importance of attending to longitudinal as well as vertical and horizontal dimensions of the translation process. Moreover, the longitudinal translation portrayed here is also partly a result of reverse vertical translation from the

frontlines to the policy field, as policy actors directly refer to feedback from municipal actors and highlight the long-term perspective and continuous development in Heatherhill Municipality as a source of learning.

8. Discussion and conclusion

Throughout decades of scholarship, interpretation has been acknowledged as a central mechanism in policy implementation, particularly in relation to ambiguity. Even so, interpretation has remained understudied and undertheorized. In this article, I have built on recent developments in implementation and organization theory to deepen our understanding of interpretation in implementation and the role of socially skilled actors in this process. Specifically, I drew on Moulton and Sandfort's Strategic Action Field framework and combined this with Røvik's organizational theory of translation to suggest that socially skilled actors' efforts to foster joint action among actors in the implementation system can be meaningfully theorized as acts and processes of translation. I argued that socially skilled actors act as translators both within and between fields (i.e. translation often also involves boundary spanning (Moulton and Sandfort 2016, 13)). In doing so, they exercise four specific translation skills as suggested by Røvik; these are knowledge, creativity, patience and strength. I further suggested that processes of translation unfold along three dimensions in the implementation system: within the hierarchy (vertical), across fields (horizontal) and over time (longitudinal).

I illustrated this theoretical argument with a multi-sited case study of the implementation of evidence-based practice in Danish child protective services. The case study traced efforts to implement evidence-based practice in Danish child protective services over several decades, showing how translation unfolded within and across the different fields and were shaped by socially skilled actors who acted as translators. I demonstrated that translation processes do indeed occur everywhere in the implementation system—in the top of the hierarchy, across fields and in the frontline—often simultaneously. The analysis also suggested that a fifth skill could perhaps be added to the four skills already mentioned; namely *learning*, understood as the ability and willingness to learn from experience. This again emphasizes the longitudinal dimension.

In sum, translation is a multi-directional process of interpretation, sensemaking and mobilization, which unfolds along vertical, horizontal and longitudinal dimensions in the implementation system, with the purpose of fostering collective action in relation to a given public service intervention. Further, translation is a continuous process, which is not limited to the initial stages of the implementation process. While implementation efforts may result in a particular translation becoming institutionalized, so that new rules, routines, roles or regulations are no longer questioned, it is also a possibility that translation processes

continue. This is likely to be the case if there is unresolved conflict among actors in the implementation system. Socially skilled actors may engage in translation to uphold stability as much as to drive change.

Translation describes what is involved when abstract rules, ideas or principles are recreated as concrete collective actions in specific contexts. It encourages us to accept and embrace ambiguity, complexity and transformation as inherent aspects of implementation, but does not tie this to the nature of a given policy or intervention, nor to the level of conflict in the implementation system as others have suggested (Matland 1995). Even when goals are clear and accompanied by widespread agreement and detailed prescriptions for action, implementation actors still need to ask themselves (and others): What does this mean for us in this particular context? The specificities of translation processes depend on the extent to which translators possess the necessary skills and whether and how use their agency to exercise them in ways that successfully leverage sources of authority and legitimacy in the field. This again depends on the specific implementation context. Translation is thus a context-sensitive but generalizable social process.

There has been a tendency to view this process as a dysfunctional distortion of policy goals as they are sifted through hierarchical levels. I suggest an alternative route by acknowledging that translation is not good or bad *per se* but rather a fundamental condition for implementation. This opens up new avenues for implementation research and practice. The argument presented here invites the following propositions, some of which no. 1 and 4 echo propositions already made by Røvik (2007):

1. The chance of successful translation increases with the skill level among key translators in the implementation system, i.e. their knowledge, creativity, patience and strength.
2. The chance of successful translation increases with the number of active translators within and across fields, but only to the extent that there is sufficient agreement among them regarding the core content and principles of the intervention.
3. Horizontal translation increases chances of replication, because recreating practices already recreated by others in a similar context is more straightforward than recreating abstract ideas and principles;
4. If the intervention is simple, explicit and widely supported, translation is more likely to take the form of replication. Conversely, if the intervention is ambiguous, complex, context-sensitive and conflict-ridden, translation is more likely to take the form of radical transformation.

These propositions may serve to explain patterns of variation in implementation. At the same time, translation theory's essential claim—that transformation is an inevitable aspect of implementation—is likely to leave us feeling uneasy. Røvik's three modes of translation, which describe a continuum from replication over adaptation to radical transformation, invite a number of critical questions. To what extent does

innovative practice change reflect a process of implementation, if what we are observing is in fact a radical transformation of what was originally envisioned? Recognizing translation as part of the implementation process means accepting that it is not necessarily possible to decide *a priori* which implementation outputs constitute 'success' or 'failure'. This has implications for how we evaluate implementation efforts: If we accept adaptation and transformation as natural and acceptable outcomes of translation, how should we then evaluate the resulting implementation behavior? To which standard do we hold implementation actors accountable?

In the case presented above, it is clear that using yesterday's yardstick to evaluate implementation outputs would lead us to conclude that implementation efforts have failed and that policy intentions—i.e. that municipalities implement evidence-based programs in their services wherever possible—are left partly unfulfilled. But if we recognize key actors' current interpretations of policy intentions as an equally relevant yardstick and focus on the underlying principle and direction of change, an evaluation might arrive at the opposite conclusion. In this perspective, implementation efforts could be characterized as rather successful, albeit in unexpected ways. Across the entire implementation system, key actors view the shared orientation towards 'knowledge-based practice' as having evolved directly out of the legacy of evidence-based practice. Many also argue that this transformation of the agenda is actually more in line with the intention of the original definition of evidence-based practice, and that it hence represents a more appropriate way forward, compared to the rather narrow focus on evidence-based programs.

Recent developments in evaluation theory and practice offer a productive way forward in regards to dealing with this form of 'output ambiguity'. In his recent book, *Principle-Based Evaluation*, evaluation scholar Michael Quinn Patton argues that evaluators should focus on the core principles that underpin (public service) interventions (Patton 2017). Rather than focusing on detailed prescriptions for action and holding implementation actors to an ideal of fidelity, which is essentially based on the idea that the social world can somehow be held constant—evaluators are encouraged to embrace the core principles of an intervention as the standard against which implementation outputs should be assessed. Accordingly, these principles should also be guiding the actions of implementation actors. Such an approach seems well-suited to accommodate the translation perspective, taking complexity and change into account as a fundamental condition rather than a flaw, and account for the possibility that variations in implementation may sometimes lead to similar outputs and outcomes, or better ones, as a result of local adaptation.

Acknowledging translation as an inherent aspect of the implementation process also provides a foundation for developing useful guidance to policymakers and practitioners (O'Toole 2004). A particular strength of Røvik's translation theory is that it sparks instant recognition among practitioners who have experience

with complex implementation processes. Acknowledging translation and change as an inherent part of the implementation process, rather than a sign of failure, encourages a more constructive dialogue. As a very first step, policymakers and practitioners are advised to expect translation along both vertical, horizontal and longitudinal dimensions. This opens up new possibilities for action. For example, it would likely be useful to identify potential translators in the different fields that constitute the implementation system around a given intervention: Who possesses the knowledge needed to act as boundary spanners, translate meaning and build collective understandings within and across field? Further, since translator skills are not static but dynamic and context-dependent, another useful strategy would be to identify—or intentionally create—opportunities to develop the skills of potential translators and the ties between them.

In this regard, the analysis pointed to a group of actors who acted as key translators in both municipalities, but have so far received little attention in implementation research; namely staff members at the organizational level who function as the tie between the administrative leadership and the frontline. An important part of their function is to engage in knowledge sharing activities, such as conferences and networks, to search for new knowledge and inspiration for practice development. They are key to developing local translations of new ideas and tools, and are often able to do so in ways that convince both managers and frontline professionals of their worth. They are also often in charge of local implementation activities. Some have an academic background, while others are analytically inclined professionals who worked their way towards a more influential position in the organization but remain connected to the frontline. Future implementation studies should pay particular attention to this group of actors who appear to play key roles as translators and boundary spanners.

Going forwards, several scholars have argued that implementation scholars should focus on comparative research designs aimed at systematic development and testing of hypotheses (O'Toole 2004; Saetren 2014; Winter 2012a). This is an important research agenda and the propositions outlined above might provide a starting point for this kind of approach. However, I would also argue that the complexity of the implementation process warrants a variety of approaches, including mixed methods research and in-depth case studies based on close observation of everyday practice. Such studies may serve an important role in generating new theoretical insights. Here, I have focused on interpretation as a central mechanism and argued that this can be meaningfully theorized as translation. Implementation scholars looking to pursue this idea might benefit from orienting themselves in ongoing debates regarding different strands of translation theory (Waeraas and Nielsen 2016) and assess their compatibility and usefulness in relation to different strands of implementation theory. Other sources may prove equally useful to the ambition of developing a deeper and more fine-grained understanding of key mechanisms in policy implementation.

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