

**Case Study Research on Public Programs and Organizations:  
Lessons v. Design Precedents as Rival Ideals for Learning-and-Transfer**

Michael Barzelay\*  
Professor of Public Management  
London School of Economics and Political Science  
M.Barzelay@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper develops compares two "ideals" about what case study research is for, and how it should be done, when the intention is for such writings to have practical relevance for "managing" public programs and public organizations. The "incumbent ideal" is taken to be lesson-drawing, the case for which has recently been restated by González and Woolcock in "Operationalizing the Science of Delivery Agenda to Enhance Development Results. The "challenger ideal" for case study research is to furnish design precedents. The idea of "precedent" is one of the cornerstones of practice in such "arts of design" as architecture. Design precedents result from systematic learning about historically-existing "artifacts" or other kinds of purposeful systems. The paper develops the conceptual foundations of case-studies-as-design-precedents, partly on the basis of writings in public policy and management, including some by Eugene Bardach. Finally, the paper will explore deep-seated reasons why it will be difficult for the design precedent ideal to displace the standard lesson-drawing ideal.

\*Research Fellow, Japan International Cooperation Agency Research Institute (JICA-RI)

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## I. Introduction

Case study research is a conspicuous feature of professional social inquiry about topics related to public policy, including public programs and organizations. Case studies often provide reporting, explanation, and commentary about problems encountered in the past, the character of the solution, and the eventual outcome (March, Sproull, and Tamuz 1991). Case study research is widely viewed as a source of "usable knowledge" (Lindblom and Cohen 1979), due, in part, to the common-sense belief that all newly encountered problems have some aspect of similarity in relation to some problems encountered in the past (Stake 2010, Ansell 2011). Knowing what solutions have been tried in response to similar problems, and how they fared, could provide reasons for taking a newly encountered problem-solving effort in one direction or another.

We might regard case study research as part of a well-established recipe idea (Spender) for performing the function of learning-and-transfer in relation to public policy. This recipe idea has been evident in a variety of settings, including universities and their research funding agencies. Concrete historical examples include Harvard University and the Ford Foundation. In the 1950s, the Ford Foundation contributed resources for the scaling up of case study research at Harvard Business School (Augier and March 2011). A historically recent example of this recipe idea's application began in the 1980s as the Program in Innovation in State and Local Government, also funded by the Ford Foundation, while operated by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

A contemporary example of the application of this case study learning-and-transfer recipe is the World Bank Global Delivery Initiative (GDI). The GDI's specific origins lie in the current World Bank president's call for developing a "science of delivery" and applying this knowledge to activities of the World Bank and its client countries (Gonzalez Asis and Woolcock 2015). The GDI team encourages institutions and individuals to undertake case

study research; in addition, the GDI team offers training and other support in how to do so, drawing to a degree on a talent pool of academic specialists in development who engage in case study research. GDI has acquired high visibility, not only due to its internal salience in the Bank, but by reaching out energetically widely to the World Bank's client countries' civil service training institutes and development agency research institutes and evaluation departments.

The GDI provides a "case in point" to raise the general issue of how case study research serves the learning-and-transfer function. The GDI takes the line that case research of this nature involves *description* of a specific phenomenon (like an episode) involving "delivery"; an *explanation* of the phenomenon (like the outcome of a reform's implementation); and a *lesson* drawn from the case study's descriptive and explanatory material. A specific issue -- on which this paper focuses -- is whether the idea that case studies are a basis for *lessons* is the right way to think about -- and publically dramatize (Goffman 1959, Hilgartner 2000) -- how case studies serve the learning-and-transfer function.

### The Problem with Case-based Lessons

The very familiarity of the general notion of lessons as a way of talking about learning from experience makes the proposition sound sensible.<sup>1</sup> The idea sounds particularly sensible to "knowledge brokers" (Hargadon 2002) in client country governments as they imagine engaging with their own clients, for they can trade on offering experience-based lessons.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>A similar but more general argument can be found in Sloman and Fernbach's (2017) *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*, around page 66.

<sup>2</sup> This assertion is based on discussions with professionals in Brazil's National School of Public Administration and the Japan International Cooperation Agency, where I have been engaged in knowledge exchange partnerships.

However, the idea of a lesson is vague about how a case study is meant to serve the learning-and-transfer function. Indeed, a calibration of vagueness might be made by mentioning where -- outside the learning-and-transfer context -- the notion of drawing lessons does signify a well-structured scenario: namely, in the context of after-action reviews, where task groups are supposed to interrogate their own recent collective experience and draw lessons for future iterations of the same kind of task. The idea of lessons also has a clear meaning in the learning-and-transfer context, but under certain special conditions. Consider the scenario where recurring errors in one hospital become the basis for changing checklists in another, as in the specific scenario of preventing surgical errors in hospitals (Haynes et. al. 2009, Gawande 2010). In this scenario, the same kind of task is performed by a multitude of similarly structured task groups and where the context of the task performance is fairly similar, as well. But in the context of policy delivery? What could a lesson mean, as a mechanism for learning-and-transfer?

Given the vagueness of the idea, it is reasonable to suggest that stereotypes will play a role in interpretation talk about "lessons". A readily available stereotype is management books sold in airport terminals. To use historical examples, think of *In Search of Excellence* or *Reinventing Government*. Or, consider the concluding paragraphs of articles published in the *Harvard Business Review*. Or, to update the stereotype, consider a management guru's blog posts. These powerful stereotypes hold a negative valence for academics, in particular (e.g. Guest 2001).

A predictable result of such negative stereotyping is that it leaves an initiative like GDI fully exposed to discrediting effects of readily imaginable rhetorical performances by research professionals who generally do not have high regard for case study research. Bear in mind that the long dominant force in the "strategic action field" (Fligstein and McAdam 2011) where GDI pitches its tent is the economics profession. Indeed, the unwritten truth

about the GDI is that it is meant as a disrupter to that dominance. Thus, someone like myself -- who would like to see the idea that (proper) case study research serves the learning-and-transfer function gain and hold legitimacy in the same "strategic action field" -- might have reasonable reservations about the reliance on the idea of "lessons", in both the dramatization of research and knowledge brokerage activities and in the backstage discussions among participants in them.

### Analyzing the Recipe of Case-based Learning-and-Transfer

The issue, then, is what is to be done in response to this concern? A precautionary consideration is the adage to do no harm. There is nothing to be gained by discrediting the notion that the results of careful study of specific experience in a "source site" is potentially usable as part of problem-solving activities occurring in a "target site."<sup>3</sup> However, in terms of public presentation, the role of the idea of "lessons" should be no more than that of a "verbal sign" (Goffman 1959) that signifies that case studies are carried out with the express intention of fulfilling the learning-and-transfer function. A further response is: develop more structured ideas of how case studies can be done specifically in serving the learning-and-transfer function.

This paper proposes (more honestly, echoes) a specific view about how case studies can serve the learning-and-transfer function. A design-focused case study's topic is about a stereotype or other abstraction of a challenge that would be recognized by some spectrum of professional practitioners, such as public managers or those whose professional knowledge is tied to a particular policy domain. The goal is to develop a more fine-grained understanding about how to deal with that sort of challenge through "deliberative" (Sloman and Fernbach

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<sup>3</sup> The terminology of source and target sites is borrowed from Bardach (2004).

2017) problem-solving involving the participation of groups of individuals within an organizational setting.

A case study would examine episodes during which responses to a situation experienced by some individuals in the same site eventuated in a form of purposeful collective activity that we can call a problem-solving initiative. As idealized (descriptively and functionally), such an initiative would be marked by events consisting, in part, in problem-structuring and solution design and development, considered as interrelated, but interpretively distinct, activities.<sup>4</sup> Such events would also include process management (de Bruijn et. al. (2003), van Aken et. al. 2017), i.e., various forms of social organization, such as markers of specific roles within an organizational situation, planned encounters among participants (such as scheduled meetings with some designation as to official purpose), and some fixity around the vocabulary that participants would readily project into discussions when they occur. As idealized, a problem-solving initiative eventuates in creations (such as specifications of objects or plans for coordinated effort) that if implemented and/or utilized would change existing conditions into different, future conditions in the site and likely beyond.<sup>5</sup>

A design-focused case study would provide a description and explanation of (a) how responses to a situation in a site eventuated in an initiative; (b) how an initiative eventuated in creations (such as system-like artifacts, process management arrangements, and plans); and (c) how the implementation of creations eventuated in future conditions in the site and beyond. A design-focused case study would "zoom into" a problem-solving initiative's

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<sup>4</sup> The idea that problem-structuring and solution design and development are non sequential, iterative activities and that the interpretation of problems evolves with the interpretation of solutions is widely held among professionals who design and is often stated in the empirically grounded academic literature on design studies. A particularly nice statement of this view is presented in Cross (2008), chapter 1, entitled the "Nature of Design."

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Simon (1996) defined problem-solving as converting existing into preferred conditions. (He ought to have said problem-solving is converting present conditions into preferred future conditions.)

creations (again, to list archetypes, system-like artifacts, process management, and plans) and their implementation/utilization. This "method of discovery" (Abbott 2004) is somewhat like that of biologists when they decompose and localize mechanisms in the study of organisms (Craver and Darden 2013) and quite like how system-like artifacts are reverse engineered (Messler 2014). At this point in the analysis, attention turns to explicating *how* the creations (such as system-like artifacts, process management, and plans) *worked* during the episode (Bardach 2004, Stake 2010). By "explicating" is meant achieving depth of understanding about *how* a given creation *worked* by the time it became a functioning presence in the program or organization. Such an understanding would be brought about, in part, by explanatory argumentation applied to systems and events, perhaps mainly involving Sloman and Fernbach (2017) label as backward causal reasoning, i.e., from effects to causes.

A direct source of this specific idealization of a design-focused case study is a book by management academic Joan van Aken and his fellow Dutch collaborators, entitled *Problem-Solving in Organizations* (2007). van Aken et. al. didn't write about case study research; however, they provided an idealized description of problem-solving projects and the activities that are subsumed in them. They labeled their idealization as "design-focused problem-solving," the title of chapter 3. In this somewhat but not entirely rationalistic abstract account of problem-solving projects, activities within problem-solving episodes are conceived and phrased as problem-structuring, process management, object design, and realization design. This account is of professional practice, of problem-solving in an organizational context.

By way of a quick digression, to make the connection to policy-making, the ideas of problem-structuring have a similar origin to Kingdon's (1983) concept of agenda-setting, while the related ideas of object designs and realization designs have a similar origin to Kingdon's concept of alternative-specification. The book by van Aken et. al. is different

from Kingdon in that it does not take the organization to be an organized anarchy and, hence, the Garbage Can Model of organizational choice (March and Olsen 1989) is not present. Likewise, where van Aken conceives of problem-solving as taking place in a project influenced heavily by process management, Kingdon sees policy-making as being a process whose structure is largely emergent. However, there are further similarities. Both Kingdon and van Aken et. al. see problem-solving as dealing with problems that are not tame and hence somewhat wicked (Rittel and Weber 1973). Both understand problem-solving as potentially "eventful episodes" (Sewell 2005). van Aken et. al.'s book is much more detailed about "alternative specification," in drawing on ideas about design activity that have developed in design studies and being influenced by the long-established notion that technology is an important facet of organizations (Thompson and Bates 1957). Indeed, it might be said that Kingdon's introduction of "alternative specification" as a purposive process (essentially, a function) in policy-making makes it different from a typical theory or study that is exclusively about how decisions happen or "are made", as in the Garbage Can Model and in many case studies in political science and public administration.<sup>6</sup> The two books -- one from management, the other from political science -- have enough in common that they could easily be used in combination. (More could be said along these lines.)<sup>7</sup>

Introducing the idea of design-focused problem-solving begs the question of what pivotal role it plays in the idea of design-focused case studies. The answer comes in two parts. The first is that, the idea of design-focused problem-solving provides a not-too-abstract, but not-too-concrete, idealization of "practice". Setting aside the specifics of the design-focused aspect of this idealization of practice, this idea serves to make the idea of a

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<sup>6</sup> For a good counterexample, see van der Voort et. al. (2011).

<sup>7</sup> For a just published article that encourages this kind of mingling of ideas between management and political science, see Weible and Carter (2017). Of course, this mingling has a distinguished history, as famously illustrated by Cyert and March (1963).



"lesson" less vague; indeed, it provides enough conceptual structure to allow for a thoughtful, deliberative discussion and potentially true learning-and-transfer. One of the reasons why this idea can have the potential to dispel the vagueness of lessons is that the ideas of problem-solving, designing, and process management<sup>8</sup> have a long history, shared among a variety of professions (including architecture, systems engineering, management, urban planning, and program planning). The history of ideas is written up, and excellent syntheses are available.

The second part of the answer is that any "tradition" of case-based learning has to be grounded in some construction of practice, so it would seem. Consider what might be accepted as one of the most venerable traditions of case-based learning: Casuistry (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988). Casuistry was (and is) a tradition of inquiry into moral action, strongly identified with the Jesuits in the Middle Ages, though it has strong roots in Antiquity and especially in Aristotle's philosophy, and particularly what he wrote about practical reason and rhetoric (Garsten 2006). In this context, (true) practice was living the good life through right action. A key conviction was that right action in many actual circumstances could not be determined algorithmically (to be slightly anachronistic in the phrasing). The conditions of practice -- known generally as circumstances -- often placed agents before dilemmas. In coming up with a decision about what to do, an agent would have to resort to exercising judgment, because principles are too abstract and too conflicting to provide conclusive reasons for action. It was understood that judgment involved case-based reasoning processes.

The aim of Casuistry was to develop the skill of case-based reasoning within a moral tradition. This is where cases came in. According to Jonsen and Toulmin (1988), a case would describe the circumstances, interpret the dilemma, and give a commentary. The commentary included a holding and an opinion - the result of a deliberative exercise of judgment by a teacher (e.g., a Jesuit one). The holding stated how the dilemma should

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<sup>8</sup>On the concept of process management, see de Bruijn, ten Heuvelhof, and Veld (2003).

reasonably be resolved and the opinion provided an argument as to why the holding was reasonable (and more so that other holdings would be). The holding and the opinion together constitute the lesson from a case.

Lessons are formulaic bits of argumentation that are relevant to informing judgment and justifying decisions situated in other circumstances; rationales given by real actors in real situations are also bits of argumentation, though they are not formulaic if they actually form part of a coherent argument about the matter at hand.

At the risk of falling into a discursive essay style, I would point out here that, as a matter of etiology, there is good reason to think that the idea of drawing a lesson from a case comes from Casuistry. Echoes of Casuistry were surely one of the main influences over case-based teaching of the common law. It is equally well-known that case teaching of law was transferred to case teaching of business in the Graduate School of Business Administration at Harvard University (Augier and March 2011). And of course this pedagogical practice was transferred to public administration and later public policy. The pedagogy was part of a larger cultural idea, including the philosophical pragmatism of the sort most closely identified with John Dewey (Friedman 1979, Anderson 1990, Joas 1996, Ansell 2011).

I would be prepared to venture that the arc of history from Aristotle through Casuistry, Philosophical Pragmatism, and case-based learning in a variety of professions including public policy is part of the etiology of the GDI stance on case-based learning-and-transfer. The history suggests that there are conceptual similarities between the structure of the idea of a lesson from a case and the idea of a lesson in conventional use of the term lesson in a context like GDI (or, for another example, *Harvard Business Review*).

I'd further venture that the GDI's basic picture of "practice" is one where the central activity within problem-solving episodes is idealized as "practical argumentation" (Toulmin

1959, Majone 1979, Walton 1992; Fisher 2004). People, facing circumstances, have to make a decision about their course of action, and they need to be able to rationalize (in the specific sense of justify) it to others in their moral community, political community, or organization. In this frame, practice is decision-making, and decision-making, in turn, is seen as conceptually similar, either to the sort of practice that the Casuists idealized, or to some other conception of practical argumentation, such as one involving the consideration and application of rules of thumb and rules proper (Schauer 1991). This view of practice as decision-making seems so natural to social scientists involved in professions like public policy and management that it almost doesn't need to be remarked upon.<sup>9</sup>

This idea about "practice" is part of the recipe idea of the learning-and-transfer function adopted by GDI.<sup>10</sup> I'd suggest that the central sense of the idea of a lesson in the GDI context is an item of practical argumentation that can be abstracted from argumentative commentary about a historically occurring matter (similar to a casuistical holding and opinion). The idea is that practitioners will do better at practical argumentation in any such circumstances if they have read through various case descriptions and explanation and have been given some lessons -- so defined -- to contemplate and apply.

In the GDI context specifically, where cases are typically episodes during which the path of a program (and some organizations) unfolds, the lesson is drawn from a combination of a narrative and an explanation of characteristics of the path. Such an explanatory discussion has been compactly idealized and justified by Charles Tilly, under the label of

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<sup>9</sup> A very good account of the development of this "paradigm" within the social/behavioral sciences was provided long ago by Charles Perrow (1986), in a chapter of his book on complex organizations entitled "the Neo-Weberian Synthesis."

<sup>10</sup> This was also the implied (and taken-for-granted) recipe idea behind my book, *Breaking Through Bureaucracy: A New Vision for Managing in Government* (Barzelay 1992), which was an outgrowth of the Ford-Kennedy School Program on Innovation in State and Local Government. This was subjected to a critique and generous reconstruction along different lines, what I now call design-oriented ones, by Gene Bardach (1994). Autobiographically, Bardach's piece was the seminal event in the intellectual journey of the past 20 + years leading to this paper.

"superior story" (Tilly 2006). Tilly wrote that superior stories provide reasons for action for decision-making in problem-solving, with an emphasis on argumentative justification of what lines of action should be undertaken. This is the twist on Casuistry represented by GDI.

To conclude this section, consider the following points.

First, those of us who work on the basis of the conviction that there is something sound in the idea of case-based learning and transfer cannot bypass the question of what practice consists in (not that a uniform or monolithic answer is required).<sup>11</sup> The casuists were crystal clear about this. For an often noted book-length argument on this, see Flyvbjerg's (2001) *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*. Many other contemporary sources offer the makings of this point, sometimes implicitly. As just one example, Levitt and March's (1988) classic piece on organizational learning is just as elaborate on how decisions get made in a target site in the light of vicarious learning about a source site as they are about vicarious learning itself. Lindblom's (1990) *Inquiry and Change* grounds his whole critical yet constructive treatise about social science and social problem-solving on a model of (typically impaired) practical reasoning that he called "probing volitions."

Second, the GDI recipe idea about learning-and-transfer seems to be grounded in the conventional social science idea that problem-solving consists in justifying action through practical argumentation. However, this view is largely implicit - so much so, that it may be fair to suggest that GDI largely by-passes the issue. In this regard, the GDI recipe may actually be mimicking the applied science, evidence-based policy-making script in relation to which the tradition of case-based learning is historically opposed.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>For a book-length argument on this, see Flyvbjerg (2001).

<sup>12</sup>For background on this statement, see Lindblom and Cohen (1989), Majone (1989), Augier and March (2011), and Dunn (2015).

Third, the previous two points imply that *it is important to bring out the background "assumptions" (really, whole idealizations) of practice if we are going to critically examine our own practice of case-based learning-and-transfer.*

Fourth, there is an alternative way to idealize practice as problem-solving, and that is one where problem-solving is seen as being design-focused. The pivotal role of the idealization of design-focused problem-solving in organizations in van Aken et. al. (2007) is to provide an alternative to the picture of practice in public policy and management as argumentation. The difference is really the idea that designing (as it has been theorized in design studies), in particular the designing of system-like artifacts, but also plans, is essential to problem-solving of the sort that is important to public policy, programs, and management (Simon 1996, Bryson 2011). Note that, by alternative, I do not mean completely divergent - just significantly different. (They couldn't be completely divergent because they actually have a very similar etiology, both with roots in philosophical pragmatism.)<sup>13</sup>

Finally, and with a view to the rest of the paper, this difference has very significant implications for how case studies should be done and dramatized as part of individual work or an initiative where learning-and-transfer is the functional telos (Ariew and Perlman 2002). *In this respect, my claim is that design-focused case studies are different from the more typical casuistical-style case studies.* This point may be over-drawn, but it will hopefully be provocative, at least.

### Introducing Design-Focused Case Studies

Design-focused case studies explain how particular solutions to challenges work. A challenge examined in a design-focused case study would be conceived as matching some

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<sup>13</sup> Given that Herbert Simon was a pivotal figure within social science in delineating designing from decision-making, this last statement should ring true.

type of challenge, as recognized by professional practitioners in public policy or management. In explaining how solutions to challenges work, researchers engaging in design-focused case studies would draw on social science theoretical ideas to conceptualize complex systems in motion and to explain case selected facts considered to be of research and evaluative interest. In addition, researchers engaging in design-focused case studies would learn from professional design fields like architecture that try to learn from experience through research.

What has been said so far is sufficient to make some remarks about how this idea compares with the recipe that case studies for learning-and-transfer should proceed through three (conceptually distinct) stages of discussion: description, explanation, and lessons. I'd venture that it's fair to say that, with explications of how things work, the lesson is in the explication, not separate from it. What makes it lesson-like is its contextualization in some tradition, or specific strand, of professional discourse about kinds of challenges and problem-structuring.<sup>14</sup>

To the best of my knowledge, the phrasing of the idea that "design-focused case studies are a learning-and-transfer mechanism" is novel. However, the idea has a clear precedent in a neighboring landscape of professional research and practice, as just pointed out. Further, design-focused case studies is a category into which one can fit a number of works about public programs and organizations that have been written by some of leading figures in the field. Within public administration and administrative law, an admired work of the sort was Jerry Mashaw's (1981) *Bureaucratic Justice*. This book is a case study of multiple decision-making systems -- and their respective cultural meanings -- within a program that made and reviewed disability benefit determinations. *Bureaucratic Justice* was

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<sup>14</sup>There are hints of this idea in a text of one of the critics of public management research, even though the emphatic conclusions didn't reflect it. See Lynn (1996), comparing the penultimate and concluding chapters.

magnificent at examining each of several linked decision-making systems as solutions to problems of program and administrative design in an actual government agency operating in client and authorizing environments in the historically-specific setting of the USA in the 1970s (Barzelay 1991). It also commented on how such analysis could be preserved and used in an organization - the thesis being that organizations like the U.S. Social Security Administration should curate an internal administrative law.

Research of this nature can also be found in literature on high-reliability systems, with Todd LaPorte's work (e.g., LaPorte and Consolini 1991), about safety on nuclear-powered aircraft carriers being an early contribution in public administration. In the field of international development, an outstanding work of this kind was Judith Tandler's *Good Government in the Tropics*, consisting of a series of studies about the etiology and functioning of government innovations in such realms as primary rural health care and public procurement (Tandler 1997). Much of my own work has been of this nature, quite consciously in relation to my study of strategic planning in the U.S. Air Force in the 1990s (Barzelay and Campbell 2003) and my study of the management system to coordinate and implement presidential priority projects in Brazil in the same decade (Barzelay 2007). An exquisitely well-done, more recent example of design-focused case study research examined the process management of a large scale public infrastructure project in the Netherlands (van der Voort, et. al. 2011).

In studies of science advising, a fascinating and beautifully done book-length study, entitled *Science on Stage: Expert Advice as Public Drama*, was published by Stephen Hilgartner. The topic of the book is how science advising works. The empirical setting is the operation of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS), with the focus on procedures involved in finalizing the texts of expert panel reports for public release and the templates used to write text about the character of this specific form of science advising. A central

theoretical issue is how the cultural authority of science comes to be attached to analysis and opinion presented in published reports of expert panels. Hilgartner addresses this issue by applying Erving Goffman's analysis of social activity and structure. Drawing on Goffman, what Hilgartner brings out is that the NAS weaves discourses associated with science into its deliberately crafted "social front" for its specific form of science-advising. The book then examines patterns in the way NAS publications are criticized when the intent of critics is to blunt the impact of a publication on policy-making. In some cases, the criticism has proven devastatingly effective. The overall picture that emerges is that, how the NAS puts science on stage -- including constructing a social front for its specific form of science advising -- is immensely important for the legitimacy and effectiveness of its enterprise.

Though this review is excessively brief, it should satisfy the need to demonstrate that research on public programs and organizations includes design-precedents, and that the settings span institutional science advising, organizations whose core tasks pose risk of physical destruction and human casualties, strategic planning, coordination at the center of government, large-scale infrastructure projects, reviewing disability benefit determinations, and delivery of primary care in rural areas of poor societies.

### Meta-Discussions of Design-Focused Case Studies

The idea of design-focused case studies is more than a box into which writings can be sorted. It is also a specific variant of some general ideas about how research can give a boost to intelligent problem-solving involving public programs and organizations. In other words, there are precedents for a meta-argument about design-focused case studies in the service of design-focused problem-solving.

The statement of this specific variant that is best known in the field of program evaluation (especially in Europe) is Ray Pawson and Nick Tilley's, *Realistic Evaluation*



(Pawson and Tilley 1997).<sup>15</sup> Pawson and Tilley argued that an appropriate purpose of research about particular public programs -- analogous to case studies -- was to understand how they worked, for in doing so, it would be possible to learn from the experience for purposes of program planning. They provided an extensive argument placing theirs as a challenger to more established positions in program evaluation research. The book not only incorporated some lines of philosophical argument identified with critical realism, but compacted their idea of a suitable heuristic for discovering how programs work into the formula  $C \times M = O$ , with C standing for program context, M for program mechanism, and O for program outcomes. Within that field, realistic evaluation became an immensely sticky idea. Pawson and Tilley's general arguments have been critically examined and amended in the light of social scientific debates about the character of mechanism-based explanations (Astbury and Leeuw 2010). That said, Pawson and Tilley's argument seems to be little known outside the field of program evaluation - and even there known more in Europe than in the US.

Within the field of public policy and management, a stellar exposition of what I call the idea of design-focused case studies was Eugene Bardach's presidential lecture for the US-based Association of Public Policy and Management, entitled "The Extrapolation Problem" (Bardach 2004). The lecture was specifically about how to fulfill what I have called the learning-and-transfer function. His examination of this topic was not specific to case study research; the discussion was presented as though this function were carried out by working professionals within government, as a form of policy analysis. Bardach worked out the idea of understanding "how things work" with greater acuity and depth than others have done (Barzelay 2012).

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<sup>15</sup> The Google Scholar citation count is above 6000.

A short exegesis of Bardach's discussion in the paper is as follows. The question is how to study a program that has occurred in a given "source site", when the motivation for doing so is to gain the benefit of the prior experience in planning a yet to be specified program within the same functional domain in a different, "target site." Bardach rejects the idea that it is sufficient to make observations about the myriad of conditions that constitute the source site program, along with those conditions that surround and interact with it. A reason that a description of conditions is insufficient has to do with the presumably true assumption that programs are not a well-bounded systems: many conditions that affect a program's performance are not those that are constitutive of the program as such. Even if it were possible for the conditions that constitute the source site program to be specified and realized (i.e. replicated) in the target site, the target site program would reasonably be expected to perform differently relative to how the source site program has performed -- and in ways that could be disappointing for the target site. That expectation would be founded on the assumption that the conditions that have been surrounding and interacting with the source site program differ from those that would be surrounding and interacting with the target site program. If the duplication of the observed source site program's conditions in the target site were to be achieved, the result would be uncertain. Given this, there would be little value in studying the source site with the exclusive aim of observing and reporting the conditions that occur in the program and, for that matter, in the environment.

The next move in Bardach's argumentative discussion is to claim that problem-solvers (e.g., analysts and their clients) in the target site need to come up with a specification of the target site's program that is different from the conditions that constitute the source site's program. The need is called "adaptation". If this claim is taken out of the specific discussion context of Bardach's lecture on learning and transfer, then "adaptation" would signify *designing*, albeit with the activity exhibiting specific characteristics.

The subsequent move in Bardach's argumentative discussion is to ask for clarity about what sort of findings should a study of a source site program aim for? The answer to this question involves two ideas that cannot be disentangled: (a) explaining how the program works and (b) discerning the mechanisms on which the program's performance depends. The ideas differ only in emphasis (plus they appeal most to somewhat different audiences, between knowledge brokers and social science academics, respectively). Explaining how a program works requires observations about the elements that constitute it as well as how their spatial and temporal relations are configured. But it also requires a form of analysis -- what social scientists typically call "explanation" -- that involve a descriptive idealization of the program as an activity system and selective causal idealizations about natural and/or social phenomena generally.<sup>16</sup> Mechanisms are causal idealizations, in this sense. So, to understand how a program works, then, involves an explanatory argument, mediated by natural language models, where conditions in the descriptive idealization of the program as an activity system act of causes of other conditions in the activity system that are taken to be of evaluative significance (as in the idea of performance). Thus, findings about a source site involve models of historically-existing programs that include and apply appropriate descriptive and causal idealizations.

Bardach's exposition of this move includes a discussion of a running example of a program, one that is chosen to allow for the illumination of the argument. The specific program is an intensive project learning exercise, lasting two weeks, that is practiced in some public policy schools, including Bardach's own institution at University of California, Berkeley. (For details, read the publication based on his APPAM presidential address.)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>The idea that explanations in science and social science are mediated by models, which, in turn are constituted by descriptive idealizations and causal idealizations, is taken from Morgan and Morrison (1999).

<sup>17</sup>Bardach's piece includes some sub-discussions not mentioned here, including one that develops the idea of "smart practices" as those that activate mechanisms to, in effect, put social nature to work at the service of human collective purposes.

The further move deals with the question of what problem-solvers in target sites should do with such research findings. The general idea is to use them in adapting the source site program to the setting with which the target site program will connect and interact. This discussion isn't worked out in particular detail, as it would have required a lengthy discussion of what is involved in designing - or providing a strong connection to a literature that does that well. Absent either, the incipient idea of a design precedent did not come to pass in the text.<sup>18</sup>

It should also be noted that Bardach's piece was presented as though studies of source site programs were done as policy analysis work, not research work. As such, the piece did not weave together literature on case study research with his ideas about what forms of analysis are appropriate to studying source sites for the sake of a specific iteration of the learning-and-transfer function. However, the main line of argument has been reconstructed and blended with certain methodological ideas about case study research, so that a statement of design-focused case study research exists in all but name (Barzelay 2007), together with an extended example, drawing on a study of the development and operation of a central agency's monitoring system for presidential priority projects in Brazil.

In substance, Bardach's discussion had much in common with that of Pawson and Tilley, irrespective of the fact that *Realistic Evaluation* was not a reference for Bardach and notwithstanding that Bardach labeled the "things" he studied as practices rather than as programs. The most conspicuous point of commonality involved the idea that program characteristics that an analyst considers to hold merit should be treated as the *explananda* of an explanatory argument.

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<sup>18</sup>Note that Bardach's presidential address was published in the same year -- 2004 -- as Lawson's book, *What Designers Know*.

The role of a case study within a design-focused problem-solving initiative can be seen as closely analogous to that of a "design precedent" (Lawson 2004) in the practice of professional architects, in other "arts of design" (Kauffer and Butler 2013) and in engineering disciplines. As explained by Brian Lawson:

Designers commonly and frequently make great use of what they often refer to as precedent. Precedents are often either whole or partial pieces of designs that the designer is aware of. They may be previously employed solutions by the same designer, by famous designers, buildings, or landscapes or towns seen on study visits or even on holiday....In fact no two design situations are ever identical. This is not necessary for precedent to be useful for a designer. Unlike the lawyer, the designer is not trying to demonstrate a close parallel with the precedent but is rather using something that is sufficiently similar in some respects to become a useful point of departure....[P]recedent is seen by designers as an important part of their knowledge upon which they are able to draw in a 'designerly way' (Lawson 2004: 96-98).

Thus, a role of *design-focused case studies* in learning-and-transfer is to provide *design precedents* for *design-focused problem-solving initiatives* in public organizations and beyond.

In relation to the foregoing discussion, a design precedent is lesson-like, in that it provides an interpretation of an actual experience with a view to its becoming (through transfer) a reference in a design-focused problem-solving initiative. The conceptual similarity is strong enough that a design precedent can be seen as a type of lesson. But, as mentioned earlier, the lesson is in the case analysis, much as in proper casuistry: it's not a add-on, involving a shift in discourse from social scientific interpretation and understanding of an episode to one about practice.

While design precedents involve practical argumentation, they consist in more than that: they are ideas -- case-based knowledge -- about what Lawson (2004: 14) calls "how well things might work". That is an idea which feels like it is part of an entirely different discourse than the idea that humans can learn from experience by encoding what's learned

from studying an experience and then giving consideration to the encoded premise when prompted to engage in on-the-spot argumentation and decision, to point to standard ways of picturing vicarious learning and decision-making in organizations (Levitt and March 1988, Zollo and Winter 2002). To repeat what was argued above, the conceptual picture of practice as design-focused problem-solving is different, by degrees, from that of practice as decision-making, even as Herbert Simon, in *Sciences of the Artificial* (Simon 1996) was at pains to make the two seem of a piece, by conceiving of object specification as (information) search in a decision-making scenario.

### Design-Focused Case Studies: A Bridge too Far?

We may be up against some serious "frame rivalry" here. The "design tradition" which sustains the kind of ideas that Lawson put forward may simply be too foreign to social scientists for them to understand the notion of design-focused case studies that has been introduced into this essay. And that incomprehension operates as a constraint on what rhetorical and substantive features can be built into an initiative like the GDI, in that such initiatives seek to appropriate the cultural authority of social science, to borrow an idea from Hilgartner's (2000) *Science on Stage*. Clearly, if the idea of a design-focused case studies is to have any legs, some persuasion as to its acceptability, at least within professionally-oriented fields where social science reigns, is in order.

To appreciate and pursue the question, let us return to the literature on the sociology of scientific institutions. The study of interest here is about professional schools within North American universities - specifically business schools. The co-authors are the venerable James G. March and Mie Augier. The book is written as a piece of historical sociology of an institutional field. The main period covered runs from the tail end of the 1940s to the early 1960's. A new breed of graduate business school came to exist and thrive during this period.

The authors refer to the new breed as the "modern management school." As part of their analytical history of this period, Augier and March trace the origins of the very idea of the modern management school. Supported by the Ford Foundation, its institutional entrepreneurs rehearsed arguments that had been made decades earlier about medical education. The practice of medicine was presented as being held back from the progress it could attain, due to the nature of medical education. Medical education was not sufficiently tied to science. Teaching and training of future doctors was done by experienced practitioners. Scientific discoveries were not being turned into medical advances to a sufficient extent. New medical students were not being educated in ways that would make them attuned to scientifically-based medical advances. The solution was to restructure medical schools and their curricula. In modern medical schools, medical education was to include a grounding in chemistry and biology. Medicine professors were to do research, rooted mainly in these same scientific disciplines. Advances in science-based medicine were to be taught to future doctors while they were in medical school. Alumni of modern medical schools would introduce science-based medical practices into their clinical activity as soon as they finished medical school. And so on. In essence, the practice of medicine would be made modern by the modern medical school.

The pitch for the modern management school ran along similar lines, with the twist that the existing situation in the field could be compared -- unfavorably -- with modern medical schools. The progress of business practice was seen as depending on fundamental research, rooted in social science disciplines - not least, economics and psychology, in addition to the formal sciences of mathematics and statistics. Business school faculty would be researchers, many with PhDs in the social and formal sciences. MBA degrees would be structured to ensure that future business practitioners acquired some theoretical knowledge in these fields. MBAs would understand the theoretical foundations of the tools and methods of

modern management practice. And so on. In essence, the practice of business (and finance) would be made modern by the modern business school, just as the practice of medicine had been made modern by the modern medical school.

Consider that ideas espoused by the GDI's institutional entrepreneurs involve a discourse that have a clear historical precedent in those espoused by the modern management school's predecessor and historical rival: the Graduate School of Business Administration of Harvard University. Well-known HBS hallmarks include its pragmatist discourse of learning from experience; institutional funding and support for case study research about companies, managers, and decisions; and case method teaching. Is there a parallel rivalry in the development field? What is its modern medical school? It is not far-fetched to identify "development economics" as the analogue. It follows that, however respectful collegial relations may be, there are good sociological reasons to presume that the HBS-like GDI might come under pressure, someday, from the institutional field of development economics, with its academic and bank economists as well as those in think tanks, foundations, and client country governments.



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