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## **A patient is not a car**

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2017

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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### **citation for published version (APA)**

van Grinsven, M. (2017). *A patient is not a car: Lean in healthcare: Studying agency in the translation of management concepts*. [PhD-Thesis - Research and graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam]. ABRI.

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## CHAPTER 2

### TRANSLATING MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS: TOWARDS A TYPOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES

*Translation has been established as an important theoretical perspective for studying the flow of management concepts. Yet, despite its potential, we find limited reflection on the various ways in which the perspective is understood and used. As the under-theorized and fragmented discourse may hamper the progress of translation research as an academic field, it is in need of closer examination. The purpose of this paper is to explore the different conceptualizations of translation, in terms of their key foci and base assumptions, and to review the work that has accumulated into different sub-streams. Based on a systematic literature review of 150 publications, we identify two theoretically relevant dimensions that mark important differences between these different streams of research: (1) the source of variation and (2) the object of variation. With these dimensions, we develop a typology of four alternative approaches to translation and we show how these are associated with institutional, rational, dramaturgical and political perspectives. We draw on these broader theoretical lenses to contextualize and deepen our understanding of the specific possibilities and limitations of alternative translation approaches, as well as highlight the potential for further connections and integration between them.*

*Key words: translation; management concepts; management ideas; typology of approaches*

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades we have witnessed a growing academic interest in the ebb and flow of management ideas (Sturdy, Clark, Fincham and Handley, 2009; Birkinshaw, Healey, Suddaby and Weber, 2014). Specifically, the development, spread and adoption of management concepts (Mueller and Carter, 2005) such as Total Quality Management, Lean Management and Business Process Reengineering have been extensively studied. To date, a number of useful approaches and perspectives have helped us understand the prevalence of these concepts, and their implications for management and organization research (Birkinshaw, Hamel and Mol, 2008; Parush, 2008; Sturdy, 2004). One theoretical perspective that proliferated quietly but rapidly is ‘translation’ (Sturdy, 2004), a construct strongly associated with, and considered to be one of the central pillars of ‘Scandinavian institutionalism’ (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Røvik, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996). In the mid-1990s, drawing on insights from Actor-Network Theory (or a Sociology of Translation) (Law, 1986, 1991; Latour, 1986, 1987; Callon, 1986), these theorists developed a critique on diffusion models of innovation underlying the established neo-institutionalism traditions.

In the eyes of these early translation scholars, neo-institutional theory was too concerned with stability and standardization and did not adequately address and explain the issue of change (Czarniawska, 2008). They sought to distance themselves from neo-institutional approaches by shifting their focus to how agents actively respond to and enact regulations, norms, values, and cultural-cognitive beliefs, thereby highlighting organizational variation and distinctiveness over stability and standardization (Frandsen and Johansen, 2011). This early translation literature mainly concerned itself with how ideas become modified when adapted from their original social contexts to new specific settings. Central to this tradition of research is the ‘travel of ideas’ metaphor with its dis-embedding and re-embedding dialectic (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Mica, 2013).

In spite of its ‘quiet emergence’ (Sturdy, 2004), the translation perspective has since proliferated and gained prominence. In a recent paper, Nielsen, Mathiassen and Newell (2014, p. 168) emphasize ‘Although this perspective is . . . recognized as Scandinavian in origin, its contribution is also echoed in organizational research in Europe and the United States and portrayed as one of the ‘expanding horizons’ of institutional thinking’. The approach has become an increasingly appealing avenue for studying the institutionalization process of management

concepts, particularly given its emphasis on the active role of agents, the mobilization of interest in creating practice variation (Zilber, 2006), and its contribution to ‘gaining a more detailed and process oriented understanding of the way by which social meanings are mobilized and gain. . . support in the innovation processes’ (Waldorff, 2013, p. 220).

However, and perhaps unsurprisingly given its (social) constructivist foundations, increasing the likelihood of multiple and possibly conflicting conceptions (Benders and Van Veen, 2001; Giroux, 2006), ‘translation’ has come to accommodate a growing range of different interpretations. While the growing number of studies on translation do share a focus on the modification of ideas by agentic actors in relation to a specific context, most interpretations are partial and highlight only specific aspects. Little attention is given to explicitly describing or systematizing the resulting divergent approaches. Lervik and Lunnan (2004), for instance, argue that ‘translation’ represents a focus on management knowledge as constructed, emphasizing the symbolic aspects of diffusion. Others, in contrast, draw on the perspective to theorize variation in local configurations as a result of organizational conditions (Ulbrich, 2010) or to explain political processes of interest translation (Kelemen, 2000). Additionally, differences exist in how core elements are interpreted. For example, the concept of interest translation from Actor-Network Theory ranges in the symmetry with which it is applied. Some studies emphasize the position of specific actors in the process of translation. Kelemen (2000, p. 495), for example, argues that through a ‘process of interest translation . . . employees are seduced, forced or rationally convinced that TQM [Total Quality Management] is a viable and profitable option for all of them’. Meanwhile, others advocate an approach to ‘intéressement’, which recognizes the existence of multiple translations from different origins and acknowledges that the translator must displace his own goals as well as those of others (e.g., Giroux, 2006).

Although there are occasional references to the ‘different flavors of this constructed view of management knowledge’ (Lervik and Lunnan, 2004, p. 295), translation is persistently, yet unwittingly, presented as a fairly coherent and delimited perspective, with little acknowledgment of its internal variation. This tendency, blurring both the boundaries and the specific contributions of translation in studying the flow of management concepts, is especially striking given that the very point of translation is to capture the process through which variation occurs. Even Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) wondered from the outset if and how their ideas on translation would be translated into others' publications, as ‘the results of the translation process cannot be

deduced from the idea itself' (p. 48). And whereas the current conceptual ambiguity in translation as a perspective may allow us to recognize our own situations and select those elements that appeal to us (Benders and Van Veen, 2007), it also creates a double-edged sword. After all, even without a direct necessity to engage in a narrower interpretation of the concepts and components at stake, the under-theorized and fragmented discourse hampers a reflexive understanding and appreciation of different approaches and interferes with an informed comparison and possible integration of sub-streams.

In recognition of such needs and challenges, the purpose of this paper is to engage in a closer examination of different approaches to translation in studying the flow of management concepts, and to systematically identify the conceptualizations and interpretations through which researchers have redefined and revised the meaning of translation. Our aim is to shed light on the specific advantages and limitations of the current approaches and their underlying assumptions, and to identify opportunities for further integration between positions in future research endeavors.

Based on a systematic analysis of how translation is used across an extensive set of relevant publications, three specific contributions can be made. First, given that both the flow of management concepts and the perspective of translation are accompanied by a plethora of labels and sub-streams, the content and boundaries of research on translation in studying the flow of management concepts have not yet been clearly delineated. We contribute to identifying and addressing this complexity through a systematic review of a set of publications representing this field, which allows us to identify the scope of current research on this topic and further investigate the specific contributions of translation in studying the flow of management concepts. Second, our review highlights the rich variety of interpretations associated with the label of translation. By providing a typology of four alternative translation approaches we illuminate the fragmentation in the discourse, enabling researchers to recognize contributions based on different assumptions and interpretations. Finally, to provide overarching theoretical insights into how these four approaches to translation are related, we investigate how they may be representative of different underlying theoretical perspectives, namely institutional, rational, dramaturgical and political perspectives. We draw on these broader perspectives to contextualize and deepen our understanding of each approach to translation, and highlight the potential for further connections and integration between them.

In this article we first explain the method we used to systematically review the literature. Next, we organize the findings from this review according to two observed dimensions, which combined, yield a holistic typology of four alternative translation approaches. We then investigate the underlying assumptions and scope conditions of these approaches, by using four broader theoretical perspectives as theoretical lenses. In the final sections we reflect on the possibilities and limitations of integrative approaches and discuss opportunities for further research.

## **2.2 REVIEW METHOD**

### ***Sampling***

In order to identify a reproducible and transparent set of theoretically relevant data, we conducted a systematic literature review. This method has rapidly gained popularity in management literature due to its capacity to overcome the ‘deficiencies of traditional review methods’ and to provide a more thorough and unbiased examination of a particular subject (Denyer and Neely, 2004, p. 133). The strategy for this review draws on the systematic review methodology detailed by Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003), which stresses the use of explicit, reproducible criteria in the selection of publications for review, and outlines the steps to frame the enquiry and present the results. We combined the systematic review with a ‘snowball’ technique (Greenhalgh and Peacock, 2005) and performed a bibliographic search in five distinct steps.

First, we constructed a list of keywords commonly used to refer to management concepts to limit our search results to publications in this specific field of research. While this topic has become an important area of study, there is remarkably little consistency in the terminology (Birkinshaw et al., 2008) and a range of labels is used to refer to the same empirical phenomenon. For the purpose of this paper, we used the scoping studies by Sturdy (2004) and Birkinshaw et al. (2008), informed by the authors’ prior experience, to create an initial list of ten keywords used to refer to the broad phenomenon of management concepts (e.g., ‘management idea’, ‘management fashion’, ‘administrative innovation’ and ‘organization concept’). We used this list to establish further combinations with different spelling variants as recommended in bibliographic database search (Benders, Nijholt and Heusinkveld, 2007). This approach yielded a total of forty keywords (Table 1).

**Table 2.1 List of keywords used in bibliographic database search (number of hits included)**

Keywords related to 'Management Concept'			
1. Management Fashion (83)	11. Organization Concept (16)	21. Managerial Model (3)	31. Managerial Rhetoric (1)
2. Management Practice (66)	12. Management Tool (9)	22. Organizational Concept (3)	32. Managerial Idea (1)
3. Management Knowledge (66)	13. Management Discourse (8)	23. Managerial Tool (3)	33. Managerial Fashion (1)
4. Management Idea (57)	14. Management Model (8)	24. Managerial Innovation (2)	34. Management Process (1)
5. Management Concept (52)	15. Managerial Discourse (7)	25. Administrative Innovation (2)	35. Organization Form (1)
6. Organizational Form (39)	16. Management Philosophy (5)	26. Managerial Technique (2)	36. Managerial System (1)
7. Management Innovation (26)	17. Management Fad (5)	27. Management Rhetoric (2)	37. Managerial Philosophy (0)
8. Management System (20)	18. Managerial Knowledge (5)	28. Managerial Concept (2)	38. Managerial Fad (0)
9. Management Technique (19)	19. Corporate Practice (4)	29. Management Trend (2)	39. Managerial Process (0)
10. Managerial Practice (17)	20. Organizational Model (4)	30. Corporate Concept (1)	40. Managerial Trend (0)

Second, we identified a set of publications related to a translation perspective in the debates on the flow management concepts. Although we do not wish to ignore analytical distinctions by collapsing different theoretical approaches, we do find a plethora of labels to refer to this perspective, making it difficult to define the boundaries of this specific field of research. For example, in addition to 'translation' or 'Translation Theory' (Doorewaard and Van Bijsterveld, 2001), the perspective is considered to be one of the central pillars of 'Scandinavian institutionalism' (e.g., Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) and strongly associated with 'Actor-Network Theory' (e.g., Callon, 1986; Latour, 1986; Law, 1986; 1991), 'editing' (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996) and 'creolization' (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002). Other 'specific versions of translation' (Frenkel, 2008, p. 22) include 'hybridization' (Frenkel and Shenhav 2003, 2006) and 'bricolage' (Campbell, 2004). So, even though translation may be used as a broad label, to signify a process through which concepts are modified by agentic actors in relation to a particular context, 'translation' itself may not be an appropriate keyword to reflect this area of research. Instead, in order to capture the literature on translation and to do justice to terms closely related to translation, we identified a set of publications highly associated with the

construct of translation, and used this set in a strategy of forward citation. To define this set, we first retrieved from the Social Sciences Citation Index all journal papers published that used the term ‘translation’ or ‘translating’ in the title, abstract, or keywords and we restricted our search to the subject categories business and management. From this list of papers (N = 1138), we exported a CSV-file containing the title, abstracts, keywords and references. Having previously established a list of keywords for ‘management concepts’, we performed an automatic search, only including those papers that used one of these keywords in the bibliographic information. This resulted in 75 papers of which 37 used the construct of translation to study the flow of management concepts. For this preliminary set of 37 papers we closely studied what papers, books and book chapters they referenced when doing so and we listed the publications that had been referenced by at least five of these 37 journal papers. We found that whereas the volume *Translating Organizational Change*, edited by Czarniawska and Sevón (1996), is indeed a well cited landmark (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009), a set of nine core publications is related to a translation perspective in the debates on the flow of management concepts (Table 2.2).

**Table 2.2** *A set of nine publications closely related to translation*

Publications related to a translation perspective	Number of mentions in a preliminary set of 37 journal papers
1 Callon, 1986	5
2 Latour, 1986	9
3 Latour, 1987	6
4 Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996	15
5 Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996	7
6 Sahlin-Andersson, 1996	10
7 Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002	6
8 Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005	6
9 Sahlin and Wedlin, 2008	5

Third, to identify all references to these nine publications, we used a strategy of forward citation (January 2016). We employed a strategy of multiple database searching using two comprehensive citation databases: ISI’s (Thomson Reuters) Web of Science and Elsevier’s Scopus. Web of Science primarily restricts its indexing coverage to high-impact journals and is considered a better option for journal citations, Scopus in contrast, includes more citations from books and monographs (Bar-Ilan, 2010), doing justice to the Scandinavian institutionalist research tradition

to publish much of the work in books rather than in journals. We used the citation databases to find all references to the nine selected publications. For Web of Science, we restricted our search to the subject categories business and management, while for Scopus we incorporated secondary document results and cited reference variants and limited our search to the subject area of ‘Business, Management and Accounting’. We included English-only articles, books and book chapters, and excluded editorials, conference proceedings, theses, dissertations, working paper series and book reviews. After merging the results for both databases and excluding double entries, a total of 2,181 references remained, for which we exported all bibliographic information to a secondary dataset.

Fourth, the bibliographic information of these 2,181 entries was filtered for our keywords related to ‘management concepts’ (see Table 2.1). The impact factor of journals was used as a threshold measure, resulting in a list of 200 publications. In line with Meier (2010), for this step, only journals with a 5-Year-Impact-Factor higher than 1.5 were included (for journals established after 2010, a cut-off value of 1 was chosen). Next, we carefully studied the abstracts of all results and removed papers in which the flow of management concepts appeared not to be a primary focus of study. Despite difficulties in defining what ‘management concepts’ entail, we limited our scope to publications studying concepts with a relatively coherent prescriptive vision on how to deal with specific organizational issues, which are coined with a particular label (Benders and Verlaar, 2003). As management concepts are widely recognized to differ from technological (also called ‘technical’) innovations (Damanpour, Walker and Avellaneda, 2009), purely technological and information system innovations (e.g., electric lightning, cardiac telecare, or ‘top-selling insecticide’) were left out of this account. This yielded a primary data set of 114 references.

Fifth, we deployed a ‘snowball’ approach (Greenhalgh and Peacock, 2005) to identify the remaining theoretically relevant studies in our secondary set. This approach recognizes that the targeted academic discussion might entertain alternative, less specific labels and descriptions to refer to management concepts, for example ‘the organizationally accepted idea of interdisciplinary teamwork’ (Reay et al., 2013, p. 963). To improve the inclusion of relevant publications in our dataset, we used our primary dataset as a threshold measure. If cited by the publications in our primary set, entries in the secondary set were carefully studied, and if relevant, added to our primary set. In this step, the impact factor of the journals was not taken into account; instead, we looked solely at the impact of specific papers as they had been

identified as relevant through our primary set. This action yielded 36 additional publications. Ultimately, the final set included 150 publications (see Appendix 3).

### *Analysis*

This set of 150 publications was then analyzed systematically using an inductive approach. Each work was read extensively and two forms of coding were undertaken. First, the material associated with translation was extracted. For each of the papers in the set, we focused on the assumptions and related elements that were implied when authors referred to the construct of translation and we exported these descriptive references to a separate file. Organizing these descriptions inductively generated two dimensions by which the variety of different interpretations of translation could be captured: (1) the source of variation and the (2) object of variation. Next, using the original texts, we attempted to classify each of the 150 publications with respect to these two dimensions. By looking for regularities and patterns in the texts, we inductively derived four elements around which our analyses started to revolve: context, actors, tools and resources, and outcome. ‘Context’ is the broader circumstances and conditions that determine, and are affected by, the translation of management concepts. Across different approaches, we found it varying in relevant scope and in terms of its perceived constraining effects. ‘Actors’ is a categorization based upon who or what affects the process of translation. Actors may be decentered from the process or may be assigned a conscious or strategic position. ‘Tools and resources’ refers to the means by which management concepts are revised. ‘Outcome’ refers to the result of the translation process that gets foregrounded in analysis. For the analyses of the dataset and as the foundation of our typology, we employed these four elements as a coding scheme, with which we combined the two dimensions into four typological approaches to translation. In the following sections, we first elaborate on these two dimensions. Subsequently we combine them in a typological framework, which is then used to systematically review how the construct of translation is used to study the flow of management concepts.

### **2.3 STUDYING TRANSLATION: SOURCES AND OBJECTS OF VARIATION**

In reviewing how the construct of translation might be used to study the flow of management concepts, our qualitative analysis captured two different dimensions based on which different approaches may be discerned. The first is the source of variation and the second the object of

variation. While the theoretical relevance of each of these dimensions has been emphasized before (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009; Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013), the dimensions have not yet been combined, or used to delineate specific ways to adopt a translation perspective.

### ***Dimension 1: Source of variation***

The first dimension resulting from our qualitative analysis was the source of variation. When taking a closer look at how variation originates, a central point of divergence relates to the underlying forces or mechanisms of translation. We find two analytically relevant emphases with respect to the causal effects of translation.

#### *Variation through embeddedness*

The first line generally considers variation as a natural result of the correspondence between a concept and the context in which it is embedded. Translation may be considered ‘an implicit search for pragmatic solutions’ (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009, p. 191). This focus is very explicit in the work of Kirkpatrick, Bullinger, Lega and Dent (2013, p. 50), who specifically indicate that they follow an embeddedness approach that focuses on ‘the unconscious efforts [of actors] to make sense of and adopt templates in local contexts’. They argue that this requires ‘a detailed understanding of the national context in which translation occurs’, as evidenced by the example of a particular model of hospital management that has been translated differently in four health systems as a function of regulatory and political structures. Likewise, in their study of MANS, a less well-known management concept, Van Veen, Bezemer and Karsten (2011) use the translation perspective to study how the general aspects of the TQM movement are adapted to the particular situation of Dutch consensual corporatism. This creates a distinctive new version of TQM, abbreviated as ‘MANS’, providing orientation for the Dutch companies in the study.

#### *Variation through strategizing*

With respect to the source of variation, we also find an interpretation of translation that highlights ‘the strategic opportunities associated with different interpretations and [that] recognizes that there is more than one way in which an actor can interpret and translate an idea or a practice

within a given organizational context' (Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009, p. 192). For instance, Kantola and Seeck (2010, p. 41) explain, 'in line with Czarniawska and Sevón (2005), we feel that different agents translate management fashions to fit their distinctive needs in a particular context'. They show how Porter's management ideas are used by national political actors to legitimize their own positions and justify the possession of power for political elites. Similarly, Morris and Lancaster (2006) emphasize translation as a political process. They illustrate how translation is used as a strategy by which actors manipulate and reshuffle interests to reinforce Lean Management. They link back to Latour's (1987) 'strategies of translation'.

### ***Dimension 2: Object of variation***

The second dimension that we distilled from our qualitative analysis was the object of variation. When we look at how translation is used to study the flow of management ideas, one of the central themes is the variation that results from dis-embedding and re-embedding efforts. However, we see two distinct emphases on what it is that varies.

#### *Representational variation*

The first line of interpretation, representational variation, is concerned with the differences that occur with respect to the symbolic aspects of a concept. From this perspective, 'practices can remain materially identical, but need to be symbolically repackaged to fit the new context' (Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013, p. 708). Translation here is primarily associated with symbolic modifications and the focus is on management concepts as circulating ideas, discourses and texts (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996 in Lervik and Lunnan, 2004). In this perspective, translation emphasizes new language over actions (Lervik and Lunnan, 2004). For example, Zilber (2006) argues that translation studies allow for a focus on the symbolic aspects of institutionalization and on how institutionalized meanings are actively reshaped over time. She notes, 'Like most studies of institutionalization as translation, I focused on the ideational. [Whereas] most studies of institutionalization as diffusion . . . focused on the structural and practical' (p. 300). Similarly, Özen and Berkman (2007, p. 828), who investigated the legitimation of TQM in Turkey, see translation primarily as a discursive effort and argue that 'actors generate texts translating and re-embedding (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) the imported practice in the recipient context by producing recipient rhetoric'.

### *Structural variation*

Yet, with respect to the object of variation, we also find a more socio-technical view ‘distinguishing it[self] from interpretative translation, which solely involves symbolic, rhetorical, or discursive changes’ (Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013, p. 709). In this perspective, translation emphasizes variation in terms of structural changes and material transformations. Representative of this interpretation is a study by Ansari, Fiss and Zajac (2010), which suggests that the lack of fit between a practice and its recipient context shapes how concrete practices vary or resemble the features of the previous version of the practice. Relatedly, Wæraas and Sataøen (2014, p. 243) who study the adaptation of reputation management in Norwegian hospitals, remark that ‘from a translation perspective, management ideas are not ‘just’ symbols . . . they turn into practice over time [and] subsequent events are more concerned with making sure the idea has lasting effects on performance’. Likewise, Rocha and Granerud (2011) rely on the concept of translation to address the implementation of certified management systems (CMS). They assert that translation departs from a one-sided focus on stability and they show how subordinate workers alter the use of CMS in their daily practices.

## **2.4 STUDYING TRANSLATION: A TYPOLOGY OF ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES**

In the following sections we provide a typology of four approaches to translation (see Table 2.3), building on the two dimensions related to the source and object of variation, and by employing four categorical elements as a coding scheme. Providing typological extremes allows us to better grasp the variation found in the literature studying the flow of management concepts from a perspective of translation. However, we would like to stress that the binary distinctions between variation through embeddedness and variation through strategizing—and between representational variation and structural variation—do not imply that the two dimensions are conceptually or empirically separate.

**Table 2.3 A typology of translation approaches**

	<b>Source of variation (dimension 1)</b>			
	<i>Variation through embeddedness</i>		<i>Variation through strategizing</i>	
	<b>Object of variation (dimension 2)</b>			
	<i>Representational variation</i>	<i>Structural variation</i>	<i>Representational variation</i>	<i>Structural variation</i>
	<b>Translation as representational variation through embeddedness (Approach I)</b>	<b>Translation as structural variation through embeddedness (Approach II)</b>	<b>Translation as representational variation through strategizing (Approach III)</b>	<b>Translation as structural variation through strategizing (Approach IV)</b>
<b>Context</b>	Social meaning systems, constraining how concepts are shaped locally.	Structured characteristics, constraining how concepts are shaped locally.	Social meaning systems, enabling actors to deploy for their own use.	Structural characteristics, enabling actors to deploy for their own use.
<b>Actors</b>	Actors decentered from process in favor of studying fit between concept and context, or assigned a responsive or unconscious position to contextual meaning.	Actors decentered from process in favor of studying fit between concept and context, or assigned a responsive or unconscious position to structural characteristics of context.	Single or multi actor viewpoint, actors strategically redefine problematic situations, shaping the meaning of the concept in ways beneficial to their interests.	Single or multi actor viewpoint, the structured outcome reflects the ability of individuals influencing the change process in ways beneficial to their interests.
<b>Tools and resources</b>	Discursive and ideational activities that agents may exhibit within the confined space of their contexts.	Material and structural aspects provided by the confining space of contexts.	The strategic use of language and ideational change and foregrounds the use of the concept as a strategic tool.	The strategic use of material and structural aspects.
<b>Outcome</b>	Representational, embeddedness within local and macro-level contexts.	Structural, embeddedness within local and macro-level contexts.	Representational, strategic moves that reflect interest of actors.	Structural, strategic moves that reflect interest of actors.
<b>Associated theoretical perspective</b>	Institutional	Rational	Dramaturgical	Political
<b>Exemplary publications in literature review</b>	Zilber (2006), Love and Cebon (2008), Heusinkveld and Visscher (2012), Crucini and Kipping (2001), Wilhelm and Bort (2013), Veen, Bezemer and Karsten (2011), Bartunek and Spreitzer (2006).	Wæraas and Sataøen (2014), Ansari et al. (2010), Lyytinen et al. (2009), Kirkpatrick et al. (2013), Valsecchi et al. (2012).	Kelemen (2000), Bromley et al. (2012), Frenkel (2005), Özen and Berkman (2007), Mahoney et al. (2013), Giroux (2006), Lervik and Lunnan (2004).	Morris and Lancaster (2006), Rocha and Granerud (2011), Ansari et al. (2014), Sturdy et al. (2006).

### *Translation as representational variation through embeddedness (Approach I)*

Approach I studies appear to draw on the perspective of translation primarily to examine the implicit emergence of a fit between a management concept and a local context. This approach focuses mainly on representational or discursive variation. Illustrative of this approach is the work of Crucini and Kipping (2001), which defines the translation process as a simplification of language and meanings, and as a personalization of consulting approaches to meet the specific needs and characteristics of clients. Crucini and Kipping conclude that, without really changing the contents, translation by consultants contributes to an increasing homogenization of management practices through the adaptation of labels into more understandable terminology.

Approach I studies tend to treat the notion of *context* as a social meaning system that affects how new concepts are translated locally. In a study of the concept of high tech, Zilber (2006) shows how meanings attached to the concept were derived from broad cultural frameworks and modified into specific rational myths depending on the dynamics of lower-level institutional spheres. Based on 'the translation metaphor . . . from linguistics' (p. 283), she argues that generic rational myths should be understood as comprising a 'tool kit' of rhetorical and symbolic resources that social actors use and interpret dynamically. In a similar vein, Love and Cebon (2008, p. 242) who explicitly 'draw on research which models the way meanings associated with practices vary at different points during diffusion and adoption (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996)' describe the dynamic relationship between organization-level and field-level meanings as these influence practice adoption. They argue that isomorphic pressures from field-level meanings and the interpretations driven by internal meaning systems are important predictors of how and when firms adopt a practice. Approach I studies tend to treat context as a given factor in two ways; as a local context to which new concepts need be applied and as a macro-level context that affects how the concept should be translated in the specific local context. Although we find variation in how local context is demarcated and in the extent to which there is interrelatedness of contexts, 'context' in this approach constrains possible interpretations and delimits actions. For instance, Heusinkveld and Visscher (2012) show how consultants use clients' interpretative schemes and local organizational settings to make sense of and justify the possible translations of a concept, concluding that the translation of a management concept features limited variation in possible interpretations.

Within this approach we find related conceptualizations of the *actors* involved in the

process of translation. Actors are decentered from the process in favor of studying fit between concept and context, or are assigned a responsive or even unconscious position in relation to contextual characteristics and pressures. For example, in a study of managerial roles in the local translation of a concept's linguistic content, Wilhelm and Bort (2013) explicitly recognize the importance of situational factors and social rules of behavior. By placing the individual in a social context, they show how the influence of managers on the actual use of a concept is limited and is highly contingent on particular social settings and situations. Additionally, and somewhat remarkably given the proclaimed value of translation and its contribution to studying agency (Reay et al., 2013), we also find studies within this approach that forego the study of agency altogether. As Zilber (2006, p. 300) notes, 'within the translation framework, agency relates to the role of translators or editors [but] I did not explore the actual acts of translation as such [and] neglected the questions of social actors and agency'.

With respect to the *tools and resources* that may be used in processes of translation, this approach highlights discursive and representational activities of agents within the confined space of their contexts. Wilhelm and Bort (2013) for example, identify four discourse categories that reflect how managers account for the consumption of concepts: (1) learning from others' experiences, (2) controlling organizational change, (3) gaining external legitimacy, and (4) collective sensemaking. Heusinkveld and Visscher (2012) show how dispositional and interactive-situational dimensions may lead a consultant to inhibit or encourage more open-ended translations of concepts during a particular assignment. Likewise, Crucini and Kipping (2001) observe how the technical consulting terminology gives rise to a basic information asymmetry between clients and consultants. They show how the main translation involves adaptation of language, eschewing foreign terms in favor of linguistic simplifications, and not necessarily adaptation of the contents of a concept.

Approach I studies tend to conceptualize the *outcome* of translation primarily in representational terms and as a result of embeddedness within local and macro-level contexts. This approach emphasizes the reconstruction of meaning over effects on actions or materialized change. For example, Zilber (2006) emphasizes that the main transformations of high tech in Israel over time involved changes in the relative prevalence of rational myths in the discourse of the concept. Zilber shows that as a result of translation, meanings attached to high tech were selected, reshaped, and appropriated at two times and at two levels.

### ***Translation as structural variation through embeddedness (Approach II)***

Similar to Approach I, studies within Approach II tend to highlight the implicit process of the emergence of a fit between a management concept and a local context. Yet, instead of focusing on representational or discursive variation, this approach tends to focus on structural and material changes. A study by Ansari et al. (2010) represents a perspective that centralizes structural and material adaptation and also reflects a perspective of embeddedness. This study states that the lack of fit between a concept and its recipient context shapes the features of a practice.

Whereas studies in Approach I treat the notion of *context* as social meaning systems that affect how new concepts are translated locally, Approach II studies tend to highlight the context's structural characteristics that affect the local adoption of management practice. Kirkpatrick et al. (2013) explicitly contribute to this approach. They draw upon the classification by Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen (2009) to position their study as taking an 'embeddedness approach', while simultaneously 'contributing to translation theory [by] extending the notion of editing rules from its prevailing focus on symbolic and linguistic aspects to incorporate structural and practice changes' (p. 59). Kirkpatrick et al. investigate how differences in regulatory and political structures of four national contexts shape 'material' translations of a particular model of hospital management. Similarly, Lyytinen et al. (2009) illustrate how the outcome of the institutionalization of enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems results from the complex interactions between the socio-technical elements of different contexts. Misalignments between four interacting socio-technical components of these contexts generate a momentum 'where general concepts and principles of the global ERP . . . become translated as they are locally transmitted[,] often producing divergent outcomes' (Czarniawska and Sevón, 1996, p. 288).

With respect to the role of *actors*, Approach II is similar to Approach I in the sense that agents are assigned a responsive position in relation to contextual characteristics and pressures. The focus, however, shifts toward materialized change, and the role of actors shifts accordingly. Studies that centralize the role of actors emphasize their efforts to translate a concept into practice. For example, Valsecchi et al. (2012) study how the concept of teamwork was translated in the context of a health call center environment, focusing on the effects of the structural differences between two sites. Although they observe that the 'rhetoric of teamwork has . . . presentational and ceremonial benefits' they emphasize the 'structural or material clash between the [concept] and the central position of individual work performance' (p. 298). They also show

how the formal concept of teamwork materialized in an informal cooperation. Although the constraining effect of context is assigned a pivotal role in this approach, we also find studies that forego the actual study of agency. Even though the translation concept might still be drawn upon to stress ‘the [attributed agency] to all individuals involved in the dissemination process’ (Wæraas and Sataøen, 2014, p. 243), agents are decentered from the process and the focus is shifted to the structural characteristics of contexts and outcomes. For example, Wæraas and Sataøen (2014, p. 247) note, ‘this is not a study of real-time translations, but of indicators that allow us to say something about translation outcomes’. Similarly, Ansari et al. (2010) acknowledge that in focusing on supply-side factors shaping concepts, ‘much remains to be done to explore the role of change agents’ (p. 86).

With respect to the *tools and resources* that may be drawn upon in processes of translation, Approach II tends to emphasize material and structural aspects provided by the confining space of contexts. Kirkpatrick et al. (2013, p. 50) illustrate specifically how elite actors mediate the economic, political and ideational pressures for reform, based on their perceptions of the ‘given available resources, existing structures and likely obstacles’. In a similar vein, Lyytinen et al. (2009) emphasize the material role of artifacts and routines in processes of translation, over that of scripts or discourse moves. The authors show how actors relate to the technological artifacts of ERP and how their use of these artifacts and routines mobilizes new symbols and relations. They argue that the unbalanced state of material elements between general and local contexts ‘trigger[s] adaptive behaviors, such as changing the implementation approach, or configuring a new type of ERP necessary to carry out the translation’ (p. 299).

Approach II studies conceptualize *outcomes* as a result of embeddedness within local and macro-level contexts, but in contrast to Approach I studies, tend to focus on materialized results. Kirkpatrick et al. (2013) for instance, show how macro contextual reform agendas in hospitals are shaped into different outcomes. They outline different pathways of change that vary along two key dimensions: (a) the extent to which management authority within hospitals is streamlined, and (b) the extent to which management work is performed by clinicians or non-clinical specialists. Wæraas and Sataøen (2014), while challenging the assumption that all translations are unique, draw on a translation approach to study how field characteristics influence the translation of reputation management into high degrees of homogeneity. They observe that hospitals display striking similarities in enacting structural components of the concept.

### ***Translation as representational variation through strategizing (Approach III)***

Approach III studies tend to focus primarily on representational or symbolic variation in their use of translation to analyze the flow of management concepts. However, instead of emphasizing a process of emergence, this approach is primarily concerned with the strategic moves of actors to align ideas with their own interests. As a result, this approach forms a direct opposite of Approach II. Illustrative of Approach III is a study by Lervik and Lunnan (2004) that uses translation as one of four theoretical perspectives to account for the adoption patterns of performance management in a multinational company. In their categorization, translation represents a focus on management knowledge as constructed, giving emphasis to the symbolic aspects of diffusion. Specifically, they state that ‘translation is a central concept used in two ways; as modification of texts (Røvik, 1998), and as acts of political persuasion to enroll support for an idea (Latour, 1987)’ (p. 295).

In line with Approach I, Approach III studies tend to treat the notion of *context* primarily as a social meaning system, however, rather than seeing this meaning system as an external and unchangeable force affecting the local translation of concepts, context is considered to be a relatively non-constraining factor. In Approach III we find a tendency to diminish the influence of a macro-level context and to focus on the specific local dynamics within the micro-level context (e.g., Kelemen, 2000; O’Mahoney, Heusinkveld and Wright, 2013). On the other hand, we also find a tendency to conceptualize the macro-level context as a foundation that actors may actively deploy for their own use. For example, Özen and Berkman (2007), who study the reconstruction of TQM in Turkey, indicate that the legitimating agencies who are involved in the process of translation, largely use ethos justifications to appeal to socially accepted norms and in doing so exploit the macro-cultural discourses already prevalent in the Turkish context. Similarly, Frenkel (2005) argues that state-level agents participate in the import of management concepts to the Israeli context, as an answer to their specific political needs. In doing so they interpret the models and their attached labels so that they can be identified with the central value of nation- and state-building and can thus be linked to purposes for which legitimacy is already sufficiently established.

Approach III tends to emphasize the strategic and discursive actions of (groups of) individuals. The first conceptualization of *actors* in the process of translation emphasizes the efforts of a single actor or viewpoint. For example, a study by Kelemen (2000), explores the use

of managerial language of TQM practices and its effects on organizational practices and employees' experiences. In line with Latour (1987), she argues that, even though employees may resist compliance, managers will embark on a process of interest translation to seduce, force or rationally convince employees that TQM is a viable and profitable option (p. 495). A second conceptualization recognizes the existence of multiple translations from different actors and highlights how meaning emerges from a process by which multiple actors strategically redefine problematic situations. For example, Giroux (2006), drawing on a translation perspective, shows how the increasing textual ambiguity of a new management concept is both the result and the resource of a collective process of 'intéressement' by which different social groups (i.e., engineers, quality specialists, the academic community and employees) come to contribute to the definition of the concept.

With respect to the *tools and resources* that may be used in processes of translation, this approach tends to prioritize the strategic use of language and representational change, and emphasizes the use of the concept under study as a strategic tool. For instance, the study by Kelemen (2000) gives primacy to language in the production and consumption of management concepts. By studying the use of managerial language of TQM practices, Kelemen draws on the concept of interest translation to show how language devices, such as platitudes, labels and metaphors, are used to influence behavior through an increase or decrease of a concept's ambiguity. Also studying the strategic use of discursive devices, Özen and Berkman (2007) investigate the conditions under which the rhetorical strategies of ethos, logos, and pathos are more likely to be used. These authors show that the reconstruction of TQM in the new local context of the Turkish society is more likely to involve ethos justification in which its congruence to macro-level cultural and religious characteristics is emphasized.

Approach III studies tend to conceptualize the *outcome* of translation primarily in representational terms and as a result of strategic moves. In this line of reasoning, Giroux (2006) shows how the ambiguity and the generality of the underlying discourse increase during the rise of a management fashion, as a result of an intentional process through which different communities translate their interests into the language of the concept. She shows how the ambiguity of the concept originates from different levels of discourse (the linguistic, rhetorical level and textual level) and builds on three modalities: ambiguity, generality and vagueness. Similarly, as noted previously, Frenkel (2005) exhibits how state-level agents participate in the

import of management concepts to the Israeli context. She shows how, in the process of translation, institutional and political agents work to shift the concepts' original master idea of rationality and professionalism towards one of nationalism and nation-building. In doing so, she highlights the changes in meaning as the models undergo a process of translation. In this approach the outcome of the position of relevant actors is pivotal, and most studies explicitly define how translation contributes to a discursive construction of a legitimate position. For instance, Özen and Berkman (2007) emphasize that in the act of generating texts that produce a recipient rhetoric to the imported practice, actors are more likely to embark on a strategy of ethos justification when they strive to legitimize themselves as a social group.

#### ***Translation as structural variation through strategizing (Approach IV)***

Similar to Approach III, studies under Approach IV tend to draw on a perspective of translation to highlight the strategic moves that actors may use to align ideas with their own interests. However, instead of focusing on discursive and representational variation, this approach tends to emphasize structural and material changes. As such, Approach IV forms a direct opposite of Approach I. Representative of this approach is a study by Morris and Lancaster (2006), which states that translation implies movement and transformation of ideas that users translate for their own benefit, as it examines the acts of translation that are undertaken to transform an idea into a set of material day-to-day working activities.

In line with Approach II studies, Approach IV tends to highlight the *context's* structural characteristics. However, rather than emphasizing its constraining effect on how concepts are translated locally, context is considered to be a more or less non-constraining factor. In studies taking this approach we find a tendency to diminish the influence of a macro-level context and to focus instead on the structural characteristics of the micro-level context. For instance a study by Ansari, Reinecke and Spaan (2014) highlights specific company-wide misfits that warrant local changes (replacing the English interface with a French interface) and central changes (adapting ACE tools based on continuous expertise) to the concept of Achieving Competitive Excellence. In line with Approach III studies, Approach IV also tends to conceptualize the macro-level context as a foundation that actors may actively deploy to their own benefit. For instance, Rocha and Granerud (2011), who study the implementation of certified management systems (CMS), show how CMS' original intrinsic value and validity are less important than the characteristics

they may develop when interpreted by different organizational groups. They observe how, by using macro institutional changes as leverage for their demands, subordinate actors act upon legitimacy gaps to change the concept 'towards a means of improving their own working conditions' (p. 269).

This approach tends to emphasize the material actions of *actors* as (groups of) individuals. Ansari et al. (2014) argue that practices get reconfigured to make them suitable for specific organizational contexts. The authors identify three strategies through which managers can engineer a concept in a way that minimizes potential misfit. In this conception, translation works as a funneling process through which one actor narrowly reframes the concerns of other, almost subservient actors (Star and Griesemer, 1989). However, translation might also involve multiple actors strategically adapting a concept into practice. By relying on the 'concept of translation', which 'emphasizes the question of agency', Rocha and Granerud (2011, p. 263) show that the search for external legitimacy of CMS is appropriated into action by various internal organizational actors, other than management. Focusing attention on the agency of subordinated actors, they conclude that organizations translate management systems in starkly different ways because of the variety of actors involved in negotiating how it may function.

With respect to the *tools and resources* that may be drawn upon in processes of translation, Approach IV tends to highlight the strategic use of material and structural aspects. As discussed previously, Morris and Lancaster (2006) focus on how the idea of Lean Management moves from a general framework into concrete working practices. In the context of construction industry, they demonstrate how organizations change as they adapt their particular structure of production to a Lean approach. The authors illustrate a range of engineering, teaching and socializing strategies that firms and project managers use in the process.

Approach IV studies tend to conceptualize the *outcome* of translation primarily in structural terms, resulting from the strategic moves actors use to align ideas with their own interests. For example, Rocha and Granerud (2011) observe how subordinate workers alter CMS use in daily practice instead of accepting the CMS as a window-dressing device, and show how the majority of the firms under study adapt their processes of dealing with health and safety. In line with Approach III, the position of relevant actors is pivotal in Approach IV. However, whereas representational approaches focus mainly on the *discursive* transformation of involved actors, Approach IV also tends to highlight their *existential* transformation. Sturdy, Brocklehurst,

Littlejohns and Winstanley (2006) argue that in the translation process, 'ideas are not only transformed, but also change objects and (human) actors they come into contact with' (p. 843). The transformation of human actors is considered largely in terms of how an idea transforms their label rather than in terms of the actual existential or emotional experience of it. In response, the authors explore the existential-emotional transitions that managers undergo as a consequence of studying a range of explicit management ideas within the context of an MBA.

## **2.5 UNDERSTANDING TRANSLATION THROUGH DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES**

Thus far this review has categorized the literature on the translation of management concepts by presenting a typology of four relatively self-contained approaches to translation. However, in order to identify overarching theoretical insights into how and why these four approaches may differ and relate, we engaged in a closer investigation of their underlying assumptions and scope conditions. By comparing and contrasting the four approaches of our typology, we find that they can be better understood through four broader theoretical lenses on the adoption of management concepts (Birkinshaw et al., 2008; Sturdy, 2004), namely institutional, rational, dramaturgical and political perspectives. We use these lenses as an interpretative framework for contextualizing and deepening our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of our identified approaches, and to illuminate the potential for further connections and integration between them.

The first approach to translation that emerged from our analysis (Translation as representational variation through embeddedness) is most in line with a traditional *institutional* perspective. From the institutional perspective, the adoption of management concepts is explained by the notion that organizations in similar organizational fields will display high degrees of similarity in certain templates, structures or ideas as they are equally exposed to institutional norms and forces (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; see also Birkinshaw et al., 2008). Compliance with these norms is largely 'ceremonial', with a strong inclination to enhance legitimacy, and is expected to result in little actual change in practices (Røvik, 2011; see also Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2008). In line with the institutional perspective, Approach I has shown great potential for an advanced interpretation of the processes through which a fit between a concept and a new context results from embeddedness-related mechanisms, such as exposure to a broader institutional context. This approach has important merits as it also highlights representational variation resulting from symbolic adoption. However, despite the prominence of

this approach, its focus typically fails to pay adequate attention to specific power plays. In addition, as practices are assumed to remain materially identical (Gond and Boxenbaum, 2013) a focus on representational variation risks neglecting the assigned influence of, and effect on, structural changes.

The characteristics of Approach II (Translation as structural variation through embeddedness) better fit a *rational* perspective. A rational perspective builds on the instrumental premise that new ideas are adopted because they provide an organization with proven techniques that help address specific problems. As such, adoption is considered to be based on the systematic assessment of organizational problems, the definition of alternatives and the implementation of the solution with the highest expected value (Birkinshaw et al, 2008; Cabantous and Gond, 2011; Sturdy, 2004). Using the lens of the rational perspective we can see how Approach II provides opportunities to understand the flow of management concepts as a process of achieving a fitting solution to specific problems. It also helps explain how the variation resulting from this process relates to specific practice characteristics. In line with a rational perspective, Approach II may also be limited, as it tends not to consider political concerns and individual strategic moves of involved actors, since they are generally assumed to contribute to making a solution fit a widely shared organizational problem. Additionally, this view often overemphasizes the structural elements of both concept and context, without specifying the variation resulting from symbolic repackaging.

Approach III (Translation as representational variation through strategizing) can best be described by a *dramaturgical* perspective. In this view, concepts are adopted by virtue of change-agents who consciously manipulate their organizational contexts and the people they work with. This perspective focuses primarily on actors' involvement in the management of meaning, and in particular the persuasive power of these agents, and the rhetoric they use, to shape the thought processes of their 'audiences' to convey an impression of quality and value of the concepts they champion (Clark and Salaman, 1995; Sturdy, 2004). In line with a dramaturgical perspective, studies of translation within Approach III have shed light on the main processes through which change agents, or organizational actors, intentionally and strategically shape a management concept discursively: not necessarily to elicit legitimacy or efficiency, but rather to enhance their own position. A focus on various actors and their strategies, however, tends to obscure the influence of broader, contested power issues. Additionally, through the tendency to study

discursive and ideological change, translation risks becoming a process through which management concepts vary solely as a function of ways of talking and thinking. This would miss sufficient consideration of more substantive influences on, and effects of, the local context.

Approach IV (Translation as structural variation through strategizing) may be associated with a *political* perspective on the adoption of management ideas. This perspective challenges the idea that management concepts are adopted for functionalistic reasons, such as organizational problem solving, or relevant information searches (Birkinshaw et al., 2008; Sturdy, 2004). Rather, its focus is primarily on showing how the outcome of adoption reflects the ability of individuals to shape a change process to benefit their specific interests (Sturdy, 2004; Symon, 2008). As Sturdy (2004) notes ‘most political perspectives tend to generalize the processes of adoption, focusing on structured interests and outcomes’. The lens of the political perspective offers important insight into how translation may be devised as a process through which a concept is shaped by specific agents and how they might draw upon translation to contribute to their existential position (Sturdy et al., 2006). However, this approach to translation also has its limitations as it tends to prioritize the influence of specific agents over context and relevance (Sturdy, 2004), and risks reinforcing the view of a-priori asymmetrical power relationships.

In addition to these four approaches to translation, our review also shows that some studies tend to adopt an approach in which different perspectives are drawn upon simultaneously. This *integrative view* can be found in a study by Reay et al. (2013). Their analysis shows that local translation develops both through the discursive activities of framing and justifying, and through the enactment of behavior. In doing so, the authors show that new actions (‘trying it’) affect the processes of making meaning just as much as the other way around. In a similar vein, Gond and Boxenbaum (2013) uncover three types of contextualization work; filtering, repurposing, and coupling, and show how each type ‘can engage both material and symbolic dimensions of the imported practice simultaneously’ (p. 718). This integrative approach ‘escapes the previous dichotomy between the ‘technical issues’ and ‘rhetorical packaging’ of practice adaptation [and] allows for the interplay of symbolic and material dimensions that unfold as actors engage in contextualization practices’ (p. 718). Additionally, a study by Corbett-Etchevers and Mounoud (2011) provides a framework of four narrative plots that links together adopting and using, and the analytical levels of organization and individual.

These integrative views of translation hold great promise, since they allow for a broader

understanding of the construct by taking into consideration the extremes of both dimensions specified before (i.e., variation through embeddedness and strategizing - representational and structural variation). In doing so, they enable us to better capture the complexity of the empirical world we study (Hirsch and Levin, 1999). However, despite their merits, integrative views also have limitations. The separate perspectives identified build on different assumptions about why management concepts are adopted and they have, often implicitly, redefined and revised the meaning of translation to fit their research traditions. As these approaches are not necessarily commensurable they can create incongruences in integrative approaches. First, embeddedness approaches (I and II) and strategizing approaches (III and IV) to translation have different conceptions of power. In embeddedness approaches, actors are not treated as heroes, but tend to be conceptualized as products of multiple forces and discourses in context. Instead of being shaping agents, their position is largely decentered in favor of studying the fit between concept and context. Strategizing approaches on the other hand emphasize the position of specific actors in the process of translation and are more inclined to perceive power as a means-end rationality that reinforces existing power relationships. Second, representational approaches (I and III) and structural approaches (II and IV) to translation have different empirical emphases on the object of variation. In representational approaches we find more constructivist affiliations focusing on discursive aspects and ideological change (e.g., Zilber, 2006, drawing on translation to study the symbolic aspects of institutionalization and the active reshaping of institutionalized meanings over time). In structural approaches, we find more realist assumptions reflected in a tendency to focus on the structural or socio-technical characteristics of concept and context (e.g., Ansari et al., 2010, drawing on translation to study the transformation of material objects and concrete practices resulting from the lack of fit between a concept and its recipient context).

Despite their observed differences, we do not seek to imply that these approaches are or should remain separate. Rather, we emphasize that pluralistic insights from the alternative approaches provide a richer understanding of translation than separate approaches and we should indeed look beyond singular approaches (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005). However, we also stress that integrating the insights of these approaches posits a challenge due to differences in underlying epistemological and ontological assumptions. Therefore, we argue that the dualisms presented through our typology can be utilized as dualities by taking an integrative approach in which the limitations of restrictive interpretations are addressed by considering insights from

multiple perspectives and using their elements as mutually constitutive. This does imply that further theoretical advancement (a) requires a more explicit awareness of the underlying assumptions of these approaches and their theoretical alternatives, and (b) should be informed by stronger reflexivity to the possibilities and limitations of these assumptions (Cornelissen and Durand, 2102; Okhuysen and Bonardi, 2011; Whetten, Felin and King, 2009).

## **2.6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Translation has become an important perspective for studying the flow of management concepts, and has contributed substantially to a more agentic understanding of institutions and organizations (Frandsen and Johansen, 2013). However, despite the potential advantages and growing proliferation of this perspective, the discourse remains under-theorized and fragmented. The blurred boundaries between specific contributions of translation in studying the flow of management concepts hinder a clear understanding of these different approaches, and an informed comparison and possible integration of sub-streams.

### ***Contributions and implications***

In recognition of these needs and challenges, the purpose of this paper is to systematically identify the conceptualizations and interpretations through which researchers have revised and redefined the meaning of translation. Based on a systematic analysis of an extensive set of relevant publications, three specific contributions can be made.

First, our study engages in a formal identification of the academic field that follows a translation perspective in studying the flow of management concepts. By using a combined strategy of forward citation and a ‘snowball’ technique, we address the specific complexities of a transparent demarcation of this area of research and generate a reproducible and transparent set of 150 publications representing this field. This is one of the first systematic efforts to identify the scope and specific contributions of current research on this topic, and as such, adds to a clearer delineation of the content and boundaries of this influential and growing area of research.

Second, our review reveals the variety of interpretations and conceptualizations associated with translation as a perspective for studying the flow of management concepts, thereby challenging the assumption of coherence in this area of research. Extant research tends to define the perspective in unambiguous terms despite implicitly acknowledging a partial understanding

and highlighting specific aspects (e.g., Lervik and Lunnan, 2004). Others however, more explicitly adopt a specific approach to translation (Kirkpatrick et al., 2013) even though limited attention is devoted to describing how choices are made at the expense of alternative perspectives on translation. Our inductive analysis leads us to combine two relevant analytical dimensions (the source and object of variation), which results in a typology of four approaches. With this typology, we illuminate the fragmentation in the discourse and we recognize the significant differences between approaches, highlighting their unique contributions and limitations. This typology provides a repertoire for studying the flow of management concepts from a translation perspective, and may serve as a heuristic tool in future research endeavors (Fiss, 2011).

Third, by applying broader theoretical lenses to translation, our study offers overarching theoretical insights on how these four identified approaches relate and how their differences can be understood. Specifically, we show that institutional, rational, dramaturgical and political perspectives provide an interpretative framework for comparing alternative approaches to translation. Through a close investigation of how these four lenses shed light on different aspects of translation perspectives, we aim to contribute to reflexivity in the use of translation as a construct, and to a better understanding of alternative approaches, opening up possibilities for enhanced integration. The review shows that, despite current inclinations to portray translation as a distinctive and identifiable research stream (e.g., Birkinshaw et al., 2008; Parush, 2008; Sturdy, 2004), alternative approaches to translation may be strongly influenced by different theoretical perspectives to studying the flow of management concepts, with their assumptions echoing in the different interpretations and conceptualizations.

Given the diversity of approaches, we do not anticipate or advocate consensus on the construct and components at stake, nor do we seek to imply that these approaches are or should remain entirely separate (Kirkpatrick et al., 2013, who specifically follow an ‘embeddedness approach’). Instead, by articulating the assumptions underlying these approaches and by defining how key elements are understood, we encourage scholars to better specify their approach to translation and to reflexively intertwine perspectives, taking advantage of the possibilities for enhanced integration.

### ***Limitations and future orientations***

Despite our efforts to provide a reproducible and transparent review with minimal researcher bias

(Denyer and Neely, 2004), this systematic review has three recognized limitations. First, we have inductively categorized our set of publications into a typology of four alternative translation approaches. However, we recognize that typologies have a tendency to hamper further theorizing by limiting our understanding of causal underlying mechanisms (Fiss, 2011). Therefore, we stress that the binaries between variation through embeddedness and variation through strategizing—and between representational and structural variation—do not imply that the two dimensions can or should be viewed as entirely separate. Nor should the categorizations of particular studies be considered completely fixed and unambiguous as they may reflect approximations. An ‘either-or’ distinction with respect to these dimensions would ignore their extensively debated character in a range of fields (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994; Sturdy and Fleming, 2003) and would fail to take into account the complexity of the empirical world we study. Alternately, the typological extremes in our approaches allow us to better grasp the variation present in translation as a perspective from which to study the flow of management concepts.

Second, the plethora of labels associated with the field of research presented a challenge in developing a systematic review. Despite careful consideration of the boundaries of our search, finding a balance between an overly restrictive and overly inclusive selection, our choices and the resulting set may be subject to debate. For instance, the terms ‘organizational innovation’ (Damanpour, 1991; Lam, 2005; Sanidas, 2005), ‘organizational practice’ (Kostova and Roth, 2002), and ‘organizational change’ (Whittle, Suhomlinova and Mueller, 2010) were excluded as keywords from our search, despite being commonly used labels in the scholarly discourse on the flow of management concepts. As these labels typically refer to a broad range of contextualized innovations that are not necessarily related to management, they would likely have yielded results that extend far beyond the discussion on the flow of management concepts. In spite of our endeavors to include all relevant papers through a ‘snowball’ approach, we acknowledge that the decision to exclude these keywords may have caused some papers to be unintentionally excluded from our review. The same holds true for the list of references used in a strategy of forward citation. Although the list arose from careful consideration and unequivocal criteria, other authors and publications might be associated with a translation perspective as well (e.g., Røvik, 1996, 1998; see also Latour, 2005, and for others see the ‘Canon of Scandinavian Institutionalism’ by Boxenbaum and Strandgaard Pedersen, 2009).

Third, even though we did seek to eliminate bias by adopting a strategy of multiple

database searching, using electronic databases as a primary resource does involve limitations. Disappointing outcomes in terms of breadth may result from the lack of sensitivity of these databases (Benders et al., 2007; Leseure et al., 2004). Initially, to maximize coverage of relevant publications, Google Scholar was included as a bibliometric data collection tool. However, as it appears to be near impossible to extract relevant information in a transparent and replicable manner, this approach was discarded.