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SUMMARY

‘A PATIENT IS NOT A CAR’

Lean in healthcare: Studying agency in the translation of management concepts.

‘Lean’ can be traced back to the Toyota production system (TPS), where the concept was developed from the 1950s onwards to reduce and eliminate waste in the production system of vehicle assembly through continuous quality improvement and radical improvement activities. Womack and Jones popularized the term ‘Lean production’ when they presented Lean thinking to the Western world with their book *The Machine that Changed the World*. The seemingly universal relevance of Lean, with its principles arguably appropriate for various organizations in the public and private sectors, has allowed the concept to spread from manufacturing to services. To understand the flow and impact of management concepts such as Lean, it is important to know how these concepts are shaped and interpreted in a ‘new’ context and how specific key agents actively respond to and enact its implementation as they champion it in its new location. However, opening up the ‘black box’ of what really happens to new ideas and concepts when they are adopted in organizations, and what actors do, remains in a nascent state.

Research on the translation of management concepts has started to address this shortcoming by focusing on variation and by studying how ideas and concepts acquire new meaning as they are applied in specific contexts. Inspired in part by Actor-Network Theory (ANT), translation scholars took issue with the diffusion models of innovation underlying the institutional traditions of organization theory that assume that organizations adopt the same sets of concepts and ideas (isomorphism) because of institutional pressures in their social environments. Three aspects are central to our understanding of translation: (1) the role of context, (2) the modification of ideas and their characteristics and (3) the role of agentic actors in establishing change. Despite the potential for broadening our understanding of what happens when ideas and concepts enter organizations, there remains considerable room to develop translation as a theoretical perspective. We tend to assume that the perspective is both inherently coherent and agentic. Yet, we find a growing range of different interpretations that is not explicitly described or systematized. Furthermore, the perspective’s assumed agentic approach has produced limited reflection as to what this agency entails and how it should be studied.

Theoretical and empirical work on the role of agency in translation remains rather narrow. This has obscured the perspective's conceptual clarity, letting it linger in a state of latency, both in its own right and in its contribution to institutional and organization theory.

The opportunity arose to study how Lean has been implemented in Dutch healthcare, where the application of the concept is still a relatively new phenomenon. A number of Dutch hospitals embracing and implementing the Lean principles constituted the basis for the creation of the national network 'LIDZ' (Lean in de zorg, which translates to Lean in healthcare) in 2011. At the time of study 57 healthcare organizations had joined the network, of which 38 were Dutch hospitals. The common refrain 'a patient is not a car' illustrated the relevance of this research context as it meant that Lean indeed required some translation for it to be meaningful. Considering the challenges and needs in researching the flow and impact of management concepts, I was interested in how people championing this concept in the Dutch hospitals dealt with this requisite. Therefore, I collected data interviews with 38 of these individuals and also collected observation and contextual data.

Specifically, my aim with this dissertation is to advance our comprehension of how key actors translate a concept like Lean to their specific contexts. And in doing so, to explore, refine and extend the conceptualization of human agency in the translation of management concepts. This overarching challenge is central to this research and is used to frame the conceptual and empirical investigation of this dissertation. To address this issue, I raise three sub-questions in chapters two, three and four.

Chapter two. To identify the analytical boundaries of translation as a theoretical perspective, we need to know: How is the translation of management concepts conceptualized and what is the role of agency? Chapter two is a conceptual study in which I conduct a systematic literature review to answer this question. I identify two relevant dimensions that mark important variations in translation and translation research. The first dimension concerns the source of variation (or underlying causal forces), which may range from being more embedded to being more strategizing. The second dimension concerns the object of variation. This object can either be more representational, concerned with the differences that occur with respect to the symbolic aspects of a concept, or more structural, concerned with material transformations. A key contribution of this study is the development of four alternative approaches to translation by combining these dimensions. By articulating the assumptions underlying these approaches and by

defining how key elements are understood, I show how the assumptions of institutional, rational, dramaturgical and political perspectives are echoed in various, yet polarized, interpretations and conceptualizations of translation. This allows us to specify the possibilities and limitations of different approaches and to identify the opportunities for integration and further research.

Chapter three. To investigate the role of agency in translation and to understand how intermediate actors engage in specific sets of practices to create dynamic links within organizations, in chapter three I raise the question: How do key intermediate actors translate management concepts across organizational boundaries? Chapter three is an empirical study based on the qualitative data outlined before. Here, I develop a theoretical model of boundary spanning in translation. The findings show a set of three practices that intermediate agents draw on to align the meaning of Lean across professional and managerial boundaries: ‘positioning’, ‘labeling’ and ‘channeling’. I specify how these practices vary as a result of contextual conditions and strategic orientations in ‘bridging’, ‘buffering’ and ‘blending’ modes. In doing so, I find buffering to be a significant, yet paradoxical and under-theorized part of translation. In a buffering mode, boundary spanners disconnect involved parties so they can engage in unhindered quasi-independent meaning-making. This is in contrast to prior literature on translation that tends to emphasize the efforts of alignment in connecting different meanings by making them mutually compatible.

Chapter four. To reach a better understanding of the role of identity in translation I explore the question: What is the relationship between the identity work of key actors and the translation of management concepts? In chapter four, which is also an empirical study, I focus on the tension between individuals’ identification with Lean and the perceived demands of their organizational context. I find that individual actors engage in narrative constructions to create a coherent sense of self in relation to Lean. Based on the data I identify four distinct categories of translation-as-identity-work: ‘Externalizing’, ‘professionalizing’, ‘rationalizing’ and ‘proselytizing’. A key contribution of this study is the understanding that through three attributes of identification—‘salience’, ‘transience’ and ‘valence’—the actor and the concept are mutually and simultaneously affected by identity work.

Overall, this research and its findings reflect two notions that allow for an advanced conceptualization of human agency in the translation of management concepts: *Mechanisms of duality* and *spatial metaphors*. By rethinking mechanisms of duality I show how in translation

research we (still) tend to either collapse or polarize organizational and individual considerations related to the adaptation of concepts. We tend to see actors as either embedded in their organization or acting out of self-interest. In itself, by the specification of these polarized approaches this dissertation opens up possibilities for more reflection on these approaches and for taking an integrative approach. In addition, I show how (and with which practices and narratives) actors are able to influence the contexts in which they are embedded and how this impacts both their shaping of a concept and the way they construe themselves. By rethinking the spatial metaphor I show how agency in translation, rather than focusing on using alignment to overcome distance, may actually entail the subjective construction and generation of distance among the concept, the context and the agent. As such, researchers should try to go beyond a conceptualization of translation as an effort to overcome an a-priori spatial proximity where the geographical, contextual and/or temporal distance is associated with ‘the trajectory of the practice’s diffusion’, reflecting the difference between the ‘context of origin’ and the ‘recipient context’. Instead, a sensitivity to the relation between the ‘trajectory of the self’ and the ‘trajectory of innovation diffusion’ is likely to yield a better understanding of what happens when ideas and concepts spread and are given new meaning in different contexts.

Based on these theoretical contributions, this dissertation also provides a number of practical implications. My findings emphasize the importance of specific individuals in implementation processes, which makes it crucial to think carefully about which agents should have a leading role. This, however, is in sharp contrast to how the individuals in this study reflected on ‘ending up’ in these positions. In many cases this was a matter of coincidence, or a choice with unforeseen consequences, as Lean started gaining popularity in the organizations. This randomness led to situations with significant discrepancy between the identification of key actors with Lean and the (experienced) organizational engagement with the concept. This discrepancy was found to impact the agents’ efforts in translation to a great extent, as they ‘actively maneuvered’ an optimal balance between themselves and the ideas they translated to create a coherent sense of self in relation to Lean. We should therefore acknowledge to a greater extent how the complex prior and emerging orientations, emotions and identities of actors affect translation processes, both with respect to how this may affect the shape of concepts, ideas and practices and how this may impact the actors too. For example, if individuals with significant personal identification with the concept (“I was a firm believer from the start. It really was like I

believe in this and it is my intrinsic motivation to improve processes”) only have limited, or even just ‘ceremonial’ organizational support, they may downplay their personal and emotional engagement with the concept, and instead focus on its organizational value in order to present themselves as an experts. This may pose challenges that may be considered limiting not only from an organizational, but also from an individual point of view, when the concept becomes further removed from the considerations they had for adopting it in the first place.

Also, the findings indicate that agents may change concepts in ways that are different from what current perspectives allow us to recognize. Being conscious of the conditions under which key agents can do so, and knowing with which tools to deploy these conditions, may aid them to implement concepts in a meaningful way. I specified a number of micro-practices (positioning, labeling and channeling) and attributes of identification (salience, transience and valence) that practitioners may use as a means of reflecting on how they and the concept of Lean are constructed simultaneously, in relative position to each other and their context, opening up new ways of thinking about their role in translation. Also, these micro-practices and attributes of identification could be used to actively translate a concept into practice. For example, boundary spanners may engage a buffering mode in which they draw on the micro-practices of ‘replacing dysfunctional labels’ and ‘juggling conflicting story lines’ to achieve quasi-independent meaning-making among different hierarchical stakeholders. Although this mode may seem paradoxical, as it creates distance between parties instead of overcoming it, it can shield conscious reflection from extending to what is happening elsewhere, which may be necessary to achieve collective meaning-making in the end.

In conclusion, this dissertation aims to contribute to a clearer understanding of what happens when ideas and concepts like Lean spread and are given new meaning when key actors translate them to their specific contexts. My research encourages scholars studying the flow and impact of management concepts to be more reflexive and explicit of their approach when using translation as a perspective. This will urge us to consider how the interaction between organizational and individual considerations for adoption affects translation. As part of this, this research argues for a conceptualization of agency that reflects the mutually constitutive, interpretive activity through which the concept and the agent are simultaneously constructed, in the tensions between individual claims and the demands on this self by the context. After all, the idea that a ‘patient is not a car’ dictates an approach to studying Lean that allows for seeing its

micro-level translations in a 'new' healthcare context, painting a completely different picture of Lean than when treating the concept as a 'thing' that hardly changes when diffused.